Movie in search of America: The rhetoric of myth in Easy Rider

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MOVIE IN SEARCH OF AMERICA: THE RHETORIC OF

MYTH IN EASY RIDER

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition

by

Hayley Susan Raynes

March 2005
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ABSTRACT

Chronicling the cross-country journey of two hippies on motorcycles, *Easy Rider* is an historical fiction embodying the ideals, naivete, politics and hypocrisies of 1960's America. This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of *Easy Rider* exploring how auteurs Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper and Terry Southern’s use of road, regional and cowboy mythology creates a text that simultaneously exposes and is dominated by the ironies inherent in American culture while breathing new life into the cowboy myth and reaffirming his place as one of America’s most enduring cultural icons.

Like every classic American tale, *Easy Rider* becomes tangled in the ironies of a mythology that consciously contradicts itself to promote social and cultural advancement in the direction of manifest destiny. *Easy Rider* is an important historical document because it reflects the social and political turmoil of the time. It has great cinematic importance because it helped reinvent the film hero, experimented with new filming and editing techniques and made mainstream many counter-culture themes and ideals.

Upon careful examination, *Easy Rider* proves itself to be one of the more complex examples of what happens when
American writers and their characters explore the commonplace of freedom and are confronted with inescapable cultural boundaries.
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CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINS OF EASY RIDER

When Columbia Pictures and Pando Productions first released Easy Rider at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969 they did not foresee it becoming the trans-generational cult hit audiences still view and study today. At the time, major Hollywood studios were out of touch with the interests of American youth, investing in large production films such as Funny Girl (1968), Hello Dolly (1969) and Dr. Doolittle (1967) (Hill 56). Major films like Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and The Graduate (1967) that challenged the norm and appealed to young audiences were few and far between. The task of creating films that took risks and addressed unconventional subject matter was left to young, independent filmmakers such as Easy Rider auteurs' Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda.

Despite the fact that Columbia Pictures financed Easy Rider, the film was considered independent because of its small budget ($365,000) and creative freedom (Hill 21). The film went beyond studio expectations to be dubbed variously as the quintessential road movie, a cult classic,
and the first of Hollywood New Wave, paving the way for directors including George Lucas and Steven Spielberg (8).

Throughout the years, *Easy Rider* has received mixed reviews. Although it was the fourth largest grossing picture of 1969, making $19 million and was nominated for two academy awards including best screenplay, immediately after its release *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby criticized the film for being “superior” and implied that director Dennis Hopper won the Cannes Film Festival best new director award because there was only one other film in competition (32). In a 1981 *Esquire* retrospective article Jeff Greenfield says, “... the hostility aimed in reality at long-haired, grass-smoking adolescents seems to have given *Easy Rider* credibility without the need for logic or proof” (90).

The film has been the subject of critical study, and it has been the subject of negative criticism. Whether positive or negative, the attention given to *Easy Rider* (it has increased its earnings to $60 million dollars since its release) indicates that the film offers audiences more than a simple 90 minutes of entertainment. In this thesis I will explore the depths of *Easy Rider*—its rhetoric, its resonance and its contradiction. I believe the film has
withstood nearly thirty-five years of changing audiences because it is a poignant combination of all things American—mythological, political, cultural. The film’s appeal is its contradiction—and its contradiction and double-talk is inherently American. While criticizing 1960’s American society it is born from that society and capitalizes on it. *Easy Rider* is critical of flaws in American culture that date back to the country’s inception, yet the story’s fabric is woven from American myth—myth that helped solidify those flaws. Though its ideology embraces the counter-culture, the film’s characters long to be accepted into the mainstream. As it sits in judgement against prejudice and subjugation, it reveals its own prejudices. A complex film spawned from a complex decade, *Easy Rider* holds significant historical value because it embodies these contradictions.

*Easy Rider* is the story of Wyatt (also known as Captain America) and Billy, two hippies on a cross-country motorcycle journey. After a drug deal bringing in $50,000, the pair set off from California and head east to Florida. Along the way they are refused lodging at a motel, are taken in by a rancher and his family, visit a commune, get thrown in jail, and make a friend out of American Civil
Liberties Union (ACLU) lawyer George Hanson. Their goal is Florida, but the story orbits around their desire to experience Mardi Gras in New Orleans. George decides to join them and the pair becomes a trio until tragedy strikes when George is murdered by a group of southern rednecks. The pair continues, but George’s death has cast a dark shadow over the remainder of their journey. In New Orleans they visit a whorehouse and take their “dates” on an acid trip in a cemetery. Afterwards, when they are back on their bikes, Wyatt realizes that they “blew it,” but his epiphany cannot change their fate. They are murdered on the highway by two southern rednecks in an old pick-up truck.

Though *Easy Rider* is a simple story utilizing a typical male-bonding/buddy movie plot line, it was innovative for its time because of its focus on the counter-culture. It seriously considered the political and social quandaries of the day, exploring the counter-culture at the end of the sixties. Its costumes, its biases and stereotyping, its fiction illustrate the confusion and paradoxical nature of the 60’s leftist movement and how this confusion affected individual lives. *Easy Rider* was the culmination of a decade. It took the political and
cultural turmoil, the idealism and the downfall of the 1960’s and threw it at the audience at precisely the right moment for the audience to catch it, absorb it and relate to it. The film is, essentially, about the end of idealism. It is the manifestation of a movement collectively throwing its hands up in defeat. That is not to say the counter-culture died at the end of the sixties, it still exists to some degree today at colleges, in collectives and on the streets of cities including Berkeley, California and other college towns. But the optimism, the confidence that the movement started with has withered considerably. The murders of Wyatt, Billy, and George, the renegade, freedom fighters obviously struck a chord in the youth audience of 1969 or else the film would not have been so successful. The deaths of these characters, who were then the closest resemblance of counter-culture heroes in a Hollywood film, was a powerful statement suggesting that the counter-culture’s attempt to live alongside the mainstream was doomed.

The film itself is a current event of 1969—a year of tremendous crisis in the world and the leftist movement. Throughout the duration of the 1960’s, the civil rights and counter-culture movements changed American society. Easy
Rider can be seen as a result of this change. The auteurs made impeccable use of kairos—a rhetorical term defined in Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students as "a 'window' of time during which action is most advantageous" (31). Any text—verbal or visual—must seize the opportune moment to show itself for maximum effect. Easy Rider does this.

By 1969 American culture was permanently altered, but not all for the better. Though 1969 was the year of Woodstock, the peaceful concert in New York State that is now to many the jewel in the crown of peace-love sixties nostalgia, the year also witnessed the disastrous west coast version of Woodstock at the Altamont Speedway where Hell's Angels beat a black man to death and three other people died. It was the year Charles Manson took his communal "hippie" followers on a murderous rampage in Hollywood killing seven in two days. In San Francisco, the construction, destruction and subsequent violence and rioting over People's Park were the culmination of the strategy shift from civil disobedience to desperate violence. Easy Rider was a reflection of this change. Berkeley philosophy professor John Searle commented:

There was no vision, no articulate philosophy, no conception of social organization and social
Though they demonstrated for peace in Vietnam through the rhetoric of civil disobedience it wasn’t long before violence crept into the game plan and took over.

It is fitting that a film should so poignantly display this contradictory rhetoric. In *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, Todd Gitlin describes the shift from peace to violence in the leftist movement as part product of the media (182). Ironically, the media—historic watchdogs of the first amendment—helped transform the free speech/peace movement into one of violence through their thirst for ever-increasing spectacle. "The media were giving lurid prominence to the wildest and most cacophonous rhetoric, and broadcasting the most militant, violent, bizarre, and discordant actions, and within the boundaries of any action, the most violent segments" (182). The movement lost touch with its purpose and inflated itself into a revolution when in reality that was not the case. "Aspiring to revolution but lacking any real agency, the movement was bound to seal itself off . . . It was a serviceable gambit for a movement that refused to face the nature—and the limits—of its social identity" (186). It was a movement that touted peace but utilized violence to make its point.
The paradoxical nature of 1960’s leftist rhetoric is present in Easy Rider. Wyatt, Billy and George are at odds with their need for community. Their rebellion against the mainstream, swim against the tide, west to east idealism is in direct contrast with their material desires and their need for acceptance—acceptance begotten only from the society they shun. The seemingly unavoidable irony present in these conflicting desires and ideals reflects the complexity of the paradox into which the leftist “liberal” individual inevitably falls. The contradictions and irony present in Easy Rider are further compounded by the auteurs’ use of American archetypes and myths.

The film is simultaneously a unique product of its time and an example of the classic American cowboy story. Cowboy myth, road myth and regional myth are all American archetypes that helped shape the American national identity. Easy Rider is a historically specific interpretation of these myths.

Throughout the history of colonization and westward migration, myths glorifying the individual and the promise of prosperity for those who take to the road have permeated American art and culture. Simultaneously, the collectivist Jeffersonian ideal offered a more settled agrarian vision
(Smith 215). Americans have sought "the American dream" using both ideals; however, the cowboy has always been the more glorified primarily because the rough, tough, self-sufficient cowboy is exciting, mysterious and intriguing while the farmer is perceived as being practical, settled and predictable. What makes Easy Rider such a tribute to American culture is that it, like every classic American tale, becomes tangled up in the ironies of a mythology that consciously contradicts itself to promote social and cultural advancement in the direction of manifest destiny.

From the tales of frontiersman Daniel Boone and mountain man Kit Carson to James Fennimore Cooper's anarchic, solitary Leatherstocking, to the dime novel heroics of Buffalo Bill Cody, the rugged, trail blazing male individual has always been a popular figure to idealize. Yet, as with Easy Rider, within all of these tales there lies the inescapable irony that these solitary, seemingly anti-social American heroes are products of a society that collectively glorifies the individual and uses his rugged independence to clear the path for imperialistic advancement. Henry Nash Smith in Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth explores this contradiction citing the entrepreneurial "empire-building" motivations of Daniel
Boone in his role as the founder of Kentucky (53). Boone was the idealization of the American individual, yet he was motivated, at least somewhat, by the desire to promote the society from which he came.

Contradictions and ironies involving heroic individuals and their place in society have always been present in American literature and will be explored in the context of Easy Rider at length in chapter two. A brief example of the contradiction is seen in Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales. Nash describes the problems that Cooper faced in creating a socially acceptable hero who embodied the romanticized talents of the mountain man yet occupied a lower place on the social ladder than Cooper’s readers (64). Essentially, the rugged, anti-social individual is a hero that society shapes and controls.

The wild frontiersman evolved into the cowboy to suit the changing needs of a growing nation and in Easy Rider we see the cowboy evolving again into a long haired, motorcycle riding, pot-smoking hippie. Though the auteurs set out to create a new, “revolutionary” critique on American values, they fell into a trap of sorts that writers have been falling into since this country’s inception. Because they chose the cowboy myth as their
medium, they are bound by the myth’s conventions, and now the film is an important historical document not so much because it pushed a radical agenda, but because it served as a vital step in the evolution of one of America’s most enduring mythologies. *Easy Rider* secured the cowboy myth’s future.
CHAPTER TWO

“A MAN WENT LOOKING FOR AMERICA . . .”

To pique audience interest in a way that sustains, the regeneration of a culture’s myth is a powerful rhetorical tool. Richard Slotkin in *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1800* describes the power of mythology:

A mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors...Reference to that myth or to things associated with it...evokes in the people the sense of life inherent in the myth and all but compels belief in the vision of reality and divinity implicit in it. The believer’s response to his myth is essentially nonrational and religious . . . (6-7)

Lynn Holleman Rudloff in her thesis *Larry McMurtry’s Argument with the Cowboy Myth* takes this notion even further, stating that a culture’s myths have the power to control and direct an audiences’ ideology:
Identifying mythic qualities is a way of explaining a literary work's power. Rhetorically, a literary myth may motivate or caution; usually it presents an appeal to the unconscious. Myth's rhetoric of acculturation, which unifies a culture, also may promote submission and resignation. (iii)

For the early American colonists, says Slotkin, mythology helped to reconcile the old with the new (15). The colonists were in the unique position of bringing mythology from Europe to the New World then having that mythology challenged by other Europeans and by the "racial-cultural conflict" between the Native Americans and colonial Christians (15). Then their ideals, reformulated to compensate for this and for their new wilderness environment, were further challenged by old-world pressures (15). Easy Rider's auteurs use myth in a similar fashion. The film was one of the first from Hollywood to portray seriously aspects of counter-culture rhetoric and lifestyle. To make this subject more acceptable to the general American audience, an inclusive mythology relying heavily on the cowboy myth but also including aspects of road myth and regional myth served as the platform upon
which the auteurs introduced new cultural themes. The exaltation of the road and land, the elevation of the cowboy and the conflict between regions are all concepts with which Americans can identify. Fonda, Hopper and co-author Terry Southern used mythology’s power to gain acceptance. They made their protagonists’ illegal drug use, anti-establishment politics and unconventional talk and dress tolerated if not wholly accepted by the mainstream moviegoer.

*Easy Rider*’s auteurs had a clear understanding of many ironies present in American mythology, and they use this understanding to critique American values. The ultimate irony, though, is how the myths end up using *Easy Rider* as a vehicle to maintain the status quo.

Peter Fonda initially conceptualized *Easy Rider* while staring at a picture of himself and co-actor Bruce Dern in a poster advertising the film *The Wild Angels*. The film was a biker movie and inspired Fonda to think of himself and others with similar ideals as “modern cowboys” (Hill 11). Cowboys represent the free man of the west, roaming the countryside, their lifestyle courageously laughing in the face of organized society. They are American archetypes representing freedom and individuality. In *Easy
Rider, a film that glorifies the rebel and has empathy for the anti-social, lawless renegade, the auteurs embrace the cowboy ideal, following the historical criteria almost religiously.

Billy and Wyatt are named after the old west heroes Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp. They wear leather and cowboy boots, have no history and ride with pride their mode of transportation, the motorcycle — an updated version of the cowboy's trusty steed. Larry McMurtry, the author of several novels and screenplays portraying the American west, criticizes modern cowboy movies for their portrayal of cowboys as gunslingers first and horsemen later. He says in In a Narrow Grave, "the master symbol for handling the cowboy is the symbol of the horseman . . . The cowboy realized himself on a horse, and a man might be broke, impotent, and a poor shot and still hold up his head if he could ride" (150). Billy and Wyatt may take the names of famous gunslingers, but they do not fall prey the shoot 'em up cinematic misconception. Their motorcycles are representative of the auteurs' attention to authenticity. The motorcycle as horse is emphasized, and the correlation between the two modes of travel is made explicit in the scene when Wyatt's bike gets a flat tire. The two
travelers stop at a ranch and wheel the motorcycle into the barn, fixing the flat while the rancher and one of his hands are outside of the barn shoeing a horse.

In Larry McMurtry’s Argument with the Cowboy Myth, Lynn Holleman Rudloff discusses the stagnation or “inertia” present in McMurtry’s characters who embody qualities of the mythic cowboy (10). She says that the irony arises from unresolved conflict: “McMurtry’s fiction is ironic in that the conflict his characters experience is not satisfactorily explained or concluded within the narrative; the reader-as-critic must discover the significance of the action” (9). Unresolved conflict and the associated irony are unavoidable when an author or auteur stays true to cowboy mythology.

Billy and Wyatt fall victim to this unresolved conflict. Fonda, Hopper and Southern use the cowboy as a symbol of freedom, yet this freedom, upon examination, is non-existent because the cowboy as attached to myth is bound by that myth’s conventions. Though the auteurs commit fully to the myth and in many ways romanticize it, they also recognize many of the cowboy myth’s ironies and use them to critique American culture. Easy Rider’s first
irony comes in the form of Billy and Wyatt's attachment to their motorcycles.

For Billy and Wyatt the motorcycle represents freedom. The obvious irony is that the bikes--which in reality are capitalistic commodities--are their ultimate undoing. In the opening scene the two are riding obviously cheap versions of their dream bikes. No attention is paid to these vehicles. But after the drug deal, the pair purchases brand new choppers and the camera glides over the shiny new chrome, emphasizing the importance, the coolness of these motorcycles. Wyatt's gas tank, decorated with the American flag, holds the pair's ill-gotten fortune while Steppenwolf's rebel anthem, "Born to be Wild" reinforces the connection between the bikes and freedom.

Scenes of the two on their bikes flash back and forth to the beautiful landscape through which they ride. No structures or walls restrict them. The wind rushes through their hair and Billy performs tricks such as riding with no hands and standing on the moving cycle.

Nevertheless, when the two pull their roaring bikes up to a motel, they are denied a room. When they ride through a Texas town, they are imprisoned for "parading without a permit." When they are withheld service at a restaurant,
one of the townspeople ridicules them by critiquing Wyatt’s bike, “Check the flag on that bike. Must be a bunch of Yankee queers” (Easy Rider).

The irony lies in the fact that though the motorcycles distinguish the “hippies” from the “straights,” the motorcycles are a product of the industrious, oppressive ideology from which Billy and Wyatt are trying to distance themselves. They are the physical manifestation of Billy and Wyatt’s unbreakable link to society. The bikes are a rebellious statement symbolizing the pair’s fight with society—their connection to society. The supposed freedom symbols are actually what keep Billy and Wyatt from really being free—if free means detachment from society. This irony seems intentional on the part of the auteurs because the drug money stored in the gas tank is the ultimate symbol of capitalism and free enterprise. At the end of the film Wyatt dies when a man shoots at him and blows up the bike’s gas tank. Wyatt and Billy’s plan to attain freedom through a capitalistic venture literally blew up in their faces.

However confused, the freedom from social constraints symbolic in the motorcycles is historically a part of the cowboy myth. McMurtry says, “from the first the cowboy was
distinguished for his daring and his cheerful indifference to middle-class values. . .” (25). Wyatt and Billy in no way uphold middle-class values, but to the middle class their lifestyle is romantic. They are wanderers, rootless and searching, and on the surface, their wandering is an attractive alternative to the confines of established culture. While George, who is not a cowboy, but a lawyer has parents, a last name, a drinking problem and was a high school football star, Wyatt and Billy have nothing—and want nothing of that sort. They possess only their bikes, the cash in the gas tank and the clothes on their backs. They are not aimless—their final goal is the purchase of a boat in Florida and the good life—an acceptable capitalistic goal, but they are without history. This rootlessness is symbolic of an American ideal. James Oliver Robertson in American Myth, American Reality explains:

The act of rebellion—the paradigm of which is the American Revolution—is seen as a courageous act in which dependence, security, and familiar ways are rejected. The ritual American act of courage is the declaration of independence-rebellion-migration of the American adolescent . . . The break from the parents and the move that was
symbolic of that break started the individual on the way to change and improvement, to opportunity and success, and to the active pursuit of happiness. Life was given by parents and family; liberty obtained by breaking away from home. The pursuit of happiness would bring individual fulfillment and ultimate improvement to American society. (150-1)

There is nothing new or rebellious in Wyatt and Billy's lifestyle. The individualistic goal of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness results in the advancement of all society. As is seen in George's character, staying home not only inhibits the goal of manifest destiny it also results in discontent.

George, a fledgling ACLU lawyer is still under the control of his parents, living in the town in which he was raised. An alcoholic, arrested so often he has made friends with the jailers, George is a stagnant individual trapped within his own history. When he meets Wyatt and Billy, their freedom appeals to him and he decides to join them on their way to Mardi Gras. (His main purpose once there is visiting Madam Tinkertoys House of Blue Lights—a
whorehouse where the women "are no pork chops. These are U.S. prime.").

It is with George that the auteurs begin to lose control of the ironies they have thus far been able to manipulate. On the road with the two cowboys the mood is light with the Holy Modal Rounders’ "If You Want to be a Bird" playing as the three pretend they are flying across the open road. All one needs for happiness, it seems, is drugs:

If you want to be a bird . . .
Won’t you come try a little flying,
No denying it gets you high.
Why be shackled to your feet,
When you’ve got weed you haven’t used yet.
Don’t wait for heaven, get out and fly . . .

Just glide through the clear air,
Makin’ figure eights through the pearly gates,
Where the soul and the universe meet.

If you want to be a bird,
It won’t take much to get up here,
But when you come down, land on your feet. (Qtd. from *Easy Rider*)
Marijuana is what finally brings freedom and happiness to a man who could not find it in family, education, career or alcohol. George is the true hero of *Easy Rider*, and the fact that his freedom is dependent on drug use and his acceptance of the road myth means that the auteurs, though aware of the ironies within the myths are ultimately unable to overcome them. Through Wyatt and Billy the auteurs illustrate the constricting nature of American mythology, but their treatment of George indicates they cannot move beyond the myths to offer another way to achieve freedom in American society. These myths are so deep seated in the psyche of American culture that though the auteurs want to expose and move past them, they can’t.

Robertson observes that despite the desire for freedom within the American psyche there are rules one must follow, and if one tries to escape this structure, trouble ensues:

While a certain amount of anarchy is contained in the ideal of American individualism . . . unrestrained egotism is not part of it. While the individual developed his capabilities in the pursuit of his own happiness, success for the
individual came only if he served his society.

(155)

"Unrestrained egotism" is Billy and Wyatt's Achilles heel. They never sought freedom; they sought money. George believes the rhetoric, and Wyatt and Billy never tell him their money, nice motorcycles, "a groovy dinner" along with prostitutes at Mardi Gras and the promise of a better life in Florida are the result of a drug deal. Freedom was never possible because Billy and Wyatt were under the control of their desire for money, and George was under the control of Billy and Wyatt. Freedom is not granted to those harboring self-serving individualism.

This restriction touches on the irony within the commonplace of freedom. If freedom is defined as "the condition of being free or unrestricted," and free is defined as "not in bondage to or under the control of another" (Oxford 551), then can freedom gained only by fulfilling some social criteria really be considered freedom? Greenfield says in his critique of the film:

As one watches them moving along a highway while psychedelic rock music embraces them, one imagines a polite, street-wise federal drug officer busting them for their cocaine score and
taking them through a black ghetto where thirteen-year-old kids are strung out. (90)

More than likely, Billy and Wyatt hurt people in their quest for freedom; in fact, their actions may have made freedom an impossibility for some. As a result, Wyatt and Billy had their freedom to live taken from them. We can see the irony within Wyatt and Billy's quest for freedom, and we understand how this came into existence because it is part of our history.

This irony is deliberate in every way down to the film's title. According to Hill, Easy Rider was the contribution of famed Texan co-author Terry Southern and is a term used to describe "a man who lives off the earnings of a whore" (19). A drug dealer, even in the permissive sixties was not a heroic occupation and this is emphasized by the first song in the film—Steppenwolf's The Pusher, a song vilifying the drug dealer, "I said God damn, God damn the pusher man . . ." (qtd. from Easy Rider).

While American mythology requires an individual to be a contribution to society, its freedom myth also upholds the ideal of individual wealth as the key to happiness. From Horatio Alger's popular rags to riches stories to the California population boom because of the gold rush,
falling into wealth, easy money, no matter how it is obtained, has been an integral part of the American dream and the carrot that brought many immigrants to the United States. That this quest ends in failure is the ultimate critique of American values and American myth.

This irony may be the reason for Wyatt and Billy’s murder, but it does not explain George’s murder. Like Wyatt and Billy, he was searching for freedom, but unlike Wyatt and Billy he was not a detriment to society—he was a civil liberties lawyer who fought for the freedoms supposedly granted to everyone. From a historical perspective, that should count as a contribution to society—but considering the civil rights struggles by which this film was influenced, society at large did not see freedom for all of its members as a positive. Herein lies the importance of regional myth in Easy Rider. American mythology cannot be collected and branded national. The cowboy may have been a hero to people of the West, and he may have been romanticized if not wholly accepted by inhabitants of the East, but Easy Rider pits West against South and though they may uphold the freedom ideal, Southern society and mythology have an altogether different conception of what freedom means.
According to Robertson, from the late eighteenth century, the South, the East and the West came to represent three distinct lifestyles; the East, though independent of Europe still clutched old world civilities; the West was a place without rules, without boundaries, and the Southern identity was formed by way of slavery and agriculture (79, 83). A successful plantation and cash crop was the chosen path to aristocracy and elitism; slavery was the chosen path to a successful plantation and cash crop (Robertson, 83). Smith says, "The fiction dealing with the plantation emphasizes the beauty of harmonious social relations in an orderly feudal society. It presupposes generations of settled existence and is inimical to change" (151). The East with its economy feeding off of industrialization and the West upholding visions of freedom and opportunity for the rootless individual were in direct conflict with the Southern ideal. Anything that challenged slavery and the importance of a settled agricultural existence challenged the Southern identity, which means the cowboy was the ultimate threat (85).

Smith says in Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth that the cowboy hero metamorphosed from the frontiersman and was introduced into popular culture in the
late 1880’s (concurrent with the Civil War) when ranching became a popular industry in the Great Plains (109). While the cowboy had a love of the land in common with the southerner, his detestation of settling down, of being a farmer made the two enemies from the start. McMurtry says of the aversion:

The cowboy’s contempt of the farmer was not unmixed with pity. The farmer walked in the dust all his life, a hard and ignominious fate. Cowboys could perform terrible labors and endure bone-grinding hardships and yet consider themselves the chosen of the earth . . . . They were riders first and last. (147)

Ranches were equally distasteful. A cowboy will work on a ranch or farm, but the notion of settling down is unattractive to the core. This explains why Billy and Wyatt do not stay on at the ranch where they fix the flat tire, and it explains why they do not stay at the commune. To give up the nomadic lifestyle is to give up the cowboy way. This mentality is in direct contrast to the fundamentals of Southern mythology. Therefore, it is no surprise Wyatt and Billy are killed. George, however, is
an even worse offender of the Southern way because he turns his back on his own culture.

As a sympathizer of the liberal cause, working with the ACLU, helping Wyatt and Billy get out of jail, George was tolerated—but only in his hometown where he was still a part of the culture; he was under the control of his parents and his drinking kept him under the control of the authorities. But the moment he leaves, wholly embracing the Western lifestyle, he commits an unforgivable offence. He abandons his heritage as a Southerner. In the restaurant scene when he, Billy and Wyatt are refused service the local hecklers do not differentiate—all three are a threat, and because George is a convert, he is the biggest threat. He represents the end of the Southern way and pays the most dearly for it. The rednecks curtail George’s journey that night, bludgeoning him to death at the three’s camp sight. Wyatt and Billy are also beaten, but they survive. The development of George’s character in relation to his southern identity and his eventual demise is the auteurs’ most successful and powerful attempt at social commentary. It makes the best use of mythology to critique current American values.
Before his death that night around the campfire, George gives his freedom speech:

What you represent to them is freedom...talkin’ about it and being it that’s two different things. I mean, it’s real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. 'Course, don’t ever tell anybody they’re not free, cause they are gonna get real busy killin’ and mamin’ to prove to you that they are. Oh yeah, they’re gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it’s gonna scare ‘em...it makes ‘em dangerous. (Easy Rider)

Of all Easy Rider’s characters, George Hanson is the least bound to cowboy and regional mythology. As a result, he is the character who most represents freedom and the individual. He feels no obligation to uphold the Southern way, even though he was raised to do so; his happiness is not dependant on amassing a large fortune; he made his own choice regarding civil rights issues long before the presence of Wyatt and Billy; he has no need for a sidekick and his views are not formulated from a desire to be accepted by people from other parts of the country as is
evidenced by not leaving his hometown. When he finally
does leave, it is not because of some social epiphany. He
leaves because he wants to visit a whorehouse. Ironically,
this desire to visit a whorehouse and its corresponding
view of women, probably the only thing that keeps him from
being totally free from cowboy mythology, is the only thing
that can spur him to leave his home for the road. And when
he rides, he does not ride west in search of a better life,
prosperity or any other supposed paradisiacal qualities of
the west in westward migration stories. But neither do
Wyatt and Billy, and this raises questions as to the
viability of American myth now that the West is won.
CHAPTER THREE
ROAD MYTH AND MANIFEST DESTINY

In the editing room Easy Rider went through five
different versions of varying length starting at 240
minutes before the final 94-minute cut was released into
theaters. The desire for a film longer than the standard
90 minutes, says director Dennis Hopper in a 1969 interview
for Evergreen Review, was because in the longer versions
"you got the real feeling for the Ride—very hypnotic, very
beautiful . . ." (72). He says he wanted the audience to
experience Wyatt and Billy's cross country trip. Though
240 minutes of two guys on motorcycles would not be
practical and would probably be boring, the road as
depicted in the film's final version does succeed as a key
part of the story—so important that it could itself be
considered a character.

The road, especially the road heading West has been
exalted in American film and literature as integral to the
American experience. From books like Laura Wilder's Little
House series chronicling her family's westward journey in a
covered wagon to legendary beat poet Jack Kerouac's On the
Road, an autobiographical journey along America's highways,
to pop star Britney Spear’s kitschy 2002 film debut
*Crossroads*, the road has been exalted, exhausted even, as
the place where one can find freedom, success and the
realization of the American dream. Robertson says of the
American penchant for migration, “Going West, seeking
greener pastures, leaving home, and moving on are not only
physical moves which demonstrate and guarantee
independence: they also carry the implication that they
lead to better, higher social and economic status” (150).
But if going west is the metaphor for freedom and
economic/social advancement, what does heading east
signify?

In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner presented the
“frontier hypothesis” to the American Historical
Association (Smith 250). The hypothesis stated, “the
existence of an area of free land, its continuous
recession, and the advancement of American settlement
westward explain American development” (250). He went on
to contend that the West and its attitude toward democracy
is the most important region in terms of the development of
American society (250). Some seventy years later,
considering the populist tradition in California and the
radicalism and influence Berkeley students had upon the
nation regarding civil rights and the Vietnam War, this supposition proves likely. But what happens when there is no more West? When there is no more land to farm, settle and impose ideals upon? What happens after the democratic vision and mythology has traveled thousands of miles and hundreds of years from their starting point in New England, becoming increasingly more liberal along the way? What happens—concludes Easy Rider—is they hit the coast, but the need for migration in the American psyche does not drown in the Pacific. Instead, it turns around, after being reshaped and reformulated to reflect the ideals of the West, the "California culture" as Todd Gitlin calls it and starts heading back whence it came (202). This concept is not original to Easy Rider. In Jack Kerouac’s On the Road, protagonist Sal Paradise has a similar notion, "Here I was at the end of America—no more land—and now there was nowhere to go but back" (77).

Unfortunately, according to Easy Rider, you can’t go back—at least not if you want any happiness. Billy and Wyatt begin their journey in Los Angeles and throughout the southwest are greeted with the welcoming landscape of desert rock formations, green mountainsides and wide blue skies. The farther east they travel, however, the more the
scenery begins to reflect industrialization in the form of metal bridges, concrete, and billowing gray carbon monoxide coming from factory smokestacks. This juxtaposition between the scenic beauty of untouched nature with the destruction of the land inevitably begotten from progress leaves the viewer questioning the manifest destiny that put the United States at the moral, industrial and imperialistic helm. The heroes' dependence on the myths that help secure manifest destiny suggests there is no possibility of reversal, while their attempt at living out the freedom ideal reveals itself to be a doomed effort. The deaths of Wyatt, Billy and George illustrate the auteurs' conclusion that attempting to harmonize American myths and ideologies is futile. They are essentially saying that while the freedom myth will continue to enjoy its cultural status as the basis of all American ideology, manifest destiny will continue to rule the actions of society. The freedom myth is merely the means to an end not an end in itself and that is the way it has always been. These ironies are intentional on the part of the auteurs.

Billy, Wyatt and George are murdered on the highway and the viewer is made to feel sympathy for these
characters. They are oppressed. They are punished for acting in a way contrary to status quo; their thwarted attempted at freedom is one with which many Americans can identify; however, the rhetoric of sympathy becomes muddied to the point of nullification when we examine the unintentional hypocrisy Wyatt, Billy and George embody. In the end their plight is ironic instead of sympathetic, because while the auteurs try to make Wyatt, Billy and George martyrs or victims of an oppressive society, they simultaneously make them act in an oppressive manner toward the land, toward African Americans and toward women.

Billy and Wyatt are dependant on the land for the limited freedom they possess, however they do not acknowledge this dependency. The land, says Smith noting the writings of Chester E. Eisinger is the foundation of American society:

... that agriculture is the only source of real wealth; that every man has a natural right to land; that labor expended in cultivating the earth confers a valid title to it; that the ownership of land, by making the farmer independent, gives him social status and dignity, while constant contact with nature in the course
of his labors makes him virtuous and happy...the concrete imaginative focus for these abstract doctrines was the idealized figure of the farmer himself, called variously "husbandman," "cultivator," "freeman," or—perhaps most characteristically—"yeoman." (126)

Though Billy and Wyatt are not farmers, nor do they want to be, they are dependant on the land and its yield (cocaine) for their freedom; thus illustrating the ultimate irony in American society, namely that manifest destiny, while completely dependent on the freedom ideal, renders freedom impossible. As is evidenced by Billy and Wyatt's failure, freedom is dependant on money, ownership, social status and dignity—all of which are necessary for success; all of which are acquired through the taming, settling and domination of the land for one purpose or another. Eventually, this domination of the land renders null the freedom ideal.

In Lay of the Land, Annette Kolondny cites writings from Thomas Jefferson, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, and George Washington that indicate, "agriculture came to be seen as the primary and indispensable foundation of both national prosperity and of political democracy . . ." (27).
And though these thinkers did allude to a “pastoral paradox” in which “man might, indeed win mastery over the landscape, but only at the cost of emotional and psychological separation from it” this paradox did not stop them from their chosen course (28). When domination and separation are the ultimate result of the quest for individual freedom, the consequences are far reaching.

Kolondny explains:

Southern gentry and “mongrel” frontiersman alike demonstrated its dangerously regressive tendencies, while the desire for increased mastery and control of the “precious soil” resulted only in greedy wranglings over possession. Once the “broad lap of our great Alma Mater” becomes an object of possession, Crevecoeur warns, the desired return becomes exploitative, and intimacy turns quickly to violation. (65)

Wyatt and Billy are not the only hippies who succumb to this American eventuality. The hippies at the commune also express a dominant attitude toward the land. During the film’s second campfire scene when the hitchhiker, Wyatt and Billy camp for the night at a Native American burial
site, the stranger criticizes Billy for having disrespect for the people buried in the land on which they are camping. Ironically, he does not acknowledge that it was he who took Wyatt and Billy to the site in the first place.

Also, when the three men arrive at the commune, the hitchhiker explains the hardships his group has undergone to live off the land. He calls the hippies "city kids" and says the previous winter they had to eat dead horses off the side of the road to keep from starving. These hippies had no real respect for the land. They assumed they could claim ownership of the land and expected it to bear fruit without respect for the seasons, the climate or the soil—and even after enduring such a harsh winter, they still felt the land owed them something. The hippies spread seed on a dusty patch of dirt that looks as if it couldn't grow a weed. They may have changed their look and moved from the city, but they are doing nothing new. Their attempt at rebellion ends up an ironic repetition of the pilgrim's historical act of colonization.

It seems the American tendency towards domination is one of its most defining characteristics. According to Hopper; Wyatt, Billy and George represent various aspects of the American way and though they all have sympathetic
qualities, essentially they embody historically American self-serving traits. Wyatt, also known in the film as Captain America, is the idealist, the patriot who sees the positive in the bleakest of situations, but self-motivated at heart. In the commune scene, while he and Billy are watching the hippies attempting to raise a crop in the poorest of conditions Wyatt blindly says, "they're gonna make it" (Easy Rider), but as Hopper points out, "He goes to the commune, hears the people have been eating dead horses off the side of the road—does he break any of that fifty thousand out of his gas tank? What does he do? Nothing" (Carson 70). Billy is the immature, streetwise, gluttonous American individual out for his own self-interest. In that same scene he sees the reality of the hippies' situation stating, "Hey man, they're not going to grow anything here. This is sand" (70). George is the hero, Hopper says, and is "trapped America," recognizing the problem but unable to do anything about it (72).

Essentially, the point the film is making is that the quest for domination, to fulfill the manifest destiny laid out by some of America's most celebrated thinkers backfired. The once fertile land of promise lies destroyed by the corruption of American values. Billy and Wyatt
represent American greed and selfishness personified. And
here we find another irony--the irony that audiences
forgive the protagonists' harmful nature. The authors can
be commended for their rhetorical savvy. Though Billy and
Wyatt act destructive, selfish, and gluttonous, the
audience views them with sympathy. Wyatt and Billy can't
help but act destructively. History, democracy, mythology
and every other sort of social conditioning determine their
behavior. In the end, we feel sorry for these two loser
drug dealers because their characters are stock
representations of the anglo-male plight. They failed in
their quest to go from rags to riches--just like Willy
Lowman and Jay Gatsby failed. The American audience has
been trained to sympathize with these characters. Wyatt
and Billy do not break free from the cliché; they do not
truly rebel like Walter Younger rebels in A Raisin in the
Sun or Lily Bart in The House of Mirth.

Despite all of the flaws Billy, Wyatt and George
posses, they remain counter-culture heroes. They are upheld
as the quintessential rebels and are still wildly popular
American images. Easy Rider was cutting edge because it
seemed to challenge the "old" way of thinking without
taking any real risks. Though blatantly sexist and non-
inclusive of minorities, *Easy Rider* was considered by Yippie leader Abbie Hoffman to be the "almost perfect propaganda film" (Woodstock Nation 11). Its auteurs were heavily into the counter-culture movement and brought it to the mainstream with the exploration of life on a hippie commune and the philosophical and religious benefits of smoking pot and dropping acid. The clothing was hip and the music popular. But for all of its innovation, the story, as we have discussed throughout chapters two and three, when shod of its beads and slang, is bound in nearly every way to American mythology, and American mythology leaves limited room for change. In the end, the counter-culture movement becomes little more than a rhetorical device to further solidify traditional American ideals—an irony that seems unintentional given the theme of rebellion present throughout the film.

*Easy Rider*'s inability to affect real change is illustrated most clearly through its treatment of women and minorities. Interestingly, Wyatt and Billy have less regard for women than what is found in traditional cowboy mythology. Larry McMurtry discusses the historical aversion cowboys have to women:
I do find it possible to doubt that I have ever known a cowboy who liked women as well as he liked horses, and I know that I have never known a cowboy who was as comfortable in the company of women as he was in the company of his fellow cowboys... Most [cowboys] marry, and love their wives sincerely, but since their sociology idealizes women and their mythology excludes her the impasse which results is often little short of tragic. (147-50)

This passage reflects the paradoxical nature of the cowboy’s simultaneous love for and exclusion of women. This is where Fonda, Hopper and Southern stray in their portrayal of the cowboy. According to McMurtry, the cowboy’s uncomfortable relationship with women comes from a sense of inadequacy and unworthiness—they idealize women. Billy and Wyatt seem to think nothing whatsoever of women—except, of course, as means to fulfilling their sexual desires.

The images of women portrayed in Easy Rider are far from ideal. In every encounter with women Billy and Wyatt have (of which there are four), the female is represented in a deeply sexist manner, portrayed as a domestic servant.
and/or provider of sex. Though this may seem ironic in light of the civil rights revolution of which the auteurs were active participants, in actuality, it embodies the general attitude of the leftist male at the time. (Another telling Abbie Hoffman quote goes something like this, "The only alliance I would make with the Women's Liberation Movement is in bed" (qtd. in Sisterhood is Powerful 38).)

The first encounter Wyatt and Billy have with a woman is at the ranch where they fix Wyatt's flat tire. They stay for dinner with the farmer and his family. The rancher has a Mexican wife who, he tells his visitors, is Catholic, hence the large brood of children. Not given any lines of dialogue, she is dismissed early in the scene to fetch her husband some coffee—a command that she readily obeys. This scene is the closest we get to seeing the full realization of the American dream. The rancher is self-sufficient and successful. Because of the cowboys' aversion to the domesticated yeoman or farmer's stable way of life, Wyatt and Billy do not stay at the ranch long, but Wyatt does express admiration for the rancher saying, "you got a nice spread here... It's not everyone who can live off the land; you know, do your own thing in your own time—you should be proud" (Easy Rider).
Next, women are present when Billy and Wyatt drop the hitchhiker off at the commune. Here, the women are in charge of the cooking and the children while the men tend to the fields. Billy and Wyatt go skinny-dipping with two of the women—Sarah and Lisa. While they are swimming, Billy, in jest, grabs Sarah by her hair and drags her around the pool. They all laugh, probably have sex, and then the men are on their way. Lee Hill mentions that originally, the script made it clear that Wyatt falls in love with Lisa (his skinny-dipping partner). He contemplates staying at the commune, but eventually chooses to continue on to Mardi Gras with Billy (Hill 46). Apparently, the authors felt that Wyatt falling in love was not necessary to the story's movement and cut the scene. The audience is left with a scene where, after preparing them a meal, the women fulfill the sexual needs of the two cowboys and are not seen or heard from again.

Women in this portion of the film also have minimal dialogue, limited to Sarah’s airing to the hitchhiker, who is the apparent leader of the commune community, the domestic problems concerning too many people showing up uninvited, then not sharing their hash; and Lisa’s flirtations with Wyatt involving the guessing of his
astrological sign. There is a moment inside of the commune when another woman asks Lisa to explain a passage from the *I Ching*. The girl reads the passage aloud, “Starting brings misfortune. Perseverance brings danger. Not every demand for change in the existing order should be heeded. On the other hand, repeated and well-founded complaints should not fail to a hearing” (*Easy Rider*). This moment is a perfect opportunity for Lisa to express her opinion about the turmoil generated by oppression and her opinion about women’s still unheeded “repeated and well-founded complaints” regarding unequal treatment. But she does not have an opportunity to say anything because at that moment, a mime troupe enters the building interrupting the serious turn of conversation with a theatrical display regarding the status of the meal. The obvious brush-off women get in *Easy Rider*, most poignantly dramatized in this scene, represents the treatment women in the sixties leftist movement as a whole received from their male counterparts.

Robin Morgan in the introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* explains:

The current women’s movement was begun largely, although not completely, by women who had been
active in the civil-rights movement, in the anti-war movement, in student movements, and in the Left generally. There's something contagious about demanding freedom, especially where women, who comprise the oldest oppressed group on the face of the planet, are concerned. Thinking we were involved in the struggle to build a new society, it was a slowly dawning and depressing realization that we were doing the same work and playing the same roles in the Movement as out of it: typing the speeches that men delivered, making coffee but not policy, being accessories to the men whose politics would supposedly replace the Old Order. But who's New Order? Not ours, certainly . . . The way in which women have so far been used in "alternate culture" communes, however, has made me extremely wary. Instead of cooking Betty Crocker casseroles in Scarsdale, she's stirring brown rice in Arizona...and instead of being the "property" of one man, she's now the "property" of all the men in the collective. (xxiii, xxxvii-xxxviii, emphasis hers)
The women in the commune are portrayed as domestic, sexual objects, and it seems they do not mind their status.

The next two encounters with women are no different. The restaurant scene, where Wyatt, Billy and George are refused service shows females as possible catalysts (because of their flirtatious behavior) for the anger of the local rednecks. A group of teenage girls are juxtaposed with a group of southern racist men sitting in booths in the restaurant. The segregation of male and female to their own tables creates immediate tension between the sexes. The camera cuts to the girls giggling over the three hippies, then it cuts to the men making prejudiced comments. This sequence is repeated several times until Wyatt, Billy and George leave. The girls follow the three men and ask for a ride on their motorcycles. Meanwhile, the locals watch from the restaurant window commenting that the three men will not make it past the town line alive. The girls, essentially, are responsible for the subsequent beating of the three travelers and the death of George Hanson. The viewer is left wondering whether the beatings would have occurred if the girls were not present in the diner. This scene and the commune scene reiterate Morgan’s point about women as
property. Billy and Wyatt belonged to the same male group at the commune so they could make use of the women there. But they were rivals of the men in the diner and the attention given them by the girls was threatening and required suppression.

_Easy Rider_ presents four female stereotypes—the good wife, the "liberated," free-love hippie woman, the coquettish, flirtatious, trouble-making young girl and the prostitute. By its release date (1969), the National Organization for Women had been up and running for three years, Marlene Dixon had been fired from the University of Chicago sparking massive demonstrations of protest, and it had been six years since _The Feminine Mystique_ by Betty Friedan saw its climb to the best seller list (Feminist Chronicles 45-54). That a mainstream film, made in the light of prominent women's issues, with the counter-culture's best interests in mind was wrought with so much sexism is telling. That the film was—and still is—so successful is also telling. The mistreatment of women is accepted as an historical fact, and perhaps hasn't generated criticism because it has simply gone unnoticed.

The truth seems to be that the rhetors were not trying to liberate anyone. They were simply using the popular
themes of the time to create a story that would sell. Cowboy myth, regional myth, road myth are all ingrained in the American psyche. But there is no place for liberated women or truly free minorities in these myths. Total equality goes against everything of which the myths are made. We cannot even discuss the treatment of minorities in *Easy Rider* because there is none. They are sadly neglected.

*Easy Rider* is essentially a film bewailing the plight of the young white male, oppressed by other white males. It takes the popular issues of the day and rearranges them to suit the dominant power. One of the foremost examples of this rearrangement can be seen in the jail scene. Wyatt and Billy are riding through a small town in the south when they are arrested for parading without a permit. Their incarceration is seemingly a statement about the intolerance of southerners toward those not like themselves. The scene, however, can be problematized when one historicizes the charge against them. Parading without a permit was the charge police used to curtail civil rights demonstrations in the South. In fact, this is the very charge Martin Luther King Jr. was imprisoned for in Birmingham, Alabama when he wrote *Letter from Birmingham*.
Jail. Considering *Easy Rider* co-author Dennis Hopper marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery, Alabama, the similarity of the charges is no mere coincidence.

By applying this charge to two white males, the auteurs devalue the struggle for freedom African-Americans engaged in during the Civil Rights movement. They imply with this scene that what happened to African Americans in the South is the same as what happened to hippies in the South—ignoring the centuries of enslavement and violence African Americans endured at the hands of Southerners. Essentially the auteurs are saying oppression is blind to race, which is simply not true. It may be true that the white male hippie experienced prejudice in the South during this time period, but to suggest this prejudice is anywhere near the prejudice suffered by African Americans is a morally questionable rhetorical stance. It supposes that the Southerner hates everyone, regardless of race, taking no account of the history and mythology that dictates the region’s culture. Besides being an outrageous stereotype of the Southerner, this kind of rhetoric puts the power back into the hands of the white male, equating his plight with that of the African American. Though George is a lawyer for the ACLU, there is no mention of him defending
African Americans, only white males with long hair. The African American civil rights struggle in the South does not exist in the world as presented by *Easy Rider*.

This type of rhetoric is safe to present to the mainstream because even if it has a liberating influence, virtually no change in the social structure would occur. Wyatt and Billy take drugs, have long hair and ride motorcycles, but they really just act in the way American myth dictates. They take to the road looking for greener pastures. They fail when they break the rules, but are still sympathetic and heroic. *Easy Rider* is a classic tale that cannot help but be well-received by the mainstream. It takes a movement thought by the mainstream to be wholly un-American and makes it as American as can be, and, interestingly enough, at the last minute, it Christianizes it as well.

The last time women appear in *Easy Rider* is at Madame Tinkertoy's House of Blue Lights. George has labeled these women as meat saying, "these are no pork chops, these are U.S. prime" (*Easy Rider*). From this point the story seems to change its course from cowboy mythology to that of Christian (predominantly Catholic) mythology; adapting the American cowboy as ultimate rebel into a metaphor for
Christ. This transition, to me, seems sloppy and unexpected; however, it is obviously the intention of the auteurs at this point in the film to transform Captain American into a modern day Christ and Billy into the humanity he could not save.

Before meeting up with the two prostitutes, the scene at the restaurant and the initial whorehouse scene introduce the transformation. Images of Christ flash between images of Wyatt while the Electric Prunes’ rendition of Kyrie Eleison plays throughout the meal. Every time the singer says the name “Christi” the camera flashes to Wyatt. This meal is literally, and figuratively, the two men’s last supper. At this point it becomes clear that Mardi Gras was not an arbitrary destination. Mardi Gras, translated “Fat Tuesday,” is the celebration before Ash Wednesday and the forty days of lent that come before the observance of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. The gluttony exhibited in Billy as he gobbles down his food and wine is juxtaposed with a composed Wyatt who seemingly lacks earthly lusts. In the whorehouse, the auteurs present side by side images of the Virgin Mary with seductive looking prostitutes, perhaps commenting on the complex intermingling of sacred and
profane that exists in the human condition and is so apparent during a celebration such as Mardi Gras. That Wyatt’s prostitute is a woman named Mary completes the allusion. Mary is part Virgin Mary part Mary of Magdalene.

After seeing the sights of Mardi Gras, the group take an acid trip in a cemetery which, in light of the previous biblical allusions, may be representative of Christ’s agony in the garden (though the presence of Karen, Mary and Billy make this assumption questionable). While a girl’s voice recites the rosary, Karen and Mary take off their clothes and cry over not being beautiful, not being able to conceive a child, not being loved. At the same time, Billy is trying to coerce Karen to have sex with him, and Wyatt is clearly suffering - hugging a statue while crying out blame to his mother and expressing hatred toward her.

In Hopper’s interview with L.M. Kit Carson, he talks about how this scene was inspired by the Gospel According to St. Thomas, a text discovered in 1946 still unrecognized as a true gospel by most Christian denominations (26). Hopper focuses in on Thomas’ instructions, “if you do not hate your mother and father in the same way I hate mine, you shall not be worthy of being a disciple” (Hopper quoting St. Thomas 26). Hopper says he used Fonda’s
mother’s recent suicide to get the real emotion in the cemetery scene. The allusion to Thomas’ gospel is lost to the audience because there is no reference to it in the film.

Giving Wyatt — the modern American cowboy — Christ-like characteristics is a brilliant rhetorical move (no matter how sloppy) because it lends an otherworldly weight to America’s manifest destiny; thus generating self-gratifying sympathy for Wyatt from middle-class white America, and elevating the cowboy figure from mere mythological status to god-like status.

Here we are faced with the question of intent. The contradictions within Easy Rider suggest the auteurs were not fully aware of their subject’s cultural power. Would they have been so bold as to compare Wyatt to Jesus Christ if they possessed a comprehensive historical understanding of the cowboy myth’s supporting role in manifest destiny? Were they conscious of the exclusions of women and minorities? Did Easy Rider use American mythology in an attempt to generate culture-changing awareness? Or did mythology, worked into the psyche of every American — auteur or otherwise — use Easy Rider to secure itself an influential place in the minds of another generation?
CHAPTER FOUR

POPULISM AND THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

The reason *Easy Rider* is so paradoxical in nature may be because it uses the ideals of American populism to convey the rhetoric of political liberalism. In *1960s Counterculture and the Legacy of American Myth: A Study of Three Films*, Bren Ortega Murphy and Jeffery Scott Harder explore this notion. They explain American populism as "rooted in the 'golden past,' in a return to values rather than trusting in a 'new world,' and a belief in the 'simple life' of yore" (Internet, Ebsco). *Easy Rider* obviously upholds populist ideals. All of the myths it uses embrace and romanticize early American history. George Hansen says to Billy, "this used to be a hell'uv a good country" (*Easy Rider*). This statement begs the question--when? When slavery was legal? When women were not permitted to vote? When Native Americans were being massacred? The populist ideal does not coincide with the new-left quest for social change, but that this quest is a product of American culture means the new-left cannot help but have populism in its fundamentals.
Murphy and Harder make a sound argument for the Americanism in Easy Rider by way of populism, and their point is reiterated through the exploration of myth in the film. But I think the real reason the film is such a testament to American values is because it is a product of this country’s ultimate manifest destiny—embodiment by way of the culture industry.

This country may have started out agrarian, but with rapid growth, industrialization soon prevailed. In order for industry to continue as the engine running the economic machine, the consumer must constantly consume.

In “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer supply a theory that depicts culture as an intricate web of marketing strategies, propaganda and advertisements aimed at perpetuating consumption and keeping the public subdued. The first hint that Easy Rider was merely a pawn in the culture industry’s mass marketing strategy is that Easy Rider is a film—a film, though touted as independent and created with a small budget—financed and distributed by the major movie studio Columbia Pictures. Presented as a look at the political and cultural oppression withstood by non-conformists, the film’s creators are a group of white
men well versed, raised even, in the movie making business. Fonda and Hopper came from a conglomerate history of classic Hollywood and sixties liberalism (Peter Fonda’s father Henry appeared in numerous films and was a Hollywood mainstay for four decades, while Dennis Hopper’s mentor was famed Hollywood rebel James Dean).

_Easy Rider’s_ auteurs’ motives were clearly less than altruistic. This desire for money is illustrated by the terrible fall-out Hopper and Fonda had with Terry Southern after they downplayed Southern’s contribution to the film. In a 2001 _Harper’s_ review of _Now Dig This: The Unspeakable Writings of Terry Southern_, George Plimpton describes the fallout:

Terry was always very bitter about his experience with _Easy Rider_. . . . The film was made on such a shoe-string, with so little hope of financial return, that Terry took no more notice of a possible profit than he did of business affairs in general. For a film that made, according to Terry, more than $50 million, he was paid only $3,900, with residuals rarely amounting to more than $100 a year. Particularly galling was Dennis Hopper’s contention that Southern’s
contribution was minimal—a view somewhat
disapproved by a court case in which Terry was
able to produce an original script and Hopper was
not. (Harper’s, Internet)
The capitalist desire for individual advancement seems to
have motivated the makers of Easy Rider. In Dennis
Hopper’s interview with L.M. Kit Carson, after commenting
at length about how corrupt American values are, Hopper
then relates an encounter he had with a young communist who
asked Hopper why he did not give the money used to produce
the film to “the Cause.” Hopper replied, “Hey, all I know
is how to make movies. I don’t know anything else. It
took me fifteen years to raise three hundred and seventy
thousand dollars. I’m not going to give it to the Cause—I
am the Cause” (71). This is the same interview in which
Hopper criticized Wyatt for not giving any money to the
hippies during the commune scene (70).

The auteurs were capitalists prompted by the profit
motive; therefore, their film reflects the capitalist
ideology upheld by the culture industry. They simply moved
the game to a different field. They updated the same old
story—the same old myths to suit the needs of an
entertainment industry trying to regain influence over a
changing middle-class. The film drew from a variety of wells and was not afraid to depict violence or the use of drugs; it used current popular music and touted the ideals of the counter-culture society, but at the same time, its auteurs were experienced in the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking. Both viewed popular, commercial cinema with scorn and acted in independent films. Lee Hill describes their influences:

The acting paid homage to the Actors Studio and the groundbreaking experiments of John Cassavettes' *Shadows* (1959) and Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World* (1963). The self-conscious use of the camera, especially the jump-cuts and zooms, also displayed the influence of the work of the various European new waves then flooding American art houses and film societies . . . The editing built on the frenetic cutting of Richard Lester and mid-60's television advertising . . . The underground films of Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, Andy Warhol and others suggested seemingly infinite possibilities of cinematic expression . . . (36)
Instead of being intimidated by the experimental like so many of Hollywood's established filmmakers, Hopper and Fonda, along with Jack Nicholson and cinematographer Laszlo Kovacs, took advantage of the work being done independent of Hollywood. They brought the new filming techniques into Hollywood mainstream, and by coupling them with the simple road movie plot line and traditional American mythological and religious themes they created a familiar, yet innovative cinematic environment. Because of this artful combination audiences were able to assimilate the new along with the old without threat or alienation, and Easy Rider thus became the definitive road film imitated and respected to this day. Over the past thirty years the dynamics of the road movie have been explored continually in films including Duel (1972), Natural Born Killers (1994), Kalifornia (1993) and Thelma and Louise (1991) (Hill 67-9).

But take out the jump cuts and zooms, long hair and drugs, and what is left is a traditional, comfortable American story that does not take risks or sincerely critique the status quo. Adorno and Horkeheimer explain:

It is with good reason that the interest of innumerable consumers is directed to the technique, and not to the contents which are
stubbornly repeated, outworn, and by now half discredited. The social power which the spectators' worship shows itself more effectively in the omnipresence of the stereotype imposed by technical skill than in the stale ideologies for which the ephemeral contents stand in. (10) The culture-industry allows for innovation because it needs to constantly reinvent itself in order to stay appealing. Robert Rosenstone in "The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Post-Literate Age," confirms that a film is bound by its form:

Our sense of the past is shaped and limited by the possibilities and practices of the medium in which that past is conveyed...Which means that whatever historical understanding the mainstream film can provide will be shaped and limited by the conventions of the closed story, the notion of progress, the emphasis on individuals, the single interpretation, the heightening of emotional stakes, and the focus on surfaces. (59)

The limitations of the film as a historical medium, as Rosenstone and Adorno and Horkeheimer cite, are numerous.
In the case of *Easy Rider*, Rosenstone's list of limitations is compounded by the capitalistic influences present in business of filmmaking and the motivations of the individuals creating the film. There are so many fiscal agendas that need to be met, from paying the actors to making sure the film will be successful at the box office that a film, like *Easy Rider*, can be transformed almost unwittingly from an honest attempt at making at social critique to the very thing it set out to criticize. Though it seems *Easy Rider* was at least conceived with noble intentions, it was made by people with a capitalistic agenda. Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper were supporters of the liberal cause and they wanted to be avant-garde, yet they could not ignore their upbringing and their knowledge of the film business. This is ironic because in their desire to reach as many people as possible, they sacrificed the cause they were attempting to promote.

Hopper said in his interview with Carson, "if you want to reach a large mass of people at this point in history, you have to deal with the people who are going to release your picture" (71, emphasis his). His point is well taken. The culture-industry, with all of its money and power, is in control of what gets produced and evading the culture-
industry seems near impossible. The problem with trying to work with those at the helm is that one has to conform. If the auteurs really wanted to make a statement about the plague of American values, then perhaps they would have made a film glorifying the Amish, but instead they latched on to popular themes and cultural conventions. Their portrayal of the hippy generated ticket sales from those audience members who considered themselves hippies, the curious and those who wanted further proof for preconceived notions—that's a lot of people—and a lot of money in the bank.

The same communist who questioned Hopper's motives, also questioned the motive behind using "commercial" music in the film. The soundtrack includes songs by Steppenwolf, the Byrds and Bob Dylan—all well-known musicians. Hopper gave his you've-got-to-work-with-the-people-who-put-up-the-money reply (71). But the communist's point is worth exploration. Adorno and Horkeheimer state that the same songs, singers, actors and plots are continually recycled to produce the effect of familiarity and submission. They may be rearranged, but there is always an underlying feeling of comfort and safety for the listener/viewer and this keeps viewers subdued (3). Repeatedly using the same
myths also accomplishes this goal. The cowboy may be a rebel, but as far as society in general is concerned, he has always been more hero than outcast. Using an American archetype as a primary thematic force limited the auteur’s freedom to move outside of the archetype’s boundaries and reinforces the culture-industry’s hold on societal conventions.

Hopper argued that it is fine and well to make a small budget, meaningful film, but no one will watch it except for the people who are already sold on the movement. This is an unfortunate truth dominating any culture-industry. But Adorno and Horkeheimer explain this monopolistic sword as being double-edged. It is correct to say that the culture industry produces and then the masses consume, with little room for independent artists to be heard unless they conform to the culture-industry’s standards. But, they say, this phenomenon is not merely the domination of one upon the other:

While the mechanism is to all appearances planned by those who serve up the data of experience, that is, by the culture industry, it is in fact forced upon the latter by the power of society, which remains irrational, however we may try to

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rationalize it; and this inescapable force is processed by commercial agencies so that they give an artificial impression of being in command. (3)

This aspect of Adorno and Horkeheimer's argument suggests that the culture-industry has infiltrated and blurred the line between itself and the society it dominates. With this in mind, it seems Easy Rider's ironies and failure to truly say something radical was inevitable. It could not help but be a product of the society that produced it. Therefore, demonizing the film for its politically liberal inadequacies would be an unfair judgment.

Notwithstanding, Easy Rider's auteurs did believe they were creating a revolutionary piece of art, just as many involved in the radical left movement of the 1960's thought they were creating a revolution. Upon examining Easy Rider, "the almost perfect propaganda film," it becomes clear why this was just not the case. Revolution, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is "the complete overthrow of an established government or social order by those previously subject to it" (1,234). But as Dr. Searle's quote established in chapter one:
There was no vision, no articulate philosophy, no conception of social organization and social change. What there were were a series of emotional moments, a series of passions, a series of desperately important issues . . . .

(Berkeley)

Easy Rider, and the radical left as a whole was working within the existing social organization. Because of this it was bound to society’s rules. A true revolutionary cannot be a cowboy if the cowboy is an American icon. The cowboy is an established, accepted character in the social order. The myth serves as catharsis for rebellion.

The cowboy myth is bound by society’s rules, and Easy Rider’s auteurs respect, enjoy and use the myth as it exists within those rules. Myth, as Slotkin and Rudloff point out, has the power to control. The cowboy myth controlled the direction of Easy Rider despite social advancements in the area of civil liberties. McMurtry notes specifically the cowboy myth’s power:

As a figure of high romance, the cowboy has remained compelling. He has outlasted the noble redman, Johnny Reb and Billy Yank, G.I. Joe, and any number of sports kings and entertainers. He
successfully absorbed the figure of the pioneer, and with luck may even outlast acid rock. (23)

*Easy Rider* is a testament to the cowboy myth’s longevity and malleability. And now in the beginning of a new century, the cowboy is still present in American culture. In the years since *Easy Rider* it has evolved to include new ways of thinking. Recent films including the Jackie Chan/Owen Wilson comedies *Shanghai Noon* and *Shanghai Knights* and the Will Smith/Kevin Kline comedy *Wild, Wild West* are testament to that evolution.

Adorno and Horkeheimer say that within the culture industry, “The explicit and implicit, exoteric and esoteric catalog of the forbidden and tolerated is so extensive that it not only defines the area of freedom but is all-powerful inside it . . .” (5). This explains *Easy Rider’s* treatment of women and minorities; it explains *Easy Rider’s* use of myth; and it explains its use of popular themes, clothes, music and so on. The “catalog of forbidden and tolerated” also serves as a reason why a myth’s evolution moves somewhat slowly compared with the changes in society.

*Easy Rider* serves as a step in the evolution of American mythology. It was the first film of its kind and is still widely imitated. *Easy Rider* gave the cowboy a
physical makeover, but could not overcome the ironies and power inherent in the myth. It contains historical, political, cultural and mythological value, lending insight into American society on many levels. In seriously examining a text such as Easy Rider, we come closer to understanding why our society functions as it does and how our history shapes our opinions and ideals.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


