ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: THE SURFACE OF THINGS: READING A CINEMA OF DECLINE

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A declensionist imagination dominated intellectual and cultural discourse in American society through the late twentieth century. The 1970s and 1980s were punctuated by real declines of multiple sorts, but the alarmed debates about juvenile delinquency, rural blight, urban decay, and violent crime often obscured coterminous trends and the more meaningful critiques of the historical forces prompting the changes felt as decline. By looking at American films from the 1970s and 1980s focused on thematic decline of varied sorts, this project explores the postmodern social experience of the late-twentieth century and the cultural roots of overcriminalization in the United States. Reading between the filmic lines (or what film theorist Siegfried Kracauer called the surface expressions of cinema) provides clues into unpacking the often contradictory political, social, and cultural configurations taking shape at the end of the twentieth century.

THE SURFACE OF THINGS: READING A CINEMA OF DECLINE

by

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For Wil and Gris

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Table of Contents

Dedication……..……..ii

Acknowledgements…….iii

Table of Contents……v

List of Figures…….vi

Introduction: Reading a Crisis……1

The Delinquency Film: Fearing for the Future……...29

The Road Film: The Passing of the Pastoral……...84

The City Picture: The Ecstasy of Decay…….128

Night Spaces and Film Violence…….193

Conclusion: The Decline Ornament……245

Bibliography……253

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure No.	Figure Title	Page No.
1.1	Juvenile delinquency editorial cartoons	39
1.2	Film stills from *Over the Edge* (1979)	61
1.3	1975 *Observer* image depicting the "new" teenager	63
1.4	Film still from *Suburbia* (1983)	70
2.1	Promotional poster for *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971)	103
2.2	Film stills from *The Loveless* (1981)	111
2.3	Film still from *Wise Blood* (1979)	113
3.1	Street violence editorial cartoon	134
3.2	Urban crisis editorial cartoon	142
3.3	Drug menace editorial cartoon	145
3.4	Film still from *The Social Life of Small Urban Places* (1980)	150
3.5	Film still from *The Social Life of Small Urban Places* (1980)	152
3.6	Film still from *Heavy Traffic* (1973)	168
3.7	Film still from *My Dinner with Andre* (1981)	179
3.8	Still from a Partnership for a Drug-Free America PSA, 1985	181
3.9	Cartoon from *Life in Hell*, 1982	183
4.1	Promotional poster for *Ms. 45* (1981)	209
4.2	Promotional poster for *Maniac* (1980)	222
4.3	Film stills from *The Last Horror Film* (1982)	224
4.4	Film still from *The Last Horror Film* (1982)	227
4.5	Film stills from *Body Double* (1984)	231
4.6	Film stills from *Crimes of Passion* (1984)	238
4.7	Film stills from *Crimes of Passion* (1984)	239
4.8	Film stills from *Crimes of Passion* (1984)	242
5.1	Film stills from *After Hours* (1985)	248
5.2	Film stills from *After Hours* (1985)	249

5.3 Film stills from *After Hours* (1985) 250

"If the ethic reduces to Know Thyself and Be Thyself, what makes it radically different from Socratic moderation with its stern conservative respect for the experience of the past, is that the Hip ethic is immoderation, child-like in its adoration of the present (and indeed to respect the past means that one must also respect such ugly consequences of the past as the collective murders of the State). It is this adoration of the present which contains the affirmation of Hip, because its ultimate logic surpasses even the unforgettable solution of the Marquis de Sade to sex, private property, and the family, that all men and women have absolute but temporary rights over the bodies of all other men and women—the nihilism of Hip proposes as its final tendency that every social restraint and category be removed, and the affirmation implicit in the proposal is that man would then prove to be more creative than murderous and so would not destroy himself. Which is exactly what separates Hip from the authoritarian philosophies which now appeal to the conservative and liberal temper—what haunts the middle of the Twentieth Century is that faith in man has been lost, and the appeal of authority has been that it would restrain us from ourselves. Hip, which would return us to ourselves, at no matter what price in individual violence, is the affirmation of the barbarian for it requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the State; it takes literal faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth."

Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Dissent*, Fall 1957

"Given to analysis, we pass in review, and break down into comparable elements, all the complex value systems that have come to us in the form of beliefs, ideas, or cultures, thereby of course weakening their claim to absoluteness. So we find ourselves increasingly surrounded by mental configurations which we are free to interpret at will. Each is iridescent with meanings, while the great beliefs or ideas from which they issue grow paler. Similarly, photography has effectively impressed upon us the dissolution of traditional perspectives."

Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*

Introduction: Reading a Crisis

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan announced new federal initiatives to combat drug trafficking and organized crime. In 1986 an official Commission on Organized Crime was convened to tackle a growing perception of lawlessness and criminality in American society, or as Reagan had termed it earlier, the "dark, evil enemy within."[1] The President's movement was not however solely targeting crime, but spoke to a more diverse, even incoherent, set of issues that revolved around social and cultural degeneration and which had animated previous administrations. Indeed, Reagan's promise to "return" America to the days of

[1] Ronald Reagan, Remarks Announcing Federal Initiatives Against Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime, October 14, 1982.

"respect for the law" is telling of his positioning of the United States in an historical narrative of time. Fighting crime would not only make Americans' houses safe *again*, but what was at stake were the "magnificent accomplishments of the American past."

The perception of an American crime epidemic traced its origins to, at the least, Barry Goldwater's platform to combat "crime in the streets," an aim subsequently taken up by President Richard Nixon and his pledge to restore "law and order" through a dual war on crime and war on drugs. Lyndon Johnson had launched his own commissions on law enforcement and the administration of justice in 1965 and the causes and prevention of violence in 1968. Since 1971, the United States has spent over one trillion dollars and arrested forty-three million Americans in the War on Drugs, with the current population of incarcerated Americans sitting at over two and one quarter million. What cultural conditions allowed this to happen?

One place to begin unraveling the problem might be with Norman Mailer. "A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life," wrote Norman Mailer in 1957. He was of course lamenting the pull of conformity on the daily life of Americans. The antidote, he believed, was a radical new subjectivity premised on the dignity and freedom offered by moral individualization. Written in 1957 and appearing initially in the left-intellectual magazine *Dissent*, Mailer's essay *The White Negro* was a harbinger of midcentury change. In it, he articulated an emerging ethic that would define the coming decades—principled "immoderation, child-like in its adoration of the present." Mailer's writing blends together a materialist and psychic interpretation of American history, as he described a new tendency in American individualism that would typify the late twentieth century, primarily that of the existential search for happiness in the midst global chaos (his was the Cold War nuclear

threat). Drawing on the black experience, he suggested the "hip" was a sensibility that emerged from alienation. The nihilism brought on by the horrors of the Second World War and the nuclear age ("death being causeless, life was causeless as well") were transformative socially and psychologically. Anxious energy had, he argued, typified the lives of black Americans for two centuries, caught as they were "on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy," but the disposition was spreading to a wider swathe of Americans, who could now embrace the at-once anarchic and pleasurable qualities of life on the edge of immanent disaster.[2]

Translating an effective form of anarchic pleasure to the realm of politics is the great complication in *The White Negro*, and its best passages wrestle with this problem. Mailer well understood that there was a dark proclivity, a susceptibility toward alarm, which grew alongside the change in moral sense he discerned. "What haunts the middle of the Twentieth Century," he lamented, "is that faith in man has been lost, and the appeal of authority has been that it would restrain us from ourselves." Mailer's solution was to welcome, indeed to jump headfirst, into the maelstrom of unpredictability. At the heart of his work is an imagined equilibrium that takes shape in the midst of anarchism—each seeking their own truth would result in a kind of lurching progress toward the benevolent society, a prophetic rationale for what could be possible under something akin to identity politics. This was despite the tendency and potential for individual violence that follows the removal of absolute disciplinary powers from the state. Long the province of state, punitive powers, including the threat of violence, were only accepted by the subject-citizen in the private and public realms in return for a modicum of stability. Of concern to those seeking out the hip,

[2] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Dissent* (Fall 1957).

argued Mailer, was the fear that such an absence would premise—the psychic terror a lack of state authority might arouse. How then to solve the problem?

The fact for Mailer was that human society was already inherently messy and uncomfortable. Existence was violence. The attendant psychic discomfort, which had accelerated quickly in the twentieth century, had found its traditional solution in greater control apparatuses of the state. But the opposite, the anarchic release from control, would allow men and women to choose their own fates, to become as it were, ethical barbarians. Such individual freedom came with the potential for violence, but it is the presence of choice that allowed for ecstatic human expression, indeed he argued that only then could the divine aspects of human nature be fully realized: "man would then prove to be more creative than murderous and so would not destroy himself."[3] The choice then is which type of violence is to be allowed—that of the individual or that of the state, and at what cost. Are we to lose our potential for the beloved society in a bargain for presumed stability? This is a core problem for the new, hip, individual and the world in which she was born.

In many ways this dissertation traces the problem that Mailer articulated and how it was answered by the end of the twentieth century. Criminality and social decay, and a consequent demand for order, emerged as defining issues in American politics and culture between the 1960s and 1980s. The chapters that follow look at the tension, even paradox, this phenomenon engendered in postmodern/late capitalist culture: the rise to prominence of a series of social anxieties related to crime and American "declension" and a celebration of the forces of revelry and ecstasy associated with decay.[4] On the one hand the culture, in

[3] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Dissent* (Fall 1957).
[4] A quick note on definitions. The term postmodern is notoriously difficult to define, though I attempt a cursory overview. In its most basic, and when not qualified, the postmodern here is defined as a challenge to historical metanarrative, which has largely defined the eras of human experience. This includes the metanarratives of

particular film culture, produced images that were dire, reflecting and spawning discourses of fear and criminalization. On the other they teased us with images of freedom, of what Mailer tried to articulate as an America on the cusp of deep cultural change and the rapturous and revolutionary release of a conservative restraint, the unwinding of the puritanical and retributive force in American society.

Culture is never homogenous, there are roads not taken, sensibilities that bloom and others that wither. America in the second half of the twentieth century had a strong trend in the rise of declensionist thought, or, to think of it another way, the eclipsing of the promise of the left-liberalism of the New Deal era and the boosterism of the postwar American century discourse. The pages that follow constitute foremost a history of cultural narratives about decline as they appeared in American film. However, I also seek to engage the related set of political and discursive issues related to crime (the disruption of order broadly conceived) to contextualize my reading of multiple films. The pivot in national politics toward a focus on crime over the long 1970s and 1980s was, I argue, one legislative policy response to much broader and complicated fears of declension in the late twentieth century, not entirely or directly associated with crime and not solely associated with conservative thinkers and politicians. Social decay in its many manifestations of crime, street violence, youth rebellion, the drug menace, and even human disaster was at the center of the declensionist imagination of the late twentieth century. If, mostly white, liberals and conservatives were afraid of, respectively, declining community, rising individualism, and narcissism or on the other hand

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Christianity, the enlightenment, Marxism, and the liberal-democratic state. I take postmodern as a cultural and social trend that embraces the chaos of the modern experience, to live in it without trying to transcend it. As David Harvey writes in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, "Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is." See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 44. It is, in effect, the social experience to the philosophical trend of nihilism.

materialism, youth rebellion, and family breakdown, tackling crime seemed one way of addressing these issues in an era in which there was a deficit of traditional liberal and conservative answers to such problems. The resonance of such narratives requires a quick delve into three overlapping aspects of postwar society: the postmodern social experience, the domestic structural transformations brought on by late capitalism/globalization, and the relation of both to what scholars term "overcriminalization."

A theoretical core of this dissertation is borrowed from philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who has looked at the relationships, reverberations, and distances between modernity and postmodernity. He argues that the modern discourse about law and order has been fashioned to provide a degree of therapeutic calm in the face of the "existential insecurity" (Mailer is a prescient voice in this timeline) brought on by the social arrangements of postmodern society. Specifically, in the period of "solid" modernity, social welfare nation states demanded that a degree of individual freedom be surrendered in return for the benefits of collective security. By contrast, in "liquid" modernity, a term coined to describe the disorientations associated with the increasingly fragmentary social experience of contemporary life, there has been "a trade off of collective security in exchange for the maximization of individual choice."[5]

Bauman's distinction of the postmodern relies on a set of arguments about "solid" modernity. He is careful to point out that the disruptions of the modern era have always been couched in the psychological and social phenomenon of feelings of rupture, dissolution of traditional bonds of family and place, and the quickening pace of time. This flurry was

[5] Zygmunt Bauman, "Social Issues of Law and Order," *British Journal of Criminology* 40 (2000), 205; See also Zygmunt Bauman *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

described famously by Marx in his description of the revolutionary power of capitalism, which demanded constant change and the sweeping away of previous forms before they even had the chance to solidify, engendering a sense that "All that is solid melts into air." But at the same point modernity in its "solid" form also correlated with the parameters laid out by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Modernism's tendency was toward bureaucratic positivism, scientism, the desire to establish order through classification, progress, rationalism, and above all the search for truth. For Adorno this stood as the recreation of a mythic (or religious) society in the modern world, with the varied limitations and unfreedoms of the modern world traced to the "rational" institutions of the enlightened state and reified by the culture industry. Many of the great horrors of the twentieth century were birthed from the desire to excise that which could not be integrated into a fabric of order. For Bauman modernity was likewise a quest bound up in a totalitarian dream. "The longing for order," he writes, "is at the same time a longing for death, because life is an incessant disruption of order."[6]

Bauman argues that postmodern society engenders a similar rampant anxiety and fear as a result of the insecurity that comes from unpredictable market forces, the drying up of democratic sovereignty over issues of economy and labor, and the psychological weight of molding the self into a commodity. "Today, in the late or postmodern stage of modernity…the inclination [is] to trade off a lot of security in exchange for removing more and more constraints cramping the exercise of free choice," which Bauman argues, "generates the widespread sentiments of fear and anxiety. It is these sentiments which seek their outlet (or are being channeled) in the concerns with law and order."[7] It is possible that

[6] Zygmunt Bauman, "Social Issues of Law and Order," *British Journal of Criminology* 40 (2000), 205-06.
[7] Ibid., 213.

such a state engenders the spontaneous desire for control from the masses, but it should be noted that the nation state is also increasingly incapable of mitigating the worst excesses of neoliberal market forces and free flowing capital. As a result, the state too has become invested in punishment as a way of exerting its own authority and legitimacy. "The tendency," Bauman argues is to "conflate the troubles of the intrinsic insecurity and uncertainty of the late modern/postmodern being in a single, overwhelming concern about personal safety—and the new realities of nation-state politics, particularly of the cut-down version of state sovereignty characteristic of the 'globalization' era."[8]

Bauman's work articulates several of the stress points becoming visible in the lives of many during the postwar era and broadly understood as the postmodern social experience. Mailer can be read as an early voice caught in this historical schism of changing understandings of social reality. His version of new subjectivity explained the flipside of the hip—the horror of perceive chaos, but he was not alone in explaining the shift and its dangers. Theorists and authors described the same anxiety brought on by "individual freedoms" (the hip, the postmodern sensibility, etc.) The sociologist and theorist Richard Sennett catalogued the "radical subjectivity" that emerged in the late twentieth century. Sennett argued, "Masses of people are concerned with their single life-histories and particular emotions as never before; this concern has proved to be a trap rather than a liberation."[9] The scourge of solipsism he catalogued was the sad denouement of the liberationist legacy of what was the hip for Mailer. Sennett's refined assessment was expressed more widely in Tom Wolfe's articulation of the 1970s as the "me" decade and

[8] Ibid., 215; See also Stuart Hall, et al, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978) which was one of the first scholarly works to trace the connections between the moral panics around crime to the emaciation of state legitimacy.
[9] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1974), 22, 5.

repeated again in Christopher Lasch's 1979 work *The Culture of Narcissism*. Sennett worried about the effect of such a limited perspective on politics: "people are working out in terms of personal feelings public matters which properly can be dealt with only through codes of impersonal meaning."[10] American society was taking on an "intimate vision of society" in which the famous feminist maxim that the personal is political had been taken to an antisocial end.[11] In his synthetic intellectual history, Daniel Rodgers argues that the middle-to-late-twentieth century was dominated by a tension between the metaphors of the mass society, one in which structuralist views predominated, and those of the individualized or disaggregated society. The late twentieth century should be conceived as an "age of fracture," argues Rodgers, in which social reality came to be imagined differently. Whereas "conceptions of human nature" in the immediate postwar era were generally "thick with context, social circumstance, institutions, and history," by the end of the twentieth century it was dominated by "choice, agency, performance, and desire."[12]

While a key element of the story is the profound instability of self that generated a desire for order, the structural transformation taking place in the late twentieth century cannot be underestimated. In many ways it constituted for Americans the very real "decline" that this dissertation appreciates. Increasingly the 1970s are treated as a watershed in the history of contemporary America.[13] Though historians are reluctant to compartmentalize history into

[10] Ibid., 5.
[11] Ibid., 5.
[12] Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.
[13] This is of course a simplification of a complex body of historiography which has emerged in the last decade and which treats the 1970s as perhaps the "pivotal decade" of the postwar era, usurping the place previously held by the 1960s in that narrative. The best synthetic treatments of the decade include Bruce Schulman's *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001) and Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A new Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Newer syntheses include Rick Perlstein's trilogy and Sean Wilentz's *Age of*

neat, ten-year slices, the themes and chronology of this decade are well trodden. Deep structural changes in United States economy, often summed up as deindustrialization, prompted the collapse of the high-wage, high-benefits "Fordist" economy of midcentury and the unraveling of the labor-management accord.[14] In light of the economic slump, working-class and lower-middle-class whites abandoned the commitments of the New Deal and the Great Society, a divorce made worse by left-liberal disenchantment with failures to redress the structural causes of poverty and racial inequality. The era saw the resegregation of urban and suburban space and a larger migration of military-industrial and technology sectors from the rustbelt to the sunbelt.[15] At the same time the global stature of the United States suffered greatly in the decade-long morass of the Vietnam War and the sense of precariousness in America's power abroad worsened with the fall of Saigon and the OPEC oil crisis. By the end of the decade, a nation made weary by Watergate listened, heads low, as a melancholic president admonished Americans to tighten their belts and face the reality of a changed historical paradigm. The Reagan Revolution was the denouement of the 1970s and a response

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Reagan: A History, 1974-2008 (New York: Harper, 2008). Castells serves as a much better grounding, in my opinion, than any of these more limited studies.

[14] Some have suggested the period would set the stage for a new gilded age. Labor historians such as Jefferson Cowie have explained the migration of capital and industry abroad, or deindustrialization, and the fracturing of the working class in the 1970s. Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010). See also Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave new World of Business* (New York: Picador, 2009), and Joseph A. McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[15] Works treating the spatial politics of postwar suburban and urban life, particularly the confluence and reconstitution of race and class in the mid-twentieth century include Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), and Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). For the purposes of this dissertation it is important to consider these mini-revolutions in lived life as just one of many disruptive forces that set the stage for increased focus on order in the same era.

to what one historian described as the "collective sadness" that gripped the country.[16] President Reagan's "morning in America" sought to eviscerate social welfare provisions while legitimating massive military expenditure. Reagan's administration successfully derided big government while expanding a nanny state for corporations by simultaneously promising free market growth globally and prosperity for mom and pop at home. If there is a definitive end to the dominance of the New Deal Order it is found in Reaganism.[17]

Historians such as Jefferson Cowie, Bruce Schulman, Andreas Killen, Natasha Zaretsky, and Robert Self all argue over the moment of "break" between the postwar era and the contemporary informational, late capitalist, contemporary, etc. era. Most of these works posit a break based on politics (1968), working class dissolution (1974), antiwar hemorrhage

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[16] Jefferson Cowie borrows from Michael Harrington's description of the mid-1970s as a moment of "collective sadness. See Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010); The rise of conservatism and the New Right is at the center of political histories of the period. Older scholarship tended to concentrate on regional white backlash and the harnessing of national reactionary polities through a top-down Southern Strategy and appeals to a "Silent Majority." In the work of Richard Hofstadter, modern conservatism was treated as a type of paranoia over economic decline, fear of cultural change, and southern resentment. Historians like Bruce Schulman, Julian Zelizer, Kim Phillips-Fein, Matthew Lassiter, Kevin Kruse, and Lisa McGirr have since problematized such an argument, instead suggesting that modern conservatism was "fiercely contested" and the result of "massive mobilization by activists, organizations, and political elites" that had persisted to struggle against the New Deal and Great Society for decades. See the introduction to Bruce Schulman and Julian Zelizer, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3. Nonetheless, backlash histories are still powerful, but have curiously come to center on the culture wars of post-sixties America. For example Dominic Sandbrook's *Mad As Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012). In this same vein of "backlash" histories, but more nuanced than the term suggests, are those focused on the tumultuous debates around feminism and the family in the 1970s and 1980s. These are not as narrowly focused on political coalitions as earlier histories but instead seek to explain the deeper realignment of civil society in the contemporary era as a difficult reckoning with social, cultural, familial, and gender transformations. See for example Robert Self's *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013) which looks at the rise of "breadwinner conservatism" or Natasha Zaretsky's *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

[17] Even this brief summary comes off as declensionist. However, there are a number of recent histories that treat the countervailing political forces of these decades and the continued successes of working people's movements, feminist activism, and the struggles of peoples of color. See for example Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), Michael Stewart Foley, *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), and Nancy Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

(1973), or moral panic (1974) but the era is not as easily disruptive as that. As I suggest, some early inklings are already visible in the postwar work of Mailer. For this reason, Manuel Castells serves perhaps best to illustrate the overlapping changes that were fashioning a new, globalized world from the 1960s through the 1980s. While important to appreciate the domestic political and cultural trends, by placing them in a broader global context the most significant and titanic shifts become more visible. In his Information Age trilogy Castells argues that a historical coincidence of three independent process brought on the "network society." These include the economic crises generated by the restructuring of capitalism and statism (also termed by other historians as the rise of finance capitalism and neoliberalism or alternatively deindustrialization and the rise of the service economy), the blooming of cultural movements such as libertarianism, feminism, environmentalism, and human rights, and the revolution brought on by information technologies such as mass media, telecommunications, and computers.

Together, the trends laid out by Castells constitute a social transformation of the highest order. The old labor arrangement was undone by the rise of discardable service jobs for the masses, precarious "flextime" jobs for the educated, and self-programmable work for the elite. The most fundamental shift, he claims, was the rise of various network flows in labor, people, capital, ideas, and materials that owe little allegiance to nation. Consequently, culture has, argues Castells, entered into the realm of "real virtuality" in which the disruptions in the rhythm of time (telecommunications transactions), pervasive media, and the blending of consumers and producers increasingly produce hypertexts which make the parsing of singular cultural texts from one another more and more difficult. It is the pastiche tendency of postmodern culture transferred to the digital age. It was also incredibly

disorienting.[18] Castells helps to lay out the larger scope for understanding some of the domestic political and social trends that came to pass in the late twentieth century. Structural changes and the onset and unfolding of the social and cultural experience of postmodernity were mutually reinforcing.

It is perhaps not surprising that crime is one of the main concerns to emerge as a result of the multifaceted changes taking place in the second half of the twentieth century. At first the choice to focus on crime might seem misguided or to narrow excessively the scope of my story. But I am doing so for three reasons: it is underappreciated in the historical literature, it has been at the center of the rise of the "victim citizen," the national security state, and a hyper-litigious society, and it was bipartisan in an age when "cultural" issues dominated politics and media. Crime, usually imagined and portrayed as "street crime," emerged as one of the defining issues in American politics and culture between the 1960s and 1980s. It was not a fictitious problem, one estimate suggests that crime rates in the United States were three times higher in 1980 than they had been in 1960, but those statistics obscure as well as enlighten.

Though primarily a cultural and intellectual history, one task of this project is to integrate the insights of criminal justice scholars into the historiography of the last third of the twentieth century, in particular the concept of "overcriminalization." It is defined perhaps best by the sociologist and criminologist Nils Christie who points out, "Acts are not, they *become*. So also with crime. Crime does not exist. Crime is created. First there are acts. Then

[18] Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Vol. 1, The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

follows a long process of giving meaning to these acts."[19] He argues that in western society the tendency has been to rely on law, specifically criminal justice, not as an avenue for addressing what is "left-over" from other forms of social control (family, neighbors, religion, etc.) but the primary avenue for addressing "an unlimited reservoir of what can be seen as crimes in modern times." "The social system has changed," argues Christie, "into one where there are fewer restraints against perceiving even minor transgressions of laws as crimes and their actors as criminals."[20]

This has been compounded by the fact that statutory crimes have grown enormously in American society as well as the power to surveil. Douglas Husak points out that the rise in crime and its response, mass imprisonment, are not easily correlated with increasing criminality but rather, "What is new is the power to arrest and prosecute nearly everyone—a power that derives from the ever-expanding scope of criminal statutes as written."[21] There are around 300,000 federal regulations, "enforceable through civil or criminal sanctions by the combined efforts of as many as 200 different agencies."[22] Of course, when it comes to the most enforced laws, such as limits on controlled substances, there are broad avenues for enforcement—for example marijuana and heroin fall under the same criminal statutes. Husak points out that in practice and despite a global crime decline taking place in the last several decades, the United States is alone in its scope and severity of punishment, as well as its cost. A staggering one in twenty children born in the United States will spend some portion of time in a state or federal prison. The US prison rate has quadrupled since 1980; the rate of

[19] Nils Christie, *Crime Control as Industry: Towards Gulags, Western Style, 3rd Ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 22.
[20] Ibid., 23.
[21] Douglas Husak, *Overcriminalization: The Limits of the Criminal Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 33.
[22] Ibid., 10.

imprisonment stood at 144 per 100,000 in 1970 up to 737 per 100,000 in 2005. This results in over 2.2 million in prison (a quarter of the global population of inmates) and over 7 million caught up in the criminal justice system through probation and parole.[23] The economic and social costs of this level of criminal justice is incalculable.

Finding the origins of this transformation are tricky, as I believe they owe much to the deeper structural and social changes already laid out. But there were also key political aspects to the genesis of law and order mania. In his study of the political culture of the 1960s, Michael Flamm has shown why crime emerged as such a powerful subject in that decade. "At a popular level, law and order resonated both as a social ideal and political slogan because it combined an understandable concern over the rising number of traditional crimes—robberies and rapes, muggings and murders—with implicit and explicit unease about civil rights, civil liberties, urban riots, antiwar protests, moral values, and drug use."[24] Flamm, along with Dennis Loo and others, points out that the focus on crime was largely manufactured in the 1960s by political elites.[25] Indeed, while murders doubled between 1963 and 1968, homicide rates in the 1960s were nonetheless at their lowest since 1910. For the

[23] Ibid., 4-7.
[24] Michael W. Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 4.
[25] Dennis Loo's study of the polling data from the 1960s show that street crime was barely registered as an issue in public opinion polls. The law and order consensus, argues Loo, "Lacked a genuine popular component. It was, rather, the *representation* of a popular consensus." See Dennis Loo, "The 'Moral Panic' that Wasn't: The Sixties Crime Issue in the US," in *Fear of Crime: Critical Voices in an Age of Anxiety*, ed. Murray Lee and Stephen Farrall (New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2009), 13; Similarly, Melissa Hickman Barlow points out that the moral panic around crime in the 1960s was due largely to anxiety over racial unrest and urban uprisings. The metaphors of a "war on crime" were, she argues, developed at the same moment that urban crime was categorized popularly as a black problem. In the 1950s, which were peppered by discourses of crime and unrest, no such tropes existed. See Melissa Hickman Barlow, "Race and the Problem of Crime in *Time* and *Newsweek* Cover Stories, 1946 to 1995," *Social Justice* (Summer 1998), 25, no. 2; Democrats were also guilty of flaming the fire. In 1966 President Johnson stated, "Crime—the fact of crime and the fear of crime—marks the life of every American…Fear [of crime] that can turn us into a nation of captives imprisoned nightly behind chained doors, double locks, barred windows. Fear that can make us afraid to walk city streets by night or public parks by day." Lyndon B. Johnson, "Special message to the Congress on Crime and Law Enforcement," March 9, 1966.

purposes of my study, Flamm's most important insight is that Americans "loaded law and order with layers of meaning virtually impossible to disentangle and turned it into a Rorschach test of public anxiety."[26] Flamm's work suggests that law and order declined from the national spotlight with conservatives in power in the 1970s, but this is also precisely the moment when it floods the cultural realm, particularly in film. His insight into the ways in which crime is used to express broader fears should be employed to explore the 70s and 80s because, I believe, it was as useful in those decades in explaining public anxiety about declension.

The focus on crime was not solely a Republican or conservative prerogative. Though President Nixon magnified the debate in 1971 with the launch of the War on Drugs, the battle was begun through Lyndon Johnson's Commission on Crime and subsequent Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968, both of which played their part in expanding the issue and ultimately inaugurated the transformation of criminal justice in our time. This transformation was one of the most profound developments of the contemporary era, though often unacknowledged in its historical treatments. William Stuntz has argued that a "pendulum justice" took shape in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the US moved from having one of the most lenient justice systems in the world and a normal or even relatively small prison population by global standards to one of the harshest "in the history of democratic government."[27] Jonathan Simon has argued even more forcefully in *Governing Through Crime* that while violence and the right to punish have been at the core of civil society from ancient times to the present, its current configuration is radically novel. In the last half of the twentieth century the "crime victim" became "the latest in a whole parade of

[26] Flamm, *Law and Order*, 4.
[27] William Stuntz, *The Collapse of American Criminal Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011): 2-3.

idealized citizens."[28] Whereas the yeoman farmer, the freedman, the industrial worker, and the consumer had once been at the center of policy and legislation, the victim of crime came to be the ideal subject for rationalizing legislation in the United States. Increasingly, protection from crime came to legitimate power in institutions not only of the state but schools, private firms, families, and neighborhoods. As a result, "A zero-risk environment" argues Simon, "is treated as a reasonable expectation, even a right."[29] Simon's point is well taken, but it should be emphasized that the "victim citizen" was conceived of as white and middle class and rarely included, for example, people of color victimized by state violence and by crime or women in their intimate relationships—as victims of sexual harassment, domestic violence, and sexual violence. That said, this dissertation will argue that the hegemonic or dominant discourse of decline emerged despite the many voices and groups that continued to resist such a characterization.

David Garland has shown that liberal criminologists and jurists also aided in the transformation of the criminal justice system. His work puts the astonishing upheaval of a century of thought about crime and punishment into context, arguing that the rise of the new punitive and victim-centered penal system has thoroughly undermined the rehabilitation model that formed the core of modern thinking about punishment since the dawn of the penitentiary.[30] There were also in the 1970s a host of popular texts that shaped debate in the emerging war on crime, perhaps most importantly, in 1975, James Wilson's *Thinking About Crime* aroused debate on the perceived American crime epidemic and advocated deterrence—getting tough on perpetrators primarily through harsher criminal penalties. This

[28] Jonathan Simon, *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 78.
[29] Ibid., 16.
[30] David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

was the most distilled and widely read justification for America's rising prison-industrial complex but was built upon a much broader rhetoric. The outcomes of these titanic shifts have only begun to be addressed, and include the seeds of the modern surveillance and national security state to the work of Michele Alexander who has shown the major consequences of this transformation for African Americans, effectively recreating a system of Jim Crow for African Americans and other underprivileged groups.[31]

My project proceeds from two premises vis a vis overcriminalization: that the 1970s were punctuated by crime and they were also punctuated by decline of multiple sorts unrelated to that phenomenon but which gave rising crime meaning. The two tendencies are mutually reinforcing. Heather Ann Thompson has suggested the connection between the regime of mass incarceration and the real declines in this era—the transformation of the working class into the working poor, urban decay, and the limiting of political liberalism—but the cultural sinews are not yet as clear.[32] Crime, as Michael Flamm suggests, might mean more, in the realm of perception and iconology, than rising incidences of violence against persons, properties, and rights. Crime is often broader than the mere action of a home invasion or a mugging—it becomes an atmosphere, a condition of society, and it refracts

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[31] Like Heather Ann Thompson, Alexander has thought about mass incarceration's relationship to other processes in the postwar era. One response to the transformations of postwar economic and social possibilities—primarily the long-term process of American job flight and declining economic prospects for the working class—has been to criminalize whole "excess" sections of the population. See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

[32] Heather Ann Thompson argues, "Historians have largely ignored the mass incarceration of the late twentieth century and have not yet begun to sort out its impact on the social, economic, and political evolution of the postwar period." Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History" *The Journal of American History* 97, Issue 3 (December 2010): 703-704. Thompson has begun to show that the issue of mass incarceration was more fundamental to postwar history than a mere response to rising crime rates. It is intimately tied up in postwar changes, not merely an effect or a cause but part and parcel of the processes of job flight, urban decay, and the ascension of conservative politics. I am trying to show something similar—that crime was riven throughout the cultural realm and the intellectual one of the 1970s and 1980s. It is part of the structure of feeling in these decades precisely because it was an age in which declension is hegeomic. It can't be isolated to the realm of social policy.

through this lens the other major problems of the society, and as Reagan suggests in calling up the "magnificent accomplishments of the American past," in the late twentieth century it was a measure for perceptions of historical change. As Flamm suggested for the 1960s, "What ultimately gave law and order such potency…was precisely its amorphous quality, its ability to represent different concerns to different people at different moments."[33] This was, I think, a dominant facet not just during the political realignment that ushered in the New Right but throughout the late twentieth century. Crime at this moment perhaps became more than an act or a problem of criminal justice (though that is a key element in the story) it was also a measure of American life and its decline. Exploring this relationship will be a major component of the dissertation.

The hyperbolic ways in which crisis in the 1970s and 1980s was talked about resulted in new ways of thinking about the role of the state and government in the lives of citizens. A narrative of declension proffered by politicians and media made particular concerns, ways of seeing, and ways of conceptualizing crime and to a larger extent society, unique. It also ignores the often coterminous "rises" of the era, of multiracial feminism, of diversity on college campuses and in elite sectors of the economy such as corporate boardrooms, and in the visibility and vocality of gay communities. One concern of this dissertation is why the crime narrative assumed such an oversized importance in these decades. It is my assumption that the crime narrative, which lays blame on individuals for supposed failings rooted in complex historical processes, served as scapegoat for larger changes and a justification for radical policies. When the public sphere, the traditional site for resolving issues, appears menacing, one must question the impact on democracy in practice. The profusion of images of crime and violence changed the relationships between generations, between strangers,

[33] Ibid.

between families, and between citizens.

And this brings us to film. This dissertation will examine the ways in which these enormous changes were communicated in the cultural narratives of the late twentieth century, in particular through cinema. The generation of filmmakers who came of age in the 1970s were invested in the larger debates about the course of American society. The countercultural animator Ralph Bakshi was not alone when he conceded, "I was angry with our society, and that anger manifested itself on the screen. I was very angry and very honest about my anger. The films are very tough."[34] There was a bevy of conspiracy films concerned with political decay, social issue films, counterculture films ranging from revisionist westerns to the more explicitly anti-authoritarian message films, ethnic films challenging the WASP narrative of American life, and a multiplicity of others, including the rise of the grindhouse and independent circuits in the 1970s and 1980s. The medium itself was changing as well, with the move away from the old studio system, with its star portfolios and elaborate sets, to the streets and unknown maverick directors. "It was the best time to be a film student," said Martin Scorsese, "It was very thrilling. Every day, a new film was opening from around the world that was totally unique. The beauty of it was that you had John Cassavetes making '*Shadows*,' which really made us believe if he could do that—pick up a camera and go out in the streets—so could we."[35] There were also generic shifts toward thriller, horror, and action. And similarly there was a decline in censorship, with it came an explosion of gore, blood, and nudity.

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[34] Ralph Bakshi quoted in Lewis Beale, "Is America once again ripe for Weirdness?," *Chicago Tribune*, December 10, 1987: D15C.

[35] Martin Scorsese quoted in Esther B. Fein, "Martin Scorsese: The Film Director as a Local Alien," *New York Times*, September 29, 1985.

But the case must be made for films as appropriate sources for discussing and finding answers to the historical problems that I have laid out. This dissertation approaches film from two perspectives. The first is as critical works, in that the films assume an explanatory position vis a vis contemporary debates at the time of their production. This most often takes the form of reading a particular filmmaker's work against their own words or in conversation with their larger oeuvre. But, as film is always the result of collaboration between a much larger group of people, including writers and screenwriters, producers, actors, cinematographers, etc., it is also possible to read films as a kind of collective critique of their time. The pioneering independent filmmaker Penelope Spheeris, who had a background in fine art, said of the cooperative process of filmmaking: "There was a discourse and this group of people to mobilize as opposed to the privacy, the serenity, the sort of psychic violence of the single person approaching a white piece of canvas."[36] Through the process of creation, films come to expresses something larger that a single vision. Excavating that expression is one project in the following pages.

Moreover, thinking of films as critical sources also means positioning a work's release against a political and social backdrop. This might include what a film hopes to say about the society, but also how it can impact the contours of discourse on a given subject. In this way they can, as critical works, shape politics and society. As historian Melani McAlister has written, "understanding the political import of culture requires that we position cultural texts *in* history, as active producers of meaning, rather than assuming that they merely 'reflect' or 'reproduce' some preexisting social reality."[37] In the background is the

[36] Kathryn Bigelow quoted in Betsy Sharkey, "Kathryn Bigelow Practices the Art of the Kill," *New York Times*, March 11, 1990.
[37] Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 5.

constant issue of production and reception, of intention and audiences. Whether or not a film's "message" is deciphered correctly by an audience, it can nonetheless take on a life of its own. The full impact of film in this regard is probably incalculable (and to fully gauge the impact of motion pictures and mediated images/narratives on American society in the 1970s and 1980s is beyond this project's scope). But, it stands to reason that films have an impact. They teach us about the world beyond our immediate experience: codes of conduct, the aura of a place, ideas about danger, the city, strangers, young people, the backcountry, and crime, and a sense about how the world is changing, notions of national and global flux. All of this can be communicated cinematically.

And this brings us to the second general approach to film that the dissertation assumes—as historical sources that convey immense social and cultural information non-critically. This is instead when the camera captures something akin to glimpses of realism. Some of this information is intentional, some of it is not. Some of it is captured, not out of a conscious narrative decision, but by virtue of being recorded at a certain time, in a certain place, with certain people. In making this claim I mean to borrow from the Frankfurt School sociologist and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer. His study of the medium was concerned with its relation to everyday life and what he described as a surface culture. He was particular distrustful of the judgements of an epoch upon itself (such a perspective was in part developed in relation to his experience fleeing Nazi Germany). Indeed, Kracauer would be suspicious of how I use film in the first sense, as a critical expression. For him, "Cinema seems to come into its own when it clings to the surface of things."[38] This was revealed beautifully in *The Mass Ornament*, where he sought out the subconscious aesthetics

[38] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*," (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 285.

underlying American capitalist ideology. He argued that modern people encountered themselves as "masses" at every turn: political rallies, sports events, as audiences, and in cultural images like the Tiller girls. Despite the celebration of individualism (a self-assessment/self-criticism) in the modern era, the "mass ornament" (the surface level) was the primary code by which life was structured and how best to understand the political, social, and cultural turmoil engendered in the early twentieth century. Such an appreciation for dissonance is key to my own reading of the late twentieth century.

Kracauer pointed out that photography, and of course its apotheosis in cinema, was unique in that it coincided with the great modernist rupture in the twentieth century. As traditional systems of belief seemed to be cracking under the frightening onslaught of human social and technological change, Kracauer suggested it was more the serendipitous that moving images would at the same moment provide "the dissolution of traditional perspectives."[39] Film was the expression of the new consciousness and could be read for a collective unconscious. Of course Kracauer was largely missing the subjects who watched and interpreted films. His theory of the film artifact meant to pinpoint moments when the cinema seemed to go mad, to reveal more than was intended. These momentary glimpses of reality, for Kracauer, were that "Which only cinema is privileged to communicate."[40] In his final work *Theory of Film* he wrote,

> My book differs from most writings in the field in that it is a material aesthetics, not a formal one. It is concerned with content. It rests upon the assumption that film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their own when they

[39] Ibid.., 9.
[40] Ibid.., 1.

> record and reveal physical reality. Now this reality includes many phenomena which would hardly be perceived were it not for the motion picture camera's ability to catch them on the wing. And since any medium is partial to the things it is uniquely equipped to render, the cinema is conceivably animated by a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most ephemeral. Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat.[41]

For a historian, this is a kind of philosophical justification for using film as a primary resource. While it cannot be used in isolation, film might provide momentary glimpses into an alternative history/reality, a history not defined by declension (the era's judgement upon itself). This is of course while remembering that when dealing with cinema there are bound to be alternative readings and even creative, meaningful misreadings. I have taken the liberty to read the following films through the lens of American fears of decline, and hopefully my readings are not rejected; they are made in good part through a wrestling with a large sampling of pictures.

The films covered in the following pages range from mainstream, popular movies to genre pictures. The selection of films varies across genres, production histories, budgets, and popularity. There is a noted focus in some chapters on horror and exploitation films as well as lower budget fare partly out of a belief (right or wrong) that such offerings allowed for greater maneuverability in their creative production (being generally out of the eyes of censors and producers). In choosing films to discuss I tried to focus on a few criteria, though not all of the films meet each criterion. Some choices were based on the importance of the artifact to contemporary political and critical debates (for example, *Taxi Driver*). Other films were chosen for their narrative and thematic interests, for example hitchhiking. Such topics

[41] Ibid.., xlix.

were too large to cover every example, so a sampling of films had to serve as a basis to make claims. The chapter on delinquency films in the 1970s, as one example, covers a broad range of films tied generally to representations of changing youth and youth in crisis. Not every film viewed or mentioned could or should be discussed at length.

In a discussion of choices, it is also important to recognize what is left out. As it would happen, doing so sheds further light on what was included and why. A key omission are the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Again, a guiding question of the project was: decline for who? I argue decline was largely a white, male subjective experience. It became hegemonic precisely because the people in society who felt decline had the power and opportunity to make such a narrative resonant. By contrast, at almost every level, statistics on women and black Americans in aggregate through the 1970s show that income, visibility, political power, and access to the workforce were on the rise. Blaxploitation was a filmic terrain that can be pulled apart to reveal the coterminious rises which betray the constructedness of decline. Indeed, Shaft's strut through the city at the beginning of *Shaft* (1971) is not a walk of defeat. It is, like Tony's walk in the opening of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), the swagger of someone not only at home in their environs but reveling in them. Such a reading fits alongside the chapters that follow, but I have chosen to expose what was essentially a narrative of decline and decay largely centered around white men. People of color would disproportionately pay for this narrative.

In reading a filmic history of decline, I was forced to narrow my scope to themes that demonstrated the shifting terrain of American life in the period under consideration, and which could speak to the authoritarian impulse I have tried to excavate in the previous pages. The narratives are about youth, region, city, and gender. The first chapter looks at the

depiction of youth, and consequently the nation's future, as the country came to grips with the momentous changes of the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter two turns to the road and the changing representation of space that unfolded via the travel films of the 70s and 80s. It looks specifically at images of the rural and small town as well as the figure of the hitchhiker to explore the increasingly alien and strange world of much of America. Chapter three, by contrast, looks at the city and the urban crisis as it appeared on film. Finally, the fourth chapter turns to the gendered experience of the city and the many debates about danger that come to light through this lens.

The first chapter looks at competing claims about the causation of juvenile crime as envisaged in delinquency films. The 1970s saw a panic over juvenile delinquency return to the forefront of American politics. The chapter looks at how fears of juvenile crime functioned as a form of declensionist thought, in particular as an articulation of post-60s notions of youth before moving on to look at how delinquency films were both a mode and format for narrating and explaining those fears. Here I focus on film as a "feeling" to borrow from Michelangelo Antonioni's own description of his outings into the genre. The films that I look at are both a product of the moral panic over youth at the same time they offer alternative readings that are critical of what is, essentially, the unmaking of the liberal relationship between government and citizens over two decades. After exploring the new cultural constellation of a post-60s youth the chapter looks specifically at three areas in which these competing cultural judgements were fastened: family failures, high school crises, and gang violence. What emerges in the films on which I focus is a critique of mid-century disinvestment, the ideals of neoliberal suburbia, and an upending of the markers of subjective violence on which the youth panic was based.

Chapter two explores road films for their narrative and symbolic connections to anxieties appearing throughout American society, such as over civic and public trust (or the lack thereof), anonymous danger, and the decline of neighborliness. Road films often express interest in the pastoral and what can be ordained "Americanness," and all of the idiosyncrasy and uniqueness of that marker. Their use of allegory is also special. The films covered vary widely in their production histories, from low-budget and made-for-TV offerings to Hollywood studio pictures to independent films. The choice on which films to prioritize comes upon looking at their narrative structure (focusing in particular on the journey through non-urban America) and their emblematic and archetypal depictions of backcounty folks. None is more important than the hitchhiker, the wanderer as it were who is both stranger and everyman. The hitchhiker figures prominently at a crossroads for many of these currents, as an icon of the traveler, the in-betweener, the neighbor and visitor. The hitcher was both a plot element in many films and a larger icon in the post-1960s debate about personal safety and public trust, making them stand in relief as a figure for connecting road movies, Americana, and declensionist paranoia.

The third chapter explores tensions in the celluloid representation of the city and the city street in the 1970s and 1980s. I focus in particular on what I term a "gutter aesthetic" for depicting the urban crisis. This aesthetic is critical while also providing a Kracauerian glimpse at reality—revealing more than is intended, in this case a joy and pleasure that was situated in the same environments deemed decayed. The films are read against the insights of Jane Jacobs and William Whyte, two sociologists concerned with urbanity, anonymity, the casual public trust, and the connections between a vanishing variety of publicness and the joy of city life. Their brand of experience is assaulted by neoliberal private life and saw its

historical disappearance with the rise of safety-consciousness. In many ways this chapter offers a counter history to decline and is perhaps the central chapter in the project as it attempts to show the multiplicity of histories and narratives that existed in late twentieth century cities. It questions the historical crisis of pessimism in this past and our present.

The fourth chapter explores debates about film violence (particularly the horror, vigilante, and rape-revenge genres) and their relation to debates about real-world violence, especially violence against women. This chapter thinks about the night as a real and visual space, and how that conceptualization impacted and intersected with the debates around gendered violence, victimization, and crime. The chapter draws attention to four directors who were self-aware of their work and the cultural discourse surrounding them. The callous discourse around film violence lent itself to a trend oriented toward punishment and suspicion that both liberals and conservatives could appreciate and use.

The Delinquency Film: Fearing for the Future

In the 1978 New Year's broadcast of the "Point/Counterpoint" segment of *60 Minutes*, Shana Alexander, the liberal complement to James Kilpatrick's conservative voice, made the case to viewers at home that the country was "all out of focus, sea to shining sea." "Everybody's mad as hell," argued Alexander, "but they're not sure what at." It likely had something to do with the interminable crisis shaking the country: "The cities are rotting, farmlands are idle, inflation is up, unemployment is up, and taxes are way up. The only value left is looking out for number one." Particular events were hard to muster, there were of course a few gleaming examples of her critique such as the infamous New York City blackout of the previous summer. But Alexander was giving voice to an impression more than a specific event. She described the milieu of living in a perceived twilight period of American history. Alexander, like other public figures and officials, deployed skillfully the language of decline that was ubiquitous by the late 1970s. This language was based not only on identifiable social ills but more importantly on the feeling that the country was on the wrong track. "The ordinary people you meet have never seemed friendlier and more lost," said Alexander, closing her argument, "If, as the movie says, 'We are not alone,' we are certainly adrift. This is the day to cry 'Happy New Year,' but what most of us feel is 'Bah, Humbug!'"[42]

In the middle of Alexander's polemic is situated one of the defining tropes of American decline imaginary: young people. "It's awful to be old today," she claims, "and its worse to be young. They have no flag to rally around except the almighty dollar."[43] The comment reveals the subtle shift in the discourse surrounding young people as it adjusted to a

[42] Shana Alexander quoted in "Point-Counterpoint," *60 Minutes*, *CBS*, January 1, 1978.
[43] Ibid.

post-1960s set of assumptions. Gone were the days of revolt and the political agency of the Students for a Democratic Society and the Young Americans for Freedom. They were replaced by the somber, listless youth increasingly centralized in shopping malls and jumping from one tawdry gimmick to the next. Tom Wolfe had perhaps most famously critiqued the perceived depoliticization of youth and their new infatuation with a fad-based consumer culture when he coined the "Me" generation. Whether it was rampant coddling and the revival of a "momism" plague, the fear of young people growing up in broken families, television violence warping the minds of children, or a general state of apathy and introversion, it was unmistakable that youth were increasingly portrayed as a constitutive part of the problem of American decline at the same time they were its victims.

The panic over youth coincided with a wave of filmic representations of juvenile delinquency.[44] The cycle of films at the center of this chapter speak not only to the last juvenile delinquency scare of the twentieth century, but to a broader attempt to make sense of and render narratively the disruptive American social, economic, and familial changes experienced at the time. Films provided an explanatory framework of decline through often-times contradictory but nonetheless narrative representations of violence, justice, security, victimhood, family, and, of course, crime. Portraits of youth often intersect with these forces to provide cogent images of the future and as a form of moral critique. Often accused of fomenting moral panics about delinquency, Hollywood, underground, b-movie, and cult cinema at the center of this chapter place young people in situations that perturb normal life. But simultaneously these films offer challenging, even subversive messages about the many

[44] As cultural critic Henry Giroux has argued, "Representations of youth in popular culture have a long and complex history and habitually serve as signposts through which American society registers its own crisis of meaning, vision, and community." Henry A. Giroux, *Channel Surfing: Race Talk and the Destruction of Today's Youth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 35.

of the tropes of delinquency. By emphasizing structural causes and the social nature of rebellion, this cinema operates in opposition to the hegemonic interpretation of crime and delinquency as individualized problems of free, rational-choice agents or what could be termed the neoliberal interpretation of crime put forward by such thinkers as James Q. Wilson.

The evolution of the delinquency film tells us a lot about the social circumstances of their creation. It is true that films in this last cycle tended to emphasize the exploitation elements of youth rebellion and violence far more than their predecessors in the 1950s and 1960s. In David Considine's overview of the cinematic depiction of youth, *The Cinema of Adolescence*, he argues that Hollywood's obsession with delinquency has produced multiple, competing visions of the phenomenon and its causes over many decades. In the thirties, "delinquency grew out of a combination of factors including economic conditions, the environment, and family life."[45] At the high water mark of delinquency films in the 1950s however, film depictions of delinquency shifted from the "realms of the social problem…to the realms of a psychological problem."[46] Moreover, films of the 1950s and 1960s such as *West Side Story* "marked the transition from reality to romance" in the depiction of violence on screen.[47] Though the 1970s are generally considered a muted interval in the depiction of delinquency (when compared to the periods before and after), the decade did see a more clear focus on "alienation and estrangement" as central to coming of age cinema.[48] Historian Timothy Shary is largely in agreement with Considine's timeline, though focuses more clearly on the scripts of masculinity embedded in the films of each era (and often their close

[45] David Consadine, *The Cinema of Adolescence* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1985), 185.
[46] Ibid., 190.
[47] Ibid., 192.
[48] Ibid., 199.

relationship to class anxiety). Shary finds one of the most important factors in the evolution of the juvenile delinquency film is the shift from a focus on "redeemable" delinquents. By the 1980s "delinquent boys were becoming more inexplicably evil, committing apparent random crimes for glee..."[49] While it is true that redemption was increasingly not the message of these films, it would be an overstatement to declare that the actions of delinquent characters were unexplainable. Many in fact enter into a debate about causation and place it, if not squarely, then at least alongside the economic and social despondency resulting from the structural unmaking of the New Deal order.[50] Taken at face value youth-in-crisis films tended to play into the punishment and decay narratives of political candidates and news media. However, alternative messages in these films suggest structural readings of decay—as opposed to individual agency as a cause for crime—that satirize moral panic outrage as misplaced and which critique neoliberalism and adult society for failing youth economically and socially. Indeed, the wall built between adult society and youth is often shown to be dangerous to democratic ideals, and a turn to crime functions as an outlet for the organic desire for publicness among young people.

James Gilbert has shown in *A Cycle of Outrage*, the effective impact of the Hollywood stereotype of the juvenile delinquent was to "sanitize" the threat of youth

[49] Timothy Shary, "Bad Boys and Hollywood Hype:Gendered Conflict in Juvenile Delinquency Films," in *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*, ed. Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 22-23.

[50] I use the New Deal order to define the relatively stable political bloc (in Gramscian terms) that extended from roughly the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan. Historians Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle used this constellation to explain the, "dominant order of ideas, public policies, and political alliances," that existed through most of this period as the United States embraced the rise of modern liberalism and consumer capitalism following the great depression. As they describe it, the New Deal order was intellectually eclectic but rested upon the promise of increased security from the worst excesses of market capitalism, generally meaning a degree of government regulation, Keynesian spending, and labor-business stability. It can be contrasted with the rise of neoliberalism and its consequent disruptions to American political, social, and cultural life. See Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, ed., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), ix.

culture.[51] In the 1970s, given the hegemonic status of declension, such a taming was not possible. In no short terms, the depiction of youth crime in the 70s and 80s was more sinister, more believable, and rather than be tamed, film unleashing a type of verisimilitude homologous with nightly news—feeding its audience a premonition of things to come. However, despite unveiling the ubiquity of youth in crisis tropes in filmic representations, this chapter will also attempt to show the potential of underground, cult, B-movies, and even some Hollywood pictures to undermine and challenge the dominant interpretive frameworks of liberal and consensus readings of these media productions.

The chapter opens with a brief overview of the media moral panic about juvenile crime before discussing films dealing specifically with the shift to a post-1960s set of assumptions about young people. It then catalogues the rising fear of family decay, school violence, and gangs before moving to closer readings of youth-in-crisis films such as *Over the Edge* (1979), *Suburbia* (1983), and *Repo Man* (1984) that betray unease with contemporary youth trends of increased autonomy, single-parent rearing, and vanishing labor opportunities. In covering this cycle of films, the chapter will point out that filmmakers were acutely aware not only of their status as storytellers, but of their position in a changing exploitation market that could offer alternative narratives to entropic decline. Sometimes consciously and other times not, the films betray a historical attempt to reckon with forces difficult to portray, and suggest at certain points that the specter of crime is not always an indication of historical decline. In the end, the point of this chapter is to emphasize the historical nature of the depiction of youth in a particular moment whose context is vastly different, but which has had a lasting effect on our own times. While the narratives are

[51] James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 195.

grotesque and sometimes laughable (oftentimes both), the underlying logic of the films and their vision of public space, safety, and youth can help us to unpack an era's image of youth that profoundly affects our own time and its relation to the dominant chronicle of decline.

The interpretation of youth as dangerous of course owes some of its power to the larger media environment with which filmic depictions coexist. Delinquency was picked up by a media that was undergoing major changes symptomatic of market fragmentation—such as the search for ratings that spawned "Eyewitness News" and "Action News" in the early 1970s.[52] Youth crime and juvenile delinquency were treated as tidal waves sweeping society, rather than a symptom of larger forces. Moreover, the new subjectivity embodied in such reporting styles—with their voyeuristic camera and strong emphasis on emotionalism—changed the nature of viewership. In addition to images of horror from Vietnam, Americans were seeing horror in their own streets and homes. At least one reporter, NBC's Sander Vanocur, reported on the changes when describing the 1968 campaign trail: "If there is one distinct phenomenon which a reporter is struck by when covering Senate races in three states west of the Mississippi—Idaho, Oregon, and South Dakota—it is the emotion of fear on the part of those who seem to have the least to fear." Vanocur could not understand why fear had grasped those in the fly-over region, "In all three states there's no problem with blacks, there are no hippies or yippies, and crime compared to other places seems hardly to be a problem at all." He ultimately blamed the notorious Democratic National Convention in Chicago and similar scenes of disorder mediated through television, but was most struck by

[52] For more on the market segmentation of American media in this era see Joseph Turow, *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

the fact that "the less they are threatened the more they seem to fear."[53] Protest and delinquency often bled together—much like the polling in the late 1960s which manufactured crime as the issue of the day, cable television could easily switch between news of youth protest and news of home break ins and often construed the two.

To the benefit of ratings chasers, the youth crisis was indistinct in nature. Walter Cronkite and others parroted the testimony of justice department figures that crimes committed by youth under the age of eighteen constituted half the nation's serious crimes and that youth crime was "growing almost four times as fast as the youth population."[54] Another report simply washed over the questionable statistics stating, "There are no statistics on exactly how many teenage offenders there are in this country, but it is known that juvenile crime is on a steady, sharp increase."[55] Like tactics used during the Red Scare, depictions of sinister, internal disease encouraged people to assume danger was invisible in their midst.[56] For example, a 1975 Special Report on juvenile crime for CBS Evening News opens with an orientation session of at the Spofford Juvenile Center in the South Bronx. "If you didn't know, you might perceive these seven youngers, all under sixteen as just kids," drones the narrator's voiceover, "no more bored and restless than children learning about any new school." Here the narrator takes a cue from delinquency cinema: "But we do know. One is charged with forcible rape, another with burglary, another with robbery and assault, the others with grand larceny, parole violation, and with generally uncontrollable behavior." Together they constituted a call list for the "explosion of juvenile crime" rocking the

[53] "Fear/Politics," *Evening News*, NBC, October 16, 1968.
[54] "Crime/Youth," *Evening News*, CBS, March 31, 1971.
[55] "Special Report/Juvenile Crime," *Evening News*, CBS March 14, 1975.
[56] According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, juvenile crime was real and had resulted in a nearly 1600% increase in juvenile arrests over the previous twenty years. But as many criminal justice scholars have pointed out, such increase can be partly laid on better data collection, increased policing, and the impact of new criminal statutes. For the purposes here what is important is the depiction of youth crime as a moral plague on the nation, something that was eating it from within and symptomatic of decline.

nation.[57] The message was not to be deceived by the children's natural appearance of innocence; children could be vicious criminals without giving any appearance of such.

This was exactly the line picked up by New York assemblyman Joseph Lentol. "It's sort of developing into a fear of children," he argued, "The adult population is becoming afraid of their children." Lentol, a Democrat and representative of Brooklyn's District 50 gave voice to what was becoming a common refrain, primarily that young people were at the center of America's crime problem. Increasingly the depiction relied on an understanding of juvenile delinquency as an inherent trait and a life of crime as a conscious choice. The responses to juvenile crime worked under these premises, as well as the assumption that the crime victim must be white and of voting age in order to earn such a designation. In the case of New York, which served as a testing ground for national reforms, the result was mandatory penalties, a lowering of the minimum age for trial in the adult criminal system, and extended court custody of offenders. As another New York assemblyman, Republican Alfred DelliBovi stated, "We have to worry about society. We have to start thinking about the victims. They have rights too. We have to confine these hoodlums and protect society."[58]

There were of course dissenting voices. Some argued that many youths who turned to crime did so because of lack of funding to critical areas of public assistance. Others catalogued material and immaterial deprivations early in life. Interviewing a court psychiatrist, one reporter asked, "Have you run into any children that do violent horrible things to other people who were loved or wanted by their parents?" After a long pause the psychiatrist responded bluntly, "No."[59] In the end, however, the political debate about solutions to juvenile crime was framed in a context that understood the causes were the

[57] Ibid.
[58] "Special Report/Juvenile Crime," *Evening News*, CBS, March 14, 1975.
[59] "Special (Young Criminals)," *Evening News*, NBC, December 16, 1976.

manifestation of individual deviancy rather than institutional failings—the premise behind the hugely influential work of James Q. Wilson. In the mid-1970s Wilson gained fame for his work *Thinking About Crime* (1975), which assumed that criminals were rational-choice agents pursuing quantifiable gains.[60] Wilson himself advocated a punishment regime based on the theory of "broken windows," which advocated harsh penalties for minor infractions as a form of deterrence. The common-sense logic of Wilson's argument had broad appeal, particularly in relation to the crisis of youth. In dealing with the youth problem, professionals, including criminal justice workers, had to be the ones to enforce deterrence, even going so far as to step in "to do what parents are supposed to do."[61]

It is worth noting that when crime statistics in New Jersey failed to go down as a result of increased policing in the 1970s, James Wilson and co-author Goerge Kellig responded in *The Atlantic* by broadening their definition of public order while continuing to espouse the basics of broken-window policing. "But how can a neighborhood be "safer" when the crime rate has not gone down—in fact, may have gone up?," asked Wilson. "Finding the answer requires first that we understand what most often frightens people in public places. Many citizens, of course, are primarily frightened by crime, especially crime involving a sudden, violent attack by a stranger. This risk is very real, in Newark as in many large cities. But we tend to overlook another source of fear—the fear of being bothered by disorderly people." It is here, argued Wilson, where increased presence of authority was needed to overlay a sense of public order. He was also articulating some of the discomfort engendered by social relations in an increasingly anonymous world. What was threatening was not necessarily the fear of immediate violence, but the perception of disorder, the

[60] James Q. Wilson, *Thinking About Crime* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).
[61] "Special (Youth Crime)," *Evening News*, NBC, February 14, 1977.

psychic discomfort of publicness that might be impolite or even vulgar. In dealing with young people, this was a particularly important facet. "Not violent people, nor, necessarily, criminals, but disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people: panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, the mentally disturbed. What foot-patrol officers did was to elevate, to the extent they could, the level of public order in these neighborhoods. Though the neighborhoods were predominantly black and the foot patrolmen were mostly white, this 'order-maintenance' function of the police was performed to the general satisfaction of both parties."[62] In justifying an increasingly punitive regime of overpolicing and public suspicion, Wilson contended, "The citizen who fears the ill-smelling drunk, the rowdy teenager, or the importuning beggar is not merely expressing his distaste for unseemly behavior; he is also giving voice to a bit of folk wisdom that happens to be a correct generalization—namely, that serious street crime flourishes in areas in which disorderly behavior goes unchecked."[63] Such a set of assumptions is a good place to begin tracing the general contours of the youth crisis of the 1970s and 1980s.

[62] George L Kelling and James Q. Wilson, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," *The Atlantic* (March 1982).
[63] Ibid..

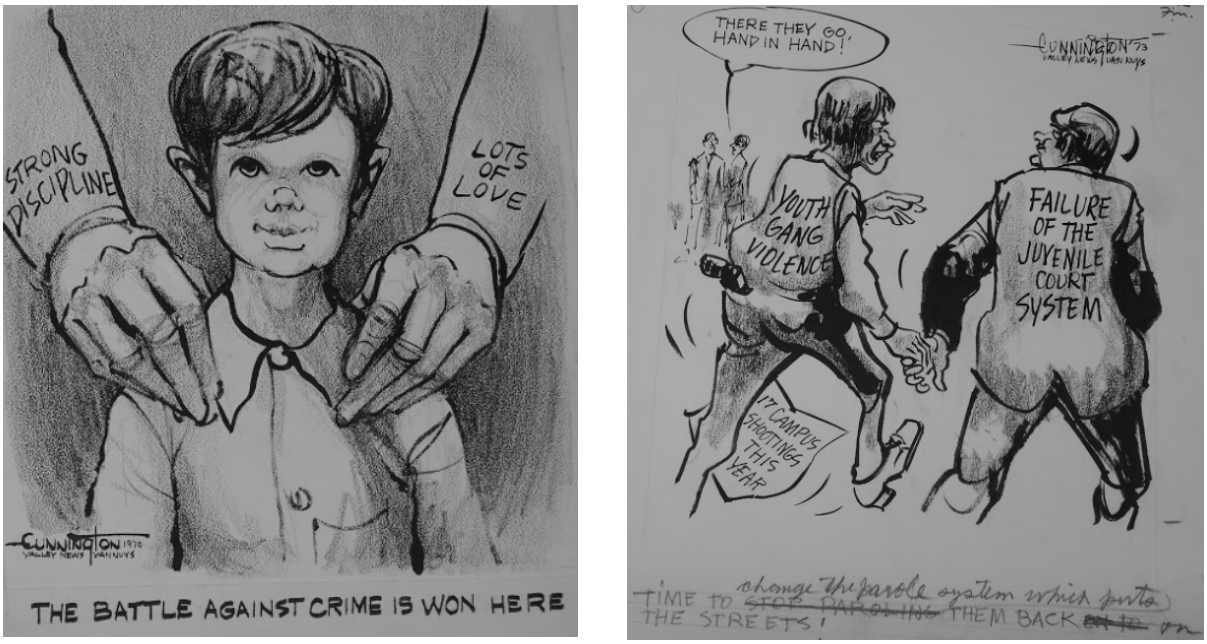


Figure 1.1 The editorial cartoons of Merle Cunnington dealt with the politics of the San Fernando Valley. His work, published in local papers in southern California, often lamented the rise of crime and delinquency. The cartoon on the left appeared in 1970; the one on the right, which was accompanied by the text "Time to change the parole system which puts them back on the streets!" is from 1973. Merle H. Cunnington Collection, 1964-2011, Box 4-5, Special Collections and Archives, Urban Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge.

The shift to a novel, post-1960s set of assumptions about youth took place gradually and reflected not only disillusionment and outright hostility toward the social movements of that era but also the historical trends associated broadly with decline such as political and social upheaval, family disruption, economic hardship, and rising crime. Though critiques of youth today abound—the constant complaints about millennial entitlement, for example, comes to mind—the preoccupation with delinquency in the late postwar era, spanning magazine coverage of young killers to congressional hearings on youth crime, make investigation of the origins and particular currents of this crisis unique.

Youth and crisis were bound in the denouement of the 1960s. That decade created the popular specter of a politicized youth as the vanguard of revolution. And it was young people as potential political agents that were key to their portrayal in media in the years that followed. Social upheaval, much of it centered on young people, polarized the country and brought to an end the consensus politics of the immediate postwar years. Conservatives as early as Barry Goldwater, and more tactically Richard Nixon, were able to seize the moment by offering of a "law and order" alternative to the seeming chaos unleashed by angry young people's democratic actions. Using protest methods that often utilized disruption (and in some cases devolved to urban uprisings) was easily reinterpreted as rising crime. The prominent sociologist Dennis Loo has shown that the fear of crime in the mid-to-late 1960s was largely fabricated by conservative policy makers, pointing that polls listing crime as the most important social issue of the day were wildly inauthentic and constructed by manipulating public views about protest.[64] By the end of the decade, youth was part of the crime constellation in public consciousness, even if it was forced so through political machinations. And perhaps crime is too strong of a word to describe what many experienced as slow subversion of postwar social norms at the impetus of changing economic and political currents. As Joan Didion wrote in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem,* "The center was not holding. It was a country of bankruptcy notices and public-auction announcements and commonplace reports of casual killings and misplaced children and abandoned homes and vandals who misspelled even the four-letter words they scrawled."[65] It was in this milieu that the first filmic portrayals began to wrestle with the 60s moment.

[64] Dennis Loo, "The 'Moral Panic' that Wasn't" The Sixties Crime Issue in the US," in *Fear of Crime: Critical Voices in an Age of Anxiety*, ed. Murray Lee and Stephen Farrall (New York: Routledge, 2009), 12-31.
[65] Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), 84.

National politics seemed unable to cope with the conflicts engendered by a newly politicized youth. In the 1968 film *Wild in the Streets*, Max Frost instigates a revolution in the voting age—lowered to 14—that ultimately leads to the internment of all adults aged 35 years or older in reeducation camps where they are fed a steady regimen of LSD. Similarly, Roger Corman's *Gas-s-s-s* (1970) borrows from counterculture, post-apocalyptic, and road films, following a group of survivors to the founding of a commune after a military experiment kills all adults over the age of 25. Both films satirized the growing gap between the greatest generation and their children, straying into the realm of the comic. While not trenchant critiques they do reveal the priming of Hollywood toward dystopian and apocalyptic narratives centered on youth. Other films contemplating the disarray and waning political power of the youth moment such as *Medium Cool* (1969), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), and *Zabriskie Point* (1970), took the generational rift more seriously. It is telling as well that these films often channel the schism into interactions between youth and law enforcement authorities. The suspect nature of baby boomer values made interactions between generations uncomfortable in such films and mediation often relied on the presence of authority figures. Moreover, in each of the films, divisions were often couched in a broader symbolic system of a young urban America and an aging, decrepit American pastoral. It is here that change, understood as decline, often found its symbolic resonance.

Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) is one skeptical look at youth and a film that reflects specifically the currents within the demise of the counterculture. It focuses on the chance encounter between a college student, Mark, and Daria, a hippie and daughter of a wealthy California real estate developer. Mark is on the run as a suspect in the campus

murder of a police officer. While he is innocent of the particular shooting, he nonetheless attempts to kill a cop and nearly succeeds but for the intervention of Daria. Mark's end comes when he is shot dead by a policeman for the theft of an airplane while Daria's story closes with her taking up the call for revolutionary violence—if only in her imagination of the destruction of her father's worldly empire. As in the more celebrated *Easy Rider*, the tone of the film implies a youth melancholia. The dreams of a generation for a different world, however idealistic, are torn apart by an America that cannot imbibe them.

Lack of understanding, perhaps described as a dearth of civic empathy, between age cohorts is key to the film. It is evident from the first antagonistic interactions between Mark and the police. When he is being booked early in the film Mark gives his name as Karl Marx—the policeman doesn't get the joke and mistakenly records Carl Marx. Enmity between young and old carries through the film. When Daria first arrived at a tiny roadside stop outside of LA, prior to meeting Mark, she speaks with the shop owner who complains that he didn't want all the hippies to come out to his part of the world. "If Los Angeles don't want them, why should we?"[66] The shop owner's window is then mysteriously broken, seemingly by a herd of parentless children running amok in the desert. The mob of kids is not only frightening in the way they overwhelm Daria and the adults, but in the potential future they represent. They swamp Daria, asking "Can we have a piece of ass?," to which she responds: "Would you know what to do with it?" Antonioni then cuts to refocus on an old cowboy getting drunk and smoking in the bar. He is mute—a wizened, decaying American archetype set against an impish, mob-minded one just outside.

The origins and appearance of the children is also mysterious. Later in the film when Daria and Mark have sex in the Amargosa Range, just below the film's titular peak, the

[66] *Zabriskie Point*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (MGM, 1970), DVD (Warner Home Video, 2009).

audience is treated to a psychedelic sequence of dozens of hippies copulating in the dusty mountain crags. It leads the viewer to assume the desert children that appeared outside the bar earlier might be the estranged offspring of these drug-induced, phantom orgies. Antonioni does not bring closure to the film. Instead, there is a subtle indictment of a counterculture ethos that never sputtered beyond daydreams of violent outburst—however spectacular they might be as we are treated to in the closing shots of the film. Clearly there is little sympathy for the previous generation or authority in the film, but the inability of those coming of age to materialize their politics or their world is not let off the hook. "You ask me if there will be a violent revolution in America?," responded Antonioni in an interview about the film. "Perhaps in 50 years things will arrive at a crucial point and these forces that are now underneath will explode. Who's to say? Even though a lot of young people talk about violence and revolution, not all of them could do it. It's not easy to be violent."[67]

Reviewing the film in the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby, like most critics, lambasted *Zabriskie Point* as "superficial and overly intellectualized."[68] His was a kinder review compared to those which objected to a perceived anti-American bias throughout the film.[69] Antonioni himself was somewhat shocked by the responses, replying in an interview, "I love this country….It's very easy for an American to say to me, 'You're an Italian; you don't know this country. How dare you talk about it!' But I wasn't trying to *explain* the country—a film is not a social analysis, after all. I was just trying to feel something about America, to gain some intuition." He was perhaps right that some, including some on set,

[67] Michelangelo Antonioni quoted in Guy Flatley, "Antonioni Defends 'Zabriskie Point': 'I Love This Country,'" *New York Times*, February 22, 1970.
[68] Vincent Canby, "No Life in Antonioni's Death Valley," *New York Times*, February 15, 1970.
[69] George McKinnon in the *Boston Globe* called it "really cliché—the current vogue of anti-Americanism, alienated youth, big business callousness…". George McKinnon, "Antonioni Film 'Zabriskie Point' both brilliant and cliché anti-U.S.," *Boston Globe*, March 5, 1970.

would perceive this feeling about America negatively: "Maybe they thought I was a Communist starting a revolution." While Antonioni did not want to provide a premonition, he did believe that there were undercurrents of change appearing in American society. "In 'Zabriskie Point' I suggest that the material wealth of America, which we see in advertisements and on billboards along the roads, is itself a violent influence, perhaps even the root of violence. Not because wealth is bad, but because it is being used not to solve the problems of society, but instead to try and hide these problems from society."[70] Here then is a film in which we see the subtle if tectonic forces at play, but at the same time does not use youth as a scapegoat. If some thought his message cliché, it was not that youth were too rebellious, but rather that there was a cooptation underway, or even a resignation.

The film, while lamenting the shortsightedness and hedonism of the counterculture ethos, does not treat its subject matter as villainous outright—that was a development of the late 1970s and 1980s portrayals of youth countercultures. But there was nonetheless a sense of danger ascribed to the 60s generation. No event more tarnished and condemned its wayward trend than the Tate-Bianca murders and the subsequent trial of Charles Manson and his followers, described as "the most dangerous man alive."[71] The events subtly impressed themselves on many films dealing with youth in the coming decade. Jeff Lieberman's *Blue Sunshine* (1977), about the lingering effects of the LSD trips of the 60s revolves around ex-users of a particular strain of LSD (known as blue sunshine) as they degenerate into ruthless killers a decade later. In a conservative reading, the film draws on the symbolic threat that the sins of the 60s could reverberate in dangerous ways down to the present. Using murders by

[70] Michelangelo Antonioni quoted in Guy Flatley, "Antonioni Defends 'Zabriskie Point': 'I Love This Country,'" *New York Times*, February 22, 1970.
[71] David Felton and David Dalton, "Charles Manson: The Incredible Story of the Most Dangerous Man Alive," *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 1970.

bald drug addicts as a wedge for the unseen scars of the counterculture, Lieberman's work was not as heady as other entries treating the subject.[72] Arther Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) (based on the Starkweather murder spree) prefigured many of the same themes of latent violence in the young.

Despite such narratives, the problem of youth crisis was articulated in ways that often bore little resemblance to real changes in the country. The dissonance between young people and adult society was stewing but did not seem to boil—at least not in the ways imagined on celluloid. While events such as the Democratic National Convention in 1968 or the Kent State shootings in 1970 seemed to emphasize a growing chasm, much of the panic set uneasily alongside the increased positive prevalence of young people as a constitutive force in American life.

In fact, contrary to Shana Alexander's reading of the era, young people of the post-60s generation did have multiple flags to rally around and they did so in massive numbers. Environmentalism, women's rights, gay rights, consumer advocacy, labor rights, and the peace movement were swelled with young people and constituted what one historian has described as the "forgotten heyday of American activism."[73] They formed the backbones of Jesse Jackson's People United to Save Humanity and, by the mid-1980s, the Rainbow Coalition. The recognition of the political dimensions of young people was recognized by the twenty-sixth Amendment, ratified in 1971, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. In the 1970s and 1980s young people were attending post-secondary school in greater numbers than ever before, with the student population, now much more gender and racially diverse,

[72] It was likewise not as exploitative as some films on the topic such as *I Drink Your Blood* (1970).
[73] Michael Stewart Foley, *Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten heyday of American Activism int eh 1970s and 1980s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013).

having quintupled since the end of the Second World War.[74] Combined with the continued youthification of popular culture—described as a "youthquake"—by the 1970s and 1980s the political, economic, and cultural power of young people was never so prevalent as in this moment. Indeed, the contemporary concept of the youth demographic betrays this truth.

The process then by which youth anti-authoritarianism and movements for social justice were transformed to more sinister expressions of violence was halting. At the core of the phenomenon was a dissonance. A generation with unqualified movements toward justice and equality would be marked as the harbingers of decline. Between the media and popular depiction of youth decay and the positive upswings in the social and political life of the nation's young blood hides the neoliberal undercurrent wrecking the postwar order. The purpose here is not to trace the historical process of neoliberalization and atomization, of the failing of postwar infrastructures. Other historians have traced these processes. But there is a reason that the youth of this era was judged as dangerous and it is because their actions and the representation of them often lay within a background structured by this real decay. The exploitative violence that functions as critique of a decaying society is only one facet of the films under consideration. Equally, if not more important, are what Siegfried Kracauer termed "the surface-level expressions" which "by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things."[75] It is the ubiquity of particular issues and materials surrounding youth, rather than youth themselves, that were the real crisis of the era. Indeed, Antonioni might be right that film evokes a "feeling" of America more than a social analysis. Family, schools, gangs, employment, and crime,

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[74] Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994), 1. The student population in 1988 was 13,043,000 up from 2,338,000 in 1947. Women constituted 54% of the student population, and 19% were people of color.

[75] Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75.

because of their situation on the edge of both youth life and postwar institutional failings, were naturally the focus of many films. Each could be read as a problem on its own, but in many films the larger institutional failings come into focus only through a surface reading of the background features of the films—a focus on the terrain upon which representations of youth lie.

The failure of the American family was considered one major cause of youth deviance as well as a general measure of national decline. As Natasha Zaretsky has argued, the crisis of the family served and reinforced the sense of national crisis and decline. Rising oil prices, the economic crises, and defeat in Vietnam took place in the context of the sexual revolution, of rising divorce rates, of new child-rearing practices, and the increased visibility of same-sex couples.[76] Larger national crises were often understood and experiences as family crises—particularly the family wage—and fueled a conservative backlash that understood the sense of decline more organically than we tend to treat it. The panic could be seen in mainstream fare such as the breakdown of the Louds visualized in the television docudrama *American Family* (1973) or the ethnic household from which John Travolta tries to escape in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). But these were somewhat tame depictions. Other films explicitly tied violence, family decay, the counterculture, and youth, particularly the horror film.

The horror genre increasingly employed imagery of national decline while commenting on the social changes of the post-1960s era—from women's liberation to the

[76] Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

trauma of Vietnam.[77] The perverted "family" became a key focus in the genre as a representation of the true danger of 60s-style "freedom" which was rearticulated through generational conflicts (indeed, the power of the term Manson family had some resonance beyond its use as a descriptor). There were likewise a spate of films that saw youth degenerate into killers such as *It's Alive* (1974), *Carrie* (1976), *The Brood* (1979), *The Children* (1980), *Bloody Birthday* (1981), *Children of the Corn* (1984), and *The New Kids* (1985). Most such films focused on the familial strife that engendered violence.

Within the horror genre there appeared fears about the decaying of American social life from the household outward. One of the most famous and trenchant images was provided by Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), with its focus on a desolate American heartland. The film's killer, Leatherface, and his family were the victims of job flight—specifically the abandonment of the meatpacking industry from central Texas. As film scholar Kim Newman has pointed out, the feverish dinner scene in the film, during which the Sawyer family host the terrified captive Sally, acts as "a parody of the sitcom family, with the bread-winning, long-suffering garage proprietor (Siedow) as Pop, the bewigged, apron-wearing Leatherface as Mom, and the rebellious, birthmarked, long-haired hitchhiker (Edwin Neal) as teenage son….Sally is served up at a family meal, presented to the centenarian half-dead Granpaw ("The best killer of them all") to be killed."[78] By the mid-1970s the dominant ideological images of the immediate postwar era, what could be defined as the "breadwinner" status quo—a set of assumptions about the male-headed, patriarchal

[77] Horror films began their steady transformation from gothic fare to social commentary in the 1970s and saturated American culture by the 1980s. For more on the transformation of horror and its pervasiveness in American culture in the Reagan years see James Kendrick, "Slasher Films and Gore in the 1980s," in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 310-328. See also Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton, "Cult Horror Cinema," in *Cult Cinema: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 194-204.

[78] Kim Newman, "Empire Essay: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Review," *Empire*, January 1, 2000. http://www.empireonline.com/movies/empire-essay-texas-chainsaw-massacre/review/.

family structure which guided the formation of public policies such as social security and unemployment insurance and upon which the liberal welfare state rested—was on the ropes.[79] But what was to replace it? Hooper was just as critical of the commune—the counterculture alternative to the nuclear family.

TCM sits as the logical extension of Hooper's earlier student film *Eggshells* (1968) and in the middle of a series of films which might be thought of as Hooper's decline cycle—following *TCM* with *Eaten Alive* (1977) about a mad, aging World War II veteran who feeds visitors to his Starlight Hotel in the Louisiana Bayou to a ravenous alligator and ending with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II* (1986), which by Hooper's own admission picks up with the Sawyers in the very different context of the Reagan years—now fairly successful entrepreneurs butchering yuppies to make prize-winning human chili. *Eggshells* is in many ways the sister piece to *TCM*, and represents the same cynical view of the era's social bankruptcy. In *Eggshells*, young hippies from Austin are slowly corrupted by a force inside their communal house. The film opens in an extended scene of a Vietnam War protest intercut with images of police and national guardsmen before moving to the film's main setting, a house at the center of a youth commune. Frenetic camera work touring the cavernous house and psychedelic imagery are interspersed with images of free-love, drug use, and lazy conversations spanning politics to song lyrics to infighting amongst the group. The audience slowly recognizes the disintegration of this world from an unknown force seemingly emanating from the house's basement. They are ultimately consumed, body and all, by the house.

[79] Robert Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (Hill and Wang: New York, 2012).

In *Eggshells* the vision of counterculture family is just as dire as that of the working-class, heartland family in *TCM*. Indeed, the film's house resembles in its decay and dirt the more extreme interiors found in the Sawyer House, which was decorated by desiccated corpses and a combination of animal and human bones. The hippies are depicted as happy airheads—and ultimately they manifest their destruction in *Eggshells* through their own dawdling way of life, ultimately a vision of an inept counterculture whose political and revolutionary transformations peter out (some might say string out). In *TCM* it is the social forces of decay—manifested within the broken and destitute Sawyer family—that finally devour the last vestiges of the 60s' free spirit. The close up of a traumatized, blood drenched Sally, the final girl in *TCM*, speeding away in the back of a pickup truck, is a definitive reminder that American society, broken as it is, has an awesome capacity to generate violence.

But Hooper's was not the only cinematic vision of the horrific family, riven by generational social crises. Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) play upon the concept of the inverted, sadistic family as the cradle of American decline. The latter pits a cannibalistic family living in the Nevada desert, headed by a hulking Neanderthal of a man named Jupiter, against an extended middle class family stranded on their vacation. The plot is standard, mirroring the western wagon train surrounded by natives, but its thematic focus is on the dynamics in both families. In the end they end up resembling one another more than we might like. By contrast, the earlier and more controversial *Last House on the Left* plays upon opposition. The film follows two young women who are kidnapped by a band of drug-addled criminals headed by an escaped convict played by David Hess. Hess's character is the father of a "family" whose crimes

could rival the Manson's. The family's quarters are a seedy tenement in New York City. They are the losers and burn-outs of the 60s generation now addled by heroin and hiding out, ready to invade the peaceful suburbs.

Last House on the Left prefigures the rape-revenge films of the late 1970s, with an important twist—the parents of the victims are the ones who enact the revenge. Hess, his girlfriend, son, and an accomplice torture, rape and kill both girls, only to be picked up by the family of one of the young victims while hitchhiking. Craven's film then turns into a slaughter-fest as the parents themselves seek out vengeance by massacring the criminals as they sleep in their home—their middle class ranch house becomes a house of bloodshed and carnage. If delinquency film often seeks the reassertion of authority, this is the ultimate example. The scenes of carnage in the home are the final cacophony in a film marked by discord. Craven sets up many incongruous elements in the film. The soundtrack is off-putting, as it is punctuated by sweet, counterculture-inspired ballads. The film is edited so as to constantly switch between images of extreme violence and the life of the parents and their sentimental, if boring, middle-class existence. The scenes in the city are starkly at odds with the peace and serenity of the green forests and black rivers of the Hudson Valley. The convicts at the center of the film are the most well-developed of any of the characters—creating an odd and uncomfortable sense of closeness. The film is a portrait of the early 1970s that manifests several decline tropes—urban decay, youth violence, crime, drug use—but at least a third of the running time feels akin to a family melodrama.

Alongside family discord, high schools were at the center of focus on youth in decline. At the core of civic life, public schools were bound to come under the assault of the

same forces seeking to transform public life from the postwar mass society to the individualized, rational-choice logic of the neoliberal order. At least since the beginning of federally-sanctioned integration, schools sat at the center of a new American Dream—they were to be the equalizing agent of a meritocratic society.[80] But, in an era of stressed public budgets schools were increasingly viewed as the rightful benefit of those who worked hard—the middle class earned their good public schools by purchasing homes in upstanding neighborhoods. It is not by chance that this era saw an explosion in the fear of public schools—some was due to overt racism and resistance to affirmative action and bussing. But the general anxiety about schools also suggested the meritocratic promise might not be true. Class and race, intractable problems, might be a defining element in the lives of young Americans to which schools alone, particularly when underfunded, could not erase.

The crisis was compounded by the solidification of "postmodern" childhood, with schools increasingly burdened by the anxieties this new constellation of youth entailed. In his broad overview of childhood, Steven Mintz identifies postmodern childhood as the broad contemporary phase of childhood that has taken form in the post-1945 US, but which had become increasingly pronounced by late century. Postmodern childhood is typified by increased economic and cultural autonomy of the young due in part to automobile culture, disposable income, and the social remaking of the family with parents often working outside

[80] It is important to note that the suburbanization of the United States was having massive effects on public education, in particular school budgets and the spending of property tax dollars, which became one of the core issues in the battle over "rights" in the post-Civil Rights "colorblind" era. Racial animus was often masked in a cold discourse about school/neighborhood choice—as if a neutral forces decided where one decided to live and school their children. Matthew Lassiter has argued, the "silent majority" that emerged in the Sunbelt was not a regional force but a national polity which both parties sought to court through a suburban strategy: "The United States became a definitively suburban nation during the final decades of the twentieth century, with the regional convergence of metropolitan trends and the reconfiguration of national politics around programs to protect the consumer privileges of affluent white neighborhoods and policies to reproduce the postindustrial economy of the corporate Sunbelt." See Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 304.

of the household. This autonomy went hand in hand with the increased regimentation of young people's lives through a more concrete division of childhood and youth, the segregation of children in age-graded institutions structured to prevent interaction with adult society outside of immediate family and childcare professionals, and the intensification of "children's emotional and psychological dependence."[81] "America's adolescents are growing up fast in the '80s—too fast for many to cope with adult roles," lamented a report in *U.S. News & World Report*. The pressure points of changing socialization and demographic trends meant that, "A new generation of American teen-agers is deeply troubled, unable to cope with the pressures of growing up in what they perceive as a world that is hostile or indifferent to them."[82]

The changes to the course of young life were profoundly disruptive to many living through them. Public intellectuals like Neil Postman argued that such trends effectively meant the disappearance of childhood. As a media studies scholar, Postman also claimed that television in particular had led to a children being exposed to the violence of the world too early. He believed that youth were developing "adult attitudes" including a cynical approach to the world and this in turn impacted their actions, including increasing lawlessness.[83] "If American can said to be drowning in a tidal wave of crime," Postman argued, "then the wave has mostly been generated by our children."[84] In longing for the return of an idealized childhood, Postman said, "Old timers may wonder about what happened to 'juvenile

[81] Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), x.
[82] Stanley N. Wellborn, "Troubled Teenagers," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 14, 1981.
[83] Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 95.
[84] Ibid., 134.

delinquency,' and grow nostalgic about a time when a teen-ager who cut class to smoke a cigarette in the school lavatory was considered a problem.'"[85]

Schools were centrally situated among these forces and debates. As early as 1970, high schools were depicted as "the most violence-prone and divisive battleground of American society."[86] The looming crisis of American education was visualized earliest in Frederick Wiseman's celebrated documentary *High School* (1967). Wiseman employed cinema vérité-style techniques to reveal the subtle breakdown of communication between young people and adults. Small disagreements over phone calls, hall passes, detention, and failing grades, insignificant in isolation but meaningful when taken as a whole, seemed to suggest a new mood in the hallways of America's most important socializing institution. Adults appeared explosive, parents insensitive, and students apathetic. While the school under investigation in Wiseman's documentary had seemingly weathered the crisis of integration, it was failing in the socialization of young people to adult society. There is a visible discord in the classroom as "hip" teachers try to express their knowledge of youth by teaching the music of Paul Simon as poetry.

The students of Wiseman's documentary could be pulled from many of the teen films of the 1970s and 1980s, through the John Hughes "brat pat" cycle of the 1980s and even into *The Simpsons*. *Rock n' Roll High School* (1979), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) *Porky's* (1981), and *The Breakfast Club* (1985) rely on a vision of youth that melds Tom Wolfe's "me generation" and a detached melancholia. Students are overseen by strong disciplinarians and aloof parents. Indeed, this constellation of youth dominated the sub-genre of teen films that was increasingly powerful in depicting middle-class, white youth ennui and

[85] Ibid., 3.
[86] Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "High School Race Turmoil—A Frightening Growth," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 1970.

apathy. In their cultural depiction, schools were far from the progressive institutions imagined by reformers such as John Dewey. This is not to say that political narratives about the democratic promise of public school did not remain at the center of American narratives about education.

More serious than indifference, school-based juvenile crime and youth delinquency were fastened to the narrative of national decline emerging in the 1970s. In his opening statements on the hearings on School Violence and Vandalism in 1975, Birch Bayh, the Democratic Senator from Indiana, proclaimed, "The number of American students who died in the zones of our nation's schools between 1970 and 1973 exceeds the number of American soldiers killed in combat throughout the first three years of the Vietnam conflict."[87] The claim was vague and unsubstantiated—possibly meaning 4 deaths (if using 1956-59 as a measure) or 25 (if using 1956-1961). In any case, using one of the great national traumas of recent memory to invoke the state of crisis in American public education, Bayh was engaging the language of decline. "Much like the ancient East German tribe known as the Vandals which plundered the centers of learning in the Roman Empire," argued Bayh, "a modern version of the Vandals today inflicts massive destruction on schools throughout the nation."[88] Such language, calling upon the decline and fall of the Roman Empire tied the American crisis of the 1970s to the entropic forces that destroy societies.

[87] Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Committee of the Judiciary, Legislative Files School Violence and Vandalism Hearing, Conference Papers, RG 46, Box 1, "Opening Statement of Senator Birch Bayh at Hearing on School Violence and Vandalism: Nature and Extent," April 16, 1975. The findings of the investigation were based primarily on a questionnaire study mailed to 757 elementary and secondary schools across the country representing 22 million of 45 million public school teachers. The response rate was 68%.
[88] Ibid.

High school was envisioned as a veritable "national blackboard jungle dominated by racial hatred."[89] Calling to the famous 1955 Richard Brooks film, the linking of this new wave of delinquency to previous manifestations was usually done to emphasize the severity of the current crisis rather than historical parallels. The image of chaotic, violent, vandalized public schools appeared in films such as *Class of 1984* (1982) and *Class of Nuke Em' High* (1984). The latter came from the fiercely independent Troma studio. Like his other films such as *The Toxic Avenger* (1985), Lloyd Kaufman's acerbic take on Reagan's America sought to unmask the cynicism of an era that on its face ascribed to the values of the so-called moral majority while quietly condoned institutional corruption and promoted empty consumerism. *Class of Nuke Em' High* sees a school terrorized by an anarchistic gang of young killers. It is exploitative at its core—with gruesome violence and sex key selling points for such a low-budget outing. But the school itself is worth considering, as Kaufman depicts it not only as a holding pen for youth, but literally stuck by corrupt authorities at the base of a nuclear reactor. Nuclear contamination kills students while Tromaville authorities undertake a coverup. The bands of roving "cretins" (the youth gang that terrorizes the school) are in fact the victims of nuclear leaching—transformed from studious juveniles into rebel mutants. While youth gangs are responsible for the overly stylized and gruesome mayhem unleashed upon the fictional Tromaville High School, it is in fact the failures of the town's governance and adult society that has compromised the future of Tromaville's youth.

Mark Lester's *Class of 1984* took itself more seriously than a Troma film. Lester sought to update the Richard Brooks narrative for the Reagan era. It opens to Alice Cooper's "I Am the Future" and the interstitial: "Last year there were 280,000 incidents of violence by students against teachers and their classmates in American high schools. Unfortunately, this

[89] Ibid.

film is based on true events. Fortunately, very few schools are like Lincoln High…yet."[90] In the film Lincoln High School is plagued by a gang of young punks, which the film's protagonist, a new teacher, played by Perry King, must overcome to reassert his own authority. The film ultimately condones a vigilantism popular in the era's films and politics—from *Death Wish* (1974)*, The Exterminator* (1980), and *Vigilante* (1983), to the celebration of the New York subway vigilante, Bernhard Goetz. As the teacher, Norris, tries to navigate an educational environment where his coworkers carry handguns and students must pass through metal detectors upon arrival. Pranks turn to assault, with Norris's wife being raped by his students. The film ends with the teacher killing four students in the gang, including throwing one through the skylight of the gymnasium where a school concert is about to take place—the student hangs by his neck above the audience.

Mark Lester took his film as a serious piece of social critique, arguing that he wanted to make a "Modern day controversial movie about what was going on in high schools and with teachers."[91] He visited many high schools in advance of filming and found, "my god these places have become violent."[92] Most fascinating though is the world envisioned around the main plot, seemingly borrowed from the mind of James Wilson. School hallways are covered in graffiti and impress the loss of control of public space to young villains. The main student antagonist comes from a broken, single-parent home. Lester picks up as well on the increased privatization and securitization of public space. Hallways are patrolled by police guards. The public school is no longer visible as a space for democratic learning—a space in which civil society is gathered of its own free will to decide and chart a course forward based

[90] *Class of 1984*, directed by Mark Lester (Guerilla High Productions, 1982), BluRay (Shout Factory, 2015).
[91] Mark Lester, Audio Commentary, *Class of 1984*, directed by Mark Lester (Guerilla High Productions, 1982), BluRay (Shout Factory, 2015).
[92] Ibid..

on shared social and cultural decisions. Underlying Lester's critique is a proposed solution—the reassertion of adult authority, even if violent.

It is *Over the Edge*, however, directed by Jonathan Kaplan, which sits most clearly at the crossroads of the forces of postmodern childhood, school crisis, and delinquency. The film follows the lives of teenage youth and their parents in the fictional town of New Granada. A suburban housing development, New Granada is advertised as "tomorrow's city…today." The slogan serves as a portent to the audience. Like *Class of 1984*, the filmmaker presents the events of the film as prediction of things to come. It also opens to scrolling text: "In 1978 110,000 kids under 18 were arrested for crimes of vandalism in the United States. This story is based on true incidents occurring during the 70's in a planned suburban community of condominiums and townhomes, where city planners ignored the fact that a quarter of the population was 15 years old or younger." Whereas news often portrayed the crisis of suburban juvenile delinquency as a form of urban infection and a rollback of the successes of white flight, in Kaplan's film, the predominately white community has crime and delinquency literally built into the structure of life. Despite its exploitative grab, *Over the Edge* can be read as indictment of a consumerist culture that ignores both the subjectivity and citizenship of its youth.[93]

The film's main focus is on the kids who hang out at the local recreation center (a makeshift sheet-metal building) where they listen to KISS, play basketball, smoke dope, drop acid, have sex, and lounge around on "beer breaks." Though Kaplan's film was inspired by news reporting of youth vandalism and delinquency, there was a clear statement that, rather than clear choices based in malevolence, these are youth with few if any outlets for their

[93] *Over the Edge*, directed by Jonathan S. Kaplan (Orion Pictures, 1979), DVD (Warner Home Video, 2005).

creativity and natural angst.[94] Carl, the teenage protagonist of the film, is a quiet, thoughtful type. He falls in with other local kids, some of whom might not be the best influences, but generally he is depicted as having a strong internal moral compass. Like the other youngsters of New Granada, Carl is nonetheless jaded. His home life is materially quite prosperous, the house an example of 1970s modernist excess of exposed wood and lush carpets. However, within this domestic sphere there is little true communication between children and parents. His father Fred, a car salesman and local developer, is rarely present as he is working with the president of the home owner's association, Jerry Cole, to bring in big money from Houston. Fred's business dealings leave little time to listen to the concerns of his son. At one point Carl asks why the drive in and bowling alley haven't been built on the spare land next to the rec center. Fred tells him that the city now plans to transfer the industrial land over to local businesses because the "city's got to make money on that property." The lack of investment in the town's youth, despite the huge influx of money that funds the building of luxury apartments and single-family houses will come back to haunt the parents of New Granada.

The youth of the town are consumed by ennui, infantilized by their parents, and isolated from adult society. They party in houses with absent parent, use excessive drugs and fornicate regularly. Their petty crimes turn more serious when one of the main characters, Richie (played by a young Matt Dillon) is killed by a police officers while flashing an unloaded gun. This in turns leads the disaffected youth of the town to lock up the parents

[94] Charles Haas, the co-screenwriter of the film told *Vice* that *Over the Edge* was inspired the the Bruce Koon and James Finerock reporting for the San Francisco Examiner, "Mousepacks: Kids on a Crime Spree." See Mike Sacks, "Over the Edge," *Vice*, September 1, 2009, accessed October 13, 2015, http://www.vice.com/read/over-the-edge-134-v16n9.

inside the local high school during a parent-teacher association meeting meant to address the youth crisis.

Fred and Jerry are the foils upon which the larger critique of *Over the Edge* should be hung, and it becomes most evident during the fateful PTA meeting at the film's climax. The group had gathered to discuss the town's crisis and the tragic death of Richie. Jerry tells the gathered parents, "People don't move into a planned community to be pushed around and scared to go out at night. They come here to get away from that sort of thing. And if we're asking them to move here then we owe them that security." Jerry's plan for New Granada is based in the white flight impetus that created gated communities of tranquility in a period of stressed public budgets. He emphasizes "I've talked to city managers and councilmen and mayors all over the country and heard that same stuff about the kids over and over again." When parents begin talking again about the shooting Cole responds, "We're all concerned here, but I think we've gotten away from the main point, which is that a community with a juvenile crime problem is not a community with a high property resale value…You can have the finest housing in the world, and we do, but nobody is going to pay 60, 80, 100 thousand dollars to live in a decorator-colored slum." It is only then that Fred begins to realize that the structure of the housing development is fundamentally lacking in genuine community. "My son and his friends are part of this goddamn town," shouts Fred, "And you people talk about these kids like they're a bunch of animals running in the street!" Of course, this discovery is made too late to close the growing dissonance between parents and children which leaves all in shambles. With their parents under lock and key the kids destroy cars in the parking lot and unleash a torrent of violence, shooting off guns and starting fires all the while taunting their parents through the school's public address system. They literally reenact the

destruction depicted in anti-vandalism public service announcements shown in school. When the police arrive and the parents are freed from the school, Ed, the policeman who killed Richie, takes off after the youth. He arrests Cole but is shot by other youth as he drives towards the Rec center. The police car crashes into the rec center, where Carl is able to escape before the building explodes, killing Ed. The following morning Carl is led out of the police station while "O-o-h Child" plays. Kissing his parents goodbye, he is loaded onto a school bus full of young people heading to what is assumed to be a correctional facility. The school bus is literally transformed into a prison bus, with steel mesh covering the windows, a guard, and the kids in handcuffs, over the sound of the lyrics "o-o-h child things are gonna get easier…things will get brighter." The final act of the film is fairly ambiguous. We are





Figure 1.2 The final scenes of *Over the Edge* (1979) depict the young Carl and his fellow town kids being led to a detention center in a school bus converted to prison bus.

allowed to watch the buildup of violence finally explode, but there is ultimately no closure to the film. There is certainly no solution to the problem of juvenile violence, at least not within the confines of New Granada. The very structure of the town would need to be changed, including the ideological assumptions of what separates children and their parents. The film necessitates an opening of discourse, but then the credits roll.

In many ways the film follows the logic of decline articulated by James Wilson only a few years later, "We suggest that "untended" behavior also leads to the breakdown of community controls. A stable neighborhood of families who care for their homes, mind each other's children, and confidently frown on unwanted intruders can change, in a few years or even a few months, to an inhospitable and frightening jungle." Though sounding alarmist, this kind of rhetoric had been translated to the visual realm in multiple films of the era, such as the *The Warriors* (1979), which came out the same year as *Over the Edge* and offered a similar vision of decrepit community. *The Warriors* follows a teenage gang as they try to make their way through the various hood "turfs" that have developed in an underpoliced New York City. In the logic of James Wilson, and consequently many public policy experts who drew on his work, "A piece of property is abandoned, weeds grow up, a window is smashed. Adults stop scolding rowdy children; the children, emboldened, become more rowdy. Families move out, unattached adults move in. Teenagers gather in front of the corner store. The merchant asks them to move; they refuse. Fights occur. Litter accumulates. People start drinking in front of the grocery; in time, an inebriate slumps to the sidewalk and is allowed to sleep it off. Pedestrians are approached by panhandlers."[95] In other words, bedlam pursues from the kind of tacit approval of adult and official society to minor infractions.

[95] George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, "Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety," *The Atlantic* (March 1982).

At the same time celluloid images of school violence were appearing, the nation was seeking solutions to juvenile crime. It is telling that both *Over the Edge* and *Class of 1984* employ the imagery of incarceration and security as a response to youth delinquency as this would increasingly be the public response. A national survey conducted by *The Observer* chalked up rising disturbances to the "avoidance syndrome" among teachers and administrators—refusing to take action to stop student misbehavior. Describing the breakdown of authority, they cite the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, which also complained that schools do not report delinquency adequately to the proper authorities.

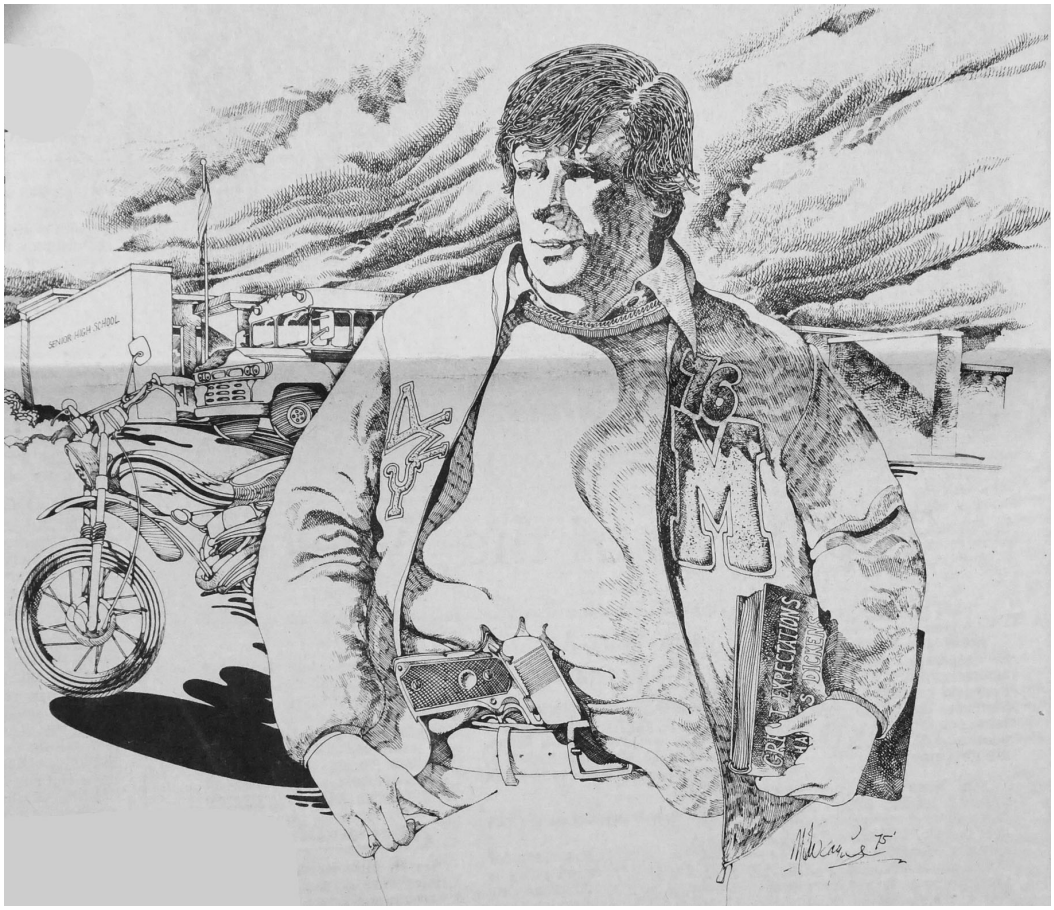


Figure 1.3 The image of the "new" teenager. This likeness appeared alongside an article in *The Observer* on school gangs. See August Gribbin, "An 'A' in Violence: Unruly Gangs, Student Toughs are a Serious Problem in Many Schools," *The Observer*, March 22, 1975.

Into the void would come increased policing situated in schools. Joseph Grealy, the president of the National Association of School Security Directors, was central to the process. His testimony before the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency in 1975 brought to the forefront of policymakers the problems facing America's schools. It read like a police blotter. Drive by shootings, rapes, abductions at gunpoint, and massive amounts of vandalism including the death of school pets sat alongside bomb threats, false fire alarms, assaults, and firestarters as major problems facing American public schools. Grealy advocated for the Juvenile Delinquency in Schools Act of 1975 and was central to the formation of the Association of School Security Directors. He also aided in passage of Juvenile Delinquency Act of 1974 which, surprisingly, sought alternatives to the juvenile justice system as the primary response to juvenile crime and misbehavior. Nevertheless, he helped pass the Safe Schools Acts in Florida, to improve and implement school security systems. It was copied elsewhere and laid the groundwork for what has since been described as the school-to-prison pipeline.[96] If the crisis of education in the late twentieth century could be envisioned as a decline of the progressive ideals of American education, the solutions proposed sought to reestablish the rigid industrial school format that John Dewey and others challenged, and this time based their model more on the prison than the factory.

While the youth of the 1960s were suspect, and as I suggest, often depicted as harboring pent up dangers because of their political views, by the late 1970s and early 1980s a more inherently violent youth dominated the screen. The new stereotype was often the gang member—the young person whose ennui took on violent tendencies. Some commentators

[96] "Nature and Extent of School Violence and Vandalism," Testimony of Joseph I. Grealy, President, National Association of School Security Directors before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, April 16, 1975. RG46 Records of US Senate. 94th Congress, 1970-1974, Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Legislative Files School Violence and Vandalism Hearing, 1975. Conference Papers. Box 1.

wrote of a "return of the armies of the streets."[97] There was also a focus on suburban gangs and new urban gangs that did not resemble the rough-and-tumble street toughs made popular in the 1950s and 1960s.[98] The popular image of gangs had been transformed within the context of the post-Vietnam era: "The new gangs are more sophisticated than their ancestors of the '50s. Many of them contain Vietnam veterans, skilled in techniques of combat and killing—and, in their anger at a society that has mistreated them, not averse to using those skills."[99] These were not the "adolescent street gangs which inspired *West Side Story*," rather they were "led by disillusioned young men who learned about violence in Vietnam" and who in turn were training teenagers in this new violence.[100] What was most frightening was that such gangs were invading, in the words of one report, "mainly white, middle-class suburban schools—the institutions generally considered safe from the barbarisms known to occur at blighted urban and some recently desegregated schools."[101]

Though people of color were often central to depictions of urban gangs and crime (and would disproportionately feel the impact of laws designed to curb the trends) white, suburban, and middle class youth were not perceived as immune to a life of crime. It was

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[97] S. Gerstel, "Youth Gangs Growing," *New Journal and Guide*, March 5, 1977.

[98] Dr. Walter Miller, a researcher at the Harvard, MIT Joint Center for Urban Studies, was a prominent voice in seeking to "dispel the my that youth gangs died with the 1950s and 1960s." He sought to shed light on suburban gangs and "new" urban gangs. In his estimation, youth gangs were a serious problem plaguing American society, but the issue was that Americans were not adept at identifying them because they were conditioned to imagine gangs wearing monogrammed jackets and looking the part of pop culture ephemera like *West Side Story*. Americans needed to, effectively, expand their definition of gangs and gang activity. Miller "describes a gang as 'a group of youngsters that currently congregate at some sort of locale out of the house. This would include that 'bunch of kids' that many people refuse to call a gang merely because it is not 'formalized,' he added." See Robert A. Jordan, "Youth Gangs More Numerous than in '50s," *Boston Globe*, December 6, 1970; Other reports sought to draw distinctions from earlier gang activity. The "wealth" of youth drug gangs, "fed by the sale of lethal cocaine derivatives like crack" was one way of distinguishing the supposedly sophisticated gangs of the 1980s. It also fed the drug war campaigns of that decade seeking to eradicate them. See "Combating Youth Gangs," *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 5, 1988.

[99] Linda Backstein, "Return of Youth Gangs," *The Washington Post, Times Herald,* May 21, 1972.

[100] "Terror Plagues N. York Schools," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 4, 1972.

[101] August Gribbin, "An 'A' in Violence: Unruly Gangs, Student Toughs are a Serious Problem in Many Schools," *The Observer*, March 22, 1975.

often alluded that the suburbs themselves were becoming infected with crime spilling from America's cities. By the 1980s in particular, the discourse had shifted from a focus on the nation's crumbling inner cities to its suburbs and smaller metropolitan areas.[102] "Officials in California say gang membership is increasing among white, middle-class suburban youths, and the officials say these gangs are engaging in such criminal acts as gang fights and robbery, and that some take part in Satanic rituals."[103] Gang membership was blamed on lack of parental supervision, the breakdown of families and rising divorce rates, the punk rock and heavy metal subculture, alienation, dim economic futures, and anxiety over nuclear war. The results was the frightening prospect that suburbia was filling up with gangs. The films of Penelope Spheeris take up this phenomenon, but offer some interesting, often contradictory messages about the causes and solutions of youth delinquency.

Spheeris is most well known for her three-part documentary *The Decline of Western Civilization*, an anthropological look at the evolution of the west coast punk rock and heavy metal scene over nearly two decades, with the first part of the trilogy released in 1980. Rather than caricature the subject matter, she chose to embed herself in the subculture she studied, slipping into the punk nightlife. Though the resulting work was acclaimed, Spheeris worried that her rebelliousness lost her jobs. Working alongside the famous independent filmmaker Roger Corman, she once said, "The studio system is a gigantic old dinosaur that needs to be totally restructured."[104] She lamented, "I'll probably look like Nancy Reagan soon just so I can make my movies."[105] *Suburbia* (1983) was related to *Decline* in many ways, not just in its choice to highlight the punk subculture and ethos. The former was one of series of films in

[102] "Youth Gangs in the Suburbs," *Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 1982.
[103] Judith Cummings, "Youth Gangs Rise in Suburbs in West," *New York Times*, January 12, 1986.
[104] Richard Harrington, "In the Punk of the Night," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 1981.
[105] Ibid..

these years that looked at music-based youth countercultures—often envisioned as gangs—as a menace such as *Rock 'n' Roll High School* (1979), *Quadrophenia* (1979), *Dead End Drive-In* (1986), *Dudes* (1987) (also directed by Spheeris), *Rock n' Roll Nightmare* (1987), and *Punk Vacation* (1990). *Rock 'n' Roll High School* (also produced by Roger Corman) was probably the most joyous of the bunch, poking fun of delinquency tropes and instead turning the dilapidated, unruly school into an all-out party. But unlike much of this other fare, Spheeris was concerned in *Suburbia* with imparting a kind of vérité. In this way it is a natural extension of *Decline*. "When I was in film school," said Spheeris, "I loved watching documentaries by people like Frederick Wiseman. My stance with the 'Declines' was to present the situations as objectively as possible and to let the characters either glorify or hang themselves."[106] So is the case in *Suburbia*, in which the central actors are a group of Los Angeles youth based in the punk scene of the early 1980s. In addition to exploring the lives of alienated youth, the film makes strides at also explaining the alienation of the working class. Unlike other delinquency films, Spheeris indicts adult society as being more lawless and uncontrolled than their youth who, by contrast, have formed alternative communities of mutuality and care for one another in the face of a viciously consumerist and broken adult system.

The lack of discourse between parents and their children, and its contribution to juvenile crime, is at the center of Penelope Spheeris's *Suburbia*. The film focuses on a group of abandoned and run-away youth ranging from elementary-age kids to teenagers as they build a new form of family in a run-down, abandoned housing development. The youth build a commune of sorts where the eldest take care of the youngest orphans, even reading them

[106] Jamie Diamond, "Penelope Spheeris: From Carny Life to 'Wayne's World'," *New York Times*, April 12, 1992.

fairy tales before tucking them into their roach-infested beds. The central characters are Evan Johnson, a white teenage runaway who stumbles upon the punk subculture and is picked up by Jack Diddley after being roofied at a concert. Jack is a street-smart punk and fellow runaway, and one of the leaders of the group. The central critique of the film centers on the idea of suburbia as the "slums of the future," and the inability of adult society to account for their young or make a world worthy of them.[107] In the punk appraisal and ethos, suburbia comes across as a soulless consumerist reverie. At the key meeting of Evan and Jack, the former reads to his new friend from his mother's stolen diary. The passage, written in 1968, is optimistic about the future his mother has planned for her young marriage: "Mark and I are going to be very happy here. The air is clean, the skies are blue, and all the houses are brand new and beautiful. They call it suburbia, and that word's perfect because it's a combination of the word suburb and utopia." As he reads the passage they drive through a dreary neighborhood of crumbling single-family bungalows. Evan and Jack laugh out loud at the passage, which goes on to describe a life of happy children and leisure (Mark has a job with Lockheed Martin). Evan knows her fate—she is now a poverty-stricken, alcoholic, single-mother. Coming from broken homes, Evan and Jack are both aware that they, like their parents, are the victims of a strangling American economic slump that has left families in dire straits. And it is the recognition of the feebleness of this particularly cherished American dream that allows them a degree of freedom to form alternative social structures and, indeed, circumvent stifling Reagan-era restraints.

While the youth do brawl and commit other forms of delinquency, their crimes are usually confined to minor vandalism, scuffling, and raucous play. There are examples of burglary (of food), but it is never intoned that such crime is the result of inherent deviance.

[107] *Suburbia*, directed by Penelope Spheeris (Suburbia Production, 1983), DVD (Shout! Factory, 2010).

More often delinquency takes on political meaning—both as a rejection of norms that offend youth and uphold unfair systems of authority. But delinquency here can also be read as the result not of choice, but of necessity—after all the kids need to eat and adults by and large have abandoned them. Coming off of *The Decline of Western Civilization*, Spheeris had spent some time, as she says, "studying behavior." In making sense of the sometimes toxic but always invigorating punk scene, Spheeris concluded that the correct sociological approach was to ask "What is it we've done to create this?" "Parents should take a lot of the responsibility," she concluded. "Children are created by their parents, so the older generation needs to look at these people and say 'What did I do?' instead of putting the blame off on the kids."[108]

The truly lawless in Spheeris's film are the adults, symbolized by a local anti-crime citizens group. The two main antagonists of the film—and who are in conflict with the young punks—are middle-aged, white workingmen recently laid off by General Motors. The audience is introduced to them chasing after the dogs that roam around the abandoned housing. Their vehicles bumper sticker reads, "When guns are outlawed only outlaws will have guns." They kill a puppy in front of a police officer and justify it by saying, "the little ones grow up to be big ones." Together, the two men are more cynical than any of the punks they despise so much. And yet, the audience can appreciate their cynicism in some ways. At one point they are seen selling a weekend camper because they "Can't afford the gas." One realizes that they too are victims of a changing America. They "Can't work, can't hunt, can't do jack shit." Spheeris's film seems to suggest that the endemic violence throughout the film is the result of a class war. But solutions are hard to come by. *Suburbia* ends with the two antagonists running over and killing a pre-teen boy. The police arrive and the film fades to

[108] Richard Harrington, "In the Punk of the Night," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 1981.

black. There is little hope for the future, as one of the main characters describes a society with no future at all: "Just think, by the year 2000 it'll all be one big chemical wasteland. All the mutants will be roaming around bumping into eachother."

Spheeris sought to expose the underbelly of suburbia and claims most of the film events are drawn from "real life" news reports. Ultimately the film's declension is in its built environment—abandoned tract housing, unemployed workers, walls covered in graffiti, and Americans young and old caught in drunken and drug-induced stupor. But, its message does not seem to be declensionist—the squatters become a family and in Spheeris's words, "Find love with eachother." The film's conflicting messages might on the surface seem to clash with one another. Spheeris herself has said she would leave out the exploitative elements of the film today: "I think as time goes on you realize that so much violence and cruelty goes on in the world you don't want it represented in movies."[109] This might be a recognition that the exploitative elements could blunt some of the film's more subtle critiques of Reagan era



Figure 1.4 The make-do family unit in Penelope Spheeris's *Suburbia* (1983). Here the group of runaways unroll sod blankets in front of a mall's Radio Shack after hours. The locale serves as a substitution for the home den that each of them lacks while the TV program talks of leukemia brought on by nuclear war. Spheeris uses the imagery of youth delinquency to indict the failures of American social change, including public and private deinvestment. But by focusing on punk subculture Spheeris also celebrates certain results of decline—these youth have reformed a social unit based on mutuality, frankness, revelry, and free expression in direct opposition to Reagan-era morality.

[109] Audio Commentary with Penelope Spheeris, *Suburbia*, directed by Penelope Spheeris (Suburbia Production, 1983), DVD (Shout! Factory, 2010).

moral arguments. The exploitative elements are however core to the historical positioning of the film. As Spheeris was seeking to convey the reports she read in newspapers and saw on television it is not surprising that the film contains scenes of shock-value violence. Moreover, her choice of setting her characters within the punk subculture of the early 1980s embodies some of the ethos of that movement, including its use of jolting imagery and behavior as a mode of political and cultural agitation. As a spectacular kind of disorder permeated most of the subject matter she sought to put on screen, removing exploitation from the film would have undermined its effectiveness. The punk ethos the film embodies serves as a kind of anti-declensionist declaration despite the social crises surrounding working-class economic slowdown. Punk's use of the symbols of consumer detritus and political cowardice as well as its exaggerated toughness and violence is both a reflection and a recycling of the modes of violence (political, economic, and social) that permeate American society. But at punk's heart, and in the center of Spheeris's film, is an intimate desire for creation (for punk) and for community and family (among the teenagers). They both find a form of success, and it is not surprising that violence, blood, and human failure were required in the case of *Suburbia* to communicate its larger affirmative message about the bonds of love. Spheeris's is a film with difficult subject matter, but its surface-level violence belies the ways in which ordinary folks continue to find avenues toward meaning in the midst of social calamity.

Spheeris's *The Boys Next Door* (1985) was released just two years after *Suburbia* and explores many of the same themes through a darker lens, placing the reactionary white working class front and center. The film follows two eighteen-year-olds on a crime spree through Los Angeles. Upon graduating from high school, Roy and Bo leave their small town and decide to take a "vacation" in Los Angeles before they have to start work at the local

factory on Monday and "run the drill press the rest of our lives."[110] Bo responds that it could be worse if they had no jobs at all, to which Roy responds, "Either way you're screwed." Bo, played by Charlie Sheen, is the more immature of the two. He is along for the ride, not completely clued in to the angst of Roy's character, content to sip beer and watch cartoons. Roy on the other hand is a truly psychotic individual. Despite his poor home life and condemnation to a future of hard labor, the audience cannot sympathize with Roy. He is a racist and mysoginistic (though Bo's character is as well), and completely devoid of empathy. He rages against the world from a critical standpoint, but is also inherently sociopathic. This is one ambiguity in Spheeris's film that is not truly explained. While throughout the audience gradually comes to understand the parochial views of these two white, working-class individuals, their poor home lives, unsuccessful courting of partners, and dire futures, it is unclear if their deviancy is caused by these conditions. The complete lack of emotion or reflection on their crimes is reminiscent of the more successful *The River's Edge* (1986) from the following year, another film that focuses on deviant working class youth for which their indifference borders on the deranged.

There is a palpable anger inside both characters, anger that they don't get women, anger at adult society, and anger that their form of white masculinity seems sidelined. At one point they ogle a beautiful woman at an arcade. She is with her date, a yuppie, embodying a new type of man who is well dressed and effeminate. Roy tells Bo, "That mother fucker. He's the one that'll keep us from going anywhere." Roy guns down both of them while they are parked and making out. Roy is also responsible for attacking a Libyan gas attendant, beating him near death, and killing both a homosexual man and an extroverted, seemingly

[110] *The Boys Next Door*, directed by Penelope Spheeris (Republic Entertainment International, 1985), DVD (Image Entertainment, 2011).

empowered woman. His list of victims is a catalogue of the far right's vision of American decline: Roy is a reactionary against the changing tempo of American life, which has left him with no chance of personal or professional success. The film makes these connections quite clear. *The Boys Next Door* is a film conscious of the backlash phenomenon on the rise at the time of its making, clued in to the racial and class tensions of Reagan's America. There is one extended scene in which the police officers chasing Roy and Bo question witnesses of the gas station attack. They interview a ragged old man who tells the cops that he saw the whole thing happen. "Two blacks and a Mexican" were responsible. They ask if they had a car, to which the man says, "Cadillac of course. Goddamn minorities, always stealing everything. They gotta have some way to pay for them cars they drive." This is an odd scene in the film, but one which provides the audience a contextualization of who is in fact considered criminal in the mainstream when compared to the actual violent individuals in this case—two white males. It reveals brilliantly a central paradox in the symbolic logic of American society: the white working class lament the signifiers which reveal the rising status of minority and subaltern groups at the same time they serve the symbolic role of perpetual criminal, occupying the bottom rung in the hierarchical order.

Spheeris is most concerned with the obscure position of the white working class in the same hierarchical order. After their killing spree Bo tells Roy "If you don't get control of this shit, they're gonna lock us up," to which Roy responds, "They'll lock us up Monday, pal." Though the audience is not meant to empathize with the killers, Spheeris's film leaves two conflicting messages. The first is largely about the forces in American society that produce violence—white, male, heterosexual authority and class inequality. However, the opening adds a level of ambiguity to the overall message of the film by suggesting a second

cause of violence. It opens with images of serial killers, such as David Berkowitz, flashing on the screen and the voice over of supposed killers along with criminologists and officials reminding us that "We live in such a violent society." Like many of the newscasters of the day and popular psychology, the causes of violent deviance are often that "The new criminals have been so brutalized in their own upbringing that they seem incapable of viewing their victims as fellow human beings." Borrowing from the alarmist rhetoric that makes such violence seem epidemic we are told, "I think we're all expecting these killers to be frothing-at-the-mouth maniacs. The scary thing is that seemingly normal people commit these crimes. They can act like anyone: your friend, your teacher, the guy next door." The statement implies both immediate danger (the switch to the second person) and the implication that such violence and violent people (effectively serial killers) are ubiquitous. This voiceover also makes it unclear overall if Spheeris herself has decided the nature of criminality and deviance. But rather than suggesting the cause to be a mixture of biology and social circumstance, the message seems to be that American society itself, with its many strings of hatred bound up in the Gordian class knot, is the primary culprit in producing such figures as Bo and Roy.

Many of the same themes can be found in the work of Alex Cox, an English filmmaker living in America, whose sleeper hit *Repo Man* (1984) melds the punk aesthetic and an eccentric anti-Thatcherite/anti-Reaganite critique into perhaps the most skillful treatment of youth and decline. As he lay dying of a gunshot wound following his attempted robbery of a convenience store, Duke, a punk gangster in *Repo Man* blurts out, "I know a life of crime led me to this sorry fate. And yet, I blame society. Society made me what I am!" Crouching over his friend, Otto Maddox, the lackadaisical protagonist of the film, responds

tersely, "That's Bullshit, you're a white suburban punk, just like me." Coughing up blood, Duke's reply is delivered deadpan: "But it still hurts." The scene typifies the burlesque tone of the film, which follows the disaffected Otto as he loses his job at a supermarket and takes up employment in the frenetic life of a repo man. Otto eventually stumbles upon a wanted Chevy Malibu that contains radioactive alien corpses stolen, presumably, from a lab in the New Mexican desert. At the end of the film, with pseudo-government, scientific, and religious authorities hot on his trail, Otto and an eccentric yard mechanic Miller blast off into the skies over Los Angeles in the preternatural vehicle. The film's philosophical message is conveyed most clearly by Miller, the unassuming and grimy grunt of the repossession company, and who Otto assumes did a lot of acid in the "hippie days." He tells Otto, "A lot o' people don't realize what's really going on. They view life as a bunch o' unconnected incidents 'n things. They don't realize that there's this, like, lattice o' coincidence that lays on top o' everything." The film satirizes America during the Reagan presidency, and uses offbeat humor to display the entropic current in the lives of ordinary, working people. As Miller says, "You know how everybody's into weirdness right now?"[111] The weirdness being an ambiguous, perhaps floating signifier for the cracking systems of meaning that define American politics and culture. It is also a kind of in-joke about the movie itself, which is, to say the least, weird.

At the center of *Repo Man* is an alienated young person, counseled by an even more aggrieved veteran repo man. The film is peppered with characters, many of them young people, falling through the cracks of a decaying America, forcing them, and the viewer, to question the very ideological assumptions of American exceptionalism. Taking place in the streets and junkyards of urban Los Angeles, *Repo Man* is particularly critical of the

[111] *Repo Man*, directed by Alex Cox (Edge City, 1984), BluRay (Criterion Collection, 2013).

American Dream and its symbolic manifestation in the postwar era. Immediately prior to Duke's failed hold-up, the doomed youth asked his girlfriend Debbie if they should begin thinking of settling down, getting a house, and having a baby. A quick snort of an unidentified substance stirs him from his doubt. Just moments later, as he is trying to rationalize his life of crime, Duke's pathetic "But it still hurts," is imparted with a double meaning. The physical shock and the trauma of trying to process the act of dying is one reading. But, as Duke gasps his last breaths he is also asking for some sympathy. As this punk character knows, the working-class suburbs of the late-twentieth century are imbued with their own pain—which Otto spends a good deal of the film cataloguing.

Repo Man is on the fringe of the delinquency films and is one of the more complex and thoughtful examples. Like other films it focused on youth, and in particular youth crime, as a measure of American crisis. The setting of *Repo Man* in a trash-strewn, baked, urban California is the perfect backdrop to illuminate the unraveling of the promises of the New Deal Order—the social contract based on FDR's extension of security from material depredation and a promise of broader access to economic and social opportunity. Indeed, the central circumstance of the film is the repossession of the American Dream, often represented by automobiles, but by extension the default is ultimately the liberal promise. There is an inkling throughout the film that much of the promise was meretricious, a devil's deal that didn't produce the promised happiness of Coca Cola commercials. Throughout the film all of the goods produced by American capitalism are represented as dull, generic, and lifeless—shed of the luster of advertising agencies. All items appear in simple blue and white packaging denoting their contents: "beer," "beans," and "cereal." At one point a can simply reads "food." Americans seemed to have sold their souls for these less-than dreary

goods and now, with few opportunities in the age of offshoring, even they are being defaulted upon. If that weren't enough the authorities in the film are represented as malevolent, unfamiliar forces whether they be government agents or familial heads. At one point Otto returns home to discover that his parents, a couple of stoned, dead-beat baby boomers, have donated his college fund to a televangelist.

The film catalogues for southern California what historian Kate Brown has described taking place throughout the rustbelt in the postwar era: a slow, strangling violence. Brown has described the process of deindustrialization as "low-decibel, slowly accruing violence," the kind which is "difficult to visualize and encapsulate, which makes it nearly impossible to locate distinct perpetrators and victims, or to recognize the destruction at all."[112] And that is ultimately what is visualized on screen. "There was no famine, genocide, or war, nothing even close, in my American rust-belt childhood," says Brown, "only lives that didn't pan out, and a sense that we were sitting sidetracked, waiting for something to happen."[113] Both Brown and Cox provide a picture of background violence that structures the choices of historical and fictional actors.

To understand the dissonance in the work of Cox and Spheeris, and indeed many of the films at the center of this chapter, a distinction between what might be termed background violence and acted violence should be employed. Such a distinction is central to understanding and grappling with narratives of crime in the late twentieth century. The deathbed debate between Otto and Duke in the convenience store represents the understood break between active choices (such as crime) and limited opportunities (the context of deindustrialization). Slovenian philosopher and social critic Slavoj Zizek has perhaps best

[112] Kate Brown, *Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of Places Not Yet Forgotten* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 32.
[113] Ibid., 21

described this distinction. In *Violence: Six Sideways Glances* he contemplates the nature of violence that permeates and is nonetheless obscured in the late capitalist first world. He differentiates "subjective" and "objective" violence and the latter's ability to remain hidden as one of the defining ideological mystifications of modern society. Subjective violence—that which has an agent—is easily recognizable. The state and society are called upon to control and punish its perpetrators. Objective violence, which is systemic and embedded within social, political, and economic systems, is, by contrast, rarely if ever acknowledged. "The catch," argues Zizek, "is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal,' peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things."[114] A mugging, for example, is experienced as a subjective violent act, but inner-city poverty, which might create the conditions of a mugging, is the objective violence that undergirds the experiential realm.

With this in mind, the satire of *Repo Man* in some ways serves as the double vantage point that Zizek fears is too often elusive. It seethes with images of decay and anomie but is punctuated with spouts of subjective violence of both individuals and institutions. Duke acknowledges that it is the background violence that sets the parameters of his life. Both petty and serious crimes happen just above the mystified violence of late capitalism. However, despite the layers of meaning, the conclusion of *Repo Man* puts it in line with other declension cinema, primarily that there is no real solution to the crisis of contemporary American life. In this case, the fantasy of leaving by way of alien automobile offers no sense of closure; rather it is part of the great cosmic coincidence.

[114] Slavoj Zizek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York, Picador, 2008), 2.

Though *Repo Man* offers little solace, it does meditate on the confluence of forces (both direct and indirect) that have shaped postwar America in a way that is often misunderstood or neglected. Delinquency films offer commentary missing in other media portraits of juvenile crime. Their unique visualizations often provides explanations for deviance that are at odds with criminological theories of "broken windows"—though many of the films including those of Mark Lester and Penelope Spheeris cannot escape this vision of crime—and would seem to be in opposition to the punishment regime supported in national discourse and enacted piecemeal throughout the late twentieth century.

As communications specialist Charles Ackland has argued, "At the point of virtually every measure of social crisis—race relations, drugs, censorship, pornography, gender, sexuality, families, poverty, waning tradition—sits the loosely defined, yet rhetorically forceful, youth."[115] This was particularly true the historical period from the late 1960s through the Reagan presidency. The crisis was tied foreseeably to rising crime levels but its captivation of the public imagination owed more to amorphous fears of decline. Violent crime did rise in the last three decades of the twentieth century by up to 500%.[116] According to historian Heather Ann Thompson, the violent crime rate by population rose from 200.2 per 100,000 in 1965 to 556.6 per 100,000 in 1985.[117] The degree to which the crime epidemic was fastened to youth, in both discourse and iconography, however, has not been truly appreciated. As official reports made clear and were spread by television hosts, the rise of

[115] Charles R. Acland, *Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of 'Youth in Crisis'* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 10.
[116] Robert A. Ferguson, *Inferno: An Anatomy of American Punishment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 16.
[117] Heather Ann Thompson, "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History," *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 3: 728.

juvenile crime, in particular burglary, was at the core of the rise in crime rates in the postwar era.[118] Taking into account the postwar baby boom, it was not surprising to see at least some rise in the rates of crime as the high risk age of 15-29 is more responsible for crime than any others.[119] The representation of crime and the ways in which it was discussed, however, tied juvenile delinquency and juvenile crime to a much broader crisis of American exceptionalism. Beginning in the late 1960s, youth were positioned as both the causes and victims of institutional failings associated with family life, education, and employment.

Films such as *Over the Edge*, *Suburbia,* and *Repo Man* catalogue, sometimes exploitatively, crime but also narrate the unravelling of the New Deal order. They offer depictions that are ambivalent when placed next to a news media which offered sensational visions of youth criminality and placed blame squarely on youth for the troubled state of American society. The melding of crime, suburban decay, and youth in media ultimately placed blame on individual deviancy and, in turn, lent credence to arguments that punishment and deterrence would solve rising juvenile crime. However, in many delinquency films the opposite is often true. Though youth still serve as a powerful symbolic mechanism for social crisis, the ability of delinquency films to meditate on particular social contexts—and the objective violence embedded within—often problematized individual agency.

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[118] It is unfortunate that fears of juvenile crime have not had more impact on synthesis treatments of the postwar era. Still, it is not very surprising given that the centrality of crime itself has not truly broken through as part of the mainstream story. While "law and order" are often discussed in relation to the election of Richard Nixon, the scope of the war on crime and its transformative effect on American society, in terms of incarceration and overcriminalization but also its cultural impact, are sorely missing. Some such as Michelle Alexander and Heather Ann Thompson are working to rewrite this history, but it is still telling that the seventh edition of William H. Chafe's synthetic treatment of the era (and one often assigned as core reading) does not have "crime" or "prison" in the index. See William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[119] Franklin E. Zimring has pointed out that the increased size of the youth cohort alone does not easily equate with rising crime. The relationship between the demographic peculiarities of the baby boom and rising crime is not yet fully understood. In any case, theories like those put forward by James Q. Wilson that the disproportionate size of the youth cohort in society leads to less investment in adult socialization has been challenged. See Franklin E. Zimring, *The Great American Crime Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 56-63.

The historical nature of this constellation of youth can be viewed perhaps best by a brief comparison with the visions that appeared later. Consider the work of Richard Linklater, who has often focused not only on youth delinquency in *Slacker* (1991) and *Suburbia* (1996), but also tried to capture the mood of the period described in this chapter in films such as *Dazed and Confused* (1993) and *Everybody Wants Some* (2016).

Slacker is punctuated by youth dreaming and theorizing terroristic violence as an outlet for ennui. Filmed in 1989 in Austin, Texas and garnering praise in the early 1990s, *Slacker* renders innocuous and makes quirky its subject matter—wayward college-age adults. At one time such subjects were considered dangerous, but the eccentricities of Linklater's characters leave them more laughable than serious. It is a toothless, ineffectual vision of Generation X. Moreover, the film signaled the waning of a particular concentration of themes embodied in the filmic representation of youth in the post-sixties era, primarily the latent threat of the post-Vietnam generation. Critic Richard Corliss seemed to pick up on this, writing in *Time,* "Though set in the '90s, *Slacker* has a spirit that is pure '60s, and in this loping, loopy, sidewise, delightful comedy, Austin is Haight-Ashbury."[120] The film was out of sync with the political and social mood of its immediate past in which youth violence and delinquency were taken as serious threats to American society.

The characters, identified lovingly as slackers by Linklater, have political ideas overflowing but no way of enacting them. They imagine violence but never dream of actually engaging it. There is no real authority to mention in the film, and yet the young people talk constantly of its presence in their lives. It returns to the youth of Antonioni—challenging a norm is enough, the power structure (completely invisible) is neither shaken or in danger. This is a period of respite. The film is fundamentally out of sync with those that

[120] Richard Corliss, "Cinema and '90s: Going on '60s," *Time*, July 29, 1991.

came even a few years earlier. This is not to say films that did present violent youth disappeared completely. Larry Clark's *Kids* (1993) and Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) are two films that are more closely related to earlier depictions of youth.

Linklater's own entry into the delinquency subgenre, *Suburbia* (1996), more closely embodies the delinquency films that preceded it. It looks at a group of young people, primarily from white working-class backgrounds, and who are made up of the unemployed, artists, and those working lousy minimum wage jobs. Their social lives consist of hanging out in front of a convenience store in the fictionalized suburb of Burnfield. Many of the tropes of delinquency are here—drug use, vandalism, and ennui. But here too there are subtle, but telling signs that a particular constellation of decline has passed. Their fates are tied up in their own ineffectualness rather than any larger force. Through self-expression one can one escape self-destruction. Even the slovenly drunk character—a simple-minded, fun-loving stiff who gladly bangs his head on street signs to get a kick—can pick himself up. It is his happy personality, a willingness to see the brighter side of things that gets him a job as a videographer for a rock star. Similarly, the protagonist's girlfriend leaves with said rock star after agreeing to do the art for his upcoming album. There is also a shift to the identity politics of the contemporary era—one of the defining interactions of the film is between the Pakistani convenience store owner (who is also an engineering student) and the discharged veteran of the group who wears his bigotry on his sleeve. Nearly coming to a gunfight between the two, the Pakistani student's final words, and the last ones spoken in the film, are of condemnation: "You people are so stupid. What's wrong with you? Throw it all away. You throw it all away."[121]

[121] Suburbia

By contrast, Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* and the more recent *Everybody Wants Some* reminisce about a transitional time that is almost completely devoid of the politics and entropy that defined the mood of its era. They are celebratory works and sidestep many of the tropes of schools in the period it represents—when classrooms were battlegrounds, streets were dangerous, youth were potential gang members, and parents were guarded. In the realm of cultural production, Linklater's work is a different type of spectacle that corresponds with a different set of politics—one in which neoliberal identity politics are on more solid ground, an era in which a Democratic president could firmly announce that the era of big government was over. By comparison, the films of the 70s and 80s that focus on youth are bound by a different logic—one in which the liberal democratic politics of the 20th century are crashing and the system is looking for a post-1960s balance. If we look at these films now they tend to stand out as exploitative and goofy, but their logic and escapism gives insight into a moment of imagined crisis.

Filmic representations of youth in the 1970s and 1980s take place on a terrain of decline, both in imagery and in the politics embedded in their assumptions. Films reflected and narrated the supposed crisis of American youth at the same time they assumed solutions to and challenged contemporary debates. Crime, broadly conceived as a breakdown of the social order, was at key to imagining youth's decline, amorality, and peril. Youth in crisis pictures, though often seeking the reassertion of authority in public space, also provided a cogent image of the structural violence undergirding the transformation of the social welfare state.

The Road Film: The Passing of the Pastoral

In 1980, Troy Leon Gregg was in the headlines once more. The news reported his body was found by swimmers and fished out of Mountain Island Lake in North Carolina.[122] Gregg had been beaten to death shortly after calling a reporter to boast of his escape from the Georgia State Prison in Reidsville.[123] He and three other prisoners sawed through the bars on a prison window, left down a fire escape, and, disguised in guard uniforms, walked out of the prison's front gate.[124] The escaped fugitives then attempted to deceive authorities by giving misleading information to a local news reporter implying they had fled to Florida. Instead they made their way to North Carolina where police and FBI agents recaptured all but the deceased Gregg. It was an ignominious end to a man quoted from his prison cell saying, "People's been killing people since time began just to get ahead or stay alive in this world. It's sort of like in the forest. Wild animals."[125] Such was the sensibility of many in the age of decline.

Gregg had developed mild infamy years before his death. In 1976 it was apparent his case would "go down in history as the keystone in the July ruling" by the Supreme Court—the decision reinstating the death penalty in the United States following a three-year moratorium. Gregg was given two death sentences for the murder of Fred Edward Simmons and Bob Moore, described in the brief presented to the court by Attorney General Arthur Bolton as "working men, who were giving him a ride from Florida when he shot and robbed

[122] "Death Row Escapees Captured," *Boston Globe*, July 31, 1980; "Three Escaped Killers Captured in Carolina," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1980.
[123] "9 Indicted in Prison Escape," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 17, 1980.
[124] "4 in Death Row in Goergia Flee Jail in Disguise: Then Telephone Reporter to Tell Him the News," *New York Times*, July 29, 1980.
[125] Timothy McNulty, "Restoring the Death Penalty: The Impact of a Historic Court Ruling," *Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 1976.

them on Thanksgiving eve, 1973."[126] Simmons and Moore had picked up Gregg and an accomplice who were hitchhiking on the Florida turnpike.[127] After shooting both victims and robbing them he dumped their bodies in a drainage ditch near Atlanta. His case and four others were grouped together in *Gregg v. Georgia* (1976), also knows as the *July Cases*, which had reignited the debate in the United States over the effectiveness of capital punishment as a deterrent to crime, as well as the parameters of the Constitution's limitations on cruel and unusual punishment.

An amicus brief submitted to the Supreme Court argued that in the wake of *Furman v. Georgia* (1972), the criminal case which struck down the death penalty, many states had thoughtfully and deliberately enacted statutes providing new guidelines for the death penalty. "Such statutes," the brief argued, "could not have been enacted in so many states in such a short period of time if our society rejected capital punishment." It was not the judiciary's role, they argued, to step in the way of legislatures which reflect the will of the people "more accurately than does the judiciary."[128] The reinstatement of the death penalty was therefore argued to be a democratic mandate, being that a majority of Americans supported it. In an attempt to justify the increasingly racialized and class-based nature of the war on crime, it was argued that as "Half of all murder victims are black….If capital punishment deters murders (as legislatures are entitled to conclude), it would follow that abolition of capital punishment would work to the detriment of the poor and the blacks, who are disproportionately the victims of murder."[129] The second primary rationale for restoring

[126] Brief to the Supreme Court of the United States. Arthur K. Bolton, Attorney General, "On Writ of Certiorari to the Supreme Court of Georgia," "Brief for Respondent," October Term, 1975, No. 74-6257, 4.
[127] "High Court Affirms Death for 8 in Ga.," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 7, 1976; Lesley Oelsner, "Court to Review Death Penalty Issue," *New York Times*, January 23, 1976.
[128] Brief for the United States as Amicus Curiae, October Term, 1975, No. 74-6275, 52.
[129] Brief for the United States as Amicus Curiae, October Term, 1975, No. 74-6275, 52.

capital punishment was that, by the mid-to-late 1970s there was a new focus on punishment as a deterrent to crime. The year prior to the *Gregg* decision had seen the publication of James Q. Wilson's influential *Thinking About Crime*, which argued that criminals were rational actors making informed decisions in a cost-benefit analysis of their actions. To dissuade criminals, it was necessary to implement severe penalties. The death penalty was, in this constellation, the ultimate deterrent.

The debates about deterrents and the death penalty informing *Gregg* were not taking place in a cultural vacuum. As the contemporary crime consensus was being fashioned to support the increasingly expensive and vicious war on crime and war on drugs, there was a larger cultural framework of decline being articulated which lent itself to the narrative that solving crime might set the country on its right course. The spectacular events surrounding Gregg's demise fit nicely with a media narrative of crazed killers and escaped convicts stalking the highways and towns of America. The previous decade began with a media firestorm around the Manson Family murders and saw an eruption of news stories following the crimes of serial killers such as Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, and the notorious Freeway Strangler in Southern California, and continued into the following decade with the Atlanta child murders and Satanism scares.[130] Blood-thirsty killers, their crimes increasingly grisly, showed up in films such as *Last House on the Left* (1972), *Black Christmas* (1974), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Town That Dreaded Sundown* (1976), *Halloween* (1978), *Tourist Trap* (1979), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *The Hitcher* (1986), and carried through the 1980s, eventually blending fiction and reality in TV shows like *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987-2002). Troy Leon Gregg's story intersects with the gore-heavy media

[130] The "Freeway Strangler" was a particular damper on hitchhiking throughout southern California. Marcida Dodson, "Freeway Strangler Casts a Giant Shadow" *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 1980.

narratives about crime and danger pervasive in these decades. But his life is more significant in the ways in which the spectacle surrounding him intersected with the real-life power dynamics reshaping US society into increasingly policed and controlled social spaces.

It was perhaps fitting that it would be a case involving a hitchhiking murder that would reinvigorate the debate over punishment. Symbolically the use of the hitchhiker was important to trends unfolding in the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, the turn toward an ominous vision of the hitchhiker stood in for greater fears of anonymous, random danger in this period and helped to elevate cases such as Gregg's to a national existential crisis. As a surrogate for the "stranger" figure, the baleful hitchhiker also symbolically represents a repudiation of civic trust. The casual public trust being vital to the functioning of a democratic public space, it stands to reason that the erosion of such a trust negatively impacts democratic norms and, as has been argued already, often engenders a desire for order. The discourse surrounding hitchhiking and its representation thus sheds light on a core aspect of imagined decline, primarily the loss of the neighborly or amicable democratic space. The hitchhiker also resides symbolically in the largely liminal spaces of America—the non-urban boundaries encompassing the villages of rural America, the frontier, and the often celebrated milieu of the road. Indeed, the hitcher will be used as a jumping-off point for looking more broadly at the iconography and story-telling developed to describe the American backwaters and boondocks, the abandoned main streets and the locales that were, rather than the heart of the country, increasingly imagined as the spaces in which people pass through, the forgotten flyover folks. Before entering into the city then, this chapter will focus on American decline envisioned in the spaces outside of the urban, on rural, roadside, and small-town America as it became more marginalized in the late twentieth century, a curiosity teeming with the

dispossessed and most spectacularly, the madmen who supposedly preyed on those venturing the American backroads.

Historian Jeremy Packer has pointed out in *Mobility Without Mayhem* that automobile culture has in large part fed the obsession with mitigating risk in American society. Drawing on Ulrich Beck's work on the rise of a risk-conscious society, Packer claims that the turn against hitchhiking in the 1970s was partly a political attempt to delegitimize and break the youth solidarity of the 1960s.[131] No doubt one element of the story involves a backlash against the political elements of the youth counterculture, but such a narrow reading of the phenomenon of hitching's decline misses the larger context of its representation. Hitching has long been associated with danger. As early as the 1930s there were warnings printed in newspapers "of the desperadoes who are hitchhiking by way of the 'thumb.'"[132] These warnings were ubiquitous—there were stories in the 1940s that "Hitch-hiker crimes—murder, rape, assault and robbery—are steadily increasing," in large part because "many kind-hearted motorists gamble on their ability to recognize 'safe' hitch-hikers."[133] As another paper warned years later, "FACES CAN FOOL YOU. Even the friendliest face is no guarantee of safety when you offer a lift on the road. None of the many injuries to drivers would ever have occurred if they had passed by that 'friendly-looking' hitchhiker!"[134]

Stories of hairy encounters with hitchers also belie the commonality of thumbing through most of the twentieth century. One clipping from the 1950s told of a motorist held at

[131] Jeremny Packer, *Mobility Without Mayhem: Safety, Cars, and Citizenship* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2008).
[132] "Danger Lurks in Road Rovers, A. A. A. Warns," *The Washington Post*, June 14, 1935. Twelve states went so far as to enact laws limiting the solicitation of free rides by 1935 including New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Utah, Connecticut, Vermont, Wisconsin, North Dakota, Maine, Minnesota, and the District of Columbia.
[133] Donald E. Keyhoe, "Beware of Hitch-Hikers!," *The Sun*, March 13, 1949.
[134] Unclassified ad, *Crusader*, (Rockford, IL), October 18, 1968, pg. 6.

gunpoint by two hitchhikers. He escaped the car and sought authorities by hitching with another driver to the nearest town.[135] What is perhaps most surprising then, given the ubiquity stories about treacherous hitchhikers, is that such narratives never gained the ability to dominate the depiction of thumbing, at least until sometime after the late 1960s. That is, such isolated, if nonetheless common, events never achieved the power to dissuade large numbers of people from the practice until a broader context of decline gave such individual events a political power and narrative force. There were even moments prior to the 1970s when the supposed danger of hitchhiking made its way into film and television. In 1960 Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* featured an episode entitled "The Hitch-Hiker" in which a phantom hitchhiker proves to be the literal embodiment of death calling on his due. And *The Hitch-hiker* (1953) involved two fishermen who mistakenly pick up an escaped convict. The advertising campaign for the film boasted, "Have you ever picked up a hitch-hiker? You won't ever…after you see this picture! It rings with truth!"[136] Despite the exploitative marketing, the practice was still common throughout the country. Many people were hitching despite the warnings.

Obtaining free transportation on the reliance of strangers has existed since virtually the dawn of automobile culture and has been historically intertwined in the United States with the American romanticism of movement, in particular movement west. Indeed, hitchhiking has at various times become part of the national mythos, defining at different moments the grit, stoicism, autonomy, and mirth of the American character. It is also a practice that has been tied up in the depiction and imagination of the American pastoral, with

[135] "Beware of Hitchhikers," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 9, 1954.
[136] Ad for *The Hitch-Hiker, Plaindealer* (Kansas City, Kansas), May 14, 1954 v. 56, i. 20, pg. 5.

the hitchhiker often a symbolic trope for defining the countryside and the down-and-out rustic figures who populate it.

In the early twentieth century hoboes, the prototype of the hitchhiker, relied on automobiles as freight travel declined and indeed, the hitcher took on a salt-of-the-earth characterization. By the early 1920s the migrant laborers of the west were using automobiles to traipse from farm to farm. One first-hand writer about the hobo tradition said as early as 1914 "Willy-nilly one is picked up and carried along by kind-souled auto-owners."[137] The allure of the road grew along with automobile travel. In 1936 it was common to find small puff pieces in newspapers, such as the one that commented on three sisters, aged 20 to 24, returning from a "transcontinental hitch-hiking trip" that had taken them, over the course of two months, through twenty-eight states and cost a total of $49 dollars a piece. "They rode in trucks and limousines and slept in camps and orchards. The longest wait they had for a ride was three hours in the Arizona desert with the mercury at 112."[138] The same year, Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues," lyricized the singer "standin' at the crossroad" unable to "flag a ride" before sunset. Throughout the 1930s the arteries of the country were crammed with migrants of the depression. The phenomenon was immortalized in the experience of the Joad family in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Along Route 66, the family of "Okies" fleeing the economic and social disaster of the Dust Bowl are forced with other migrant laborers to make due in squalid camps. But the road itself embodies in Steinbeck an American pioneer spirit crushed by greed and poverty. During the Second World War, servicemen often hitchhiked home when returning from duty. "It was considered a patriotic

[137] Frederick Mills quoted in *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 258.
[138] "End Coast-Coast Hitch-Hike," *New York Times*, August 13, 1936.

duty to give servicemen a lift," wrote one commentator of the wartime phenomenon.[139] Postwar, the road was picked up in the writing and lived experience of the Beat generation who celebrated bohemian travel. Allen Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac, and Ken Kesey each wrote of the phantasmagoric experience of travel on the byways of the country. Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and *The Dharma Bums* (1958) turned the road journey, including hitchhiking, into a semi-religious enlightenment experience and influenced a generation of young people who took up hitchhiking as a form of social rebellion in the following decade.

The allure and mystique of the road was still very much alive in the 1970s. The key work of fiction that took up this romantic view was Tom Robbins's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976). Following his first work, the hippie novel *Another Roadside Attraction*, Robbins wrote the more consciously feminist and political *Cowgirls* (it opens with a disclaimer on the use of male pronouns) which melded themes of freedom and magic. The book follows Sissy Hankshaw as she hitches across the country, setting out from her home in Richmond, Virginia. Along her journey she becomes a model for feminine hygiene products, meets a cavalcade of idiosyncratic characters such as the Mohawk artist Julian (whom she marries) and Bonanza Jelly Bean of the Rubber Rose Ranch in the Dakotas. It is on the Ranch that she is embroiled in a fracas with the FBI over the cowgirls' attempts to free endangered Whooping Cranes. The serpentine plot is secondary to themes of liberation pecked throughout the book. Robbins, like writers before him, connected freedom and the power of the road. It is Sissy's oversized and unnatural thumbs that serve as the ticket out of South Richmond via hitchhiking. As he writes, "Hitchhiking was her customary mode of travel; hitchhiking was, in fact, her way of life, a calling to which she was born."[140] Robbins

[139] Donald E. Keyhoe, "Beware of Hitch-Hikers!," *The Sun*, March 13, 1949.
[140] Tom Robbins, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, (New York: Bantam, 1976), 10.

qualified this: "It should be made clear, hear and now, that Sissy never really dreamed of hitching *to* anywhere; it was the *act* of hitching that formed the substance of her vision."[141] And she hitches everywhere—to and from school, to the movies, and even just on a jaunt downtown. It is clear as well that the freedom of movement and mobility is ratcheted to a traditionally male form of autonomy that Sissy makes her own.[142] As a child she heard an uncle say in jest from a distance, "'That young'un would make one hell of a hitchhiker…if she was a boy, I mean.'"

Already highlighted in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* is that hitchhiking, as a form of cheap travel, often involved a negotiation of the boundaries of sexual commerce and safety. Sissy Hankshaw must constantly suffer moments of sexual abuse and danger in her career hitching. This was also the case in reality. A California state Court of Appeals reversed the conviction of a rape in 1977 because the presiding judge had introduced information related to a prior sex offense, information deemed prejudicial. In the course of the case, the presiding judge suggested that the woman who was raped had reasonable suspicion to expect that, as a hitchhiker, she was entering into a situation in which sexual advances would be likely. "In the light of all the warning signals that appear almost daily in the news media," declared Justice Lynn D. Compton, "The lone female hitchhiker in the absence of an emergency situation, as a practical matter, advises all who pass by that she is willing to enter the vehicle

[141] Ibid., 23.
[142] As Ann Brigham has argued, "For women, the road offers a mode for exposing and escaping the social and spatial configuration that restrict them." See Ann Brigham, "Critical Meeting Places: Major Approaches to the American Road Narrative Genre," in *Critical Insights: American Road Literature* ed. Ronald Primeau (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2013), 15-31: 27; Deborah Paes de Barros offers a necessary corrective to the male-centric historiography and memory of the road narrative. "The larger truth of the American road," she argues, "is that women have always traveled it, as a historic actuality and as a discursive adventure." See Deborah Paes de Barros, "Girls Gone Wild: American Women's Road Narratives and Literary Tradition" in *Critical Insights: American Road Literature* ed. Ronald Primeau (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press, 2013), 150-169: 151.

with anyone who stops and in so doing advertises that she has less concern for the consequences than the average female."[143]

By the early 1970s, the "question of hitchhiking" was, in the words of one commentator, "approaching a raging kind of fever that refuses to break or yields to the basic social illness."[144] While Robbins continued a literary tradition celebrating tramping, the fearful depiction of the road was gaining ascendance. The fear of hitchhiking was linked with a broader crisis in the United States. "This is also the place where walking at night may be a danger," wrote one skeptic in the *Lost Angeles Times*, "where waiting at a bus stop may be a hazard on certain streets, where answering your own doorbell without peeping may result in robbery. The dreadful things that happen to hitchers are related to the other dreadful crimes that happen in a country where a man may only trust another man at his own peril. We simply have a history of random violence against innocent victims. We seem to lack senses of respect and community and gentleness."[145] This was the potentially fatal miscalculation of young hitchers—thinking that they were immune to such crimes, or that communion might actually be possible with strangers.[146]

In fact, despite real-world instances of violence, interviews with hitchers and potential hitchers reveal a diversity of varied experience contrary to the emerging moral panic surrounding the practice. Many, as young as 13 and often around the age of 16 (those either too young to drive or without a car) had experiences being picked up. "I check them out" said one young hitcher. "I got picked up by all cool people, mostly truckers…nobody

[143] Gene Blake, "Court Voids Rape Verdict, Warns Women Hitchhikers," *Los Angeles Times*, July 21, 1977.
[144] Art Seidenbaum, "A Hitch in Tragedy," *Los Angeles Times*, January 19, 1972.
[145] Ibid..
[146] Though hitchers are often the freak or deranged character in popular culture, crime statistics show that hitchers are the ones who more often face the threat of violence, in particular sexual violence. Kenneth F. Bunting, "Hitchhiking: A Hazardous Journey," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 1979.

hassles me," said another 18-year-old woman. Discretion was key for her: "I watch out for the weirdos around here. I just turned down a ride from a guy who wanted to stop at his house to pick up something along the way." Moreover, many hitchers realized the potential danger of getting in a car with strangers—and reported sitting close to the door, carrying a knife, and jumping out at a stop light if things felt awkward. The police often stop to advise hitchers of the dangers, but it did little to dissuade people of the practice. As one Culver City officer said, "they've heard it all before."[147]

Nonetheless, a perceptible change was underway regarding the practice of thumbing. The alteration in perception had much to do with increased apprehension about hitchhiking in the broader public as well as among those who might have adopted the practice. "I used to hitchhike about four years ago when you could trust anybody driving a VW van….I"ve never had a bad experience but it's spooky now. You can't trust anybody any more." These are the words of Jane Moorman, a student at Santa Monica College interviewed about the risks of thumbing.[148] Another seasoned hitchhiker wrote in in 1981, "There is nothing lonelier than being a hitchhiker on a Sunday evening in America." At one point this particular hitcher counted over 500 vehicles pass by before being picked up.[149] Another reporter, interviewing hitchhikers in 1985, wrote longingly of the ease of travel by thumb in decades prior: "Those were the days you'd see sailors with their sea bags and college kids with their suitcases and teenagers with their school books, all hitchhiking by the side of the road. And folks weren't afraid to give them a ride."[150]

[147] "Most Girl Hitchhikers Calculate Perils They Face," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1977.
[148] "Most Girl Hitchhikers Calculate Perils They Face," *Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1977.
[149] Fred Contrada, "The Life of a Hitchhiker," *Boston Globe*, January 18, 1981.
[150] Doug Struck, "5,000 Miles, Few Hitchhikers: Fear clears the Road," *The Sun*, April 3, 1985.

The decline in hitching coincided with a spate of films lamenting the closing of the counterculture era and the loss of a type of cordiality associated with an American folk pastoral. Following in the wake of *Easy Rider* (1969), films about the American rural, and especially road films of the 1970s and 1980s, used the hitchhiker phenomenon as an avenue to explore the deeper economic, social, and cultural crises facing the country. They reveal an unease with American rural and regional decline, in particular in the west and the south. Part of the change in these films is a depiction of the rural as left behind. As Robert Weise has pointed out, "To most postwar liberals, rural isolation conjured images of social pathology: poverty, poor health, ignorance, closed-mindedness, constricted opportunities for personal growth, and, as the Deep South proved all too well, violent racial hatred." Weise argues that "'isolation' became a code word for poverty during the 1960s, and it implied not only a material deprivation but economic, cultural, and social deprivation as well." Weise's main claim is that public policy meant to address rural poverty relied on the assumption that urban areas were more modern and integration of the rural poor into the metropolitan future was the avenue toward progress. Indeed, policy had much less to do with economics and far more to do with liberal attitudes about "the essential character of the United States."[151] This insight can be broadened as an element of the declensionist attitudes appearing in the broader culture and key to imagining the phenomenon in the rural spaces of the country.

The road film, one of the most popular genres of the era under consideration, has often used the theme of escape to interrogate the crises facing the country at any given point. They also tend to cover a significant amount of ground (literally) and in the process provide ample storytelling about spaces that are decidedly non-urban. As film scholar David

[151] Robert S. Weise, "Remaking Red Bird: Isolation and the War on Poverty in a Rural Appalachian Locality," in Caterhine McNicol Stock and Robert D. Johnston, ed., *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 258-280: 261-262.

Laderman points out, "The driving force propelling most road movies…is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique." Similarly, Ann Brigham argues, the road film genre's significance "emerges in its demonstration of the ways mobility both thrives on and tries to manage points of cultural and social conflict." "Primarily viewed as a space outside of social order, the road has been overwhelmingly understood in relation to an undifferentiated openness, movement, freedom, and escape." But Brigham argues to the contrary that, "Mobility does not function as an exit from society/home/the familiar, but instead emerges as a dynamic process for engaging with social conflicts."[152]

The endlessly parodied and referenced *Easy Rider* most clearly represented the imagined freedom of the open road, the equation of space and escape at the same time it serves as a critique of the forces limiting the potential of that freedom, primarily backwards cultural attitudes and unchecked authority. It also lays out the cinematic settings and narrative devices that become central to explaining decline. Jack Nicholson's performance as the hitchhiking lawyer might be the best example of the neighborliness of the hitchhiker phenomenon as envisioned in the 1960s—here the friendly hitcher is literally beat to death by a small-town mob intolerant of strangers and hippie-types. We also see the beginning of a stereotype of small-town myopia. In particular, the use of a diner as a setting for the wicked, the hard-working, beat down, and desiccated farmers, policemen, and blue-collar workers, often spiteful of their being left-behind by history. Indeed, they chase the "yankee queers" out before being served. The self-consciously countercultural politics of *Easy Rider* indict personal feeling and racist behavior as the undoing of the promises of a great society. While Hopper's diagnosis does ring with some truth given the rise of Nixon's reactionary political

[152] Ann Brigham, *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), introduction.

block, it nonetheless bears some semblance to conservative diagnosis of the crises of American life, primarily in that individualized defects and attitudes are squarely identified as sources of disunion. Moreover, a wide variety of political stances are shored up on a reliance on stereotypes (whether it be the equation of drugged-out dropouts and criminals or rednecks rascals prone to quick violence) and are often used to explain the course of American history into a noticeable and sharp decline. The end of the film, in which the two protagonists are gunned down by rednecks, is one of the most downbeat in film history.

The vicious hillbilly stereotype does much to obscure the fact that de jure segregation, to the bitter end, was enforced by a business-minded southern elite. Largely missing in the cinematic depiction of racial animosity in this era is any notion that the Ku Klux Klan was a largely middle-class organization. Moreover, the rise of the modern "colorblind" ideology that sustained the rise of the New Right relied on middle-class real estate interest and property ownership. Certainly, the hegemony of the ruling class has meant that ordinary working-class whites are often avidly sympathetic of the narratives spun by the power elite. To suggest as much is not too ignore the power and force of racism among ordinary white southerners (racial apartheid required the consensus of the majority, tacit or not), but rather to note the significance of wealthy and middle-class southerners ideologically and in terms of their influence in dispensing judicial, police, and political authority in the South. As Jason Sokol has argued, "Most white southerners identified neither with the civil rights movement nor with its violent resistors."[153] The visage of the poor white racist as the cause of American backwardness, and yes, even decline, is largely a class obfuscation. The symbolism of the

[153] Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything: White Southerners in the Age of Civil Rights, 1945-1975* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 4.

dangerous redneck is a facet of declensionist imagery that minimizes the victimization of poor, rural whites at the hands of capital. It provides a convenient scapegoat.

While poor white were often said to be least able to cope with the changes that desegregation brought, having the privileges of whiteness historically assuaged the pains of poverty in the south, they were the ones who confronted it most clearly—in their schools, neighborhoods, and entertainments. It was the white upper middle classes who did not confront desegregation except through the media or through the labor exchange—removed in their private worlds. As Sokol further points out, these beliefs about the poor "rested on a stereotype…in which Black Belt planters and urban moderates had long sneered at less fortunate 'rednecks' and upcountry whites." While by 1964, only 20% of the least educated southern whites supported integration, still more than half of white southern college graduates were opposed to integration.[154] Again, this is not to say that poor whites were not racists, but that the image of "The sheriff, filling station attendant, or other working-class white man—often drawling and poorly educated—became a symbol of American prejudice…it cloaked the fact that a cadre of powerful men stood behind every brutal southern sheriff and every vicious purveyor of prejudice."[155]

The significance of these stereotypes and their connection to narratives of rural crisis are especially evident in *Vanishing Point* (1971), Richard Sarafian's entry into the chase sub-genre of road films. Released on the heels of *Easy Rider*, the thin plot follows a bennies-popping driveaway man, Kowalski, as he delivers a 1970 Dodge Challenger to California from Colorado. Having made a bet that he can make it from Denver to San Francisco in under a day, Kowalski's speed run puts him at odds with state highway patrol, and initiates a

[154] Ibid., 305-306.
[155] Ibid., 306-307.

cross-state police chase. Perhaps the ultimate example of the sub-genre, *Vanishing Point* engages big, if often clichéd ideas about the denouement of the 1960s as well as the closing of the frontier. The film assimilates ideas from Leo Marx's seminal *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), primarily the trope of "depicting the machine as invading the peace of an enclosed space, a world set apart or an area somehow made to evoke a feeling of encircled felicity."[156] In terms of film intertextuality and reference, Sarafian seems to emulate European new wave cinema—indeed his might be better American Antonioni than Antonioni's own counterculture picture *Zabriskie Point*. Sarafian also deploys a host of imagery and ideas that are key to the development of the discourse about the road and American scenic and rural space: the auto graveyard, keystone cops, diners, dingy hotels, and of course, the hitchhiker. Here it is a gay couple who are stranded, with a "just married" sign on their car. Kowalski picks them up, only to suffer an attempted robbery. It is a short scene in the film, and would seem almost superfluous. But it is key when put into the larger picture's constellation of decline. Sinister hitchers are part of the scenery of the west.

The film is a modern-day western—Zuwalski is an outlaw chased down by the law, meeting Brahman figures, religious wanderers, and fellow outcasts. The road here, as in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, is teeming with the oddballs and subalterns of American society. The American road, and specifically the American southwest, is a place, as in Bob Dylan's phantasmagoric "Highway 61 Revisited," where normal rules are allowed to break down and decay. The film's main critique is that contemporary society and its control impetus, illustrated in the presence of helicopters, California's centralized electronic highway

[156] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 29.

monitoring dashboard, and backward racial animus, are meant to impose themselves on the free landscape and its human voyagers.

Sarafian packs into the film an enormous amount of political and social symbolism, much of it cliché. Of central importance is the depiction of American archetypes. Kowalski himself stands in for about every possible working-class male viewer subjectivity of the early 1970s: a Vietnam veteran, a demolition derby driver, a broken-heart, a disillusioned former policeman, and, though too square to smoke marijuana, certainly hip to the youth scene and alienated by authority. He is coupled spiritually with the narrator of the film, Super Soul, a blind, black radio jockey (station KOW), broadcasting from a small town in the Nevada desert. Super Soul picks up on Kowalski's run from the law on a police frequency and begins to support "the last American hero" as he terms him. His proselytizing on the airwaves eventually attracts a large gathering around the radio station. The crowd includes elderly Midwestern lookers, Native Americans, black radicals, hippy and counterculture types, and others. What is surprising is the diversity on display; all of the gathered are visibly pinning their hopes on Kowalski. Over the course of the weekend chase the station's sign (KOW) is appended by a banner making it read KOWalski. It is also a biting image of the languid American public. In a key scene, Super Soul's station is ransacked and the jockey beaten by a group of white good ol' boys incensed by the interracial swan song being pumped out on the radio waves. The crowd does nothing to prevent the assault, standing around guffawing the violence—an indictment of the failures of the previous decade.

In the film's finale Kowalski drives his car head-on into two bulldozers barring the highway in Cisco, CA. The impromptu group around the station disperses in a melancholy state. What had been the most joyous scene of the film—shot in a vérité style—a portrait of

the cross-section of Americans, intercut with images of puppies, landscape, and fraternization, and scored to an uplifting tune, turns to a harsh reality of the punishment society catching up to Kowalski. "The question is not when he's gonna stop," as Super Soul opined earlier in the film, "but who is gonna stop him." The casual grouping of onlookers have given up, they are too passive and apolitical to prevent the onslaught.

The inclusion of an on-screen audience for the death of Kowalski is the most interesting artistic choice of the film. This depiction of spectators at the end of the film is a proxy for the theater audience adding weight to the film's narrative of American history. By incorporating such a visibly broad swathe of possible Americans, the film serves as a mechanism for collective mourning at the deferral of the promise of a progressive history. Though problematic (as mentioned before, Kowalski is a universalized white, working-class protagonist) Kowalski stands in for the now irretrievable liberatory promise of the recent past. His journey through the American west is a metaphor for the enclosing of freedom of space and movement in American society. It is a thoroughly declensionist narrative.

A comparison to *Two-Lane Blacktop* (the latter premiered just a few months after *Vanishing Point*) is insightful here. It is a better-developed film, as it doesn't attempt to usher the audience so forcefully, allowing for a degree of ambiguity in the overall message. Indeed, as the Camus-inspired director Monte Hellman has stated, "I don't really know what my film is going to be before I make it…I think I have a pretty good idea, but I'm willing to be surprised." In fact, his actors didn't know what the film was to be either; Hellman kept the script secret in an effort to have the characters experience the unfolding story, a story that by Hellman's own account, "Could be a western, but it isn't."[157] Despite the ambiguity, *Two-*

[157] Quoted in Kimmis Hendrick, "Back Talk," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 18, 1970; Aljean Harmetz, "Monte's Turn for the Big Time?: The big Time for Monte?," *New York Times*, May 16, 1971.

Lane Blacktop shares a similar plot to *Vanishing Point*—two men driving a 1950s-era Chevy (known only to the audience as the Driver and the Mechanic) make a bet with a third (known as GTO) that they will make it to Washington, D.C. first. The winner gets the other's pink slip. An empty narrative vessel similar to Kowalski's bet, the message of Hellman is, however, more imprecise. Asked about the themes that interest him, Hellman once responded, "The beauty and horror of existence—how's that! I guess 'beauty and terror' is better. Anyway, the existential dilemma."[158] The film, though obsessed with speed and machines, is lackadaisical in tone and style, with the actual wager becoming muddled over the course of the film due to emerging sympathies between the competing drivers and as the inanity of the competition begins to weigh on all involved. The plot eventually fizzles out—the competition is lost and they break up and go their own ways after traveling together for a while.

Hitchers are the core thematic device driving *Two-Lane Blacktop*. A young hitchhiker, credited simply as the Girl, hops into the 55' Chevy when the Driver and Mechanic are stopped at a diner. She does not ask for a ride, but simply leaves one vehicle and climbs in. The Girl becomes the real contest between the Driver, the Mechanic, and GTO. Human connection is fleeting in the film. There is a sense of despair to the road, it is a place to get lost on and tender moments, most of which involve the Girl, are rare. The audience comes to realize that all three of the men are reticent travelers, using the road as a crutch to avoid their past and future. GTO makes this most clear, telling the Girl as she sleeps of all the possible scenarios for their future—going to a beach in Florida, fleeing to Arizona, building a house somewhere to get grounded and avoid losing themselves. He tells her he

[158] Monte Hellman quoted in Kevin Thomas, "Monte Hellman and Hollywood's Best-Kept Secret," *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1970.

must get settle down or else face "going into orbit." The road has become somewhat of a prison, a site for lost souls. Hellman has said, "In my work my motives are pretty classic. I was raised on Aristotle. I always hope to achieve purgation by pity and fear. I really hope to disturb my audience, to move it to another place. Haunt it for a while, maybe."[159] Similarly, at the end of the film the Driver asks the Girl to go to Ohio with him to pick up parts—the first inkling that his cool passivity might give way to some permanence or commitment. Instead she jumps on the back of a random motorcycle and speeds off.

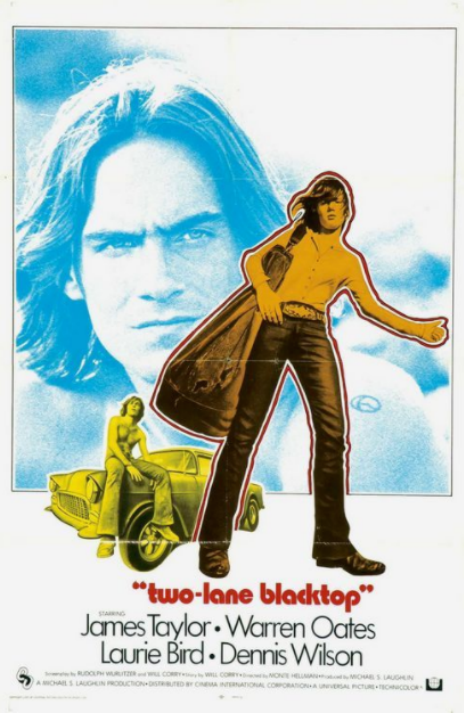


Figure 2.1 The hitchhiker features prominently in the original theater bill for *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971).

The hitchers in *Two-Lane Blacktop* are the standard against which the characters measure their lives and failures. GTO (played by Warren Oates) picks up numerous hitchhikers over the course of the film—a gay cowboy in Oklahoma, a wizened old woman and young child on their way to a graveyard, a candid hippie, men in uniform on leave, and others. To each hitcher he tells a different story about his past life and where he is going. Every new hitcher is an opportunity for him to imagine alternative lives, to revisit lost opportunities, and even spin pure inventions. At one point he complains to the Driver and the Mechanic, "You ought to see what I'm picking up on the road. One fantasy after another." Of course, this describes his subjectivity more than that of his passengers. Only once does GTO come close to revealing his true backstory

[159] Monte Hellman quoted in Kevin Thomas, "Monte Hellman and Hollywood's Best-Kept Secret," *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 1970.

to the Driver, who tells him, "I don't want to hear about it…It's not my problem." The hitchers are thus the main mechanism for expressing the weary, fatigued mileu of life in the early 1970s—both in their ephemeral nature as passengers, but also in their role in relation to the film's broken characters. Richard Linklater has called *Two-Lane Blacktop,* "Both the last film of the sixties…and also the first film of the seventies."[160] The despondent, even melancholy, tone for portraying the post-1960s moment lays upon the shoulders of the roadside hitcher.

The hitcher plays a similar role in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), Bob Rafelson's coming-home drama on middle-class discontent. The film follows a wanderlust-stricken Bobby Dupea on a journey home to see his ailing father. Bobby, a one-time piano prodigy, lives a life of self-imposed social exile, working in a blue-collar oil field and living with his girlfriend, a waitress who dreams of life as a professional singer. Their relationship is one of frequent emotional abuse—the result of Bobby's detachment and restlessness. The environments of the film give it a good deal of its thematic potency, reflecting the disillusion and anomie the characters all suffer. The oil fields of southern California are dirty and hot, with respite only coming from cool beer and whiskey. Early in the film, Elton, one of Bobby's only friends and his coworker, is arrested on the work site for having robbed a gas station some years before. The event, which defines the first third of the film, reveals the inescapability of the past—in this case, the desert hideaway is no longer safe. Similar themes occur in *Badlands* (1973) and *Vanishing Point*. In both, the closing of the frontier is represented in the arrival of authority in the western badlands. Dupea's past will also catch

[160] Richard Linklatter, "Ten (Sixteen Actually) Reasons I Love 'Two-Lane Blacktop'," Booklet, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, directed by Monte Hellman (1971; Criterion Collection, 2013), BluRay.

up to him sooner than later. This image of the enclosing world on a hero (or sometimes antihero) returns sporadically in the films of the decade.

Five Easy Pieces is broken almost in half by the introduction of two eccentric female hitchhikers. After their car breaks down, Palm Apodaca and Terry Grouse join Dupea and his girlfriend on their road trip to Washington state. The introduction of Palm and Grouse is the comedic highlight of the film, but the two hitchers also serve as the main channels for understanding the broader world beyond the personal struggles depicted in a fairly insular character study. Palm's constant haranguing of the "filth" that has overtaken society and her attempt to get to Alaska where it is "cleaner" are played deadpan. Her hypochondria is mixed with a critique of consumer waste: "Those signs everywhere—they should be erased! All those signs selling you crap and more crap and more crap…People are filthy. I think that's the biggest thing that's wrong with people. I think they wouldn't be as violent if they were clean because then they wouldn't have anybody to pick on. Dirt. Not dirt. See, dirt isn't bad. It's filth. Filth is bad. That's what starts maggots and riots." She works herself up to the point that she is compelled to constantly refrain, "I don't even want to talk about it." The troubled monologue situates the film in the post-sixties moment—Palm is a burnout, a victim of the tumultuous decade prior, beaten down and giving in to the collapse. However, this monologue ends in a breaking of the fourth wall. She delivers the line, "I don't even want to talk about it," multiple times and finally looking dead-on into the camera, speaking it to the audience. It might be the truest moment in early 1970s cinema—the audience is invited to appreciate her comments critically rather than as a character's personal madness. She stands in as the subjective figure that carries the burden of the previous decade's failures.

Film scholar David Laderman has suggested Rafelson's picture "cannot decide what it wants to say, ultimately retreating into solipsistic anxiety and confusion." He reads Palm Apodaca in *Five Easy Pieces* as "hypocritical, unreliable, and somewhat ridiculous."[161] But really, she anchors the middle portion of the film in which the journey to Washington takes place. The passage in the film stands out (partly because the infamous diner scene takes place in this interim, in which Dupea argues with and outwits a spiteful waitress). But it is not by chance that this passage with the hitchhikers is one of the only points in the film in which the audience step away from the main character's personal drama to interrogate the broader world existing around and framing the story. It is a declensionist view through and through. The farming countryside between California and Washington imparts rural space that, when paired with Palm's grousing reveals the larger social alienation that structures Dupea's own search for meaning. Raefelson himself described this section of the movie as serving to "open the movie up a little bit." "These shots that sort of break up the dialogue are meant as punctuation marks," he states in a commentary on the film, "We could have stayed inside the car, but we're trying to say, ok, we're getting from one place to another and we're traversing the landscape and, in fact, this is the landscape. This is the way you get up there to the north. You drive through all this kind of territory."[162] Of course the territory is rather bleak—overcast with mist, truckers, indignant roadside waitresses, and, of course, populated with raving hitchhikers. As the movie captures a mood of the early 1970s, it is unmistakable that the depiction of the rural—from down-and-out oil fields to the roadside diner—are tied to the crisis of meaning facing the characters. The internal struggle of Dupea is mimicked in the environments he inhabits and passes through. Palm's prognosticating is the verbalization of

[161] David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 86, 92.
[162] Bob Rafelson quoted in commentary, *Five Easy Pieces*.

the decaying process, providing context to the larger world outside of the personal struggles and crises of a middle-class, educated prodigy living in self-exile in a working-class hideaway.

The increasingly exploitative portrayal of the dire effects rural isolation are most evident in a spate of relatively low-budget films that exploit the fear of backwoods and rural bumpkin life. Notable examples include *Duel* (1971), *Deliverance* (1972), *Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Race with the Devil* (1975), *Eaten Alive* (1976), *Tourist Trap* (1979), *Mother's Day* (1980), *Just Before Dawn* (1981), and *The Hitcher* (1986). Several of these films develop tropes central to the narrative decline. The hitcher is, of course, a key figure. *Last House on the Left, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *The Hitcher* all introduce hitchhiking characters who turn out to be violent criminals. Another leitmotif are duplicitous yokel characters, often themselves the victims of historical forces such as the development of the interstate highway system, deindustrialization, and American wars abroad. In *Deliverance, Eaten Alive, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,* and *Tourist Trap*, it is not only backcountry Americans that are to fear, but the spaces in which they reside. In these films the American woods, roadside motels, the farmhouse, and the interstate highway and its various truck stops appear as sites out of step with modern America. There is a sense that, left behind to their own devices, the human detritus of these regions are literally becoming monstrous. The family of cannibals in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are the victims of the shifting of meatpacking away from the heartland. The formula was perhaps first articulated in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and its sequels *Psycho II* (1983) and *Psycho III* (1986), which have as their setting a roadside motel that has been bypassed by a state highway. Left to their own devices, the degeneration

produces the likes of the disturbed mindset of Norman Bates. It is not by chance that in the sequel, Norman Bates takes up employment in a town diner. Time and again the iconic eateries are used to denote decline, serving as both a site of nostalgia and revulsion. In the films covered in the following pages there is the development of an iconography for depicting the American non-urban—it is filled with remnants of rubbish Americana, the debris of a post-industrial society.

Many of these tropes are visible as early as Steven Spielberg's *Duel* (1971), a low-budget, made-for-TV film given a short theatrical run, and a blueprint of sorts for the emerging iconography of the sinister vision of the American highway landscape. Spotty diners, phantom and faceless strangers, dusty and dingy Americana, and backwards country bumpkins appear throughout. The simple story has the audience riding passenger with a small-time salesman named David Mann on a business trip through the high desert of California. Early in the film Mann comes across a beaten-up tanker truck, pouring out black exhaust and moving at a painfully slow speed. Mann passes the truck, instigating what becomes a fatal chase in which the unshakeable, faceless driver grows increasingly malevolent, ultimately attempting to kill the businessman by running him off the road. The miscreant trucker also stalks Mann off the highway, showing up at a gas station and waiting for Mann as he stops for a cheese sandwich in a diner.

Duel is fairly light on commentary, though there are moments of lucid symbolism. The imagery of the rusty, mangled Peterbilt semi imparts the same economically distressed atmosphere of *Deliverance* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. That vision of rot and rust stands in for the forces of deindustrialization. At other points Spielberg's visual storytelling fails him and he relies on the inner dialogue of Mann. Perhaps the most revealing soliloquy is

in the bathroom of a roadside diner. Pulling himself together, Dunn laments, "Well you never know. You just never know. You just go along figuring somethings don't change, ever, right? Like being able to drive on a public highway without somebody trying to murder you. And then one stupid thing happens. Twenty, twenty-five minutes out of your whole life and all the ropes that kept you hanging in there get cut loose. And it's like there you are, right back in the jungle again." Here Mann connects the unsolicited stalking to both the wonton violence of strangers and the construction of an untamed "jungle"—the suspension of the decorum of civilized society. Indeed, though he speaks kindly to the waitress in the diner it is clear that any one of his fellow patrons could be the evildoer. They are largely hicks—sweaty, leathery men in cowboy boots, mesh caps, jeans and open shirts. Mann goes so far as to accuse one of the men of being the mysterious culprit, which results in a fist fight.

Mann ultimately prevails—the Peterbilt drives off of a cliff in the films finale. The audience is left alone with him at sunset overlooking the wreckage. The question as to who the driver is goes unanswered—just a random stranger. The same skepticism toward the "other" is picked up in Jack Starrett's low-budget *Race with the Devil*. The film follows two motorcycle dealers and their wives on an RV trip from Texas to Aspen, Colorado. Pulling over for the night near a barren river bank, Roger and Frank (played by Peter Fonda and Warren Oates respectively), witness a human ritual sacrifice by Satanists across the water from their camp. They flee, but not before being spotted and giving chase. The rest of the running time is devoted to a hunt through west Texas. The ominous depiction of rural Americans sustains most of the film. Drawing inspiration from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), the four main characters are unsure who to trust at any spot. The police, fellow RV travelers at the roadside trailer park, and the patrons of a roadhouse restaurant all

turn out to be part of the Satanist cabal. Unable to escape, the vacationers-come-victims find themselves encircled by their tormenters at the film's closing.

Perhaps the more well-known film to exploit such fear of the boondocks is John Boorman's *Deliverance*. It is the sordid version of *Easy Rider*'s America—what happens if you invade the brush or stay too long in the backcountry. Four friends decide to leave for a trip on remote Georgia rivers before they are to be damned by the state authority. The dissonance between city life and country life is explored at the beginning of the film—with the four travelers offending the backwoodsmen they meet trying to find the riverhead. However, this is papered over through a musical truce of sorts—the infamous dueling banjos scene in which a boy playing a banjo riffs with the character Drew. It is a moment of harmony before the film descends into exploitative horror. The group, having offended some of the locals are stranded on the banks of a river where Bobby (played by Ned Beatty) is attacked, raped, and forced to "squeal like a pig." The rapist is killed by Lewis (Burt Reynolds) and the group proceeds to bury the body in the woods. The remainder of the film sees the group being hunted by the backwoodsmen, and unfortunately Drew does not survive the ordeal. As Boorman has said of his work, "My films are nearly always involved with an individual contending with society in some way….Society seems to be a hostile thing….For me the world, the planet, is a very dangerous place to be."[163] In *Deliverance* it is the rural South that is decidedly savage.

Deliverance hits the audience over the head with its dire predictions about rural change. By contrast, Kathryn Bigelow's breakthrough film *The Loveless* (1981) is more tender if no less serious in its depiction. It is a revisionist period piece about the postwar

[163] John Boorman quoted in David Sterritt, "Filmmaker John Boorman: Ideas should burst 'like fireworks' from the screen," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 8, 1974.

American pastoral, and follows a group of bikers caught in a kind of Bermuda Triangle of backroads America. The protagonist of *The Loveless* is a recently released prisoner and his fellow bikers, all of whom are "going nowhere, fast." It is a kin piece and updating of *The Wild One* (1953) and other biker films from the 1950s and 1960s. While seemingly taking place in the immediate postwar era, the film's claim for authenticity is undercut by the contemporary sensibilities on display and the deliberate attempt to subvert the golden era of American life. As such we see a catalogue of key symbolic places. Most of the runtime transpires in a lackadaisical diner, a mechanic's garage, and a local dive bar. At one point, Defoe's character asks the diner waitress, "Is this a town or a truckstop?," to which she replies: "If you weren't born here you wouldn't have a lot of reason to stick around." And yet, that is what Kathryn Bigelow forces the audience to do. Though just passing through on their way to Daytona, the bikers and audience succumb to the maundering, dire depiction of American life on the ropes. The townsfolk are depressed, drunk, and dirty. Whereas bikers often serve to represent the rough and tumble invading the quaint in Hollywood pictures, the townies here have their own rough edges. Indeed, one of the inhabitants confesses at one point, "I ain't never seen anything like it before in my life. They're animals. Hell, I'd love to

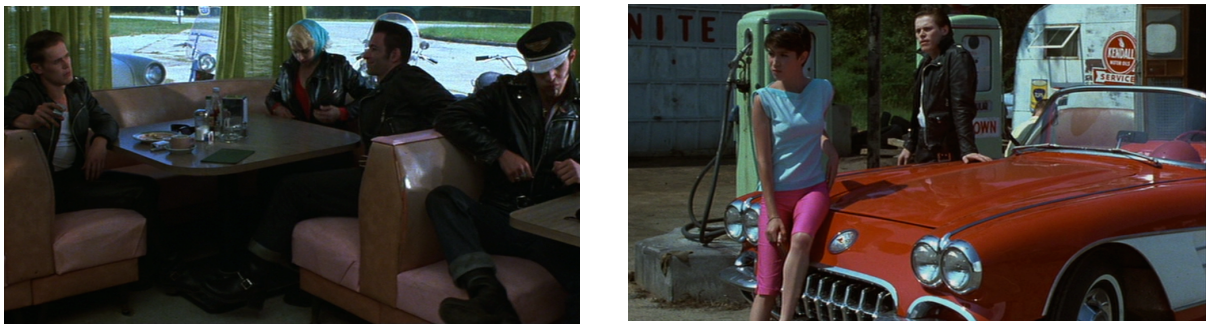


Figure 2.2 There is little nostalgia to be found in Kathryn Bigelow's *The Loveless* (1981). This revisionist depiction of the postwar townscape is a sensual but ultimately dismal look at small town life.

trade places with them for a day or two." It is a subtle upending of the tropes of small town representation, in which the biker is traditionally a nuisance and renegade. In this depiction of the 50s small town, there is no sweetness on main street—all are derelict.

The restless monotony is broken briefly when the audience is introduced to the love interest. The loose plot development sees the main biker (played by Willem Defoe) initiate a brief fling with a local girl, which leads her father to organize the murder of the group of bikers. Before he is successful however, the daughter shoots him dead in the bar and then kills herself in the parking lot. The bikers then head out for Daytona. There is no resolution, rather, Bigelow seems to suggest that a disquieting violence percolates up from the small town, they are just sad stops on the lonesome highway.

While Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920) or even Grant Wood's painting *American Gothic* (1930) had perhaps begun the process of satirizing an increasingly alien world of small-town and rural America, the visualization of its decline in the 1970s and 1980s was far more dire. Kenneth MacKinnon points out that as early as the Lynd's study of Middletown it was becoming clear than the American small town was largely integrated into national economic, regulatory, and cultural trends. Despite this, small towns and American culture in general tend to believe "the notion that the basic traditions of American society, freely expressed individualism, grass-roots democracy and decency, are preserved in the small town."[164] There were saccharine portrayals such as in *Grease* (1978), the town that bans music in *Footloose* (1984), or in the nostalgia-tinged, time-traveling films such as *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), but the more powerful images of rural and small-town America, particularly in the 1970s were those presented in *The Last Picture Show*

[164] Kenneth MacKinnon, *Hollywood's Small Towns: An Introduction to the American Small-Town Movie* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1984), 7.

(1971) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978). In these films the small town is literally disappearing, swallowed up by the plains in the former and losing its vitality to war in the latter. The disappearance of the small town might also be read as a tale about the decline of the New Deal Order. As historians Gary Gerstle and Steve Fraser have termed it, the "dominant order of ideas, public politics, and political alliances" in the period roughly between the late 1930s and 1970s.[165] This era saw the triumph of liberal, modernist, and secular values around the promises of affluence, individual expression, consumerism, citizenship rights, and a stable international order premised on American hegemony. If we consider the ways in which the small town and rural life were faceted to the emergence of the representation of the New Deal promise (artists such as Alexander Hogue and Thomas Hart Benton), it is surprising the degree to which its disintegration forty years later was likewise represented in the shriveling of the land and its residents.

The ephemerality and ultimate disappearance of rural America is one of the key facets of its representation. "Where you come from is gone. Where you thought you were going to, weren't never there. And where you are ain't no good unless you can get away from it." So harangues Hazel Motes, standing above his beaten-up car, positioned between a building topped with giant lettering spelling "Jesus Cares" and opposite of a Pepsi Cola billboard advertisement. It is a sermon from a country boy fleeing his past, but



Figure 2.3 Hazel Motes proselytizes in John Huston's *Wise Blood* (1979)

[165] Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, ed., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), ix.

also an elegy for the rural south. John Huston's *Wise Blood* (1979), based on the 1952 novel by Flannery O'Connor, follows the self-styled preacher of the Church Without Christ and his attempt to escape the religious orthodoxy of his upbringing. Thought of as a close retelling of the book, Huston's version is nonetheless a product of its moment of creation. In telling what on the surface is an adaptation of a postwar southern gothic novel, Huston gives a pessimistic vision of the rural South's past and future that runs counter to the Sunbelt boosterism of the 1970s.

A key distinction between *Wise Blood* as film and as novel, is that in Huston's film has updated the setting of the narrative to the 1970s. Like *The Loveless*, it relies heavily on imagery and themes associated with the immediate postwar period, but with subtle clues and a sensibility that situates the film firmly in its contemporary moment. Both films differ from the rash of nostalgia-tinged depictions of small town America in the 1950s that were popular throughout the 1970s and 1980s, such as television show *Happy Days* (1974-1984) and films such as *American Grafitti* (1973), *Stand by Me* (1986), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987). It is simply New Deal America in sharp decline. The novel, by contrast, takes place in the immediate postwar period, with Motes being a veteran of the second World War. The movie makes no attempt at historical periodization—street and highway signs, costumes, and automobiles all undercut any verisimilitude to the 1940s. But there is also a conscious attempt at obscuring the time period so as to be nearly timeless. Old cars are in disrepair, no events are given to situate the era (at the beginning of the film Motes is wearing a military uniform but there is no mention of which war he is coming home from and the uniform is of questionable vintage). The death dates on the tombstones are deliberately obscured by weeds.

We can only see, for example, that his father Jerusha Motes was born in 1924 and has "Gone to become an Angle" [sic].

The film opens with imagery of small town scenery, Christian iconography, and the detritus of consumer society, such as a tire yard. Standing on a rural road is a hitchhiking veteran and protagonist of the film, Hazel Motes. After being picked up, Motes tells the driver "I don't remember this here interstate. Weren't nothing but a dirt road once." He's told in return, "It ain't been here about a year, just long enough for everybody to drive off on it. Ain't practically nobody left…they all done took out for the city." Brad Douriff's character gets dropped off at a decrepit farm house. He walks around it—literally destroyed. The wallpaper is curling off the walls, floorboards are missing, the roof has opened up to expose the sky. There is a large wardrobe left—about the only piece of furniture in the house. He tears a piece of wallpaper and appends a note to it: "This shiffer robe belongs to Hazel Motes Do not steal it or you will be hunted down and KILLED." Though not intending to return, the sentiment is about preserving some semblance of the past. Motes himself stands in for a rural past that struggles to find its expression in a changing society.

This becomes clearer when he enters the fictional city of Taulkinham. The city is filled with traveling salesmen, madmen, and evangelists. Motes meets the eccentric Enoch Emory, a young man who works at the zoo where he teases monkeys. Emory, also a country boy, tells Motes to beware of tiring city life: "All they want to do is knock you down…I ain't never been to such an unfriendly place before." It is then that they are stopped by a policeman for jaywalking at a red light. It is a crazy kind of interaction: "Now what do you think that thing is up there for?," says the policeman gesturing towards the red light. "Now maybe you thought that red was for white folks and green was for niggers. Huh? Now tell all

your friends about these lights. Red is for stop. Green is for go. Men and women, white folks and niggers all go on the same light. Now you tell all your friends about that, you hear, so that when they come to town, they'll know." It pits the city's civilization (and it is visibly an integrated city) against the supposed backwardness of rural folks. Of course, the joke is on the policeman, whose rules meant to denote decorum and law are undercut by his callousness and casual racism.

The city is also where we are introduced to Harry Dean Stanton's preacher Asa Hawks and his daughter Sabbath Lily Hawks, proclaiming in the street, "Give up a dollar for Jesus." The film's minimal plot takes off from here as Motes becomes increasingly fascinated with Asa, pitting his nihilistic lack of belief against what he sees as Asa's huckster faith. After failing to leave town, Motes takes up a room in the same boarding house as Asa and becomes romantically involved with Lily Hawks. Despite his prosletyzing that "Sin is a trick on niggers," Motes proves unable to shake the beliefs that were bred into him by his preacher father (played by John Huston) as a young boy.

The road is symbolically key to Motes's decline and his eventual self-destruction. As he states several times, "Nobody with a good car needs to worry about nothing." Twice in the film he tries to depart the city but proves unable to—in both cases providence seems to prevent his leaving. He buys a used car and tells the seller "I wanted this car mostly to be a house for me. I ain't got no place to be." This is illustrative of his position as a small town southerner in the world. On his journey out of the city the car breaks down next to a piece of exposed bedrock that has painted on it: "Woe to the blasphemers and whoremongers. Will hell swallow you up? Jesus Saves." By chance, Asa had called him a blasphemer and whoremonger. This prompts him to return to the city to refute the coincidence. Upon trying

to leave once more he is pulled over by a sheriff. Asking why he was pulled over, as he was obeying all laws, the officer responds, “I just don’t like your face.” The officer forces Motes to follow him to the top of a hill overlooking a small pond and valley. The sheriff then puts his car in drive, turns the wheel and pushes it down the incline into the body of water below. Viewing the happenstance as divinely ordained, Motes return to his rental room carrying quick lime. He blinds himself and begins a regimen of mortification of the flesh, including wrapping his own torso in barbed wire and putting rocks in his shoes. After being exposed to the elements one night, he succumbs to death.

The film’s grim tone and dire content is undercut by dark comic elements throughout that burlesque American society. The bleeding between slick salesmen and preachers is the most obvious indictment of the American soul. But the inclusion of shrunken heads in a local museum, the man in a gorilla suit who is ferried around the town as a curiosity, and the somber listlessness of the town’s inhabitants, with severe countenances on almost every face (reminiscent of Grant Wood in their asceticism), all serve as an open mockery to the small town and its prominence in the American mythos. That such an environment can be lauded as the cradle, indeed the safe keep, of the democratic spirit is laughable in Huston’s film. “The world is an empty place, Mr. Motes,” the boarding house owner tells our protagonist. From the vantage point of this desiccated environment, one would be right to believe her. And though not explicit, the film also reflects on the late 1970s transformation and the continued crises facing the American south, from busing to sunbelt transformation. The inability to escape the past, which presses itself indomitably upon the present, is threaded throughout the narrative and gives us the most lasting contradictory images in the film, with Coca-Cola, car culture, and the Church without Christ all twisted together in a southern Purgatory. It might

be that these contradictions swallow up the people who live there. As Motes constantly harangues, "Sin is a trick on niggers." Of course, Motes himself is doomed to succumb to his belief in sin, emphasizing, if not an equality, then a kind of divine parity and justice.

Hazel Motes then stands in for a kind of stoic figure common in the literary and film canon. But there are others that certainly hold their own in terms of stature. If the Joads are the quintessential road figure of the 1930s and Sal Paradise for the hippie generation, the key embodiment of the 1980s would be Rutger Hauer in *The Hitcher* (1986) and John Rambo, the Vietnam War veteran played by Sylvester Stallone, in *First Blood* (1982). *The Hitcher* takes the anxieties of the previous decade and merges them with the slasher film, the most popular subgenre of the horror boom of the 1980s. The film is not concerned with serious commentary—the emblems and icons developed to describe the crisis of the 1970s appear purely as postmodern pastiche here. It stars Rutger Hauer as a serial killer picked up by a young man delivering a driveaway car to California. "My mother told me never to do this," he tells the Hitcher, John Ryder, upon picking him up. The hitcher, revealing that he plans to cut off his limbs, instigates an elaborate chase through the desert. At points it becomes unclear whether Ryder has supernatural origins. Hauer's performance is quite threatening and the film, along with most of its genre, amps up the peril through gore. At one point, driving behind a family roadster, the young driver sees Ryder in the back seat of a family car, playing with two children. When he catches up to them the car is literally leaking blood. The film is unique in that Ryder has no purpose in hitching other than the victimization of innocent travelers. He hops from one unsuspecting good Samaritan to the next, taking their vehicles as his own as needed before dumping them and grabbing another ride. The desert west in the film allows this predator the leeway to do as he pleases. It is as wild as the

nineteenth century. Only the casual diner or petrol station gives any clue that it is populated. *The Hitcher* is perhaps the most extreme use of the hitchhiker stereotype.

Similarly, *First Blood*, one of the most successful films of 1982, is an extreme effort to refigure the western model into a fairly bloody action film obsessed with the 1970s and decline. It follows the drifter John Rambo, a Vietnam veteran, who is stopped in a small town in Washington for vagrancy. After the town's sheriff fails to hassle him out of town, he is arrested and beaten in the county jail. The experience causes flashbacks to Vietnam and leads Rambo to break out and start a guerilla war in the forest outside town, eventually escalating to involve the military in addition to the town's police force. If small town police are often portrayed as bumbling fools, appearing as neighborly goofs even in as serious of films as *Last House on the Left*, in *First Blood* the police are both small town and severe. The critique is unstable. For example, one of the trends in the depiction of the rural that peppers through films is that of such a dearth of crime that keystone cops are caught off guard by any intrusive or disruptive event. At the same time, they are bombarded by violent danger requiring immediate force and fastidious police action. The depiction of authority in the Rambo films can swing from police that are racist and backwards, homely and helpful, ineffective or brutally calculating. What usually goes without saying is that the world in which they operate is degenerating—populated by yokels or even violent criminals at war with civilized society. As John Rambo himself says, "There are no friendly civilians." In effect, the American landscape is returned to its guerilla origins, recreating an imaginary continuation of the desperados and lawlessness of the frontier of western mythos. Here the tendency toward lawlessness and the consequent desire for new forms of authority is the main message, though the unrestrained plot and violence tend to give the film a delusional

logic. Perhaps this is meant to make the audience more susceptible to the film's deeper ideological call for increased authority.

Just as these depictions of iconic figures were becoming distorted, the road film too was taking on a sheen of self-parody by the early 1980s. Albert Brooks's *Lost In America* (1985) is, quite self-consciously, an *Easy Rider* for the 1980s, a Reaganite road film. As David Howard (played by Albert Brooks) states, "My wife and I have dropped out of society and we really, just, were gonna roam across the country and find ourselves. Just like they did in *Easy Rider*." Like the film they repeatedly reference (Steppenwolf plays as they set out in a Winnebago), they light out for the open road with the insurance of a nest egg—they are left with over $100,000 after David quit his job for failing to get a promotion. But their plans go awry when Linda loses the entirety of their savings on a one-night bad luck streak in Las Vegas. It is only after realizing that the money is gone that the full weight of their decision becomes obvious. "This is our home!" says Brooks as they sit in the shadow of the Hoover Dam in shock. It became obvious quite quickly that without the hefty cushion of the nest egg they are on less sure footing: "The egg is a protector, like a god…Without it, no protection."

David and Linda are the fictional personifications of David Brooks' bobos in paradise, the same comic foil as the parents in the television sitcom *Family Ties* (1982-1989)—children of the sixties attempting to justify their consumer-driven lives. They try to merge rebellion and bourgeois comfort, all the while worried they might be "too responsible" and "too controlled." After upending their lives and losing all their money, the Howards briefly reestablish life in the small town of Safford, AZ. Living out of a trailer park they find jobs in service industries, as a crossing guard and a fast food worker. What they realize is they wanted to make a statement, but that actual rebellion is far too much work. In reality

David's dream was for a Mercedes, not a Harley. In the film's finale the two Californians book it to New York, where David picks up a transfer job with his old advertising agency. Linda is working for Bloomingdales and expecting a child.

Lost in America is the cinematic equivalent of Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool*. The film, on the surface, pays homage to the counterculture ethos (the post-credits read, may god be with those who have the courage to drop out) but is wholly in sync with the values and cultural change of the 1980s. Brooks wants to have his cake and eat it too. Just as Frank has shown that consumption was tailored to fit the counterculture ethos (becoming a way of expressing individualism, self-realization, and self-actualization), so here a critique of Reaganite middle-class values actually becomes a mode for celebrating those same trappings. Though making some fun of its own characters, it in the depiction of the lives and experiences of the rural that belie the conservative sympathies of the films.

The film relies on a fairly artificial vision of rural decline, fumbling through tropes of decay, the western (the town of Stafford itself has men riding around on horseback), and the road film. Brooks uses hitchhiking as key to establishing the declensionist setting. At the Hoover Dam, after a fight over the squandering of the nest egg, Linda decides to leave David. She throws her thumb to the road, to which David responds, "Don't hitchhike here in Nevada!" In mere seconds a car is slowing to pick her up. "Holy shit," shouts David, "would you take your arm back in!" The ease of bumming a ride is comically swift. It establishes their entry into the non-urban space of the country. David finds her, in classic fashion, having lunch with her driver in a roadside diner. The car driver assaults David as he tries to get Linda to return to the Winnebago. His quick turn to violence is offbeat at best, there is very little prompting—quite simply the driver, who might think he is Linda's savior, defends his

passenger. After beating David, the driver gets in his car and flees, fearing the arrival of police. Linda returns to the road with David. It turns out that the unnamed man who picked her up had, stereotypically, escaped from prison: "To hear him tell it he said that those two guys were dead when he got there." This might appear an unfair singling out of the film's plot points, but the centrality of the scene is key. Despite being a film about the sobering effect of "dropping out," the time devoted to plot development outside of Los Angeles and Las Vegas is surprisingly short. The portion of the film devoted to their time in Stafford is miniscule—they each work one day at their menial jobs before fleeing. And it is only in the last five minutes of the film that they cover any territory in the Winnebago—a series of images of the American scenery made up primarily of Sunbelt cities and oil refineries. The hitchhiking scene is thus fairly weighty, establishing the mood of life outside of their suburban enclaves. For a proto-road film, it has surprisingly little to say about the road.

Brooks is satirizing the yuppie lifestyle, but the film's critique rings fairly hollow. The depiction of the non-coastal America is both reactionary and denigratory and speaks to a declensionist vision of the rural. The film opened with David imploring Linda, "We have to touch Indians, we have to see the mountains and the prairies and the whole rest of that song." The final message seems to be that such things are indeed fantasy, a fine critique. But the response seems a fairly political justification for the life of a bobo, a humorless depiction of the fly-over states.

Brooks's comedy might be read against another road comedy of the same era, Harold Ramis's *National Lampoon's Vacation* (1983), a superior film in both its trenchant critique of Reagan-era politics and in its filmmaking. It also depicts a yuppie family, this time from suburban Chicago (the blundering patriarch of the family, Clark Griswold, works in food

preservatives), on a family trip to an amusement park in Southern California. The film satirizes the changing social and cultural currents of 1980s America from women's liberation to welfare funding to urban decay. The film's humor reservoir draws from the dissonance between the decaying of traditional American life and the Griswold family's attempt to live out that chimera. In particular, the moral majority's railing against the decline of the family is played upon. The maladroit father (played by Chevy Chase) lasciviously seeks oral sex while his kids sleep in the backseat of the car and flirts with passing women on the highway while his wife rests next to him. At one point the family's dead aunt Edna is tied to the roof of the car alongside the family's luggage.

The film paints a fairly unkind portrait of the US—venal, filthy, at times despairing. The American road seems to be filled in particular with snake oil salesman trying to grift the unsuspecting. And yet, there is a whimsy to the entire proceedings that indeed seems to find joy in all of the decay. The film's title sequence is a series of postcards from across America, leaning heavily to gimcrack roadside attractions such as Gatorland. It sets a mood for the film—the offbeat Americana inspires both nostalgia and sneering distaste. The foreignness of the American landscape is exciting. At the start of the film Ellen Griswold asks her husband multiple times whether it might be better to simply fly, to avoid the pain ahead. But just as the characters must suffer the American road, we must too. The film never lets up on the tawdriness of the family vacation—cheap motels with vibrating beds, surly reenactors in counterfeit ghost towns, the ticky-tacky, budget rusticity of cabins in Colorado, and (given the race against the clock) the many fleeting, antsy stops along the way whether it be a gas station or the sublime vista of the Grand Canyon. It is a portrait of American decline, and yet

from it comes a fairly loving portrait of family reconnection. They do make up and the Griswolds sincerely love one another. There is light shining through.

The same relationship between decline and revival is seen in Errol Morris's *Vernon, Florida* (1981). Morris's second feature film documentary is narrated solely through interviews, driven by the voices of residents in the small town of Vernon. The personalities are almost too idiosyncratic to be believed. They include weathered northern transplants, a nightcrawler farmer, and retirees who stalk the town's benches, storefronts, and stoops. As in his first film, *Gates of Heaven* (1978), there is a sense that Morris catches something beyond reality. The characters are quirky to a fault, and one wonders to what degree they play for the camera. But there is an honesty to the interviews as well, whether they are describing a kind of mystic living, breathing sand or their hunt for the smartest of all birds—the turkey. The film opens with the voice of one resident asking, "Is this reality?" The audience wonders as well.

The portrait of Vernon is also one of work and poverty. Everything is rusty—from the old Chevy trucks driving through town to the makeshift sheet-metal cages that house a resident's opossum while waiting to sell it at a county fair. It is a portrait, on the surface, of small-town desperation and economic depression. But as the interviews expand outward it becomes obvious that the people of the town are not at all sorry for themselves. Their performances are genuine. As Errol Morris says in an interview about the film, "There is all of this strange, anguished doubt that runs through Vernon, Florida….These people all seemed like crazy versions of Enlightenment philosophers. It could be Pascal or Descartes in the cypress swamp." Morris had initially planned to do the documentary on the massive insurance fraud that made the small town famous—many residents had removed limbs in

order to collect on life insurance policies. The practice had left the town with the moniker "Nub City." After being beaten up rather severely for pulling on that narrative string, Morris decided to focus instead on the personal stories of residents. "Nub City, indeed, was scary," said Morris, "but in a different way than I might have imagined. And I came to really love it. I thought, this is a fabulous place. Fabulously weird."[166]

Vernon, Florida captures, in the flesh and in greater dimension, the kind of rural folk that pop up repeatedly in the fictional films already covered. They are the living and breathing versions of Hazel Motes or the aged man Zowalski runs across catching rattlesnakes in the desert for a revival-camp meeting. If one is to take the archetypes developed in many of the kinder films, the country seems to be made up of tight-lipped, tired waitresses, dropouts, mystics, modern-day cowboys, freaks, and keystone cops. These archetypes might also act as an archaeology of an America that is quite beautiful. A quixotic land of course, but one that seems to have many skeptics of the authoritarian trend of modern society. Sometimes these critiques are oblique—but there is in the celebration of the weird roadside a certain alternative America that might be disappearing. If, as Greil Marcus found in looking at the "old, weird America" that haunted the tracks of Bob Dylan and The Band's *The Basement Tapes*, it might be here in visual form. While the image of the road in the 70s and 80s became increasingly more pessimistic, carrying with it a judgement on the backward-looking ways of rural America on the ropes, there is nonetheless a melancholia at its coming end.

What exactly prompted the decline of hitchhiking in the United States, a practice that relied heavily on social capital? The primary argument here is that a declensionist

[166] Interview with Errol Morris, October 2014 on *Vernon, Florida* (Criterion Collection, Blu Ray, 2015).

metanarrative fostered the perception that small and disconnected events, such as a hitchhiking murder or robbery, were in fact harbingers of a deeper corruption of American society. Whereas hitching had always been rife with danger, in both reality and its depictions in art and media, it took on an overwhelmingly negative view in the 1970s alongside a general pessimism about the American rural, and was tied in iconography to the withering of small town America.

News reports of highway robbery, casual freeway killers, and the demise of unfortunate hitchers had long peppered America's newspapers. But the larger narrative space in which hitchhiking has been understood was undergoing change. Only in the 1970s and 1980s did a vision of the dangerous road take on an overwhelming cultural resonance that leapt from casual news stories to a general distrust of the practice, to its decline and even criminalization in some parts of the country. Hitching was a visual shorthand for other symbolic cues relating to the depiction of the American rural in decline. The hitchhiker, long a symbol of "a locomotion that smacked of all-American traditions like independence and neighborliness and can-do spirit" was also a symbol of the crises of the American character.[167] On film, the hitchhiker embodies spaces that are decidedly non-urban, they are a core symbol standing alongside a bevy of declensionist Americana including dilapidated diners highway motels, tourist traps, broken and bizarre figures, and dried-up, economically depressed towns.

The distinctions made in road films between the rural and the urban emphasize the genre's obsession with imparting blame, dissecting causes of decline, and imagining escape. To some degree the rural had become, and remains, a necessary scapegoat. As a racist backwater, the rural country and its poor residents become a culprit in their own economic

[167] Doug Struck, "5,000 Miles, Few Hitchhikers: Fear clears the Road," *The Sun*, April 3, 1985.

and social evisceration. Even today this remains a truism. Rural America has its own dynamics of course, its ways of living, and systems of oppression. But in the popular imagination it is schizophrenically treated as a disappearing wild, set off kilter by modern authority, a space of danger, filled with backwoods killers, freaks, and nuts, and at the same time it is caught up in the romanticism of the road, a liberatory vision of space for rejuvenation. These competing images are all historically situated in a temporal space of the end of the new deal order. Decline is of course the driving metanarrative that results in the spinning off of many incoherent cultural visions of the vast spaces of the country. And while there is real decline, owed in particular to economic disinvestment and deindustrialization, the vision of the present, future, and past visualized on the road and rural might obscure as much as it enlightens.

It became apparent that it was easier in New York than anywhere else to talk with strangers, easier by far during the night than by day.

The Night People's Guide to New York, 1965

The City Picture: The Ecstasy of Decay

In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, the science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany recounts his life as a gay black man on the street scene of New York from the 1970s through the city's transformation under mayor Rudy Giuliani in the 1990s. The book is structured as a set of paired extended essays, the first a personal account of life in the margins of urban America and the second a tract on the academic status economy and networking. The pairing functions to illuminate the structured, perhaps stale, public sphere of the professional world to the often liberatory, if sometimes discomforting, publicness one engages on the street.

A majority of the events narrated in the book take place on or around 42nd Street, which gained notoriety in the 1970s as a sordid environment overflowing with pornography theaters and the homeless. Delany recounts his contacts with a variety of the area's denizens from young male hustlers, some of whom he established long-term relationships with, to anonymous encounters with strangers in the back of porno exhibition halls. He moves between theaters such as the Capri, the Venus, and the Eros. Such theaters, along with massage parlors, bookstores, and peep shows, largely constituted midtown and Times Square from the late 1970s through the early 1990s.[168] Theaters showed straight and gay fare, some had live sex shows, and all had men, sitting in the shadows, masturbating into the backs of their seats. It was an environment for voyeurs but, as Delany makes clear, also functioned as a space for human touch and contact and an express sexuality denied by the larger culture.

[168] Timothy Gilfoyle, "From Sourbrette Row to Show World: The Contested Sexualities of Times Square between 1889 and 1995," in *Policing Public Sex*, ed. Strange Bedfellows (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1996), 263-294.

The environs frequented by Delany were treated by politicians and pundits as the scourge of American society in these decades and emerged as part of a constellation of images that would define urban decay in the era. The crisis of public services and city politics that slowly emerged in the late postwar era, the draining of tax dollars to decentralized suburbs, and the collapse of manufacturing hubs in America's cities all played their part in eating out the core of vibrant city life. American cities became associated with the burned-out edifices of the Bronx, the seediness of Times Square, the wreckage of the nation's capital and South Central Los Angeles following the uprisings of the late 1960s and later the drug dens those areas spawned. [169] Urban decay was one of the most visible threats to America's Cold War image of itself—the concrete city landscape was envisioned as a physical and moral cesspool.

This chapter focusses on the representation of the urban crisis, and in particular the development in American cinema of what I term a gutter aesthetic for depicting the city— a visual shorthand for conveying the dominant critique of urban decay that emerged in these decades, a critique which combined the structural and social breakdown of the city and the amoral characters that populate it. The gutter aesthetic is defined by the ubiquity of panhandlers, the homeless, corner drug deals, broken windows, crumbling buildings and infrastructure, neon, garbage, and graffiti. All of these aspects defined the city street and made up the background matter for establishing not only a city in crisis but a temporal and historical moment of declension in American history. The public sidewalk developed a sinister connotation and on film, the frame became claustrophobic with litter, prostitutes and street people, broken windows, cars on bricks, and actual crimes taking place (these are not

[169] The famous publicity stunt in which it was tested whether hard drugs could be bought in Lafeyette Square just across from the White House in Washington, D. C. was proven to have been orchestrated by the George H. W. Bush administration, but the message was clear: cities were overflowing in crime and hard drugs.

plot points but crimes as background fodder). It is imparting these aspect of urbanity within the framework of decline that gives them their power and is the primary mode of interrogating their representation and historical meaning.

Stanley Corkin has shown how the remaking of New York City, its built environment, and its peoples in the 1970s was reflected in its cinematic "representation of space" as the city wrestled with deindustrialization, the dislocation of ethnic communities, and poverty.[170] Corkin's work focuses on the canon films that make up a particular moment of "new" Hollywood filmmaking in the 1970s. Studios grappling with financial pressure turned the reigns over to auteurs who used the independence granted them to explore personal and controversial topics, often using new film-making technology to tell stories from the street and off of sound stages. *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Serpico* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Annie Hall* (1977) all emerged in this milieu and captured a particular moment of urban life in transformational decline that came to be described most often as "gritty." Building on Corkin, this chapter looks at an alternative set of films, primarily those of the exploitation, b-grade, horror, and Hollywood films of the post "new" Hollywood moment.

More important is the intervention this chapter seeks between cinematic representations of decay and the multiple intellectual discourses surrounding urban public space in the 1970s and 1980s. I argue that cinematic depictions often engage in a similar critique to politicians and news media of the time and in a reciprocal way reinforced a particular vision of dangerous public space on the one hand while fostering a discourse about the increasing anomie and detachment of city dwellers. However, despite their critical

[170] Stanley Corkin, *Starring New York: Filming the Grime and the Glamour of the Long 1970s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), vii.

stances, many films which are set in and exploit urban detritus often betray the possibility and optimism envisioned by critics such as Delany. As he points out, the cities of the late twentieth century, prior to the transformations unleashed by finance capital, operated their own unique public spaces. In describing the pornography theaters so hated by reformers, Delany writes:

> The population was incredibly heterogeneous—white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, Native American, and a variety of Pacific Islanders. In the Forty-second Street area's sex theaters specifically, since I started frequenting them in the summer of 1975, I've met playwrights, carpenters, opera singers, telephone repair men, stockbrokers, guys on welfare, guys with trust funds, guys on crutches, on walkers, in wheelchairs, teachers, warehouse workers, male nurses, fancy chefs, guys who worked at Dunkin Donuts, guys who gave out flyers on street corners, guys who drove garbage trucks, and guys who washed windows on the Empire State Building. As a gentile, I note that this is the only place in a lifetime's New York residency I've had any extended conversation with some of the city's Hasidim.[171]

Such a description could be drawn from Frederick Law Olmstead's ideal plan for Central Park as democratizing space. While acknowledging the limitations of such a public space, Delany's observations deserve a sincere assessment. Indeed, he seems to be excavating in many ways the vibrant vision of urban life expounded by Jane Jacobs in her 1961 classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Though Jacobs would no doubt view the New York City of 1975 with some suspicion, she pointed out that urban areas considered to be in deterioration (by an objective reading vis-a-vis the institutional and bureaucratic lenses of

[171] Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 15-16.

planning theory) could be nonetheless vibrant. Boston's North End, for example, was an example of a thriving neighborhood, complete with community spaces, spirited publicness, and autonomous redevelopment despite the absence of any capital investment and the pressure of urban planners to bulldoze an area "in the last stages of depravity."[172]

Indeed, Jacobs offers a theoretically approach to urbanity and publicness that explains not only Delany's celebration of New York in the heyday of decline, but offers a framework of sorts for teasing out the sanguine expressions of urban life that populate the films of the era. For Jacobs the lifeblood of the city experience is embodied in casual public interactions. And the most important site for such an interaction takes place on the street: "The casual public sidewalk life of cities ties directly into other types of public life."[173] Key to sustaining vibrant city life, Jacobs contends, is a "casual public trust."[174] Such public trust is created by balancing what one shares publicly and must be separate from the personal, private world of individuals, friends, and families. Indeed, "the line between the city public world and the world of privacy" is the most sacred and guarded distinction of life in the modern city.[175] It is a casual anonymity that requires little in terms of institutional policing of boundaries or mores, instead the mores are produced organically. One way to interrogate the perceived breakdown of urban life in the transformational period of the 1970s and 80s is to focus on the transition from one form of modern publicness defined by embodied, cross-class interactions in public space to another defined by the security parameters of the neoliberal city in which interactions shed their casual nature and instead rely on legalistic frameworks of interaction undergirded by a punishment regime and a culture of surveillance. In situating this line in

[172] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 8.
[173] Jacobs., 57.
[174] Ibid., 65
[175] Jacobs., 62.

these films we can trace the dual celebratory instincts of urban life and their undoing.

In describing the nature and tenuous balance between public-private Jacobs offers several examples for fleshing out the concept. The "public character," for example, embodies the casual, non-institutional framework of urban relationships. Such a figure, whether a barkeep or bodega owner, acts as a brokerage for public news and gossip as well as a liminal figure who negotiates the world in between the public and private. Such figures might take keys for apartments when the owners are leaving town and have friends visiting. They act as an authority but also one with no personal investment in the interaction. To institutionalize such a role would immediately destroy the reciprocal and communal nature of such interdependence—by introducing insurance, contractual obligations, etc. to an informal relationship. Jacobs describes an almost intangible element to urban life. Public aspects of life take on their enjoyment because they are different from that of the private—it is an anonymity that is not total but situated in a human-centric environment. As she points out, asking advice from a grocer is different than asking advice of a neighbor. And drinking pop on the street is different than drinking it in one's living room.

It is in traversing and playing with this boundary that the pleasure of urban life is manifested. It is possible, says Jacobs:

> "To know all kinds of people without unwelcome entanglements, without boredom, necessity for excuses, explanations, fears of giving offense, embarrassments respecting impositions or commitments, and all such paraphernalia of obligations which can accompany less limited relationships. It is possible to be on excellent sidewalk terms with people who are very different from oneself, and even, as time passes, on familiar public terms with them. Such relationships can, and do, endure for

many years, for decades; they could never have formed without that line, much less endured. They form precisely because they are by-the-way to people's normal public sorties."[176]

It is precisely in the transformation of the city under neoliberal conditions that such a constellation of public and private is lost. She points out, early for 1961, that a chain store, with its excessive turnover, etc. cannot fulfil the same role as a small shop or bar. The era of urban decay might be one of the last moments to see precisely the type of publicness that is historically distinct from our own but not completely lost.

It is then important to look at how the street and street life are represented in an age of decline, and what if anything we can say about its effects. "When people say that a city, or part of it, is dangerous or is a jungle," writes Jacobs, "what they mean primarily is that they do not feel safe on the sidewalks."[177] And as the sidewalk's relation to city life is total, such insight is a jumping off point for explaining why powerful representations of the city street as avenues of crime are important. Many of the films explored in this chapter offer a discourse and narrative of decline, replete with suggestions for causation and solutions to the urban crisis. But as will be shown, the chorus of decline was often betrayed by street life that

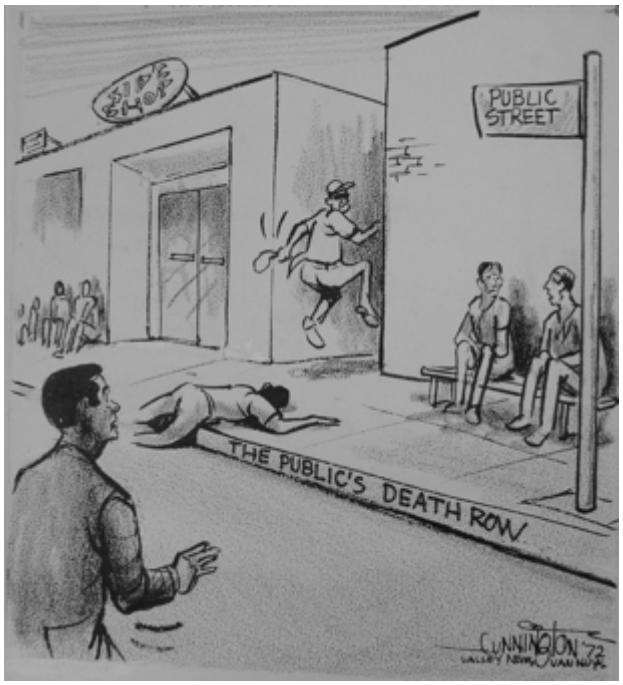


Figure 3.1 Merle Cunnington, Box 6, Folder Jan.-May 1972, Merle H. Cunnington Collection, 1964-2011, Special Collections & Archives, Urban Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge.

[176] Jacobs. 62
[177] Jacobs, 50

remains vibrant and is also visualized enthusiastically on screen.

Such a vibrant street life in the face of decline is also one of the key insights of William Hollingsworth "Holly" White, the urbanist and public intellectual famous for his midcentury work *The Organization Man* (1956) and on whom this chapter draws extensively. In Whyte's work as professional observer of urban life for the "Street Life Project" and his film and book project *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* one finds a voice of optimism that challenges directly the dominant voices of decline. "Of all our historical legacies," says Whyte, "the streets of the center city are one of the greatest. The street is the river of life of the city; it is what gives continuity and coherence. It defines its scale. And it is very much under attack."[178] Like Jacobs before him, White understood the dynamics of the urban crisis—from the over-hyped fear of street people to the corporate assault on public space by what he called "fortress" mentality. His work, when read against the larger critiques of decline helps to provide some greater context to the often times vibrant tempo of the metropolis, in particular New York City, in its supposed darkest decades. "True, the economy is going to hell, construction is at a standstill, taxes are mounting," said Whyte in 1974, "but out on the streets more people are coming together, talking, schmoozing, looking. It is the greatest show on earth, and it is right in front of our noses."[179]

A caveat is needed when discussing the possibilities and limitations of social thought in the 1970s and 1980s. Both Jacobs and Whyte celebrate, to varying degrees, the classic liberal market economy and its connection to the creed of liberal universalism popular in the

[178] William Whyte, "Street Life: Long Live Diversity!" *The Designer*, Vol. 23, No. 273, November 1979.
[179] William Whyte, "Why Shmoozing, Smooching, Noshing, Ogling are Getting Better all the Time," *New York*, July 15, 1974; Both Jane Jacobs and William Whyte belong to a group of theorists (along with Lewis Mumford, Walter Benjamin and others) who, as Thomas Bender has argued, are obsessed with "a public domain in which the individual sees and is seen by others who make up the city." "Seeing and being seen in this view," writes Bender, "is the central act of being in public and of making a public culture that represents the city to itself." This is true in particular of Whyte's reflections on the nature of the public street. See Thomas Bender, *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 228.

postwar era, a "belief in the fundamental unity and sameness of all humanity….This universalism reflected the public purpose of the postwar generation, especially northern liberals and intellectuals."[180] Liberal universalism, an outgrowth of New Deal state policies and the expansive vision of progressive rights spawning from the 1930s, also contained within it a more genteel form of assimilationist Americanism. While it offered positive affirmations and justification for the activist and interventionist state, it nonetheless was burdened with its own blind spots regarding the multiple ways in which race, gender, and class undercut the perhaps too-easily-imagined expanding sphere of "we Americans." Theirs might be read as the last gasps of a utopianism that was being undone by alternative visions of utopia based on diversity, pleasure, and identity (those more akin to Delany). The intention here is not to romanticize the former, but to consider it alongside these other manifestations of promise and renewal that sought to challenge the triumph of pessimism in this period. It is possible to elucidate multiple forms of freedom, expression, and political resistance in spite of the overwhelming rise of declensionist thought.

It is from such a premise that this chapter will attempt to approach the cinematic visions of urban decay such as *Taxi Driver* from a new vantage point. *Taxi Driver,* perhaps the seminal film representation of New York City in the 1970s, aestheticized the decay of New York City in that decade. But, I argue, it is not just grit that one sees. In the opening credit scene, the audience travels through the city peering from Travis Bickle's windshield. In the flashing neon, made more ethereal by the rain, wet pavement, and steam billowing from the warm sewers below, one finds beauty, even joy in decay. Though Bickle himself tries to save the nymphette prostitute, Iris, in the end it is not his choice to save her, nor is it

[180] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 58.

clear she needs to be saved. It is Bickle whose view of the city as cesspool ultimately required a reimagining.

This chapter then will begin with a brief overview of the structural transformations of urban life in the late twentieth century and then move to exploring the iconography on film that expressed these changes and which often approached them from the perspective of decline. The chapter will also look at how filmic representations through the 1970s and 1980s offer (intentionally and not) a perspective of public space. I argue that this space is defined and delineated by the transformation of one type and order of publicness to another, from the modern liberal era to the neoliberal city space of late capitalism. I contend that in such a context many films offer a surface level reading that is, rather than declensionist, celebratory. The construal of these films draws heavily from Siegfried Kracauer's assertion that, "Cinema seems to come into its own when it clings to the surface of things."[181] This chapter looks not only at the intentions of filmmakers, the narratives and critical standpoints of their creation, but for the something extra that film is perhaps uniquely capable of capturing and to which Kracauer gives us key insight. "Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality," he writes. "Now this reality includes many phenomena which would hardly be perceived were it not for the motion picture camera's ability to catch them on the wing. And since any medium is partial to the things it is uniquely equipped to render, the cinema is conceivably animated by a desire to picture transient material life, life at its most ephemeral. Street crowds, involuntary gestures, and other fleeting impressions are its very meat."[182] With filmmakers literally out-of-doors and out-of-studios in this era, the

[181] Siegfried Kracaeur, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 285.
[182] Ibid., xlix.

cinematic frame is perhaps even more capable of espying that type of physical reality (and even social reality) that problematizes a too simple narrative of urban crisis and decline.

When the films contained in this chapter are viewed alongside dissenting voices such as William Whyte and Samuel R. Delany, the city in decline reveals itself as a space for democratic and cross-class interaction at the same time it is limited by the structural and social forces of urban decay. The condescension toward the lives of those who live in these spaces and times and the political project of criminalizing and spectacularizing the metropolis both require a reassessment. The guiding question of this chapter might best be imagined as "decline for who?" Certainly not for Delany. "Were the porn theaters romantic? Not at all," he says. "But because of the people who used them, they were humane and functional, fulfilling needs that most of our society does not yet know how to acknowledge." Because porn theaters were "relevant only to that margin," they were able to be "dismissed—and physically smashed and flattened."[183] In their wake, the city was increasingly imagined as a safe space for formal commercial relations of the middle class.

David Dinkins, the democratic mayoral nominee in 1989, and subsequently the first African American mayor of New York City, ran on a campaign that crystalized the declensionist narrative of America's cities. It was time, he said, "to take New York City back from the fixers and the corrupters, from the pushers and the muggers—and most of all—from the indifference, the cynicism and the moral decay that have sold out the ideals and

[183] Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, 90. In some ways this question builds on Thomas Bender's insightful point in *The Unfinished City*, primarily that those who view the metropolis (in Bender's case New York City) as incomplete in its progression toward metropolitan ideal have fundamentally misunderstood modern urbanity. "Its very essence [that of NYC] is to be continually in the making, to never be completely resolved." See Thomas Bender, *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea* (New York: The New Press, 2002), xi.

the soul of this city."[184] Despite his rhetoric, the most concrete and lasting manifestation of Dinkins's call to celebrate the "mosaic" future of New York was the passage of the Safe Streets, Safe Cities legislation which dramatically increased the size of the New York police department and set the stage for the return of the "beat" cop. While crime levels began to decline in the Dinkins' years, it was Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and police chief William Bratton who precipitated the onerous stop-and-frisk policies that allowed police to stop any pedestrian deemed suspicious.[185] The class and racial disparities in the populations who were policed led to the program being greatly curtailed in recent years. Functionally however the damage was done, redefining public space as space in which the state has primacy in defining danger and the crime victim is paramount. Stop-and-frisk is the antithesis of the casual public trust. It is not by chance that these laws and the coterminous expansion of the carceral state (the same years see the explosion of incarceration) emerged at a moment in which decline and moral decay were the primary rallying cries for political action. Outside of the punishment and surveillance regimes, the capacity to transform the cataclysm of urban America was viewed largely as outside the realm of the public. Such a conclusion was a long time in the making, and began in the 1970s with the decline of urban liberalism and the rise of increased privatization of city services and public spending on programs from poverty to education.

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[184] "Dinkins Speech: Retaking the City," *NYT*, 8/23/89.

[185] The actual cause of the precipitous decline in crime throughout the 1990s is still disputed. The mid-1980s saw crime drop to a fifteen-year low only to see explosive levels return with the recession of the late-1980s and the explosion in the use and availability of crack cocaine. 1990 would be the bloodiest year in the city's history with 2,245 violent deaths. Overall between 1978 and 1998, 32,600 New Yorkers were murdered. By 1998 however, homicide rates were down 72 percent, back to 1964 levels, similar to other forms fo crime such as car theft. The causes of the crime decline were likely due to a confluence of trends including people turning away from drugs, economic fortunes improving, increased policing and incarceration, and demographic and migration trends. For more detail see Andrew Karmen, *New York Murder Mystery: The True Story Behind the Crime Crash of the 1990s* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

There is a longstanding debate about the historical origins and trends associated with the postwar urban crisis in the United States. The late postwar era did indeed see increased stress on the public budgets of large municipal governments and these forces were tied to much deeper changes in the country associated with the long-term struggle to undo the New Deal order that sustained mid-century consensus politics. The contradictions over resources and investment at the heart of the New Deal state were key to the dissolution of the liberal municipality, and helped fan the racial animosities central to the rise of conservative resentment. Patterns of urban clearance, suburban and urban development, government-sponsored social planning, including the federal mortgage market and municipal zoning, all did their part to foster arguments about colorblind property rights and so-called neutral investment, despite the racial and class inequalities such policies often exacerbated.[186] White flight from urban areas to the suburbs and regional flight to the Sunbelt states combined with the loss of manufacturing jobs to cheaper suburban and later non-US hubs also played their part in undermining the tax bases of municipalities across the US. New York City, as one example, saw the population decline by around 1 million people between 1950 and 1975.[187]

[186] For a detailed look at the "culture of clearance" and the inception of inner city and urban renewal/destruction see Francesca Russello Ammon, *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); See also Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[187] Kenneth T. Jackson, "Robert Moses and the Rise of New York: The Power Broker in Perspective" in Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2007), 68. On a side note, Jackson's apologia for Robert Moses (and a retort to Robert Caro's *The Power Broker*) seeks to underplay the devastation his projects had on the thousands of New Yorkers whose homes were destroyed in the process of rebuilding. His reevaluation of the 70s and 80s argues that the redevelopment projects begun by Moses from the 1930s-1960s set the stage for the contemporary rejuvenation of NYC. Jackson argues Moses was the greatest builder in American history, and set the stage for the rebounded city life that has emerged since the 1970s. With his focus on "big projects" rather than "neighborhood ones" (in a jab at Jane Jacobs), it was Moses who was able to envision the future renaissance of the American metropolis. Jackson has the gall to say that if housing and real estate is a "barometer of urban health" then NYC is unequaled (forgetting that most residents can't afford housing in a city which now has higher homelessness than in any time in its history).

Combined with the uptick in the pace of automation, working class communities, particularly urban workers, felt a major squeeze.[188]

[188] On the creation of the suburbs and their larger relationship to the postwar state see David Freund's *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Freund makes two important interventions. First is that the New Deal state was always implicated in suburban segregation. Metropolitan development, particularly zoning laws and federal mortgage market segregated white suburban homeowners at the same time they created them. Secondly, minority exclusion from the suburbs was justified by a new ideology of colorblind property rights that rejected open racism while entrenching the structural benefits of white privilege granted by state action. See also Matthew Lassiter *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). Lassiter's work puts suburbanization within the broader context of the enormous implications for northern deindustrialization and federal investment in the sunbelt crescent of the US. See also Bruce Schulman, *From Cottonbelt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); On the crisis of deindustrialization and its impact on American cities and their working-class communities see Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

There were also political trends that deepened the crisis. Fred Siegel's conservative reading of the unfolding of the crisis lays blame on the development of American municipal liberalism. In the case of New York, the public spending initiated by mayor Fiorello La Guardia became an albatross under the different circumstances of the postwar era when unrestrained public spending without congruent taxes and funding meant that city finances were eaten out.[189] Similarly, he blames black nationalism in power for the crisis of DC, primarily wasteful spending, and the haphazard and dispersed nature of civic power in Los Angeles (rooted in its progressive-era city charter) for its own crises and inability to reckon with immigration, white outmigration, crime and costly city services. Combined with the larger economic and social processes underway, the inability to find meaningful claims for liberal big-government spending meant that by the 1970s the response to the urban crisis could be tackled from the right. Indeed, as Kim Phillips-Fein has recently argued, because public sector spending had been so tied to the transformation of the urban locales like New York, with its "democratic sensibilities, its working-class ethos, [and] its common public life….The experience of the fiscal crisis seemed to delegitimize an entire way of thinking about cities and what they might do for



Figure 3.2 Merle Cunnington, Box 6, Folder April-June 1972, Merle H. Cunnington Collection, 1964-2011, Special Collections & Archives, Urban Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge.

189

people who live in them."[190] It served as a catalyst for a larger debate over the course of the country. The battle for the future of the city was, in the 1970s and 1980s, part of a larger discourse over the future of the nation.

By the late 1960s there were calls for dealing with a host of issues labeled under the "urban crisis." In 1967 the National Governor's Conference released a report calling for Action to Alleviate Civil Disorder and Eliminate Social and Economic Injustice. The report was largely a response to urban unrest of the Vietnam and Civil Rights era. In dealing with the crisis of the cities, it is telling that the discourse of reform was not yet dominated by the law and order mandates of the Nixon administration. Only one of the platforms referred to "Order and Respect for the Law." The great majority of the conference saw the urban crisis as intimately linked to larger reform goals and called for greater participation in government, community improvement groups funded by state aid, the rehabilitation of blighted areas through public private partnerships, and educational and employment opportunities including the expansion of pre-school and college programs.[191] In effect, the report was one of the last gasps of a more holistic program of renewal that sought structural solutions to the urban crisis. Both progressives and conservatives tended toward capital investment of various forms, though the 1968 campaign as well as the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King would do much to link the popular perception of the city to crime and civil

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[190] Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017), 5; William Tabb had much earlier charted the rise of "benign neglect" in the federal policy response toward the urban crisis. What he termed the "long default" was the steady shift toward socializing corporate welfare and cutting social services. He argues "the dominance of private decisions and the lack of government action in dealing with the social costs forms the political basis of the urban fiscal crisis." See William K. Tabb, *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis* (New York: monthly Review Press, 1982), 4.

[191] National Governors' Conference 59th Annual Meeting, "Call and Commitment: Action to Alleviate Civil Disorder and Eliminate Social and Economic Injustice," Box 48, Folder 508, Nelson A. Rockefeller gubernatorial records, Hugh Morrow, Series 21, Subseries 1: General Files, RAC.

unrest, which slowly made criminal justice a core pivot point for handling the evolving urban crisis.

The 1968 Presidential election was a catalyst in the public debate over the future course of American cities. In his bid for the Republican nomination for President, Nelson Rockefeller's staff made urban renewal a core platform of his campaign. The campaign itself was very much tied to a feeling of disenchantment and decline: "America is today beleaguered by social, economic, political, and spiritual problems."[192] A core facet of the problem, he argued, was that "Our cities flame – not with the love of knowledge which made them centers of civilization throughout history – not with the warmth of the brotherhood of all mankind – but with violence and revenge."[193] Nonetheless, Rockefeller's proposals were situated firmly within a New Deal and Great Society framework. The assumption was that government had a responsibility for raising the prospects of the urban poor.

The countervailing forces which would come to usurp the debate also appeared in force during the election. Much was owed to President Nixon's "law and order" response to the riots that swept through the United States in the late 1960s. Nixon took umbrage with the claims that the uprisings were outbursts from those who had been left behind socially and economically. His common refrain was that there was no reason for violent protest in a society flush with material wealth. He also decried the "barbed wire of legalisms" for "weakening the peace forces against the forces of crime."[194] He accused those pointing to

[192] "A Theme for Our Times," Box 48, Folder 508, Nelson A. Rockefeller gubernatorial records, Hugh Morrow, Series 21, Subseries 1: General Files, RAC.
[193] "The Creation of the Participating Society," Box 48, Folder 508, Nelson A. Rockefeller gubernatorial records, Hugh Morrow, Series 21, Subseries 1: General Files, RAC.
[194] "Nixon: Exploits Riots for Political Purposes," Staff Report, Box 5, Folder 28, Nelson A. Rockefeller personal papers, DNA, Series 5, Subseries 1: Notebooks, RAC. The full quote is from a speech given by Nixon on May 8, 1968 in which he claimed, "The barbed wire of legalisms that a majority of the one of the Supreme Court has erected to protect a suspect from invasion of his rights has effectively shielded hundreds of criminals from punishment as provided in the prior laws."

poverty and limited opportunity as "tending to lay blame for riots on everyone except the rioters."[195] And though Rockefeller had early on fought Nixon for attacking the symptoms of riots rather than the causes of the problem, it would be his own 1973 Drug Laws that expanded upon the groundwork laid by Nixon. The Rockefeller Drug laws heralded a new age of policing on the streets of New York but also across the country more broadly as they provided the blueprint for national crime and anti-drug statutes elsewhere.

The Rockefeller Drug Laws were sold as a way of combatting urban crime and the larger crisis of the city. They mandated life in prison for anyone convicted of selling or sharing one ounce or more of narcotics (heroin, morphine, cocaine, or opium). It also mandated the same to someone selling or sharing 1/8 ounce of a narcotic or LSD, but with the potential for parole after 6 to 8 years in prison. The War on Drugs and the War on Crime generally had a large impact in swamping the discourse about cities. By 1973 the problems of poverty, tax evasion, and job flight were increasingly sidelined by the focus on the city as dens of drug users. Part of the shift was out of political utility. Calls for increased spending were beaten back by the generally agreed mantra that the days of the great society were over. But crime was an area in which government action was visible. In a memo to Governor Nelson



Figure 3.3 Merle Cunnington, Box 4, Folder 1969-1970, Merle H. Cunnington Collection, 1964-2011, Special Collections & Archives, Urban Archives, Oviatt Library, California State University Northridge.

[195] "Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders – Objection to Laying Blame for Riots on Everyone Except Rioters," Box 5, Folder 28, Nelson A. Rockefeller personal papers, DNA, Series 5, Subseries 1: Notebooks, RAC.

Rockefeller, Hugh Morrow, the governor's speech writer, wrote "I have seen and heard much favorable comment about the notion you declare drug addiction in the State an epidemic, as suggested at one of the drug forums the other day. This would be first class public relations if it makes reasonable sense administratively and legally….Perhaps you can announce the declaration of an epidemic in Central Park Friday mid-day?"[196]

The passage of the Rockefeller Drug Laws emphasized a criminal suspicion of strangers and city dwellers in general. It built in provisions for turning in neighbors and friends suspected of drug use. The laws fit snugly alongside cultural images of the city and discourses that pointed to the lonely and desperate lives of its citizens. An emerging imaginary of the city dweller was the drug addict but other deplorables were caught up in an increasingly broad assault. By the early 1980s efforts were underway to clear out the moral smut from New York, starting with Times Square. Mayor Ed Koch released a report calling for increased policing as well as new zoning laws to push out adult use business such as peep shows, theaters, and massage parlors. The report stressed the reform as a way of dignifying and reviving public space rather than a moral crusade: "Individuals who perhaps may not be offended by pornography or prostitution nevertheless fear, and consequently avoid, going into areas where they will be mugged, harassed, stared at, forced to accept handbills for massage parlors and propositioned for drugs, sex, or small change…a significant reduction in street crime and street pollution is a critically important objective in any effort to improve the Times Square area."[197] There was consequently a major push in the city to close adult

[196] Hugh Morrow to The Governor, "Declaring Addiction an Epidemic," August 10, 1970, Box 32, Folder 339, Nelson A. Rockefeller gubernatorial records, Hugh Morrow, Series 21, Subseries 1: General Files, RAC.
[197] Selwyn Raab, "Koch Gets Plan for Celanup of Times Sq. by 1980," *The New York Times*, July 3, 1978.

businesses.[198] In place of the old, decaying urban America a new type of city was taking form.

The now infamous New York Post headline, "Ford to City: Drop Dead" was the ignominious trumpet horn of an emerging turn to the corporatization and privatization of American municipalities. The neoliberal response to the urban crisis was to rebuild cities as the playgrounds of the wealthy, as sites for international tourism. Like the suburbanization of the country in the postwar era, the reurbanization of the country since the 1980s has come with a redrawing and resegregating of urban space along lines of class and race.

What I call the neoliberal city space that emerged in the midst of the crisis needs some definition. Primarily it is a city space that is structured around the management of people, a focus on safety, and with the core of urban publicness situated around consumption. Michael Sorkin's work is key to such a definition, specifically what he has called the departicularization of the American city. In *Variations on a Theme Park* Sorkin argues that the new American city has been stripped of historical place, replaced by superficially constructed symbols meant to signify authenticity, but belied by their emphasis on consumption and security. For example, the waterfronts, warehouses, and main street revitalizations that are the favorite sites of urban renewal projects tend to preserve only "the physical remnants of the historical city" absent of the real "human ecologies" that made them.[199] Such gentrified sites are structured around consumption and cater to the globalized jet set. In opposition to the ideals of Frederick Law Olmstead who envisioned public spaces

[198] See Donald Singleton, "Hookers are Hassled, but Still Hustling," *Daily News*, August 1, 1978; Eleanor Swertlow, "Find Sex Emporium Violates City Codes," *Daily News*, April 3, 1975; "East Siders Get Together and Oust Peep Show and Pornography Store," *The New York Times*, May 14, 1975; Jill Rifkin, "Sex Show Closing Shop," *The East Side Herald*, April 18, 1975.
[199] Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), xiv.

such as Central Park as democratizing opportunities for social and class mingling, consumption and security drive contemporary urban planning. Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* makes a similar case about the transformation of Los Angeles, in which the increased class stratification has built itself into the security-minded edifices of southern California, creating "Fortress L.A.." Moreover, cities were shedding their connection to the communal politics that defined progressive politics for generations. For Davis, "the big cities, once the very fulcrum of the Rooseveltian political universe, have been demoted to the status of scorned and impotent electoral periphery." If one looks, for example at the language used to describe cities in electoral campaigns of the 1990s even President Clinton had adopted the Republican language of "micro-enterprise zones" and "infrastructure."[200]

These processes and countervailing forces were described in detail by William Whyte, who offered a voice of dissent to the common knowledge of his day. Whyte gained fame for his writing on the stifling environment of white collar America in the 1950s. In the 1960s he began to advocate for open-space urban design and helped pass statutes in California, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maryland championing such development. From 1964 to 1972 he served on the Hudson River Valley Commission and also worked on President Johnson's Task Force on Natural Beauty and wrote the first urban beautification grants program. Over the course of these years Whyte also became one of the most prominent public intellectuals commenting on urban life in the United States. His 1968 work *The Last Landscape* lambasted the suburban vision that dominated mid-century planning. In 1969 he drafted the Plan for New York City, a manifesto for fixing the city's scattered problems, and in 1971 he began his Street Life Project, a ten-year long study of

[200] See Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990); Mike Davis, *Dead Cities and Other Tales* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 240-241.

how people utilized streets and urban space. New York City was the focal point of his study, which used time-lapse photography to trace everything from sidewalk conversation to behavior of couples in urban plazas to the engagement of the public with everything from street performers to street people. And he traversed the city, from East Harlem to 42nd Street to 5th Avenue. The project resulted in his book *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* and a filmic counterpoint which aired on PBS. It also resulted in New York City adopting an open-space zoning code.[201]

The insights by Whyte show the degree to which many of the assumptions about urban decay were political and ideological constructions. Whyte's focus on the city adopted a "birdwatching" methodology. He would sit for hours at an intersection charting the movements of pedestrians, hand gestures of friends, the embrace of lovers on the street, the reactions to street people and street performers alike, and the ways in which Jane Jacobs's casual public trust functioned in a city undergoing massive change. In a speech to the American Planning Association Whyte complained that as a result of "brutal restructuring," the city was losing its primary function as a place for people to come together to meet face to face. This idea was being repudiated and in its place an attempt to remake the city "in the image of a suburban shopping mall….Thanks to advances in electronics, face to face contact is now deemed to be no longer vital."[202]

By contrast he found, "Many people actually like the city….Complain as they will how horrible it all is, they enjoy the hustle and bustle. They like to watch the parade go by, they like being part of it; they like to schmooze, to girl-watch, and whenever any sort of

[201] "The American Institute of Architects," William H. Whyte Papers, Box 29, Folder 513, Series 2: Personal, RAC.
[202] William H. Whyte, "The Center is The Center is The Center," speech to the American Planning Association, May 2, 1989, Box 29, Folder 522, Personal Writings By Whyte, 1980-1989, William H. Whyte Papers, Series 2: Personal, RAC.

decent open space is provided they will quickly make it into a very sociable place." Especially surprising was "The fact is that some of the most used places are visually quite awful. Some, to boot, are noisy, fume-ridden, and drafty."[203]



Figure 3.4 As William Whyte was prone to say, the action is on the street. Whyte was constantly on the lookout for "city moments" in which strangers were brought together to become a public. Still from William Whyte's documentary *The Social Life of Small Urban Places* (1980).

In 1974, after some initial scouting the previous summer, Whyte and his assistants decided to focus one study on the "most crowded two blocks in New York," on Lexington Ave. between 58th and 59th streets. "The place is really quite extraordinary," claimed white, "The sidewalks are only twelve feet wide and about half of this width is taken up by obstructions, stanchions, sign posts, outdoor store displays, and add to this an army of vendors, handbill passers, beggars, vendors, and cops arresting vendors." He was fascinated by how the space continued to function, with 5,000 people or more going through this "gauntlet" by the hour.[204] What he found was that, in the same city that was on the verge of bankruptcy there was much that went against the prevailing narrative of urban decline. "In

[203] William H. Whyte, "New York is a Tough Town to Sit In, or, A Plea for Sittable Plazas," draft, November 10, 1972, Box 29, Folder 521, Personal: Writings by Whyte Articles, 1970-1979, William H. Whyte Papers, Series 2: Personal, RAC.
[204] William Whyte, "Narrative Report: The Street Life Project," March 5, 1974, William H. Whyte Papers, Box 23, Folder 413, Series 1: Projects and Research, RAC.

the crowded, noisy center of this most deplored of cities, probably never before have so many people been having so good a time on the streets—gossiping, schmoozing, eating, people-watching—and having a safer time too."

"The image of New York is the stock telephoto shot of the documentary: squeezed-up masses of anonymous faces, harried, neurotic, dulled, the detritus of the machine. But it is not that way, really, not if you look," claimed Whyte. He had a proclivity to point out the many positive aspects of life—public spaces were being utilized in greater numbers (he knew because he had been recording them for four years), there was a rise in a vibrant street theater, and, perhaps most surprising, "characters are flourishing."

The focus on public characters was particularly important given their situation in filmic and news depictions as often more than human garbage and scene setting. His descriptions of Street People and the role they play in defining space is surprisingly at odds with the larger panic over the presence of the homeless, vagrants, drug users, and beggars that dominated the time. "It is the mark of a great city to be tolerant of them, and New York is," argued Whyte.

> People who in other places might be put off in a country home are free to act out their fantasies here, at the busiest spots, and to congenial audiences. There is Preacher Willie with his silk top hat and flag, the 'Husband Liberation' man and his placards, the Tombourine Lady, the soapboxers at Wroad and Wall. There are also some deranged people who annoy others—the Witch of 60th Street, for example, who suddenly shouts obscenities at passerby. But most are good to have around. Characters do something for people. Strangers start speaking to each other—'Only in New York' is a stock exchange—and one falls into the role of amused philosopher.

Whyte himself philosophized the increased kissing and schmoozing, the need of ordinary people to stand and gossip in "nothing talk." "This rich street life is no frill," but rather, he claimed, "It is an expression of the most ancient function of a city—a place for people to come together, all kinds of people, face-to-face, and there is far more of this congress here than in the bland shopping centers being touted as the new downtown."[205]



Figure 3.5 The "odd people" and "undesirables" that flesh out city life. Whyte was particularly sympathetic of such figures and even lauded their role in bringing people together (in the case of eccentrics or street performers) as well as their functioning in the city's symbolic order, assuring the rest of us of our normalcy. Every square needed its "pigeon lady" to feed the birds. Unlike those calling for their purging from public space, he urged, of the homeless and downtrodden, "They don't hurt anybody. It's not unsafe." Stills from William Whyte's documentary *The Social Life of Small Urban Places* (1980).

This final insight is particularly important. Whyte railed against the securitization of urban public space—particularly in building designs which sought to make brutal, concrete facades with little space for people to congregate. The hard, ninety-degree angle of the cement sidewalk meeting a concrete, windowless building façade disgusted Whyte. He took a blasé attitude to the occasional discomfort of urban life and accepted that, "If there are a lot of people, of course, there are bound to be some odd types and some odd behavior, and there will also be some littering. In general, however, the people problem reflects what the building managements expect of people. If they are mistrustful they can find plenty of

[205] William Whyte, "Why Shmoozing, Smooching, Noshing, Ogling are Getting Better all the Time," *New York*, July 15, 1974.

incipient mischief to worry about….The managements which take a live-and-let-live attitude, however, don't seem to run into much trouble."[206]

The cinematic images that emerged at the moment of Whyte's writing often betray contradictory visions of decline. Two early depictions of the city in decline, Bob Rafelson's *The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972) and Hal Ashby's *The Last Detail* (1973) are key as they reveal the class markers that determined the nature and meaning of urban decline while beginning to answer the question: decay for who? It is possible to glimpse in the city nonetheless joyous expression of human interactions, diversity, and working-class optimism. The American metropolis was cold and hard, but alive.

The King of Marvin Gardens provides a middle-class vision of post-1960s malaise. It follows David, a Philadelphia-based radio host (played by Jack Nicholson), on a trip to Atlantic City, New Jersey where his brother Jason (played by Bruce Dern), a confidence-man and self-styled businessman, has landed in jail. Jason plans to get away from the city through a scheme to buy up land on a Hawaiian island and open a resort. The film highlights the slowly-perishing Mid-Atlantic resort town. The boardwalk, pleasure palaces, and casinos that had made Atlantic City one of the first middle-class weekend spots is now an empty and cold town. The city itself stands in for an existential American crisis—the same quizzical dreams that animate David's American-style boosterism have failed this place. At one point David finds himself inside the cavernous Atlantic City Convention Hall. He and the rest of the cast enact a Miss America Pageant in the vacant belly of a once proud example of urban civic development—complete with a magnificent organ that blasts tunes to the faux pageant but really, in the end, serve as the dirge for the city and its representation of American success.

[206] William H. Whyte, "New York is a Tough Town to Sit In, or, A Plea for Sittable Plazas," draft, November 10, 1972, Box 29, Folder 521, Personal: Writings by Whyte Articles, 1970-1979, William H. Whyte Papers, Series 2: Personal, RAC.

As the city is tottering on the brink of collapse, Jason too experiences his own destruction—shot dead by his wife, a psychologically-broken beauty with forlorn dreams of stardom and fame. The bleak ending ties the causes of America's psychological and physical destruction to the fantasy of lucre.

The Last Detail, on the surface a more anguished narrative than *The King of Marvin Gardens*, displays, by contrast, the many pleasures of the contemporary urban environment. It follows two "lifer" navy men on a detail to transfer a third sailor to a naval prison—he received an eight-year sentence for stealing $40 from a charity collection box. During the week-long escort from Virginia to Maine, the veteran sailors Buddusky and Mulhall, who are white and black respectively, take pity on the young Meadows and decide to show him a good time before he begins his incarceration. The trip to Portsmouth becomes a travelogue of the American east coast with stopovers in Washington, D.C., New York City, and Boston. The cities are sites of interracial working-class release from the reality of institutional forces. It is, surprisingly, the city in decline that makes this release possible. The three sailors treat the transfer as a form of shore leave. They are largely free agents, with little oversight—considering the regimentation of the military it is a welcome release. They drink in parking garages, brawl with Marines in public bathrooms, picnic and booze in public parks, gamble in bars, and patronize greasy spoons. The city is a space for the unfettered and the weird—walking the city street the characters are just as likely to find a cabbie willing to take them to a brothel as they are to follow disembodied chanting to an eastern religious ceremony. The American city bears some of the markers of the 1960s riots and, shot in the winter, the concrete and grime mix to create an assuredly cold space. But the city is nonetheless a place of fun, where anything can happen. A rapid fire of experiences can lead to brief exhilarating

expressions that take one out of the dominating structures of life—for the character of Meadows it is a way to forget his looming imprisonment. For the other two it is an escape of their roles as coercive agents of the machine. At one point Buddowsky, played by Jack Nicholson, says "Fuck help, fuck fair! Fuck injustice! Don't you ever just wanna fuckin' whomp and stomp on someone, bite off their ear, just to do it? I mean just to do it, just to get it out of your system?" The question is owed to the exhilaration of the city—a space that allows and even encourages the dissipation of stifling social codes.

Writing in 1974, William Whyte picked up on these then unarticulated aspects of the contemporary city. The class dynamics were of particular importance. One of the defining joys of the street was both the lively anonymity it provided at the same time it firmly situated one a sense of locality and place. Whyte was obsessed with the groups he saw on the street, either cruising or hanging out. In the middle of the day there would be groups of kids and young adults, often black and sometimes interracial. "They are mostly male, although their girlfriends seem to join them every now and then." They took joy in just occupying public space: "Most of the time they are just talking and girl-watching, and occasionally they have a radio." Whyte noticed that many people come out to the street on their breaks just to hang out and take in "Lots of action." "Most of the people who become involved in this sort of hanging-out activity are in the area first because of work. The department store employees, much higher up than Joe and Thomas [two stock boys], come out for the same reason." These groups would interact with the workers of other businesses, such as "Manny and Sandy of the Hair palace" who were, in Whyte's estimation, "effective cruisers in the neighborhood, but they were also part of the work force, albeit a borderline job. How they come back to see their friends of work. It is doubtful that any of these people would have come to the street

merely to hang out, but once they are there, they discover its attractions. At any rate, they find some form of street life preferable to spending the whole day inside a building, and the street, with its action, appeals to them."[207]

Filmic depictions, however, often reconfigured the street as sinister and dangerous. Street crime in particular dominated images of the city sidewalk. Unsurprisingly much of the public debate on street crime in the cities catalyzed around particularly lurid events such as the cases of Kitty Genovese, the serial killer David Berkowitz ("Son of Sam"), the subway vigilante Bernhard Goetz, and the Central Park Five. The murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 shook the country, in large part because reports (now known to be gross exaggerations) claimed that nearly 40 bystanders refused to come to her aid as she was assaulted and stabbed to death in front of her own apartment building. The case came to represent the supposed hardened callousness of the average urbanite. In the case of Bernhard Goetz, who shot four black men attempting to mug him on the New York City subway in 1984, the debate over the "subway vigilante" as Goetz was termed had been prefigured in a spate of vigilante films following the pattern laid down in the 1974 film *Death Wish*. In that film, "violence rules the city," and the middle-class Paul Kersey is pushed to carry out a series of revenge murders after his wife is raped and killed in a home invasion. Kersey's depiction is relatively ambivalent, as the trailer for the film suggested: "Call him a mad vigilante, call him a hero." In the case of Bernard Goetz, who was found not guilty on all charges except the carrying of an unlicensed firearm, the media debate was similarly ambivalent. "Although my mind tells me that Goetz was wrong," said columnist James Kilpatrick, "my gut aches with understanding for him…But we have to live by the mind and not by the gut. The subway

[207] William H. Whyte, "Cruising and Hanging Out," Notes, August 16, 1974, Box 21, Folder 372, Projects and Research: Sensory Street: Research, Lexington Avenue: Street Vendors, Handbill Passers, 1972-1974, William H. Whyte Papers, Series 1: Projects and Research, RAC.

goes from 14th to 96th Street, stop by stop, and we go from barbarism to civilization the same way. Our rule of law is still a most imperfect rule, but it beats the law of the jungle."[208] The spate of vigilante films helped to concretize the notion of rampant, anonymous crime in American cities. Most vigilante films demand a street in which crime is absent, generally a positive and worthy desire. But in pursuing this logic the war against the street would destroy those aspects that made the sidewalk appealing and desirable.

The middle-class vigilante film *Death Wish* might be the standout when compared to *The Exterminator* (1980), *Ms. 45* (1981), *Vigilante* (1983), *Savage Streets* (1984), and *The Park is Mine* (1986). This also accounts for its much darker message than many of its contemporaries, which, while also lamenting the systems and agents that have brought the urban world to near collapse, do not call for the same type of moral and physical razing of the city. They are exploitative but at the same time depict alternative systems of support that Paul Kersey's world does not recognize.

Michael Winner's *Death Wish* opens with Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) and his wife returning from a Hawaiian vacation. The idyllic images of the beach are contrasted with the city vista that introduces the title card—the distant city skyline is deep red at twilight, framed by a barren tree and streetlights. The image mimics the look of Caspar David Friedrich, in particular *The Abbey in the Oakwood* which juxtaposes nature and the crumbling edifices of man. The title screen is paired with an arresting soundscape—cacophonous, eerie, formless noise that settles into a jazz fusion score by Herbie Hancock. The score embodies a particular 1970s urban sound and borrows from Blaxploitation films. However, in this context the music does not imply jubilation but foreboding.

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[208] *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1985. It is also noteworthy that *Death Wish II*, released in 1982, had switched locations to Los Angeles. The tagline for that film, which similarly starred the white, middle-class Kersey, was "Death Wish II—He's Doing it for you!".

The narrative of *Death Wish* sees Kersey's first forays into challenging muggers leads to open war against the city's crime elements. The flaunting of the status quo peacekeepers in city hall and the police department raises official resistance to Kersey, but in the minds of the average New Yorker, Kersey is a hero. The city rises up, bolstered and encouraged by the bravery of its vigilante citizen. The film in particular reflected the discourse of a failing criminal justice system. The hands of bureaucracy tie up courts and police. The police in the film are resigned to the unlikelihood of catching the culprits of violent crime: "In the city, that's the way it is."[209] The film in turn celebrates the imposition of justice and order on a violent, wayward city. Corrupt and venal government bureaucracy is viewed as the primary culprit—the city halls, police departments, and courts cannot and will not handle the novel viciousness of modern criminals. The vigilante citizenry attempts to reinscribe the public trust in light of perceived shift in economic, political, and social relations that have made the city poorer, less democratic, and more hardened.

But this vision is somewhat different from the logic of other vigilante films in which the street justice is manifested by working-class individuals. In *The Exterminator* the role is filled by an ex-Vietnam veteran. In William Lustig's *Vigilante*, the need to combat rampant street crime is about reasserting control of the city in the hands of working-class communities. Lustig's vision of New York was particularly powerful—he also directed *Maniac* and *Maniac Cop*, slasher films situated in the debris of New York City. The police in *Vigilante* are treated as much as an invading army as the low-life criminals. The patrolling squad cars rarely stop, they drive through neighborhoods as a form of surveillance but never enforce the law. In *Vigilante* when Ms. Marino, a mother, fears a home invasion, the police respond (by phone) that they can't do anything about verbal assault and will send a car as

[209] *Death Wish*, directed Michael Winner (1974; Dino De Laurentiis).

time permits. In such an environment it is up to the community to defend itself. In the words of the leader of the community vigilance group, the goal is to provide an environment in which "We can start to live like human beings again." The vigilantes are a community.

Lustig was also interested in capturing the reality of urban New York, done beautifully in a chase scene through a graffiti-covered drained public swimming pool and recreation area. This is a working-class vigilante film. And the working-class is interracial and ethnic, as are the gangs. The communities remain tight knit—it is, again, the institutions that fail. The communities are vibrant—they play racquet ball, hang out and patronize parks, and have a local bar. On the side, members of the community police the streets and reestablish the public safety. As the leader again says, it is impossible to hide or run away when criminals were going to turn their neighborhood into a "cesspool." "These are our homes," he laments, "We give em' up we got nothings….Fight for it."[210]

Such a working-class vigilante film sits oddly next to perhaps the most famous of the genre—*Taxi Driver*. The class subjectivity of Martin Scorsese's film is particularly hard to pin down, as Travis Bickle is, arguably, not a personification of the working class despite donning its markers. *Taxi Driver* is perhaps the definitive depiction of New York City at the high watermark of the decline imaginary. It follows a Vietnam veteran and cabbie, Travis Bickle, as his mental condition deteriorates and he becomes increasingly violent, ultimately plotting unsuccessfully to assassinate a presidential candidate before turning his guns against the patrons of a brothel and its procurer. The plot unravels against the backdrop of a

[210] In an odd way, the film sits nicely alongside the argument of Heather Ann Thompson in *Whose Detroit?* She challenges much of the post-Sugrue history by pointing out that white flight and the abandonment of cities actually led to black liberal-left reforms of things such as municipal judiciaries and allowed real challenges to police violence in cities. Lustig's film, though landing squarely in the exploitation genre, is a kind of neighborhood level snapshot of this alternative history. See Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in the Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

tumbledown working-class and poverty-stricken street environment. Stanley Corkin points out that the film is situated firmly within the historical frame of the Abraham Beame mayoral administration and the city's mid-decade fiscal crisis. New York City in this constellation "is a place with any number of menacing people, a world of drug use, sexual assault, and a police force that is unable to bring stability to the volatile mix that defines New York City."[211] The audience is treated to long panning shots of sordid storefronts, blazing advertisements for XXX films, flocks of whistling hookers and an equal number of stumbling drunks and homeless peddlers. In his reading of the film, Corkin points out that Travis Bickle, "though truly a disturbed character, does make a case for the fact of the world he sees it. This world is one of decay and menace."[212] It is seemingly this environment that drives Travis mad, ultimately taking it upon himself to initiate a razing of the morally compromised city. In his carefully rehearsed soliloquy Travis states: "Listen you fuckers, you screwheads. Here is a man who would not take it anymore. A man who stood up against the scum, the cunts, the dogs, the filth, the shit. Here is someone who stood up."

Travis is a firm proponent of the narrative of decline. He is disgusted by the state of the society in which he lives, the people who populate the streets, and the condition of human relations—both between men and women romantically and between strangers. At one point the Senator and presidential candidate Charles Palantine serendipitously steps into Travis's cab. After some gentle cajoling, Palantine address Bickle partly in an attempt to politick and partly to guage the working-class mind. "I have learned more riding in Taxi Cabs than in all the limos in the country," says Palantine. He asks Bickle what bothers him most. Travis responds with a disclaimer that he doesn't follow political issues closely, but his feeling was

[211] Corkin, *Starring New York*, 134.
[212] Ibid., 151.

that the city was filled with "filth and scum." "I think the president should clean up this whole mess here. He should flush it down the fucking toilet." His intuition defines what is his sole political view. His rage against the city is motivated by confused inklings more than any hard-and-fast issue—Travis is, in effect, the Nixon voter who *senses* things are out of whack. However, it is not really clear that the world as Travis sees it is the reality—indeed, his viewpoint and the trustfulness of his narrative is constantly undermined as the audience spends as much time looking at him as looking through him. It is wholly possible that Bickle's view of the city is fundamentally flawed. While couched in a language and rationale that suggests Bickle is raging against a society that has decayed morally, in fact it is Bickle's own inability to find a space for himself in a new, changing city that is the real undoing of his character. This message is likely drawn from Scorsese's own experience of living in New York over several decades. *Mean Streets* (1973) and *New York, New York* (1977) are likewise intimate portraits of the city drawn from his personal experience. Of the latter, Scorsese said, "A lot of the story parallels my own life, my first marriage, struggling to be recognized. That period of struggle was perhaps the toughest. It made the city begin to turn ugly, although what was really turning ugly was my own image of myself."[213] Though he was speaking of *New York, New York*, this sentiment is visualized more clearly in one of the ugliest scenes of *Taxi Driver*, in which Scorsese portrays a disturbed passenger who threatens to murder his adulterous wife from behind the taxi's partition wall. "You should see what a .44 magnum is gonna do to a woman's pussy," Scorsese tells Travis. The scene is almost inexplicable, except to implicate Scorcese's own grotesque interpersonal problems, which parallel Travis's, into the film's message.

[213] "Scorsese creates Hollywood version of New York," *The Sun*, June 3, 1977.

Similarly, Travis is a man out of his own time. He is unable to reconcile himself to his environment or the people who inhabit it. As he says early in the film, "All my life needed was a sense of some place to go. I don't believe that one should devote his life to morbid self-attention. I believe that someone should become a person like other people."[214] He attempts throughout the early part of the film to behave as he believes others would, in particular during his courting of Betsy, a campaign worker for the Presidential candidate Palantine. But Travis fails in his attempts at mimicry. He is trapped in a toxic form of masculinity, enacting empty forms of chivalry while grousing over the phenomenon of the "new man" embodied by Alfred Brook's character Tom. Travis is unable to stay afloat against such men—charming, funny, and untraditionally masculine. It is why he is puzzled by Betsy's interest in Kris Kristoferson and why Scorsese chooses Jackson Browne's "Late for the Sky" as the sole lyrical music in the film. The song charts the unraveling of a relationship and the protagonist flummoxed over not only the relationship but his own sense of self—"How long have I been sleeping? How long have I been drifting through the night? How long have I been dreaming I could make it right?"[215] Travis of course is unable to reconcile who he really is with what he believes are the codes of the society. He takes Betsy to see "Sometimes Sweet Susan," a pornographic film, to which she objects. Travis protests that he sees a lot of couples at these movies. The scene reveals Travis is a creature of the world of "filth" at the same time he rages against it. "This is not so bad….I don't know much about them [other films], but I can take you other places," he pleads.

Key to an alternate reading of *Taxi Driver* is the critical question of whether Travis is indeed a reliable narrator. Just as Travis is foreign to his time, he is at variance with the

[214] *Taxi Driver*, directed by Martin Scorsese (1976; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2016), BluRay.
[215] Jackson Browne

people who inhabit his world. The neon streets, the fun that they embody, and the night people such as prostitutes and peep-show viewers with whom he engages are strangers to him. He rages against the city, the moral cesspool. "All the animals come out at night. Whores, skunk-pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies. Sick, venal. Someday a real rain'll come and wash all this scum off the streets." Of course, there is a clear misogyny, homophobia, and racism in the protagonist's list of deplorables. The camera often lingers on black pedestrians for long periods, with Travis's stare registering as a challenge and often hope for raucus interactions. But, Travis himself falls within the iconography of the wretched. He resents those like himself. After all he completely inhabits this world—he drinks from brown paper bags on the street, lives in squalor, visits the pornographic theaters regularly (indeed, buying popcorn, candy, and soda for long evenings in his seat). His self-hatred is key. But also key is that others seem to be having more fun than he is. Can he adequately define this world given his mental state and what position does he fulfill in this world?

Perhaps it is easier to say what Travis is not—a paragon of the working class. The working class folks that Travis engages are also peculiar to him, including the fellow cabbies he meets when ending or starting a shift. They are alien to him. And these characters are surprisingly at home in the maelstrom of New York City and the times. Peter Boyle's character, Wiz, describes picking up two homosexuals who were quarrelling with each other in the back seat of his cab. Though his comments on the couple are laced with slurs, Wiz's feelings are punctuated by tolerance and a live-and-let-live mantra. He remarks that he doesn't care what they do in the privacy of their own home, that pursuit of happiness and "all that" is fine. He only objects to them bustin' heads in the back of his cab. "God loves you, do

what you want," says Wiz to which another of the cabbies chimes in "Tell them to go to California. Cause' out in California when two fags split up, one's gotta pay the other one alimony." Peter Boyle responds, "Not bad. They're way ahead out there, you know? California." This is not played sarcastically but sincerely. The group is weathered, working-class, and down to earth. These don't seem to embody the backlash ethos nor harbor the racial resentment of Travis. Indeed, Wiz's character offers perhaps the key philosophical point of the movie. It is in his discussion with Travis midway through the film that serves as the fulcrum in Travis's slip into darkness.

Leaving a diner together, Travis and Wiz emerge to a street scene typical of *Taxi Driver*, as a group of people sweep along the sidewalk. They include black women, seemingly prostitutes, and a group of teenage kids and even younger children (kind of an odd pairing given this is an unspecified night hour—but the heterogeneous, and in this case intergenerational, nature of the street is one of its defining features). They are laughing and cajoling as the youngsters tease and provoke them. Travis focusses carefully on the group, who constitute for him all that is wrong with city life. He then confides in Wiz that he is real down and on the verge of something. "I don't know. I just wanna go out. I really wanna. I got some bad ideas in my head." To this Wiz responds:

> "Look. Look at it this way. A man…A man takes a job, you know. And that job, I mean, like, that job you know, that becomes what he is. You know, like you do a thing, and that's what you are. I've been a cabbie for 17 years. Ten years at night. And I still don't own my own cab, you know. Why? Because I don't want to. That must be what I want. You know, to be on the night shift, driving somebody else's cab. You understand? You get a job, you become the job. One guy lives in Brooklyn, one

guy lives in Sutton Place. You get a lawyer, another guy's a doctor. Another guy dies, another guy gets well and people are born. I envy you, your youth. Go out and get laid. Get drunk. You know, do anything. You got no choice, anyway. I mean, we're all fucked. More or less, you know?"

Listening contently, Travis responds, "I don't know. That's about the dumbest thing I ever heard." Wiz retorts, "It's not Bertrand Russell, but what do you want? I'm a cabbie. You know? What do I know? I mean I don't even know what the fuck you're talking about….Don't worry so much. Relax, Killer, you're gonna be all right. I know. I've seen a lot of people and I know." Wiz's admonition is twofold. First is his existential point not to push against the tendency to be who one is—something that Travis has struggled with constantly. But his key suggestion is to live in turmoil of the rapids. "Go out and get laid. Get drunk…Don't worry so much." The dictate is to enjoy! This makes sense within the context of a working class resignation to the structural limitations of success and happiness.

When Travis meets Jodi Foster's character Iris—a child prostitute—the same logic seems to hold. Though Iris's age is unclear she is obviously a minor, and this position compromises her agency in the film. And yet even she pushes back against Travis's attempts to categorize her as a lost soul or a victim of contemporary moral decay. Iris, who is implied to be a runaway, says she could leave her current situation any time she wishes. Travis is shocked by her "women's liberation" stances. To this she labels him square. And that is perhaps the best description of who Travis Bickle ultimately is. His madness is singular rather than an outgrowth of the decaying society that he blames for his dissatisfaction. Indeed, the inhabitants of the environment again and again seem to articulate or represent an optimism, whether for the political campaign they work, or driving a cab, or working the

street. Travis, by contrast, is unmoored from anything that might give him meaning in this world—community, class mutuality, joy, religion, or even political engagement.

Taxi Driver should be considered within the context of the larger 1970s cultural stew—an era in which both "lifestyle" and dropping out sat alongside one another as genuine aspirations. The New York City street of this era might be read through the lens of what historian Peter Braunstein called the "hedonistic fringe of liberalism" that flourished in the 1970s. This trend "held that nothing was wrong if it felt right, that personal exploration through dance, sex, or drug use was indeed a quasi-religious quest, with a morality as valid and legitimate as the counter-morality condemning it." Indeed, Braunstein sees these as core to a revolutionary experience of the 1970s—"the elements that prevail during times of revolution--the exhilaration of collective experience, the inversion of social roles, the supremacy of the present, the triumph of imaginative life."[216] What then seems to trouble Travis is his inability to live in this particular constellation. He sees only decay. As a white, working-class man, Travis's vision of the city is one of utter degradation. And it is fundamentally then Travis view of the world that is in need of renewal rather than the city in which he lives.

[216] Peter Braunstein, "Disco," *American Heritage* 50 (November 1999): 43. Braunstein makes the convincing case that the discotheque was a site of "cultural struggle pitting the forces of hedonism, revelry, and sexual liberation against those of sociosexual stability and control." "Disco," he argues, "firmly situated itself within the cultural politics of the 1970s, which ran a bizarre gamut from radical-chic terrorist groups like the Symbionese Liberation Army to orthodox feminism, from gay liberation to the environmental movement." The failure of the left to harness this power and instead to largely reject it is an interesting project in itself. It illustrates that there was potential in the 1970s but largely untapped. As Braunstein shows, the disco catalyzed "White, adult, middle-class fears of what could be called the spillover effect of dance music, the possibility that the sexualized frenzy of the dance floor might seep out onto the streets and into the suburbs of America."; Braunstein argues that New York in the 1970s, with its "fuck trucks" (roaming trailers that hosted orgies, its hardcore gay clubs, and the dance clubs offered a possibility for "transcendence" and indeed a "mass experiment in hedonism," in the "erotic city" of the 70s. This was only possible, because of the city's supposed decline. See Peter Braunstein, "'Adults Only': The Construction of an Erotic City in New York during the 1970s," in Beth Bailey and David Farber, ed., *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 146, 152-53.

Ralph Bakshi's *Heavy Traffic* (1973) builds upon this view of the street as a site for the "exhilaration of collective experience." Bakshi emerged in the 1970s as an alternative artistic powerhouse to the animation studios of the era, in particular Disney. He gained fame for the underground classic *Fritz the Cat* (1972) based on the counterculture cartoon developed by Robert Crumb. In a prolific decade he also released *Coonskin* (1975), *Wizards* (1977), and *The Lord of the Rings* (1978). *Heavy Traffic* was his most well received film among critics. The New York Times described it as "A cruel, funny, heartbreaking love note to a city kept alive by its freaks, and always, always dying."[217]

A highly experimental X-rated animated film, *Heavy Traffic* is a portrait of New York City. It captures in particular the frenetic energy of the city through a surreal cascade of animation. The film splices together animation, back-projection location shots of historical and what were then contemporary urban street scenes, and live action. The picaresque plot follows the life of a struggling cartoonist, Michael Corleone, as he and his black love interest, the bartender Carole, attempt to leave the city for San Francisco. Michael floats through his environment, and the audience is able to glimpse momentary flashes of the world he inhabits as the camera follows casual city dwellers ancillary to the main plot. These snapshots of city life overflow with lurid depictions of public drunkenness, sex, crime and random shootings. At the same time, they flesh out the built environment of the city—represented as an open gutter marked by profuse litter, dumpy tenement-style housing, prostitutes, and a near-constant neon glow. The film is also peppered with urban denizens such as Snowflake, a transvestite who haunts the neighborhood bar, and Shorty, a disabled barfly in love with Carole. Michael's warring and homicidal parents, his Italian father Angelo, an unrepentant

[217] Roger Greenspun, "Heavy Traffic," *New York Times*, August 9, 1973.

racist and womanizer, and his Jewish mother Ida, are also key characters and represent a particular moment of ethnic urbanism in decline.



Figure 3.6 Examples of the cell animation and backprojection of scenes of urban blight as they are combined throughout Ralph Bakshi's *Heavy Traffic* (1973).

Heavy Traffic offers a view of New York City that ranges from cynical to upbeat. It is especially concerned with imparting, often impressionistically, a history of place that on the surface seems to suggest the city's greatest days are behind it. This theme is particularly evident in the depiction of its working-class ethnic communities which seem to be in retreat, not unlike in the later *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). Most powerfully this is represented in the broken figure of Angelo, Michael's father, whose machismo and tendencies toward violence are crutches for working-class brokenness. His mother Ida lounges about the house half-naked in her bathrobe swinging between obsession and hatred of Angelo and pining over her son's future, in particular his love life. Michael and his parents are situated on the outer rim of an unclear, even nebulous, working-class city life that seems to be ever present and yet vanishing. We see for example, a collection of dock workers listening to a blowhard speaker. They are told they no longer need a union, to which they respond in a resounding and unison, "Fuck no!" Such scenes, rendered in vivid animation, sit next to a representation of a deeper restlessness that places contemporary life in the city in conversation with its own history of labor struggle throughout the twentieth century. The audience is very much forced to

confront how New York got to the place it is in—with violent deaths and grotesque violence embedded in the experience of daily life. There are back projection images of the city from the 1940s followed and mixed with images from contemporary New York such as bums clapping along to black musicians singing folk music on the street. These live action shots are themselves often overlaid with animated characters. The history of the city—the strikes, the mafia's greed, the devouring of the impoverished, the hustle, the energy of technological change, and personal struggle are collapsed into a singular and totalizing vision of urbanity. And while the ultimate hallucination is topsy turvy, it is nonetheless vibrant for it. The city, though dilapidated, is very much alive.

Such a reading of the film relies in part on an appreciation of the storytelling exaggeration on display. The degree to which the city is truly a crime-infested cesspool is unclear. Indeed, much of the depiction of violence in the city is situated as two-fold satire. The first degree of parody is the dramatization of city crime—when within the first ten minutes of the film a street person experiences a violent, if comical, death through sheer happenstance. The violence on display discards any claim of realism. This satirical view of city crime itself provides the fodder for Michael's comic imitation in his own cartoons. The cartoons, and Michael's feverish and even ecstatic work on them, suggests that it is a representation of the city on display throughout the film rather than verisimilitude. Indeed, it could be argued that while morally the world seems to be falling apart, the emphasis is that people construct lives in the waste that embody a true rapture and joy. Michael's exploits are reminiscent of those in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), which likewise in a funhouse-mirror way reflect the ecstasy of stylized violence with release. Michael and his friends beat each other violently, stab one another, and at one point believe (falsely it turns out) that they have

killed a prostitute. Bakshi uses these images to parody the idea of debased city. What we see, through this vision, is not a critique of crime and urban debasement per se. The exploitative images function as a lamentation of the lost city of mid-century, of the failed promises of the New Deal city—one in which ordinary workers might live in peace. *Heavy Traffic* nonetheless revels in the excitements that city life continues to offer.

Of particular importance for reading the film as celebratory is the framing technique. The film is bookended by live action sequences of a real-life version of Michael playing pinball in an arcade. The pinball machine returns throughout the film, as new balls are pumped into the machine. The entire film takes place seemingly within this pinball machine. It serves as a metaphor for the city—represented as a series of popping lights, loud noises, and the beats of a bumper game. The animated story proper ends with Michael's head being blown open by a mob assailant hired by his father. In the real world this is represented as Michael losing the game—"Tilt" blinks and he kicks the entire machine over. The game kills another guy while he is leaving. The final minutes of the film see Michael walking on the actual streets of New York—litter covers the ground and some shop windows are boarded up. He walks by the unemployment agency where he sees a woman who turns out to be Carol. In a twist reminiscent of the Wizard of Oz the audience realizes the people who populated the pinball machine exist in a "real" version of the world. Here though, there is a softness and melancholy to human behavior absent in the animated world. Street performers serenade Carol, and Michael catches up to her in a public park where there are many people standing around visiting. They embrace, she gives him her hat, and they dance and promenade through the park. The pinball game pays off.

What are we to make of the finale? It situates contemporary New York outside of the panic about contemporary New York—as a real historic place. Conscious or not we see here an image of urbanity that is both exhilarating and, as the final shots suggest, real. It is in the in-between of the panic discourses that reality peaks through. Bakshi's film leaves us with a working-class rejection of the narrative of criminal unrest and instead situates New York's problems as part of a deeper economic crisis owed in large part to the shattering of ethnic community and organized labor.

If *Heavy Traffic* explores the contemporary moment by looking at the past, John Carpenter's vision of the city in *Escape from New York*, released in 1981, investigates the urban crisis by looking to the future. The film takes place in the near future of 1997 and is one of a series of urban sketches in Carpenter's filmography, alongside *They Live* (1988) and *Escape from L.A.* (1996). In *Escape from New York* the city has been walled off from the outside world and transformed into a high security prison. Kurt Russell's character, Snake Plisskin, is sent in to the prison to collect the President whose plane has crash-landed after a terrorist hijacking of Air Force One. Similarly to *Blade Runner* (1982), the futuristic metropolis is one in which a vibrant street scene exists in the midst of deterioration.

The film exploits the imagery of decline. The theatrical poster for the film shows Snake and the President fleeing a throngs of gang member though a darkened avenue with the head of the statue of liberty laying in ruins in the street. It is a wholly Reaganite era film, with a new emphasis on security and technology as apparatuses of control meant to bring order to the chaos of decline. By the late 1980s we are told that crime has grown so out of control that New York was isolated and walled-off from the outside world, being transformed into a high security dumping ground for what can only be a police state. This is the aspect of

the film that is perhaps the most striking. While *Escape from New York* on the surface provides one of the basest representations of the city as a den of crime, it is, ironically, the last free place in the United States. What goes without saying is the inversion on display in the film. The question that is not voiced is what type of society would transform New York into an open-air prison? Though not wholly evident in the film, but stated expressly in the 1990s sequel, the United States has descended into a form of dystopian authoritarianism (a religious and millenarian authoritarianism as described in the sequel.) What the audience experiences then is to follow Snake into the last space in the United States where fascism holds no sway.

And the actual prison-city as represented appears to create the organic relations of a functioning city, albeit in a satirical way. As Snake works his way through the city he come in contact with what can only be described as the glue of city life—public characters. As Jacobs pointed out, the public character is "anyone who is in frequent contact with a wide circle of people….His main qualification is that he *is* public, that he talks to lots of different people. In this way, news travels that is of sidewalk interest."[218] They serve as a cohesive force because, "in a curious way…help establish an identity not only for themselves but for others."[219] These characters are best represented in *Escape from New York* in the figure of Brain and Cabbie (played by Harry Dean Stanton and Ernest Borgnine respectively), both of whom help Snake navigate the parameters of the city and avoid falling into the hands of the street gangs or the crime boss who now runs New York.

A core facet of *Escape from New York* is on the community that exists in the midst of urban detritus and continues to anchor city dwellers to place. It is important then to

[218] Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 68.
[219] Ibid., 69.

historicize the figure of the street person if we are to accept a reading of the street that is, if not optimistic, at least not declensionist. For William Whyte, the street figure rather than a symbol of decay, often imparted an aura of place, joviality, and even community. He went so far in his cataloguing of street life to point out some of the most important figures, those who might be considered public characters to use the language of Jane Jacobs. One such character was Mr. Magoo, a curmudgeonly homeless man. "Sympathy for him?" asked Whyte. "Hardly. Mr. Magoo is not a nice person; he's rude, a bit of a bully and, while he's funny about it, he treats people the way we might like to but don't. And perhaps that's it. As in a W.C. Fields movie, with the sanction of laughter, we can enjoy kicking little children and things like that." A similar character was "The Witch." This person functioned similar to Mr. Magoo, in that "She suddenly hurls raucous comments at people she doesn't fancy – these are usually very dignified people. A priest for example, in charge of the girls band of a parochial school." This particular street person gave lewd gestures toward the priest, suggesting his sexual interest in his charges. "There is no stopping her when she starts a tirade," remarked Whyte. Despite this, "The cops usually leave her alone. The victims who protest end up looking foolish." Part of this is the fact that criminalizing or policing such a figure would be to assault the city itself—to attempt to wipe out that which makes urban life spontaneous and joyous—its unpredictability, anonymity, and even a sense of discomfort at being forced to engage those with whom one would not under private circumstances. Such an interpretation might seem to stretch the boundaries of what people desire from public space. But the Witch is telling in this respect. As Whyte continues, describing the street scenes he has captured:

> The witch does not like children and sometimes spits at them. I have a splendid sequence in which a nice mother and her nice little boy walk by. All this niceness is too much for the witch. 'F--- you, you little bastard', she says sending a fountain of spit hurtling his way. She is perfectly dreadful, but so, in a way, are the onlookers. They look at each other in mock horror. 'Did you see that woman spit at that little boy?' but they are smiling broadly as if, they are on her side.

It is precisely this type of interaction that makes the city street interesting and enjoyable—its spontaneity and in particular the unscripted social codes of response. How does one respond to such a situation? It occurs outside of normal by-and-by social relations of consumption as well as official or professional codes of conduct. It is the fun part of street life.

Such an interaction is further explored when Whyte describes a so-called Knapsack Man who would be spotted wearing a trench coat with a knapsack and a photograph with a message pinned to the sack. People would follow the man while attempting to read the sign (which read "only my family has the right to assault me. If you are not a member of my family, please do not hit me."). Whyte describes a "whole line of people behind him, jostling each other for better position to read the message." Only when he stopped could all read it and "the crowd would dissolve."[220] By chance such a man serves as the catalyst of public interest—something that cannot be replicated by the billboard advertisement. It is precisely the non-commercial aspect of the street person as which they serve their function as public character in the age of decline.

[220] William Whyte, "Odd People," William H. Whyte Papers, Box 23, Folder 416, Series 1: Projects and Research: Street People: Research 1971-1985, RAC.

Whyte offers a ruddily optimistic vision of the potential to have meaningful, unique human experiences in banal settings. The unremarkable street, rather than a site of conflict or consumption, has an animating energy that is worth noting and saving. Such insight peppers one of the most important of decline films that bears key, though not all, markings of the genre. *My Dinner with Andre* (1981) is both a New York movie and a conscious reflection on the postmodern moment. It is aware of its time and is especially a film depiction of the late 1970s and early 1980s—specifically referenced in the film as a period of immense insecurity. Almost the entirety of the film's running time is devoted to the dinner conversation between Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory (playing characters influenced by their own experiences, many drawn from their lives in the theater). The film is especially focused on the space of New York City in its contemporary moment.

The conversation between the two thespians is a wrestling between opposing philosophical points—that of the mystical experience of transcendant life and the spiritualism of a humanistic, routine life. Both are concerned with the liberatory potential of these lifestyles in the setting of contemporary America. As Andre says, "People today are so deeply asleep." But the two differ greatly in their assessment of what it means to be awake and the process for stirring contemporary people to address reality and express any form of truth. Andre, whose affluence has allowed him access to world travel and eccentric experiences describes the power of simply "being" and stripping away the roles placed upon human beings by society. In his quest to undo the meanings behind father, husband, and son he worries that he may have wasted his life, but he nonetheless finds he has had deeply metaphysical experiences. Wally, by contrast, takes umbrage with the points raised, finding that really Andre's quest for being has been on an absurd quest to do "nothing." Rebuffing

the suggestion to find self-realization one must visit Mt. Everest or the Sahara, Andre asks, "Isn't New York real?"

Just beneath these philosophical debates are a reckoning, deliberate and not, with the hegemonic power of the decline narrative. Both characters are acutely aware they are searching for some type of meaning in a frightening contemporary world. Wally sees his role as playwright as a small way of bringing people to some form of reality—to show that which is missing from contemporary life. Andre, by contrast feels such an attempt at realism in the theater, even the very endeavor of representation, is bound to fail.

> How does it affect an audience to put on one of these plays in which you show that people are totally isolated now and they can't reach eachother and their lives are desparate? Or how does it affect them to see a play that shows that our world is full of nothing but shocking sexual events, and terror, and violence? Does that help to wake up a sleeping audience? See, I don't think so, 'cause I think its very likely that the picture of the world that you're showing them in a play like that is exactly the picture of the world they have already. I mean, you know, they know their own lives and relationships are difficult and painful. And if they watch the evening news on television well, there what they see is a terrifying, chaotic universe full of rapes and murders and hands cut off by subway cars and children pushing their parents out of windows. So the play tells them that their impression of the world is correct and that there's absolutely no way out. There's nothing they can do. And they end up feeling passive and impotent.

Andre critiques Wally's simple view of consciousness-raising given the weight and power of the symbolic system in which ordinary people live. But he is also referencing the critical

stance of *My Dinner with Andre* as an entry into that symbolic system. If Andre is correct, artistic representations (including film) make a spectacle of social anxieties and dominate the audience. Over a deeply sweet and personal dinner between friends, *My Dinner With Andre* invites a break from the power of images and strays as far as possible from the imposition of traditional narrative upon the audience—we hardly ever leave the restaurant table. Despite this there is an intensity in Louis Malle's direction which swoons in for close-ups and is anything but stale. Moreover, the film demands of the audience a judgement on the two visions of the world.

It is Andre himself who has completely internalized the impression of the world he accuses Wally of fostering. Andre admits that he imagines New York as a large prison where no one can get out. He speaks in the language of Gramsci, believing the city is built by its own prisoners who can't even see it as a prison any more. He thinks he and his wife should leave, but the problem as Andre assesses it, is the rest of the world is now similar to New York:

> See, I think it's quite possible that the 1960s represented the last burst of the human being before he was extinguished and that this is the beginning of the rest of the future, now and that from now on there'll simply be all these robots walking around feeling nothing, thinking nothing. And there'll be nobody left almost to remind them that there once was a species called a human being with feelings and thoughts and that history and memory are right now being erased and soon nobody will really remember that life existed on the planet.

He imagines invisible secret planets serving as centers of resistance—a new attempt to create spaces that will maintain the species through a dark age. This "underground" as he describes

it will "preserve the light" and "keep things living." Despite Andre's emphasis on creativity and his suggestion that to reform the world would require a new type of perception—a sense of being united with all things and understanding "everything"—he is hopelessly unimaginative, even paranoid.

To such a vision of the world, one which is profoundly declensionist, Wally gives his "actual response." He is just trying to survive, pay his rent and bills, and read Charlton Heston's biography in his free time. He attends parties from time to time and every once and a while writes a play. Wally enjoys marking off errands from his notebook and asks how anyone could enjoy anything more. He wants the cup of coffee in the morning that is unabused by cockroaches or flies. "I just don't think I feel the need for anything more than all this. Whereas, you know, you seem to be saying that, uh it's inconceivable that anybody could be having a meaningful life today and, you know, everyone is totally destroyed and we all need to live in these outposts. But I mean, you know, I just can't believe—even for you—I mean, don't you find—Isn't it pleasant just to get up in the morning and there's Chiquita, there are the children and *The Times* is delivered, you can read it….Why not lean back and just enjoy these details?"

We find in Andre, an upper-middle class thespian, a vision of the world that is, in the end, in need of reform. The psychic terror of the moment is on full display. Both characters realize something is amiss. But Andre by far is the more pessimistic. Despite his globe-trotting and quest for enlightenment, a quest that has made him deeply estranged from family, friends, and place, he is lost. And surprisingly, by fostering a middle class fear that their world might be a prison, however metaphorical, figures such as Andre have actually allowed, if not fostered, real prisons and security apparatuses justified in political discourse



Figure 3.7 Wally on the subway in *My Dinner with Andre* (1981). One of the only scenes in the film which is not confined to the restaurant dinner table.

to mollify middle-class subjective terror. Though the dinner is meant to be irresolute in that neither side really wins the debate, there is a key to reading the film. Almost the entire running time of the film takes place in the restaurant over dinner, save for brief intervals at the open and close of the film, as Wally travels to and from the dinner. Here we are given a taste of Wally's objective world—he walks the streets, he collects his mail, and he takes a taxi home. We are treated to the gutter aesthetic through both passages—the streets are as trash-strewn as those in low-budget exploitation like *C.H.U.D.* (1984), the subway is as graffiti covered as in *The Warriors* (1979), and the neon-tinted taxi ride Wally takes home is reminiscent of the cascading drive in *Taxi Driver*. They are a direct affront to the impressionistic world that Andre provides of contemporary New York. Instead, it is a calm, quotidian space. Dirty, yes, but inoffensive. And while Andre's fanstastical stories are enjoyable—the beautiful and heady stuff of dinner conversations—they are a poor gauge for the real world.

Andre was however correct in his assessment that media was obsessed with imparting a vision of the world that was dangerous and in decline. In the most exploitative of film

cycles—the urban horror film—the city is a site of extreme psychological and bodily peril. Low-budget slasher films like *The Driller Killer* (1979), *Maniac* (1980), *The New York Ripper* (1982), and *Maniac Cop* (1988) along with supernatural and creature films such as *Wolfen* (1981) and *C.H.U.D.* and to a lesser extent, mainstream films such as *Ghostbusters* (1984), *The Terminator* (1984), and *Robocop* (1987) often transform the peril and nastiness of the street and of street people into singular monstrous figures. In the case of slasher films like *Maniac* decay is embodied in the serial killer Frank Zito who shoots random victims in parked cars reminiscent of the Son of Sam murders that plagued the city in the summer of 1977. In *C.H.U.D.*, the homeless of New York City are literally transformed into mutants living in the city sewers. In William Lustig's *Maniac Cop* many of the same features haunt crime-ridden New York as they had in his earlier film *Vigilante*, such as the unreliable bureaucratic organs of city hall, a justice-less criminal justice system, and crooked police manifest themselves in the figure of a white-gloved preternatural police officer who stalks the city's streets. The imagery of the monster and city grime grew throughout the 1980s. It appeared in the highly racialized anti-drug Public Service Announcements by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America which targeted middle class suburban whites. The PSAs draw from an iconography developed in horror films. In one, a young, black drug dealer speaks directly to the viewer. As he explains how easy it is to hook a victim he slowly transforms into a creature of the night, emerging from behind a van covered in scales and flashing fangs and a hooked tongue. The monster and the city had become so common in the horror genre that the eighth installment in the *Friday the 13th* series was subtitled *Jason Takes Manhattan* (1989). The supernatural killer's romp through the city takes license with the grime tropes—the

docks of New York have literal barrels of slime, Jason kills drug users with their own heroin needles, and he stands his ground in Times Square against the city's punks.



Figure 3.8 Partnership for a Drug-Free America PSA, 1985. Here a young, black man peddling drugs is transformed into a creature that might have appeared in one of the many horror films of the 1980s.

Frank Hennenlotter's films stand out in this filmic landscape as they both celebrate the street life of New York at the same time they reflect on the monstrous city motif. Hennenlotter was born in 1950 and grew up near 42nd Street in New York. He has been a lifelong defender of the world from which he came. His films *Basket Case* (1982), *Brain Damage* (1988), and *Frankenhooker* (1989) each document and celebrate the seedy urban environment. The films lampoon the Reaganite moral panic discourse over drugs and sex at the same time they provide vérité-style snapshots of the real urban sidewalk. *Basket Case* follows the at-one-time conjoined twins Duane Bradley and his deformed brother Belial on a trip to New York where they plan to exact revenge on the doctors who separated them at birth. The outlandish and often repulsive narrative situates itself around a cheap motel off of 42nd Street. Shot on 16mm, the long-takes of Duane as he traverses the sidewalk are surprisingly beautiful and give more of a funhouse feel than danger. Moreover the cheap

hotel which becomes his home base is occupied by a host of down-on-their luck urbanites that are genuinely obliging. This part of New York, though overflowing in lewd images was the public space lauded by Samuel R. Delany. It was also described in at least one tourist book as a curio: "We'll walk along 42nd, just one block between Seventh and Eighth Avenue, and we needn't spend a cent, because it will take us hours to look at all the theatre fronts covered with stills from horror films, and adult-only pedantic sex antic films, but if you should find a Tarzan film you didn't see as a kid or a film in which Anthony Quinn is still a minor sidekick to a desperado, well, in we'll go, and the 90c be damned."[221] Hennenlotter's work sought to both capture the rush of such city areas while not downplaying their grit and grime. He was also particularly aware of the space they held in the symbolic discourse about moral decay. In that respect, *Brain Damage* is a satire for the anti-drug discourse made famous by Nancy Reagan. Here though the exaggerated rhetoric of "just say no" is lampooned in the figure of a crooning, well-spoken brain parasite that encourages an unsuspecting victim to kill in return for hits of his mind-altering saliva. Similarly, *Frankenhooker*, which focuses on a med school dropout's attempt to resurrect his dead girlfriend using the bodies of Manhattan hookers, quite consciously juxtaposes the stuffy suburbs of New Jersey with the intoxicating energy of the city, "super-crack" and all. Hennenlotter's films make the city and its denizens desirable—sites for the tossing away of inhibition.

Despite these alternative visions of the city street, the middle-class image of the city as dangerous had enormous consequences on its social ecologies and lifeblood. "America's most pervasive urban designer is Fear," claimed one commentator, "There is no place to sit

[221] Jean Shepherd, introduction by, *The Night People's Guide to New York* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 87.

on streets or plazas, for fear that bums or hippies might become comfortable. There are no benches in the parks for fear that drunks might sleep on them. There are no vendors, for fear they might compete with established stores. There are no street performers for fear they might become an attractive nuisance. There are no hot dog or fruit stands, for fear of litter."[222] At the same time these tropes were deployed to remake urban America, the pervasiveness of the decay imaginary had, by the mid-1980s, begun to lose some of its salience as a marker for realism. Though verisimilitude had been the primary mode for utilizing the gutter aesthetic, it increasingly detached itself from real city spaces in films such as *Batman* (1989) and *The Crow* (1994). *Batman* is a good example of the increased decorative use of the gutter aesthetic which could quickly construct the parameters of the decaying city. Coming after decades of scenery building in the industry, Gotham is established slipshod in the first ten minutes of the film when a tourist family, unable to find a cab in a crowded street, push through the bustle of street people and rustling garbage before being propositioned by hookers and finally mugged by two bums. It was increasingly possible by the mid-to-late 1980s to poke fun at the markers of decay and yet continue to be



Figure 3.9 Matt Groening, "The Los Angeles Way of Death," 1982, in *The Big Book of Hell* Matt Groening (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 21.

[222] Wolf Von Eckardt, "Scary Spaces: A Master's Rx for Our Fearful Downtowns," *The Washington Post*, March 8, 1980.

bogged down by their realities. Matt Groening's "Life in Hell" comic strips pointed out social crises of the city and the resignation of most to this fact. One example is his panel, "The L.A. Way of Death" in which pollution, gun violence, and indeed ennui plague the urban dweller.

The primary reason that urban decay began to falter in the aim of imparting realism (remembering of course that the intentional message of crisis often betrayed messages of hopefulness and joy) is that the political project that sought to exploit decay imagery was largely successful and a new vision of the city was becoming ascendant. As William Whyte commented, "As one who lives in New York, I would certainly [sic] not minimize the danger of crime." Nonetheless, he found that "What is remarkable is how safe the streets of the business district are," despite the incessant claims by the corporations fleeing the city that "put street crime at the top of their reasons [for leaving]." His insight here into the deeper structural undercurrents playing on and exploiting the vision of the terminally ill city deserve consideration. He pointed out that corporations which left (he studied many of them and wrote articles related to the phenomenon) "almost invariably had displayed an obsessive regard for security measures in their business while they were in the city. Their buildings were fortresses, with TV surveillance cameras all over the place, guards, and check points. If the building had a plaza, there was no place anyone could sit." While of course there was the potential for pick-pockets, con men, and three-card-monte players to grift the unsuspecting, and that certain city spaces such as the subway could be dangerous "at any hour, at 42nd Street and 8th Avenue especially…the fact remains that crimes of violsence [sic] on the street are comparatively rare during the hours when most people are using them."[223] It is then a

[223]William Whyte, "Odd People," William H. Whyte Papers, Box 23, Folder 416, Series 1: Projects and Research: Street People: Research 1971-1985, RAC.

vision of the city as compromised that gave salience to claims of reform that under the guise of cleaning up urban detritus removed those aspects of street life that animated liberatory social experiences.

There was coterminously the development in film of a different version of the city that bore relation to the changing nature of the metropolis in these decades—the neoliberal city. Though not clothed in the same moral panic discourse of the decaying city, its sister representation constitutes the other dominant vision of urban America. This vision was also menacing. Los Angeles might be the best example of this manifestation. A "global city" in the terms of Manuel Castells—a node in the emerging world system of flows in capital, culture, persons, and commodities—Los Angeles was at the center of postwar historical change. At the heart of American entertainment and media, southern California was at the forefront of global image production for much of the twentieth century. In the case of Los Angeles a series of media conversations about gang violence, crack cocaine, and social decay—all deeply racialized—were especially pronounced and punctuated the national mindset with events such as the 1992 LA riots, which solidified the media portrait of the Southland as warzone. Los Angeles as depicted in such films as *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Falling Down* (1993), and *Strange Days* (1995) reflected the discussions of crime and gang warfare as put forth by the administration of Mayor Tom Bradley, but they also present an alternative city in which these forces are increasingly sidelined in the creation of a city space that is sterile, punitive, and gargantuan. In his seminal work on Los Angeles, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, Mike Davis makes tentative connections between the postwar economic and social transformation visible in LA, from suburbanization to globalization to gentrification, and the rising militarization of public space. "Welcome to

post-liberal Los Angeles," Davis states, "where the defense of luxury lifestyles is translated into a proliferation of new repressions in space and movement, undergirded by the ubiquitous 'armed response'." Writing in the early 1990s, Davis lamented the lack of a coherent interpretation of these transformations, but he did suggest one realm of insight. "Hollywood's pop apocalypses and pulp science fiction have been more realistic, and politically perceptive, in representing the programmed hardening of urban surface in the wake of the social polarizations of the Reagan era."[224]

Manuel Castell's Information Age trilogy from the 1990s offers one avenue for explaining the shifting terrain of urban representations. In *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells argues that a new world was taking shape in the late twentieth century as a result of economic restructuring, global social justice movements, and the information and technology revolutions. Taken together these processes were producing a new social structure, a new global, informational economy, and a new culture of real virtuality. Increasingly economies worked in real-time on a global scale, flexibility, specialization, and autonomous individualism defined work, flows of capital, people, and ideas operated without interruptions by nation and geography, and time and space were increasingly shed of their human dimension. It is telling that in describing this new world, and in particular the new economy, Castells preferred the term "informational" as opposed to "post-industrial," which was the language actually used in the 1970s by intellectuals such as Daniel Bell to describe postwar changes. Much of the panicked representation over the urban crisis described in this chapter was distinctly of the language of the post-industrial though the more objective and precise reality was, in hindsight, closer to the informational world as described by Castells.

[224] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), 233. Mike Davis's work on Los Angeles is particularly enlightening to this history. See also Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

The fantasy and language of decline most ascendant in the 1970s and 1980s was of the post-industrial city. In the decay imaginary then forces were still on the human level—agents of change could be seen, solutions to chaos were within the realm of the possible, the interactions, even if onerous, were between people and, if institutions failed it was in their bureaucracy—their inability to represent the world of the ordinary in which they found their failure. The truly horrifying city however was the one that would replace and clean up the gutter—the neoliberal city, whose scope is on the corporate level and the power to change has evaporated into the space of non-state and even non-human actors.

Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) might be one of the first depictions of the neoliberal or informational city. It is depicted as a panorama of glass and concrete, harsh angles and populated by men in suits. The city in this film is cold and big, a place of business and antithetical to the natural world. It is contrasted with the beauty of the rural and scenic parts of America which the main character, an alien living on earth, first explores. Neither is this manifestation of the city confined to the East Coast. The sunbelt city of Albuquerque is, while not Manhattan, shown to be a space that is also alien. The pace of the film and temporal change in the film utilize these spaces. They represent a future in which alien technology is advancing at a quickening and imprecise pace. The audience is disoriented by the pace of change—it is implied that alien technology has been adopted and become widespread. The choice to film brutalist architecture as sites for such innovation is representative of the shift to the fortress-like assault on public space. Indeed, there is no visible public in the urban environments of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. When compared to *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), with its helpful, if somewhat debased street helpers like Rizzo, the urban milieu portrayed by Roeg is perhaps the more alarming of 1970s cities.

The frightening pace of change illustrated in *Koyannisqatsi* (1982) is perhaps the best example of the neoliberal city. Koyannisqatsi, translated from Hopi, means life out of balance. The first in a trilogy of films directed by Godfrey Reggio, it is the cinematic equivalent to Manuel Castells's information society. A non-narrative, experimental film, *Koyaanisqatsi* juxtaposes images of an idyllic American wilderness with the hive-like bustle of the American metropolis. While there are shots of city dwellers and even images of the burned out slum edifices, the urban environment is largely a space of gargantuan buildings circled by unending traffic. The tempo of traffic—commercial and not—replicates the logic of the factory floor and the signal transfers of a microprocessor. The human aspects of the city are in the process of being wiped away—there is no opportunity for communication, misunderstandings, or discomfort. Human activity is taken from the totalizing view of flows and disconnected from systems of meaning as well. The flow becomes self-justifying and anti-human, persons inhabit the world but do not make it. *Koyannisquatsi* prefigures the insight of Donna Haraway's 1984 "A Cyborg Manifesto": "It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between human and machine."[225]

The same vision of the city haunts the low-level bureaucrat and protagonist Sam Lowry in *Brazil* (1985). In his dreams appear giant skyscraper-like columns—looking unsurprisingly like the World Trade Center, a core image of the future financial dominance of New York City after its completion in 1971—which explode from a verdant green landscape. For Gilliam the built environment determines the functional and ideological base of the society. The state in *Brazil* attempts to erase any form of deviancy from a clockwork-

[225] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), pp.149-181: 178.

like exactitude (though nothing ever works correctly). The nightmarish bureaucracy of the state—totally alien and brutalizing—is mimicked in the cityscape. What then of the decaying city? Its ideological corollary would, in opposition to the neoliberal or informational city, imply the fun and explosive nature of social life. Both *Koyannisqatsi* and *Brazil* seem to suggest that the unplanned chaos of immediate experience, the accidental shock and enjoyment of unstructured life are under assault from forces that seek regimentation and efficiency.

For Willaim Whyte, the redevelopment of city spaces begun in the 1970s heralded a very real decline in the character of cities. The megastructures growing up in the cities were the "ultimate expressions of the flight from the street." They were for people with cars, and focused on "self-containment." They presaged a development model that desired "wholly inward-looking environments….The resemblance to fortresses is not accidental. It is the philosophic base." Whyte had been told by one proponent of the model, "They look that way for a reason. The hard fact is we're not going to lure middle-class shoppers back to the city unless we promise them security from the city." In Whyte's estimation, "To save the city, they would repudiate it." He pointed out that people recognized these environments were missing something—they did their best to mask the emptiness by incorporating open-air markets, convention centers, arenas, and concourses. But, they could not hide the fact that, "The street is what is missing." "Some managements are constructing facsimiles of streets to fill the vacuum," lamented Whyte. "The next step, apparently, will be a theme facility to give people the experience of the city without any of the dangers. One proposal I have seen would feature multimedia presentations of aspects of the city: striking visual images from batteries of slide projectors; high-fidelity tapes of street sounds, taxi drivers' colorful argot, and such.

The walkways would be programed with strolling actors done up as street people." Tying the process back to the organic life of the post-industrial city, he believed, "One of them, to come full circle, would be a bag woman."[226]

The preceding chapter does not argue that the urban crisis was fictitious—there absolutely was a historical decline of the mid-century city. Nearly one million people had left New York City by the end of the 1970s. The fiscal crisis of the mid-70s was only staved off by investing teachers' pension funds in city bonds and finally by a recalcitrant Federal government loan. But as is the case with any historical event, how the process was explained and narrated mattered. Beginnings, causes, ends, and solutions were all up for debate and contentious. It is in describing how historical actors constructed these narratives and which narratives of decline loomed that this chapter focused. In film, a different vision of the world, often at odds with mainstream voices, took hold. The images were often contradictory—both a lamentation and a celebration. They didn't need to be internally consistent.

In coming to terms with the slow disappearance of the city that he had resided in and enjoyed for over a decade, Samuel R. Delany pointed out that he had falsely assumed the world "was far more stable than it was."[227] Its passing happened not suddenly but neither was it slow. Nonetheless, Delany didn't desire a reestablishment of the old world in the face of Mayor Giuliani's Disneyfication of Times Square. In fact, "My argument's polemical thrust," he claimed, "is toward conceiving, organizing, and setting into place new establishments—and even entirely new types of institutions—that would offer the services and fulfill the social functions provided by the porn houses that encouraged sex among the audience.

[226] William H. Whyte, "The Dullification of Downtown," draft for *The Atlantic*, November 21, 1988, Box 29, Folder 522, Personal Writings By Whyte, 1980-1989, William H. Whyte Papers, Series 2: Personal, RAC.
[227] Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, xii.

Further, such new institutions should make those services available not only to gay men but to all men and women, gay and straight, over an even wider social range than did the old ones."[228] Delany's New York was not a public space without problems, but something was lost at our peril to the safe and sanitized cities overseen by CCTV cameras, cities which desire the outlawing of catcalling, that concede the stopping and frisking people of color as a precautionary measure, that shipped out the homeless, and that cleared the sidewalks. They in short privilege a stale public space in which consumption becomes the dominant form of interaction. If we can mourn the end of an ethnic stoop culture of the early twentieth century (with its own problems of course), we should acknowledge if not also mourn the loss of a public culture that sustained itself in the midst of America's urban crisis, and in many cases offered new forms of liberation. The primary response to the urban crisis was to clean up the human garbage—the non-peoples and non-citizens. Cities were being remade to halt the assault of a perceived criminal class on those who would hope to revive and celebrate high culture and city life.

The gutter imaginary defined the American metropolis of the 1970s and 1980s and was used to justify its destruction. William Whyte gave voice to the opposition of such a political project and lamented the corporate and private money flowing into urban redevelopment that would remake the city in fortress form. The presence of "undesirables"—a class-based moniker that could catch up the working-poor, street people, and even figures like Delany—was the key rationale for change. Uncomfortable social relations could be policed and new forms of interaction could be geared to consumption. Of course, "The undesirables themselves are not too much of a problem," argued Whyte,

[228] Ibid., xv.

> But the actions taken to combat them are a problem. Out of an almost obsessive fear of the presence of these street people, civic leaders worry that if a place is made attractive it will attract undesirables. So the city becomes defensive. Loitering is forbidden—what a Calvinist sermon is in those words—and so are eating and sleeping. Thus benches are made too short to sleep on, and spikes are put on ledges; many needed spaces are not provided, and plans for them are scuttled. One of the difficulties in the way undesirables are dealt with is failure to differentiate. Most businessmen, curiously, don't see muggers, dope dealers, and other truly dangerous people as the problem. They worry instead about winos, derelicts, men who drink out of half-pint bottles in paper bags—the most vulnerable of the city's marginal people. When some people speak of these men they smile as if they were telling a dirty joke. For retailers, the list of undesirables is more inclusive. It includes bag women, bag men, people who talk out loud in buses, teenagers, older people, street musicians, street vendors. One retailer pointed to two young women in blue jeans taking notes at the corner. 'There are some of them,' the retailer said. The women were two of my researchers.[229]

In the midst of the decay city image was an ascendant new vision of the city growing up alongside it. Surreptitiously a wholly new urban world was created not to reform the problems of the city in decline, not to make a new democratic city space that could preserve the liberatory urbanity while reconciling economic disparity, but a new vision of urbanity that was controlled, a city made safe for middle-class, white consumption. By imagining one dystopia reformers came to embrace a different dystopia altogether. Gild the garbage.

[229] William H. Whyte, "The Dullification of Downtown," draft for *The Atlantic*, November 21, 1988, Box 29, Folder 522, Personal Writings By Whyte, 1980-1989, William H. Whyte Papers, Series 2: Personal, RAC.

Having been told that pleasure threatens civilization, we wonder: what if there is no end to desire?

-Carol S. Vance, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*

The political value of denouncing rape in real life leads to a blanket condemnation of the representation of rape in sexual fantasy—a condemnation that begins to seem a little like dictating the proper content of dreams.

-Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*

Night Spaces and Film Violence

In 1982 in the midst of a moral panic over video violence, Janet Maslin, the film critic for the *New York Times* lamented the trend in horror films toward graphic violence and gore on screen. A spate of films such as *Maniac* (1980), *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *The Prowler* (1981), and *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982) were drawing the ire of many parents, politicians, and feminists. "Go see one," said Maslin, "and you'll have empirical proof that a film like this makes audiences mean. You will leave the theater convinced that the world is an ugly, violent place in which aggression is frequent and routine." Her first truth claim, that such films impact the behavior of viewers, has been repeatedly discredited, but her second point is surprisingly lucid. Many it appears did conflate the narratives represented on celluloid with a dire vision of the real world. This is one of the key arguments made in this chapter, primarily that the explosion of violent sexual imagery that dominated films through much of the late 1970s and early 1980s both reflected and helped instigate a moral panic over social narratives of crime, in particular crimes against women. "Lurid headlines in the tabloids will seem positively realistic," claimed Maslin, "after watching a dozen young vacationers being garroted, the news of, say, a gunman on the loose in a hospital ward will sound comparatively harmless. Violence in the real world

becomes much more acceptable after you've seen infinitely greater violence on the screen."[230]

Much of the moral panic had to do with changes in the production of films, including more complex special effects that allowed for realistic depictions of disembowelments, beheadings, and a bevy of other grotesque and imaginative death sequences. Alongside the misfortune doled out to mindless teenagers, there was also a rise in gratuitous nudity paired with sexual violence in genre pictures. On-screen rape scenes were depicted in detail in films such as *The Last House on the Left* (1972)*, I Spit on Your Grave* (1978)*, Ms. 45* (1981)*, The Evil Dead* (1981)*, The Entity* (1982), and *Re-Animator* (1985). The explosion of cable television and home video in the 1980s also meant that increasingly people had access to violent and pornographic content in the privacy of their own homes.[231] This in particular led to fears that young people might have too easy access to such media. In the United Kingdom, government regulation of "Video Nasties" was spurred by wildly flawed and discredited reports such as "Video Violence and Children" (1983) which suggested that 37% of children under the age of 7 had seen films such as the exploitation picture *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) or the slasher *The Burning* (1981).[232] In the US, where laws regulating obscenity had been steadily chipped away at for several decades, the profusion of mediated violence became tied up in issues of free speech, women's rights, and children's safety.

Public debate in the United States was dominated by feminist intellectuals on the left and moral majority voices on the right. One of the key issues at stake was the fact that

[230] Janet Maslin, "Film View: Bloodbaths Debase Movies and Audiences," *New York Times*, November 21, 1982.
[231] Tony Schwartz, "The TV Pornography Boom," *The New York Times*, September 13, 1981.
[232] Ian Taylor, "Violence and Video: For a Social Democratic Perspective," *Contemporary Crises* 11, Issue 2, January 1, 1987: 107-127.

pornography, horror and exploitation films were debasing to women.[233] Filmmakers like Brian De Palma were specifically linked with real world crimes committed against women because their films seemed to relish in the mutilation of the female body and female victimization. As feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon articulated the relationship between violence against women and their visual commodification and outright abuse in pornographic films, horror films were likewise gradually made a terrain in the struggle for female equality. It is not surprising that the rejection of such films were linked with anti-pornography feminism, both by feminists themselves and in the cultural marketplace. As Maslin argued of the genre, "this kind of horror film, in addition to inuring its audience to genuine violence, has a debasing effect as well. In this respect it harkens back to hard-core sexual pornography, the tactics of which it carries to the most extreme degree. Years ago, when sexual explicitness on screen seemed to have advanced as far as it possibly could go, it was often remarked that only by actually penetrating the body could the camera go farther. That, in a sense, is what the camera does now."[234]

The linking, between pornography, mediated violence, and real-life violence against women was not confined to intellectual or critical debate. The Take Back the Night campaigns that were sweeping across the country throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s were a parallel development and reveal the significance of the intellectual cross-pollination taking place, in particular the engagement of some feminist criticism in a difficult-to-shake declensionist narrative, a dire vision of a dangerous society crafted largely by voices on the right. While Take Back the Night offered a much needed critique of systemic violence, in

[233] Barbara Brotman, "From Porn to 'Brutal Chic': Women Declare War on Violent Images," *Chicago Tribune*, December 16, 1979.
[234] Janet Maslin, "Film View: Bloodbaths Debase Movies and Audiences," *New York Times*, November 21, 1982.

particular the intimate violence embedded in abusive familial relationships, it occasionally borrowed from the discourses used to justify increased policing as a result of the perceived chaos on American streets. In many ways the phenomenon implicated some liberal and radical feminists alike in the rise of increased policing and a focus on safety as key elements in American public life. This type of connection is not meant to blame those feminists for seeking equality and in particular freedom to embody public space without fear. Rather, it is to look at the ways in which that struggle could be couched, as it were in a lexicon and iconography that pulled heavily from popular culture. In other words, this is a reassessment of how mediated violence intersected with a broader discussion of danger and gendered violence in the 1980s.

First this chapter will explore the claims made by some feminists about pornography and sexual violence before looking at several of the films that were at the center of the debate. This chapter looks in particular at four films lambasted as pictures which supposedly delighted in the depiction of violent sexual imagery. The critically scrutinized *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977)*, The Last Horror Film* (1982), *Body Double* (1984), and *Crimes of Passion* (1984) were accused of stylizing violence against women and open misogyny. However, they should be read as pieces in critical dialogue with the cultural debates over feminism, anti-pornography, violence, and safety. In fact, these films are deep, if sometimes problematic meditations on the issues of sexuality and violence, pornography and obscenity, representation and reality. Unlike their detractors they employ the visuality of "decline," in particular the gutter aesthetics defined in the previous chapter, not for exploitation purposes but in order to critique the dominant interpretations being put forth by liberals and conservatives about the nature of the contemporary American crisis. What critical responses

to these movies reveal is the degree to which liberals had accepted the claims of decline. What this chapter finds is that directors such as Brian De Palma and Ken Russell use the imagery of decline to make trenchant critiques of social panics over sexual violence and pornography while also leaving room for solidly feminist readings of their work. Several of the intellectuals engaged here, while initiating a powerful and meaningful critique about violence against women sometimes adopted a view similar to the moral majority vis a vis the imaginary of the night, going so far as to use the symbolic night as a marker of national decline. Richard Brooks and the other filmmakers are not so declensionist—they embrace the power of the night while also critiquing problematic social narratives of reality, police, and gendered violence.

There were deep changes taking place within the feminist movements that preceded Take Back the Night. The mid-to-late-1970s saw the decline, in historian Alice Echols's words, of the radical feminist critique and its replacement by cultural feminism. Radical feminists had focused on gender as the core facet of women's oppression and had sought the transformation of society from the premise that the personal is political.[235] Cultural feminists were more concerned with the devaluation of women by society and, unlike radical feminists, were more likely to accept the premise that women and men were fundamentally different, not merely the outcome of social conditioning. For cultural feminists it was important to celebrate difference whereas radical feminists had sought to tear down what they felt were constructed forms of difference. The profusion of "sisterhood" would be a key conceptual term in the rise of cultural feminism. Echols contends that as a result of this breach, liberal

[235] Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: university of Minnesota Press, 1989).

feminists, such as those in the National Organization of Women, came to be the primary voice of women's interests in politics. Radical and leftist feminists descended into further infighting as the "third wave" emerged in the 1980s which largely washed over the static definitions of what constituted a feminist, though at the same time incorporated many of the critiques of earlier generations, from workplace justice and access to healthcare to the division of labor at home and systemic poverty. Echols is quite critical of cultural feminism. She argues the focus on individual goals and female consciousness had supplanted a structural critique and a vision of systemic change. Cultural feminism she felt, over emphasized personal behavior as a key terrain in the struggle, which emboldened anti-porn and lesbian separatist offshoots to police the sexual boundaries of other women. They made issues such as desire, attraction, and pleasure contentious, and perhaps even proffered a declensionist vision of heterosexual sexual relations. "In the cultural feminist analysis," argues Echols, "sexual danger so defines women's lives that it precludes a consideration of sexual pleasure."[236]

In the midst of this intellectual schism, one of the defining feminist issues was pornography. The "new tolerance" for pornography was an issue that would repeatedly surface in the culture wars which consumed the 1980s.[237] Pornography was a lightning rod in the battle over tradition, morality, religion, and the nature of American society. The mainstreaming of smut and loosening of anti-obscenity laws began with the Supreme Court ruling *Stanley v. Georgia* (1969), which expanded the right to privacy to include obscene materials viewed in one's home. The President's Commission on Obscenity and

[236] Alice Echols, "The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968-83," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 58.
[237] Robert G. Kaiser, "As with the Country, Differing Sympathies for the 'New Tolerance,'" *The Washington Post*, November 1, 1980.

Pornography, set up by Congress and Lyndon Johnson in 1967, was making headlines the same year. The Commission's final report found that "interest in sex is normal, healthy, [and] good."[238] Moreover, the Commission encouraged a repeal of federal, state, and local laws which prohibited the sale of pornography to adults. The report had its detractors, including President Nixon who vowed to continue "to control and eliminate smut from our national life."[239]

Perhaps surprisingly, pornography became a divisive issue among feminist groups as it became more accessible over the coming decade. While some perceived sexually explicit images to offer greater freedom to women to be sexually expressive, others felt that pornography dehumanized and debased women. The moral majority and some radical feminists found common ground in their objection to pornography. Radical feminists argued that sexualized images found in *Playboy* and *Hustler* taught women that their value lay in sexual appeal for men. Moreover, many took aim at the producers, pointing out that women working in pornography rarely earned much from the profits while the industry itself was riven with violence. Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin were at the forefront of this critique. As Dworkin wrote in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, "In the male system, women are sex; sex is the whore. The whore is *porne*, the lowest whore, the whore who belongs to *all* male citizens: the slut, the cunt. Buying her is buying pornography. Having her is having pornography. Seeing her is seeing pornography. Seeing her sex, especially her genitals, is seeing pornography. Seeing her in sex is seeing the whore in sex. Using her is using pornography. Wanting her means wanting pornography. Being her means being

[238] United States, Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, *The Report*, [Washington: For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. Govt. Print. Off.], 1970, 47.
[239] Warren Weaver, "Nixon Repudiates Obscenity Report as Morally Void," *New York Times*, October 25, 1970.

pornography."[240] The core problem with pornography as articulated by Brownmiller and Dworkin was its inherently anti-feminist nature, less about sex than about power and control, a medium which privileged male desire while diminishing women's agency. By the early 1980s, Dworkin and fellow feminist Catharine MacKinnon had begun to sponsor local ordinances that would classify pornography as a form of sexual discrimination against women (subsequently deemed unconstitutional).[241] Other feminists opened up avenues for critiquing existing pornography but not pornography in theory. The solution was to create "feminist porn," produced by women for women and would privilege the female gaze. This offshoot allowed liberal anti-censorship feminists and sex-positive feminists to object to violent pornography while still upholding the first amendment and without negating avenues toward sexual pleasure. The theorist Carole Vance perhaps put it best at the time: "Social movements, feminism included, move toward a vision; they cannot operate solely on fear. It is not enough to move women away from danger and oppression; it is necessary to move toward something: toward pleasure, agency, self-definition. Feminism must increase women's pleasure and joy, not just decrease our misery."[242]

A core facet of the anti-pornography critique was to draw connections between real-world issues of violence, rape, and child abuse and the profusion of pornography. Andrea Dworkin herself wrote that, "The refusal, especially among liberals, to believe that pornography has any real relationship to sexual violence is astonishing."[243] The rise of "hardcore" pornography, primarily as a marketing strategy to distinguish itself from more available forms such as *Penthouse*, brought on a slew of objections. Perhaps the most famous

[240] Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: A Perigee Book, 1979), 202.
[241] Peter Mancusi, "Free to Express—Or Suppress?," *Boston Globe*, June 2, 1985.
[242] Carole S. Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 24.
[243] Andrea Dworkin, "Pornography's Part in Sexual Violence," *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1981.

and causal example was *Hustler's* June 1978 "All Meat Issue," the cover of which featured a woman's torso being ground into hamburger. In response, Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) and Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media, both activist groups formed in the late 1970s, helped to proffer an increasingly widespread critique against the eroticization of violence.

It was from within these groups that Take Back the Night would emerge. A demonstration tactic spawned in the mid-1970s as an outgrowth of the anti-pornography critique developed by radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, Take Back the Night was and remains one of the most iconic protest actions of the larger feminist movement. It is also sorely lacking in terms of its historicization. Its relationship to the to the politics outside of feminist circles has not been well developed. In particular, Take Back the Night as an expression of the particular social fears the late 1970s and early 1980s and its relationship to the broader culture in which it was formulated, including the increased attention to crime as a result of the war on drugs and war on crime, remains underdeveloped. Take Back the Night's discourse and the larger intellectual furor surrounding its critique could only have been articulated in the context of a larger American declensionist milieu.

The 1978 march in San Francisco organized by Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media to coincide with a conference on "Feminist Perspecitives on Pornography" was the first to gain widespread attention. Over 5,000 women marched through the city's sex industry district. From there however, the purpose of Take Back the Night was articulated in various ways. For example, in Fall 1982, the feminist coalition Freedom from Violence Against Women organized a Take Back the Night march in Annapolis, Maryland. It was followed by a similar march in Baltimore. Both were modeled

on marches being held in cities and college campuses across the country and meant to draw attention to the violence women faced in public as well as the relationships between street muggings, sexual violence, pornography, and misogyny. Elizabeth Baer, one of the main organizers of the Baltimore march, developed the plan to make the streets safer after taking a feminism course at Towson State. "I'm an average woman who's frightened of the streets." One goal of the march, she argued, was to demonstrate "that women can take care of ourselves, that we don't have to depend on the police or the good will of our male friends for our safety." As this quote makes clear the anti-victim was one powerful response to violence, but there were also points when the discourse required a reliance on victimization to make inroads. One method pioneered was the Baltimore Safe House Project, a project in which neighborhood houses were marked by a decal so as to be visible in the case of emergencies. In explaining the motive, April Seitz, a 26-year-old social worker, used clear declensionist reasoning: "A lot of times if you're in danger on the street, the most immediate solution is to go inside a friendly home. But who knows their neighbors anymore? Who knows what you'll run into if you just go up to a strange house?" Seitz was clear that the city streets were a gendered space: "You have your key out, so you can get into your car as quickly as possible….If you have a purse, you clutch it tightly. You're always looking around to see who's there. If you see a man there, you wonder if this is the one who will attack you. It takes so much energy that could be spent on better things…It makes me so angry that just because I'm a woman I have to constantly be on guard. It's as if my freedom were taken away at night."[244]

[244] Geoffrey Himes, "Women to 'Take Back the Night,'" *The Baltimore Sun*, October 1, 1982.

In a separate rally in New York, Take Back the Night was articulated as a movement "intended to assert women's right to walk about at night without fearing rape."[245] The rise of sexual violence against women and the subsequent pushback by activists animated a growing critique against intimate violence in relationships as well. With some statistics suggesting a woman was battered in her own home every 18 seconds, the connections between violence and interpersonal relationships was ever more visible. Women in Boston and elsewhere organized annual Take Back the Night rallies specifically to call attention to the rising number of rapes, many by intimate partners, in Massachusetts. "Most women have problems just walking around at night," said one marcher, "and we're not going to put up with it anymore."[246]

Take Back the Night was often unmoored from the specificities of a particular college campus or unsafe city block. It was possible to expand the rationale of Take Back the Night to encompass broader issues not solely related to gendered violence, but to a host of insecurities broadly understood as social decline. In the broadest sense there was a conscious relationship between social fears of crime stoked by punitive-minded conservatives and Take Back the Night. For example, an anonymous opinion piece in the *New York Times* celebrated the opening of a "flower stall" on the Avenue of the Americas at Bryant Park as a counter to the destitution of New York City's parks and plaza's which the author described as "grim, graceless, inhospitable—wastelands." The writer suggested, "take back the night" is a "slogan worth stealing from a feminist rally in San Francisco several years ago. During

[245] Ronald Smothers, "Stop-Rape March Aims to 'Take Back the Night'", *New York Times,* August 2, 1980.
[246] Kathryn Tolbert and Richard Higgins, "Thousands of women march in Hub to 'take back the night,'" *Boston Globe*, August 30, 1981; Hank Klibanoff, "Women Rally Against Crime," *Boston Globe*, August 19, 1979; John E. Yang, "2500 women march to protest violence," *Boston Globe*, August 10, 1980; Ronald Smothers, "Stop-Rape March Aims to 'Take Back the Night,'" *New York Times*, August 2, 1980; David Johnston, "5,000 March Through Hollywood to Protest Nightime Attacks on Women," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1980.

discussions of the kinds of crimes that keep people indoors, the participants were urged to 'take back the night.' Something similar might be urged upon New Yorkers—'take back the city.'"[247] It was this understanding that was key. Taking back the night could be about more than violence against women, it encompassed a demand for a new vision of safety and authority. The language and rationale behind increased policing and Take Back the Night was eerily similar. For example, in the early 1980s amid a rash of studies on fear of crime, Newark, NJ paired with the National Institute of Justice of the Department of Justice in a grant-funded project to curtail basic disorderly street behavior in an attempt to reduce crime and perceptions of a neighborhood as unsafe. Describing the effort, the language escaped a gender focus but maintained the rationale of Take Back the Night: "In this city, as in many other communities across the state, residents scurry home with approaching nightfall, anxiously peering over their shoulders as they walk, crossing the street if a stranger approaches and barring the door once they are safely inside."[248]

The relationship between the movement of Take Back the Night and the broader cultural soup in which it stewed are most important here. One of the earliest critiques of the movement was Katie Roiphe's blistering 1993 *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* which recounted her experiences at Harvard and Princeton in the mid-1980s. Roiphe depicted the Take Back the Night marches as a ritualistic "substitute for religion." She described the feminism on her campus in the 1980s as, in effect, a revival of the image of an innocent (victim) with no agency of her own, an image of womanhood that would mesh

[247] "Counterattack in Bryant Park," *New York Times*, November 13, 1981.
[248] "Fear of Crime Hobbles Cities and Casts Shadow on Suburbs: 'Newark is Selected for Experiment,'" *New York Times*, January 16, 1983.

with her grandmother's generation but which a generation of feminists had fought to overcome.[249]

She pointed out the many contradictory messages about sex that pervaded contemporary American culture in the 1980s, an era in which popular culture and advertising seethed with ever more scantily-clad and sexually-coded imagery and at the same time was dominated by Reaganite family values discourse. She found this schizophrenic tendency to pervade the women's movement as well, which increasingly lost a message of liberation and libido in favor of "trauma and disease."[250] While Roiphe largely ignored the potential that came with the fracturing of the "third wave" of feminism and it's consequent multiplicity of voices, her points on the cultural image of danger might be her most salient. "Some feminists argue that Take Back the Night thrusts the issue of safety, more blue lights, and more full-time rape counselors into the public eye," she argued. "But the march also has its less practical dimensions: its ritualistic, symbolic meaning that eclipses the nuts and bolts of specific demands. With its candles, its silence, its promise of transformations, this movement offers a substitute for religion."[251] It might be unfair to call it a substitute for religion, but Take Back the Night did have symbolic meanings that were at once admirable if also open to problematization.

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[249] Roiphe was not the first to make these connections. Alice Echols had, many years earlier, made connections between the New Right and the seemingly regressive opinions about sexual freedom in some strains of feminism. She felt it was, in effect, "Manipulating women's sense of themselves as the culture's victims as well as its moral guardians." Echols also lamented, "The [anti-pornography] movement's mono-maniacal concern with sexual danger," which laid the groundwork for a victim-centered consciousness without an adequate vision to move beyond it. See Alice Echols, "The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968-83," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 63-65.

[250] Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 12.

[251] Ibid., 38.

A core facet of the struggle dealt with the night as a cultural space rather than a physical one. By participating in Take Back the Night, some women were demanding access to a world in which men rarely had to acknowledge their privilege. These issues might best be explored through the lens borrowed from historian Bryan D. Palmer's whose work has focused on the night, "both lived as an experience and socially constructed as a representation."[252] Claiming the night as both a space of transgression and marginality, in opposition (as in Carnival) to the logic of the day, "The night has always been the time for daylight's dispossessed—the deviant, the dissident, the different—and there is something of a bond among those who have chosen or been forced to adapt to the pleasures and dangers of the dark."[253] The "comfort and escape" to which the night offered some of course had an obverse: "So too could it be darkness within darkness, a discomforting anarchy of alienation and distress that shattered the brittle securities of daylight in fearful and terrifying dangers…"[254] Palmer's insight on the duality of the night and the tensions that it holds in the cultural marketplace is visible in the way feminist organizers conceptualized Take Back the Night. To expand the pleasurable aspects of night—the dalliances, drugs, dancing—while mitigating the more dangerous elements was a worthy objective. But defining danger loosely could also have unequal and adverse effects.

A key problem was that gendered violence has been overwhelmingly situated in intimate and familial settings. Most women know their abusers and attackers.[255] Nonetheless,

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[252] Bryan D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 6.
[253] Ibid., 17.
[254] Ibid., 18.
[255] There are a host of problems related to sexual assault statistics, the most serious being massive under-reporting in all instances. Acquaintance rape (in which the assailant is known to the victim) might be underreported in relation to stranger rape out of fear of social consequences. Nonetheless, the National Institute of Justice found in 2008 that between 85-90 percent of sexual assault victims on campuses know their attackers. National Institute of Justice, *Most Victims Know Their Attacker*, https://www.nij.gov/topics/crime/rape-sexual-

the dominant image of gendered violence in film is that committed by strangers on the street. Random, anonymous danger typified the cultural image of the rapist. And policing danger from this premise creates losers. Kristen Day has looked at how young men, in particular young men of color, have been burdened psychologically, socially, and physically by being "the object of others' fears."[256] She points out that men's perceptions of public space and their subjective ability to inhabit such space is constantly questioned and ultimately policed, including by harmful self-perceptions.

The social constructedness of perceptions of crime has at least some linking to the dominant images and narratives fostered around gendered violence. For the 1980s, Hollywood films, and horror films in particular, were key artefacts. The profusion of celluloid images of random crime, of strangers attacking their victims in dark alleys, and of brutal murders is also intimately related to Take Back the Night and declensionist thought. This is not to suggest that video violence caused a moral panic, but that film was a terrain for representing the anxieties of the era. It is not by chance that horror was the dominant genre of the 1980s. It is also not surprising that the genre was implicated in some feminist critiques of the causes of violence. Film was a core facet in how women in public space and the night were imagined as well as how narratives of violence against women were presented.

The relationship between violence against women and mediated violence was intensely scrutinized throughout the 1980s. The feminist writer and theorist Robin Morgan famously stated, "Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice." This causal relationship went far beyond just pornography. Research on the phenomenon of mediated violence often

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violence/campus/Pages/know-attacker.aspx; The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network reports that 7 out of 10 rapes are committed by someone known to the victim. RAINN, *Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics*, https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence.

[256] Kristen Day, "Being Feared: Masculinity and Race in Public Space," in Murray Lee and Stephen Farrall, *Fear of Crime: Critical Voices in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 82-107: 82.

used horror and slasher films like *The Toolbox Murders* (1978) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) to make their points about desensitizing effects of violent media on subject's tolerance for rape and violence against women.[257] One in depth study concluded, "It is possible that the whole genre of movies called slasher films, which graphically depict mutilation of women, may be desensitizing viewers….We risk the possibility that many members of our society, particularly young viewers, will evolve into less sensitive and responsive individuals as a result, at least partly, of repeated exposure to violent media, particularly sexually violent media."[258] Of course some, such as the always prudent Carole Vance sought to temper the debate: "We understand more readily that visual representations—movies, paintings, even photographs—are not literal or realistic; they betray a style, an emphasis, a perspective, raising questions for the viewer about the relationship between what is depicted and what is."[259] It is surprising that there has yet to be a study that explores the cultural linkages between horror films of the 1980s, the anti-pornography and feminist intellectual works that specifically linked violence against women to the profusion of mediated violence in this era, and the broader articulation of decline being made by liberal and conservative commentators. In particular, there has been a lack of studies that look to the critiques embedded in the films themselves and what they hoped to impart on the discourse.

Perhaps the most thoroughgoing rejection of anti-pornography feminism came from Linda Williams, whose *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible,'* contended that the too easy conflation between actual crimes against women and their

[257] Judith Michaelson, "Sexual Violence and the Media," *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1984.
[258] Edward Donnerstein, Daniel Linz, and Steven Penrod, *The Question of Pornography: Research Findings and Policy Implications* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 135-36.
[259] Carole S. Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 11.

representation in pornographic fantasy had the unintended consequence of reifying the "archetypal 'suffering woman' in the role of the absolute victim of history."[260] She goes on to state, "As long as we emphasize woman's role as the absolute victim of male sadism, we only perpetuate the supposedly essential nature of women's powerlessness."[261] This particular framework can be applied to many of the fictional female figures covered throughout this chapter. Williams's primary critique of antipornography feminsts was that in pointing out that heterosexual pleasures are imagined as male-centric, they nonetheless fashion a "kind of 'politically correct,' ideal sexuality."[262] Moreover, while sympathetic to the cause of reducing violence against women, Williams feared the comingling of feminist language and conservative politics that similarly sought to connect the dots between image and reality. The Attorney General's Commission on Pornography in 1986, led by Edwin Meese, linked hardcore pornography with escalating violence against women, and used almost verbatim language of feminists such as Robin Morgan in the pursuit of supposed traditional moral standards. Williams contended that the desire for a more natural or universal sexuality was destined to fail. "The fact that pornography is not a love story," Williams points out, "is hardly surprising. Nor would a



Figure 4.1 The theatrical release poster for *Ms. 45* (1981) emphasizes both sexual titillation and sexual violence. Such films were the most likely to draw ire of anti-pornography feminist critics for the blending of eroticism and violence in a rape-revenge narrative.

[260] Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 21.
[261] Ibid., 22.
[262] Ibid., 23.

'love story' necessarily preclude relations of power."[263] The goal then had to be to move beyond the narratives of sexual victim and to a politics of pleasure.

This intellectual project was picked up by the feminist theorist Carole S. Vance who found, "It is all too easy to cast sexual experience as either wholly pleasurable or dangerous; our culture encourages us to do so."[264] This tendency, which emphasized an opposition between safety and pleasure, effectively translated to a "highly controlled sexual expression," for women. In effect, the sexual double standard is maintained, she argues, through the discourse of female victimization. As a primary articulator of the phenomenon of the sex panic, Vance argues that "Feminism has succeeded in making public previously unmentionable activities like rape and incest. But the anti-pornography movement often interprets this as an indicator of rising violence against women and a sign of backlash against feminism."[265] Like Williams, Vance believes that there must be a core element of pleasure, even fantasy in the politics of sex.

One of the core problems however is in distinguishing the lines between power, pleasure, and violence. In *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, Sarah Projansky undertakes the difficult task of unpacking the rape narratives pervasive in film, arguing that "Representations of rape form a complex of cultural discourses central to the very structure of stories people tell about themselves and others."[266] She argues that in the context of postfeminist understandings of gender-only feminism (i.e. formal equality with men defined by largely white, middle-class, heterosexual feminism) on the rise since the

[263] Ibid., 22.
[264] Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 5.
[265] Ibid., 6.
[266] Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 3.

early 1980s, that representations of rape even when attempting a pro-feminist stance often become intensely voyeuristic. Indeed, the inclusion of rape is often included so as to portray the feminist laurels of a film.[267] This then is a core paradox for feminists and representations of sexual violence: there is a need to depict it at the same time the goal is to see an end to such violence. But where earnest depictions end and exploitation begins is a tough line to discern and many of the films discussed here lay somewhere in that boundary.

It is not surprising that the rise to prominence of rape-revenge films and exploitation pictures came at the same moment that feminist social movements were unfolding. Pictures such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978)*, Ms. 45* (1981)*,* and *Savage Streets* (1984) all focused on women pursuing their abusers and rapists, or even going so far as to kill any man who crosses her path in the case of Thana, the mute victim in *Ms. 45*. While they upended some of the tropes of weak and defenseless women, these films also exploited their subject matter and made use of immoderate nudity and violence in order to find their audience on the home video market. As Alendandra Heller-Nicholas argues in her critical study of the rape-revenge genre, "there is no singular, unified treatment of rape across the rape-revenge category. Rather, these diverse, broad and often contradictory films offer a multitude of representations and reactions to—sexual violence."[268] Like Projansky, she finds the pervasiveness of narratives of sexual violence and vengeance across the globe to be revelatory. She rejects critics who find the subject matter unrepresentable (the trauma of rape) or too voyeuristic and argues that while there are notable exceptions, given the relatively loose genre of rape-revenge, most do not attempt to profit from the desire to watch sexual violence (spectacular and sensational imagery). The tendency to reject the genre is owed to "a broader cultural

[267] Ibid., 21.
[268] Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2011), 8.

confusion about rape more generally….at their most powerful, rape-revenge films can expose and collapse our simplistic assumptions about the ethics of rape and its representation onscreen, and remind us that what we are seeing is only a brief glance through a small, controlled window into the true horror of rape and sexual violence."[269]

In fact, despite the barrage of criticism directed against them, many generic horror films were some of the most willing to confront the debate over the meaning of their imagery, narratives of sexual danger, and the nature of mediated violence. Films such as *The Last Horror Film*, *Body Double,* and *Crimes of Passion* reveal a deep understanding of the social and cultural stakes involved in their production and reception. And even those less self-conscious films such as *Savage Streets* or much of the slasher fare of the decade reveal a subjective response rooted in the victims and the female gender. This point was argued brilliantly by Carol Clover in the midst of the moral panic over the meaning of such films. Detractors claimed that horror pictures allowed for voyeuristic murder and violence against women. In fact, contrary to this assumption, the audience tended to identify with the victim, in the case of slashers the "final girl."[270] Clover found that the final girls that emerged in horror in the late 1970s were pseudo-males in name, behavior, and demeanor, allowing male viewers to sympathize and identify with them at the same time they enjoyed viewing their torment.[271] Clover went so far as to claim they served as "the premier repository of one-sex reasoning in our time."[272] By this she meant that the subjectivity of the final girl was encompassing enough to invite men in the audience to identify with her as victim and hero.

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[269] Ibid., 4.
[270] Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 8.
[271] Ibid., 23.
[272] Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15.

Clover is generally correct, but many films also had more to say about their contemporary discourse than simply offering subjective empathy. In their on-the-nose critiques of the specific debates over violence, pornography, and safety these films point to the absurdity of the backlash, the complicity of liberals in Reagan-era crime and punishment discourse, and a skepticism toward the notion of social decline, often by pointing to the liberatory and exhilarating life of the "street" as a site of transgression.

One of the earliest non-horror films to do this was *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, based on a 1975 novel by Judith Rossner. It was, in the words of director Richard Brooks, "the story of a woman in her 20s living in the '70's."[273] It follows a young teacher, Theresa Dunn (played by Diane Keaton), and her troubling journey into adulthood. Dunn lives in multiple shadows—of her seemingly successful socialite sister, her overbearing parents, and the childhood trauma of scoliosis, which is still visible through a surgical scar on her back. The film follows Dunn's attempt to break out and live on her own. It proves to be a difficult process, with her hapless lifestyle manifested most clearly in the cockroach-infested apartment she keeps and where she hosts furtive dalliances with male acquaintances. Dunn teaches at a school for the deaf by day and haunts seedy bars and dance clubs by night. Over the course of a year, her relationships and casual drug use become increasingly perilous. Her double life slowly degrades, so that when she does attempt to escape and set herself on a brighter course, it is too late. She is unfortunately murdered by a pick-up and would-be lover.

Director Richard Brooks conducted a great deal of research in preparation for the film, visiting women's seminars and dorms at UCLA to conduct interviews with more than 600 women. He held himself accountable to neither Rossner's book or the actual case upon which is was based in which a young teacher was murdered by a pickup she met in a singles

[273] Mary Murphy, "Brooks' Research on 'Mr. Goodbar,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1976.

bar. He found the book was only a jumping-off point for a deeper set of issues: "They [the women he interviewed] all read into it something very personal, having little to do with the book and much more to do with feelings the book has triggered."[274] Neither did he agree with the media attention and narrative developed around the actual case of Roseanne Quinn, the victim who served as a model for Theresa Dunn. Quinn's murder was covered in the *New York Times*, where they quoted a police captain: "The city is dangerous…You don't know what it offers exactly. If you live on the West Side, like she did, and you're friendly, affable, mix with all kinds of people and have a lot of night life, go to small bars…well, a lot's open to you. A lot."[275] Brooks openly rejected this narrative and the sentiment, "that you can't go into a singles bar without winding up murdered in your own bed."[276] Instead, he fashioned a film that he believed spoke to women's experiences and dealt impressionistically with the issues of violence and sexuality that peppered the lives of women in the 1970s. Brooks's many digressions from the book, in particular his changing of Dunn to a more endearing, loveable character was one of the key reasons that Judith Rossner disliked the film, saying of the finished product, "I feel like the mother who delivered her 13-year-old daughter to the door of Roman Polanski and didn't know what was going to happen."[277] Rossner, despite appreciating Keaton's performance as Dunn, was generally pessimistic about the changes made to the narrative, in particular to the characterization of Dunn. But there is also the problem that Brooks was very consciously politicizing the subject matter. Rossner has said that while she was "surely a feminist," there was "No political message in my novels."[278]

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[274] Mary Murphy, "Brooks' Research on 'Mr. Goodbar,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1976.
[275] Lacey Fosburgh, "A Man Seen with Teacher on Slaying Night is Sought," *New York Times*, January 6, 1973.
[276] Richard Brooks, quoted in Mary Murphy, "Brooks' Research on 'Mr. Goodbar,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1976.
[277] Art Harris, "Rossner: Looking for Her 'Goodbar' in the Film," *The Washington Post*, October 21, 1977.
[278] Judith Rossner quoted in Randi Henderson, "Writing of Women, She Reaches Men: Fantasy, Tragedy broaden 'Goodbar' Author's Appeal," *The Sun*, November 11, 1980.

Despite the supposed lack of politics, the concept of a double life is one of the key feminist motifs carried into Brooks's version of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. The frustrations of Dunn's daily life, marked by insecurity and unhappiness firmly situated in her position as a young woman, manifest in a libidinous nightlife. The double life is a result of the alienation of the multiple and fractured identities that she is required to keep; as daughter, lover, worker, and even self-actualized individual she is constantly demeaned and struggles with her own vulnerabilities. The film's moral message seems to indict more the social and familial limitations that lead to Dunn's disastrous end more than the individual choices she makes in arriving at the end of her life.

It is not surprising that the fracturing of her person begins, at least visually in the film, following Dunn's breakup with an older, married professor. Dunn is at a loss when Martin - breaks off their toxic affair. Following the unsatisfying breakup, the camera follows Dunn as she walks into the street. She is then attacked, run over by Martin in a car. She is frantically rushed to the hospital. But then, the audience realizes that this is Dunn's fantasy. The breakup was real, but the violent attack was imagined, at least partly. This vision is a manifestation of the violence embedded in their relationship. In fact, Martin is married and he constantly admonishes Dunn, for example when she tried to call his home on New Years Eve. Theirs is an emotionally abusive relationship. A heady professor, Martin is revealed as a womanizer, cynic, and quick to anger. "Why is it after we make love that we never talk or touch or anything," Dunn asks at one point. Martin replies that he can't stand a woman's company, "right after I fuck them."

The car accident is Dunn's first fantasy (of many)—and like those that follow it is the result of trauma. Dunn's relationship with Tony (played by Richard Gere) is the core plot

mechanism that feeds her instability and downward spiral. Tony is a hustler and dealer, but with puckish personality and charming persona. He first introduces Dunn to cocaine and Quaaludes, and becomes her dealer and lover over the course of the film. Tony is also violent, and threatens her when she begins to owe him money. At one point he attacks her at school and calls her repeatedly, telling her "you've done it bitch." This instigates an extended fantasy in which the police break into her house, find her drugs, and arrest her. She imagines the news reports of a teacher who fed her drug habit with prostitution. It is revealed, once again, to be a fantasy, but it does lead her to flush her drugs.

For the audience, the fantasy passages are bewildering. They are compounded by the fact that time in the film is treated hazily. The passage of time is unclear and jumpy, with New Year's serving to contextualize that a year has passed. Brooks does this to impart the sense of a decent into habitual drug use. Similarly, the scenes in which Dunn elapses into her own mind reveal her trauma and a degree of paranoia brought on by drugs. The fantasy sequences spread through the film are also used, I believe, to increase the intensity of the film's ending. The film concludes when Dunn brings home a questionable man from the bar. Recently out of prison, Gary has been turning tricks as a prostitute for older men. When he can't get an erection, his insecurity escalates into fury. With a strobe light going off in the background he strangles Dunn, rapes her, and finally stabs her to death. Having been accustomed to the fantasy segments, the audience might be fooled into believing, or hoping, that the final sequence is a dream—part of Dunn's penchant for imagining her own punishment. In fact, lit by a flashing strobe light in the dark of her apartment, more than any other scene in the film the ending adopts a surreal, dreamlike setting and visuality. By the end we see only Dunn's blue-tinged, disembodied head. But when her cold, dead

countenance fades to black, the audience realizes that her subconscious violence and real violence against women has merged. Here is the film's gut-punch.

Indeed, the ending solidifies an ongoing critique in the film. Not only does it highlight the violence that Dunn has internalized by turning her death into a reverie of punishment, but it pushes home the connections between intimacy and violence that are explored throughout *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. As Brooks states, "I wanted to do a story about a contemporary girl who is influenced by the world in which she lives, not only by her upbringing and her physical handicap but by seeing Hustler and Penthouse on the newsstands. By the advertisements on TV that are more violent even than knifings and car chases….Sex and violence are inextricably linked."[279] This is one of the few areas of agreements between the film's director and the book's author. Judith Rossner had herself suggested, "The whole human race is fascinated by actions where sex meets violence….Partly because our first impressions of sex are not really distinguished from our first impressions of violence. You think of a kid knows what daddy's doing on top of him mommy at night? Half the time the child probably thinks he's trying to kill her."[280] Violence and intimacy are paired throughout the film, not only in the mind of the character of Dunn (who may be unstable), but also in the depicted world's reality—relations between men and women are to be seen as a negotiation of intimate violence.

The merging between the fantasies and reality in the representation of violence is a core element of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* and is important for understanding its relationship to contemporary discourses about violence against women. Many critics found the film obscene. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* said there was no reason to see *Goodbar*,

[279] Aljean Harmetz, "Will 'Mr. Goodbar' Make Voyeurs of Us All?," *New York Times,* July 24, 1977.
[280] Judith Rossner quoted in Randi Henderson, "Writing of Women, She Reaches Men: Fantasy, Tragedy broaden 'Goodbar' Author's Appeal," *The Sun*, November 11, 1980.

except perhaps for Keaton's performance or if "you're sex-and-violence starved."[281] It didn't help that the film was embroiled in an obscenity trial when the city of Provo, Utah sought to bar the film from playing on the basis that it violated the community's anti-pornography standards. The presiding judge found *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* to be a "serious work in the field of art" and therefore protected by the First Amendment. *Goodbar* joined *Carnal Knowledge* as one of the final battles in the adjudicated censorship of Hollywood films.[282] It was nonetheless given a "condemned" rating by the U.S. Catholic Conference.[283] This did not stop its success with audiences, but reviewers were somewhat split. The review for *Variety* explained, "With lights, editing and photography, he has literally filmed sexual passion of the highest emotional order." But the review also complained of the "almost a moralistic, simplistic attitude," of the film which could find no "middle ground" between the authoritarian adult world which Keaton's character seeks to escape and the squalid, swinging nightlife in which she finds herself.[284]

Many critics lamented the adaptation, and its inability to capture the subtly feminist undertones of the original novel, which fashioned Dunn's descent into self-harm as a result of a lifetime of subtle gendered violences, beginning with the trauma of her home life and childhood struggle with scoliosis. But, as already laid out, it translates many of the feminist undertones in less blatant ways. It also more than makes up for these supposed faults in its depiction of women's boundaries between pleasure and danger. The film, more than the book, relishes in portraying the fine line by which Dunn's character finds excitement in life

[281] Vincent Canby, "Film: 'Goodbar' Turns Sour," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1977.
[282] "'Mr. Goodbar' Wins Over Provo," *Variety*, February 1, 1978.
[283] "Catholics Condemn 'Mr. Goodbar,'," *Variety*, November 23, 1977.
[284] Review of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, *Variety*, October 19, 1977.

and the ways in which it reveals not only her own damaging illness, but society as a whole's confusion about sexuality and violence.

This is perhaps best reflected in Richard Gere's character, Tony, and his constant toying with the boundary between sensuality and violence. After flirtatious interactions in a local dive, Dunn eventual goes home with him. He proves to be both very playful and mysterious, and their sex scene was surprisingly erotic for 1977. In said scene, Gere halts before orgasm and commences pushups on the floor. This nutty, if macho, behavior leads Dunn to toss Tony's clothes at him. A switchblade falls out, causing immediate tension. Is she going to be attacked? The audience, as Dunn, begins to recall the backstory of Tony—a veteran, maybe unstable. He tells her to turn the lights out. Panic sets in. And then Tony pulls the blade on her—a toy (??) glow in the dark blade! The tension subsides. He goes into an intense flurry of action, swinging the knife in rhythmic enjoyment. He pretends to stab her—her response is unclear, fear or feigned alarm. The sequence plays uncomfortably with the lines of sexual violence and intimacy. Tony's constant pantomime of a boxing match throughout the scene also imparts his affected machismo. The inclusion of the pretended assault is meant to tie visually the trappings of traditional courting and masculinity (Tony's pushups and boxing) with more sinister aspects of male sexuality, such as abuse and open violence. Brooks, who visited up to 300 bars in New York in preparation for the film, looking at everything from conversations to the set-up of ladies' rooms, pointed out that, "The man still sees himself as the hunter and resents it when a woman presumes the same prerogative."[285] The film however is ambiguous as to Dunn's culpability in the masquerade—she both enjoys it and is alarmed.

[285] Aljean Harmetz, "Will 'Mr. Goodbar' Make Voyeurs of Us All?," *New York Times,* July 24, 1977; Mary Murphy, "Brooks' Research on 'Mr. Goodbar,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1976.

This continues through the film, with higher stakes. At one point Dunn comes home following another date to find a stranger in her apartment. She discovers it is Tony, listening to music. Her relief is couched in the trepidation of her statement, "I knew it, a burglar." Here the criminal is also an intimate. Tony continues his restless behavior with an impromptu drumming on her kitchen pots and pans before revealing he has cocaine. "I knew it, a burglar and a junky," is Dunn's response. Interested in the cocaine, she asks what it does, to which he replies: "Makes America beautiful." The duality of a criminal lover clearly is meant to establish the apprehensiveness that women must carry in their relations with men. This also puts *Goodbar* clearly in sync with feminists' increased awareness and articulation of the problem of intimate sexual violence that women faced.

What is surprising are the many moments in the film in which safety is laboriously toyed with, as are issues of sexual violence and even rape. The film expresses the paradox Carole Vance has laid out, primarily that, "Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency."[286] It does well not to forget that this film appeared at the same moment that rape revenge films, which have only recently begun to be appreciated for their feminist undertones, were catalyzing into a genre. It is, albeit, more subdued than the revenge films that would come in its wake.

But amidst those pictures appeared some clear ruminative and compelling examinations of sexuality, violence, and film. A visually arresting and intensely intertextual film, *The Last Horror Film* (1982) never received a wide theater release, only appearing briefly on the film festival circuit before entering the booming home video market of the

[286] Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 1.

1980s. *The Last Horror Film* must be read at the intersection of the debate over violence, pornography, and the role of horror films as purveyors of both. The film centers on Vinnie Durand, played by Joe Spinell, a taxi driver in New York City and aspiring filmmaker. Vinnie is obsessed with the fictional horror icon Jana Bates (played by Caroline Munro), whom he wants to star in his first film. He decides to go to the Cannes Film Festival where Bates's new horror film is debuting. In the midst of the film premieres a series of grisly murders plague the festival, foreseeably the doing of Vinnie, who is stalking Jana and filming her guerilla-style. The plot climaxes when Vinnie kidnaps Jana so that he can film the final scene of his own movie in which he puts a stake through her heart. It is revealed that Vinnie staged the death while Jana was knocked out with chloroform and, in fact, had not committed any of the murders. Instead, Bret, Jana's manager is revealed to be the killer wreaking havoc on the festival. Vinnie rises to defend Jana, killing Bret with a chainsaw, only for it to be given away that the entire fiasco at Cannes has taken place within Vinnie's film. In the final scene the audience is suddenly transported to Vinnie's mother's home in New York City where the two are smoking a joint and watching the reels of his first (and only) horror film.

The Last Horror Film is a masterpiece of sorts. Deploying guerilla filmmaking, the majority of the film was shot on location at the Cannes Film Festival without permission. This setting allowed for a number of critiques of the film industry to emerge. In particular, the film looks at the relationship between critical and media discourse about horror films and the phenomenon of horror's rise to generic prominence as it occurred in the early 1980s. In doing so, director Mario Dante skewers arthouse arrogance as well as the puerile discourse surrounding the genre, primarily the tendency to conflate real and mediated violence. It is a Dubordian film in this way. As Dubord wrote in *The Society of the Spectacle*, "The Spectacle

is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."[287] The problem in *The Last Horror Film* is not the exhibition of violence but the way media violence has permeated the real—its role in determining the parameters of our discourse about real violence, especially about women.

It is important that the film's main actors, Joe Spinnel and Caroline Munro, both starred in William Lustig's notorious *Maniac* (1980), one of the goriest slasher films of the early 1980s boom. *The Last Horror Film* cannot be read except in relation to the earlier work and the controversy surrounding it. *Maniac* followed the psychotic Frank Zito as he stalks and murders women in New York City, taking their scalps as trophies to decorate the mannequins in his apartment. Showcasing some of Tom Savini's best effects, the film's gore was surprisingly realistic and includes a shotgun to the head effect that maintains its shock-factor almost forty years later. "Horror wasn't always torturous like this," lamented one commentator on the rise of films like *Maniac*. "Today, it is not just suspenseful, discreet forms of horror that lure moviegoers into theaters, it's graphic, gut-wrenching stuff."[288] *Maniac* was also among the growing list of films that had gained the ire of many feminists. It's theatrical release poster portrayed a man from the waist down, standing in a pool of blood and clutching a knife in one hand and a woman's scalp in the other. The



Figure 4.2 The theatrical release poster for William Lustig's *Maniac* (1980).

[287] Guy Dubord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967).
[288] Laurie Warner, "Horrors! It's Getting to be No Joke," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1980.

lighting reveals a bulge in his pants. The knife is a not-so-subtle phallus surrogate. The poster evokes the connection between sex and violence that many lamented in the horror films of the decade. *Maniac* also had its share of protests outside of theaters, with women carrying placard's reading "Hollywood's Maniac Fantasy is Women's Reality." "It's the new pornography," were the words of another protester and attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union.[289]

Maniac was also within a grouping of films that liberals perceived to be part of a conservative, Reagan-era backlash against the gains of the women's movement. Though conservatives often blamed declining morals and rising violence on permissive media, liberals too were quick to attack such films as part of a general historical decline: "Reagan Is the Maniac" read one placard at a Hollywood protest of the film. At the same protest one 26-year-old male protester was quoted as saying, "We think there's a general repressive mood in this country and a general offensive against women, Latins and blacks. You can see that with the rise of the KKK and the cutbacks of the Reagan Administration. 'Maniac' is just one more in a series of movies legitimizing violence—in this case, violence against women, just as 'Cruising' legitimized violence against gay people."[290] The prominent critics Siskel and Ebert also bemoaned films like *Maniac* for the same reason. "These films hate women," said Roger Ebert. Gene Siskel, for his part, said "The teen-aged girls who watch these films seem to adore them, even though if they had any sense they'd get up and walk out of the theater." He argued, "One of the messages of these films is that women should get back in line."[291]

[289] Jack Slater, "Women Picket 'Maniac' in Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1981.
[290] Jack Slater, "Women Picket 'Maniac' in Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, March 24, 1981.
[291] Stephen Grover, "Blood Flows Freely as Hollywood Goes Horrific," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 11, 1981.

The Last Horror Film relies in good part on Spinnel's iconic screen persona developed from *Maniac* in order to both put it in conversation with an already existing dialogue about the supposed problem with horror films and in order to drive home the surprise at the end of the film that he is an innocent. From the outset, Vinnie (Spinnel) is portrayed as a skulking creep. We first meet him in a theater where he is watching a bare-chested woman being electrocuted. He seems feverish, the feminist vision of a voyeur who takes sexual pleasure in seeing the female body imperiled. This scene also subtly relays a popular argument by defenders of pornography, primarily that imagery of rape and murder scenarios in violent pornography served as a safety outlet for men's natural aggressive tendencies. His perceived psychosis is further developed using many generic props: he is a disconsolate taxi driver, has an unnatural relationship with his mother, is teased by women as a frustrated little boy who "just likes to watch," and frequents midnight screenings of distasteful films. He is, in other words, a cut-and-dry villain, an embodiment of a series of mediated images of the criminal psychopath developed from discourses as varied as the nightly news coverage of Reagan's would be assassin, John Hinckley Jr., to Hitchcock and Scorsese.



Figure 4.3 The relationship between images and gendered violence is a key issue at stake in *The Last Horror Film* (1982). Vinnie Durand's desire to manipulate images of women is part of his maniacal descent, which follows him from observer to voyeur to abuser. Violent images and the reality of violence bleed together in the film, as in the discourse surrounding its release.

From the outset then connections between film, real-world violence, and sexual arousal are in constant tension. The relationship between "photographic pictures" (the lyrics to the pop song overlaying the credits repeat the phrase over and over) and the real is the core problem of the film. From the film's credit sequence on, the audience is constantly asked to ruminate on the power which images of women hold. Vinnie is surrounded by and manipulates images of Bates—film stills and promotional materials from her movies plaster his private walls and billboards advertising her newest films assault him in public. In one particularly striking scene, he is overcome with arousal as he projects an image of her face on the wall. This scene is intercut with a press conference in which Bates is asked if she feels that the violence of her films is too graphic. She replies that it is the violence of real life that is really horrible: "It's the real violence in life that is unbelievable." This press conference interview cuts back and forth between Vinny having an erotic affair with the image of her. She is asked if she fears becoming the obsession of some fanatic. She responds: "I believe that people understand the difference between real life and illusion." Here then it appears that *The Last Horror Film* sides with the critique that imagery has the power to blend reality and the simulated. The scenes proffer the same questions that Diana E. H. Russell and others raise over the profusion of imagery of women in the late twentieth century. "I personally believe," said Russell, "that portraying women being bound, raped, beaten, tortured, and killed for so-called sexual stimulation and pleasure should be banned, because I believe these portrayals encourage and condone these crimes against women in the real world."[292]

But the film takes the problem further. The problematic is not just in the individual unable to rectify the image vs. reality, it is that the entire industry has upended the nature of

[292] Diana E.H. Russell, "Pornography and the Women's Liberation Movement" in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography,* edited by Laura Lederer (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980), 304.

the real. This is perhaps best encapsulated in a key scene in which Vinnie breaks into Bates's hotel room. His fantasy of direction is played out in reality as he holds her captive with a broken champagne bottle. He is able to "direct" her—moving her head slightly to the right for a better angle. The fantasy here is to move from the film world to the actual world. Bates is able to escape and a chase ensues through the hotel, as she runs down the stairs in her bathrobe the crowd believes it to be another publicity stunt for her new movie and clap for Vinnie as he runs down after her. The crowd applauds Vinnie, who is allowed to bow and relish in his role (he has finally gained some of the critical appreciation he craves). He continues his chase, leading Bates all the way to a film preview where the crowd also believes it to be an electrifying entrance. The starlets and industry professionals believe it to be a promotional gag, and rather than help the apopleptic actress, applaud her and her would-be assailant Vinnie. The purpose here is to lampoon the larger system of meaning that surrounds the filmic representation of reality, with fiction and reality becoming impossible to untangle.

It might be possible to read *The Last Horror Film* as a critique of the desensitizing power of violence on screen, but such a reading misses the deeper critique, which is that we have become unable to disentangle real violence from the systems of representation that have transformed the perception of crime and violence. The audience is constantly reminded of "real" violence (as are the characters in the film), but these fail in comparison to the gratuitous and sensory power of mediated violence. These points are made repeatedly throughout the film. At one point an unheard background radio announces, "Violence is the headline around the world," and then proceeds catalogues a series of assassinations, disappearances, murders, and terrorist attacks. Meanwhile, at a slasher film premiering at

Cannes the hyperreal violence, which has an arresting power on the viewer, leads an American cowboy in the audience to shout "great kill!" at the silver screen. Similarly, critics applaud a film in which "The End" is plastered over the mutilated face of a victim. The underlying critique is that we have become unable to distinguish between the real and the hyperreal, and that it is childish, perhaps dangerous, to seek out a scapegoat in the spectacular violence exhibited in horror films. The society as a whole is a culprit in its own debased lapping up of mediated violence. *The Last Horror Film* is thus spoofing the critical debate over horror films in general and their ability to represent real violence.



Figure 4.4 Film critics applaud a gruesome ending title card in *The Last Horror Film* (1982).

The film takes a serious, mature rendering of the public debate on the relationship between real-world violence against women and the filmic representation of said violence. It makes clear where writer-director David Winters stands in the final minutes of the film. The film's twist ending—revealing that it was all just a movie within a movie—makes the serious questions appear frivolous. Indeed, it is an almost mean, callous rejection of the entire

debate—Vinnie's mother asks for a joint and the two of them get high as they watch his "last horror film." It comes across as a full-on rejection of the entirety of the debate—as little more than masturbatory discourse. Vinnie is an altogether sane character, ordinary, indeed a working-class cab driver and talented filmmaker. To confuse the outlandish gore and violence of horror films with real-world acts of violence is to retreat into the realm of fantasy, to choose not to engage real problems. The film does not underestimate the power images hold over audiences, but the problem is not that they offer examples or titillation for serial killers and rapists, but that the terrain of debate about real-world violence has been colonized by the postmodern tendency to conflate the easy, moralistic, and Manichean narrative spectacles and archetypal figures of the cinema with the chaos of real world disease and destruction.

The same theme of mediation was explored perhaps best in the early 1980s works of Brian De Palma, such as *Blow Out* (1981) and *Body Double* (1984). The latter was the conclusion to a string of his films to concern gender and violence, following *Sisters* (1973), *Carrie* (1976), and *Dressed to Kill* (1980). *Carrie*, based on the bestseller by Stephen King, adopted King's theme of harnessing the power of womanhood, following a telekinetic teenager whose powers begin to develop as she enters puberty. *Dressed to Kill*, a thriller based around a prostitute's witness to a grisly murder by a transvestite, was protested repeatedly for its depiction of violence against women. *Dressed to Kill* was an homage to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and like that film is concerned with the connections between perceived sexual deviance and madness. Women protested the film by laying in front of theaters with bloodied makeup and signs reading "violence is not sexy."[293] Women Against

[293] Diana E. H. Russell, ed., *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), 215.

Violence and Pornography in Media organized a protest march and condemned the film: "As if the eroticization of violence were not enough, *Dressed to Kill* asserts that women crave physical abuse; that humiliation, pain and brutality are essential to our sexuality. If this film succeeds, killing women may become the greatest turn-on of the eighties."[294]

De Palma was never one to shy away from addressing his critics. "I have trouble with the imprecision of the language of those who attack me," he argued. "When they say violence is pornographic, what do they mean?....I don't think violence itself is pornographic. If you have a scene in which a woman is tortured, raped and killed that's not pornography. It's a violent act not a sexual one."[295] This might be a misrepresentation on his part. There is a very explicit linking between violence and the pornographic in *Body Double*. An infamous scene in which a woman is killed by a home invader wielding an over-sized power drill ends with the assailant standing over his victim, the enormous drill bit clearly a substitute for a phallus between his legs. De Palma was on firmer ground however when he complained, "There's usually a murder in my films. Maybe two. But it's not a slash-and-splatter film, and I get offended when I get thrown in with them."[296] This is true, his work rises above 1980s slasher fare. *Body Double* was the culmination of De Palma's mid-career in which he updated a classic Hollywood style, in particular Hitchcock, while engaging in a deeper discourse on gender, violence, and film. It is quite possibly his masterpiece and a rumination on the politics of pornography and violence that had been festering for a decade. De Palma brings together a dizzying array of references and styles that makes for an eclectic, even perplexing, tone to the film. The female-in-danger here is toyed with gleefully and

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[294] "*Dressed to Kill* Protested," *Jump Cut*, no. 23, Oct. 1980, p. 32.
[295] Brian De Palma, quoted in Nina Darnton, "Is Brian De Palma Crossing the Line Between Art and Pornography?," *New York Times*, November 18, 1984.
[296] Brian De Palma, quoted in Nina Darnton, "Is Brian De Palma Crossing the Line Between Art and Pornography?," *New York Times*, November 18, 1984.

problematically. At the time of its release, the boundaries of sex and violence against women were at the center of controversy about the film.

De Palma's work has often been treated in film studies primarily through the lens of Hitchcock's work, as little more than a master of homage. As Chris Dumas has argued, De Palma's filmography has been dominated historically by feminist reaction, burgeoning film studies, and the armchair critics of moral-majority dominated local newspapers. He states, "This is how Brian De Palma, right around the moment that Ronald Reagan was elected president, could be—and was—understood: as a thief of the Master's treasured masterpieces and metonymically, as a rapist or sex murderer, or even as a committed enemy of feminism."[297] Such a characterization, Dumas argues, is unfair. De Palma's early works are hyper-critical of both capitalism and the role Hollywood plays in the cooptation of oppositional critique. "When I made *Greetings*," De Palma said in 1980, "I found myself on talk shows, talking about the revolution, and I realized I had become just another piece of software they could sell, like aspirin or deodorant. It didn't make any difference what I said. I was talking about the downfall of America. Who cares? In my experience, what happened to the revolution is that it got turned into a product, and that is the process of everything in America."[298] Dumas makes the case of De Palma as a "Godardian" filmmaker, whose political undertones and theorization of the medium are in need of reappraisal. Dumas looks in particular at the early career films of De Palma, but it is his work in *Body Double* that stands out in this regard.

[297] Chris Dumas, "Cinema of Failed Revolt: Brian De Palma and the Death(s) of the Left," *Cinema Journal*, 51, No. 3, Spring 2012, 2.
[298] Quoted in Dumas, "Cinema of Failed Revolt," 19.

In his own words, De Palma has described his thinking about film: "I am constantly standing outside and making people aware that they are watching a film…We are very much controlled by the media which present things to us. And those media can be manipulated in any way: they can make what is seemingly real false, and what is seemingly false real. And that is what has always fascinated me about film—the ability to lie and twist it any way you want."[299] To demonstrate this tendency, it might be best to start at the end. The final credit sequence of *Body Double* reiterates De Palma's interest in mediation. The credits roll over a take from a horror film as a body double is used to film a breast shot in a low-budget vampire film. Painfully slow, the film's protagonist, a struggling actor, holds his pose in a shower as his co-star is switched out for a woman set to be filmed from the neck down. The actor/vampire goes in at the neck and the film fades to black as blood pours down exposed breasts, taking up the entirety of the frame. Never one to shy from controversy or bluntness, the brazen nudity, with blood dripping down a bare chest, is preceded by a

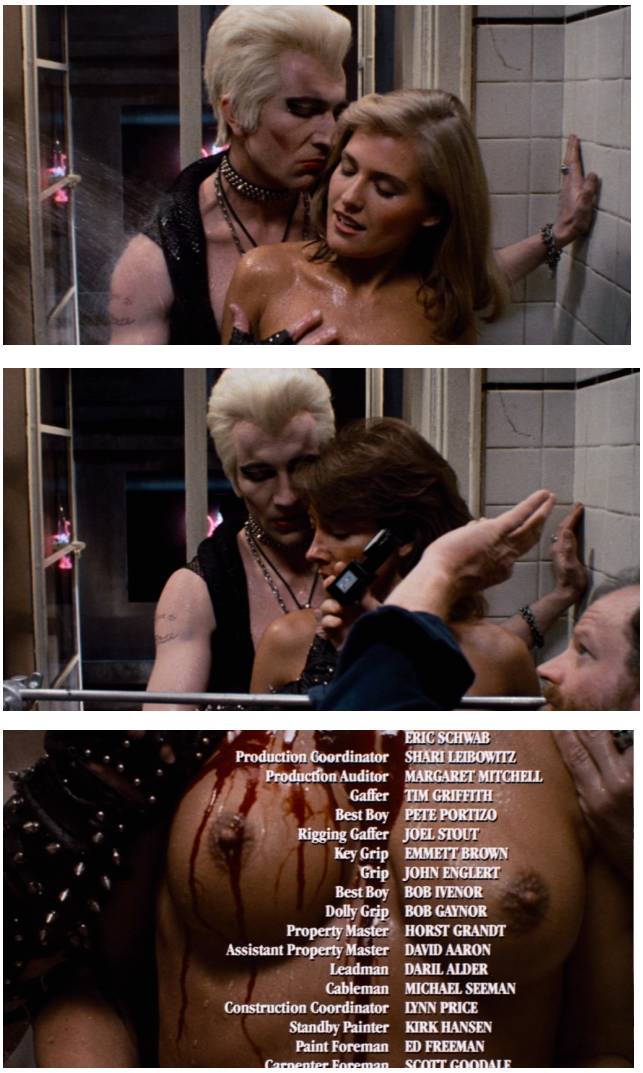


Figure 4.5 The "trashy" closing moments of Brian De Palma's *Body Double* (1984) emphasize the unreliability of filmic images.

[299] Quoted in Dumas, "Cinema of Failed Revolt," 20-21.

drawback in which the audience is made privy to the constructedness of the film artifact. As if to make the scene more obscene, the body double tells the vampire, "Be very, very careful, ok. My breasts are very tender and I've got my period." The shift back and forth between the reality of the vampire film (the movie we see being made), the "real" world of the filming (the body double and actor), and the movie being watched (*Body Double*) says in the most callous way—this is not reality. It also reiterates the film's obsession with mediated violence against women. "I do not believe, judging from my own personal experience, that the movies create imitative violence in their audience," De Palma has said. "When I go to a movie, I go to have a good time. I am part of the Aristotelian school of expiating violence. I know this isn't popular today, and I know that George Will thinks it's a lot of junk."[300] By including the body double scene at the end, his critics would be hard pressed to miss the message.

De Palma had considered placing this scene at the opening of the film. Critic Gene Siskel said of the "trashy final scene" that it displayed of De Palma "a self-destructive impulse to trash his own movie," and ruined "what could have been a more visually striking, deeply evocative, graveside ending that comes only minutes before."[301] But it actually speaks directly to De Palma's critics for whom he wants to explain that reality and image are not one in the same, in particular when it comes to violence. It might have been appropriate to place the scene at the start of the film as it drives home the overarching theme of the film. Instead, the taglines were meant to do some of the heavy lifting: "Do you like to watch?" and "You can't believe everything you see.," were both used in the marketing campaign. With this in

[300] De Palma quoted in Michael Blowen, "Bad Boy Brian De Palma Explains Himself," *Boston Globe*, October 28, 1984. The connections between real-life violence and screen gore appeared regularly in the discussion of Hollywood productions in the 1980s. See for example Newspapers often report on studies that linked increase violence toward women and the rise of R-rated horror films with graphic violence such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Friday the 13th*. For example: Daniel Goleman, "Violence Against Women in Films," *The New York Times*, late edition, August 18, 1984. David G. Savage, "Violence and Women: Researchers Condemn R-Rated Films as Worse Offenders than Pornographic Movies," *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1985.
[301] Gene Siskel, "Why Does Brian De Palma make such Gory Movies?," *Chicago Tribune*, October 21, 1984.

mind, *Body Double* might be the most misunderstood of De Palma's great works and most in need of a historical recontextualization. The film is situated in conversation with the debate about pornography, desensitization to violence, and feminist critiques of violence against women.

Body Double follows the struggling actor Jake Scully through a voyeuristic nightmare scenario. Jake is down on his luck after losing a role in a B-grade horror film due to his claustrophobia. An acquaintance, Sam, asks him to take over a house-siting job for him in an ultramodern home in the Hollywood Hills (LA's famous Chemosphere). One of the many perks, along with the rotating circular bed, is a telescope for viewing the nightly strip-tease of a neighbor, Gloria Revelle. It turns out that Jake is the victim of a set-up. He is meant to witness of the murder of his libidinous neighbor by an Indian wielding a power drill. It is only when Jake is watching a late-night porno channel that he realizes his neighbor's strip tease was performed by a body double, Holly Body, played by Melanie Griffith. Jake was meant to point the finger at an Indian burglar, thus providing an alibi for the husband who in fact murdered his wealthy wife. The husband is revealed to be Sam, the same acquaintance who hired Jake to watch over the lush bachelor pad.

The film's high stylization and constantly-shifting tone is mean to pull the audience out of the drama and subjective experience of being engrossed and instead force the audience into a critical position in relation to the text. For example, when Jake and Gloria Revelle kiss on the beach, the scene verges on cornball, with a spinning camera and affected eroticism. The scene is not meant to enrapture the audience but call them to question the relationship between these two characters, and through them the Hollywood tropes of chivalrous love (not to mention it comes after Gloria walks Jake back from a panic attack that has already

reversed traditional male heroism). Indeed, it is less a kiss than the *idea* of a kiss as expressed through film. The movie constantly deploys this type of distance. The lavish use of camera movement and long shots highlights the artificiality of the film medium. As such, it is difficult in *Body Double* not to adopt a critical standpoint. This is also true in the characterization of Jake. His enigmatic behavior and the ways in which he undercuts most of the traditional tropes of masculinity likewise leaves him open to critical scrutiny as a "type." Jake comes to stand in for a complicated set of gender politics.

This is best realized in Jake's relationship to Gloria Revelle (the neighbor whom he spies on) and Holly Body (the porn actress who Sam hired to do a strip tease in the elaborate body double ruse). The prurient Jake (played by Craig Wasson) is a strange choice for a leading man. It is unclear if the audience is meant to empathize with him or revile him. He is introduced as a goofy, floundering actor with a risible phobia. In the opening scenes he catches his wife in the middle of an affair. De Palma has set him up as a cuckold and pathetically emasculated figure. But he is also a creep—he spies on Gloria, takes a pair of her panties that she buys on Rodeo Drive, and follows (stalks) her around Los Angeles. Ostensibly it is boyish obsession, but De Palma relishes in straddling the line between playfulness, eroticism, and voyeurism (the Pino Donaggio score is particularly important in getting this across). Jake is a Peeping Tom at the same time he is the hero. When he sees a strange electrical repair man staring in at the neighbor, he is visibly offput, realizing his own perverse actions are mirrored in the revolting, monstrous form of the onlooker (a sensation perhaps felt by the audience as well).

In *Body Double* Jake might be the savior, but he is also complicit to some degree in the endangerment of his female consorts. De Palma seems to be suggesting that gender roles

are messy. For example, when he finally confronts Gloria to explain the Indian stalker, it is on the beach after shadowing her all morning. He states, "Excuse me. Someone's following you." She looks unsurprised and responds, "I know," to which he quickly retorts, "It's not me." It is a contradiction, but captures the duality of his situation. This interaction is similarly replayed with Holly Body. After Jake informs her that she too was part of a setup in a murder, she leaves only to be kidnapped by Sam who plans to kill her near a Los Angeles aqueduct. Jake is able to overpower Sam and throws him into the torrent. When Holly awakes however she questions Jake's motives. "Is there somebody here that I don't see?" He is, for all intents, her captor. And it is still unclear how complicit Jake is—where he stands in relation to the crime. He is neither an innocent nor a culprit. Holly accuses him: "I know all about you guys. I've seen about you on late night television. You're one of those necrophiliacs, a corpse fucker. Yes, I mean I turn you on alright, the only problem is that I'm still moving. I mean I'm conscious, but dead is better, right?" De Palma's characterization for Jake and the way in which he chooses to present him ambiguously throughout the film is a commentary on the new gender politics of the early 1980s. It speaks to a deep confusion about the codes of masculinity, courting, and attraction in the midst of changing ideas about consent and victimization. Here De Palma seems to suggest the fear about the stranger and danger cannot really be reconciled, it is chance. It upends some of the assumptions of liberal-left and conservative sensibilities about danger and subjectivity. Like his doubt about the truthfulness of the mediated image, here the gender codes are thrown into uncertainty. Yes, Jake is technically a flawed creep, but at the same time he presents a fairly socialized, healthy version of masculinity. He realizes himself that it is a performance (and he is often bumbling about while doing). It is also somewhat interesting, intended or not, that the violence in the

film is inflicted by the husband, reifying the fact that most violence against women is familial, and not the work of an anonymous stranger.

This upending of the taken-for-granted is also true of De Palma's obsession with the city of Los Angeles. *Body Double* is one of the most celebratory depictions of the city to be found in this era. The sumptuous filming of a shopping plaza on Rodeo Drive, the focus on architectural oddities such as the midcentury modernist Chemosphere or cascading beachfront condos, and the alluringly relaxed and hazy ambiance of sun soaked southern California reproduce a kind of city-scape of classic Hollywood. De Palma's Los Angeles exudes a calm beauty that diverges from the discourse of urban decline that populated film screens of the 1980s—this is not the "city of quartz" described by Mike Davis. If there is crime, it is surely not the kind of random, anonymous mugging that appeared regularly on the nightly news. Indeed, when Gloria Revelle is mugged on the beach, that too is a kind of body double, as it is not an actual mugging, but her disguised husband instigating a fraud. For De Palma the discourse about cities is part of a deeper set of mask-play. As in his other films such as *Dressed to Kill*, it is a clandestine kind of white collar crime and abuse, rather than random street crime that proves to be his focus. It could very well be that some of the pushback to the film is due in part to this setting, a kind of jarring affront to the dominant set of ideas about cities and the logic of their depiction. De Palma's work is thus somewhat uncomfortable as it plays with symbols of gender, space, and danger in a way that recognizes each as a form of simulation. The emphasis on the *double* pervades the entirety of the film.

A similar critique is embedded in Ken Russell's *Crimes of Passion* from the same year. Russell's work had often swirled in controversy, nonemoreso than his *The Devils* (1971) which was heavily censored in both the United States and the United Kingdom for its

graphic depictions of sexuality and religious imagery, including an orgy scene involving nuns and a statue of Christ. His 1984 American film *Crimes of Passion*, mixes thriller, drama, and horror into a commentary on the discourse surrounding sexuality and violence. It was likewise heavily censored and caused quite a stir upon release, being called the most sexually controversial Hollywood picture since *Last Tango in Paris*.[302] One critic complained, "Russell has given his every assignment the Grand Guignol treatment, using his swollen imagination to create a gaudy landscape full of vulgar, self-loathing characters and images of decay and corruption. But here he's transformed what could have been a daring study of sexual politics into a squalid, irredeemable disaster."[303] Film reviewer Janet Maslin deplored its sleaziness and "lurid peep-show atmosphere," writing that it "just seems out of control."[304] In fact, what *Crimes of Passion* is quite clear in its critique.

The film centers on Bobby Grady, a struggling middle-class white man whose marriage and business are on the rocks. Moonlighting as a private investigator, he follows Joanne Crane, a designer whose boss suspects her of selling patterns to competitors of his women's sportswear company. Bobby discovers that Crane lives a double life, in the evenings she haunts the red-light district as the prostitute China Blue. The film's core problem is of masks and identity—both Bobby and China Blue must come to terms with their inability to be truthful to themselves, which manifests most clearly in their frustrated sexual lives. This is also true for the film's most unhinged and quizzical character, the lecherous Reverend Peter Shayne (played by Anthony Perkins). Shayne frequents the peepshows and is a returning client of China Blue. He also murders prostitutes with a spiked, steel dildo which

[302] Michael London, "Russell's 'Crimes' Stirs Passion Over its Rating," *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 1984.
[303] Patrick Goldstein, "A Tale of Sex, Squalor in 'Crimes of Passion'," *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1984.
[304] Janet Maslin, "Tony Perkins In 'Crimes of Passion'," *New York Times*, October 19, 1984.

he carries in his satchel alongside his bible and a small stool used for giving impromptu sermons in which he condemns whores and defilers. Their lives intersect and swirl in the decay of the red-light district of an unmarked Los Angeles.

Hated by feminists and ratings boards and largely disliked by critics, it is only in relation to the social problems that defined Reagan-era America and in the context of early 1980s gender relations and questions over safety, victimization, the night, and pornography that *Crimes of Passion* comes to make sense. Russell uses the big cultural boogeymen of the Moral Majority to upend the dominant narrative of American social decay as expressed in Reaganite logic. The decline of traditional roles for men and women, permissive sexuality and homosexuality, drug culture, secularism, and the profusion of violence and pornography in media were core facets of the culture war in the 1980s. Moral majority voices and televangelists like Pat Robertson were able to spread the message that American social decline was the result of the degradation of American culture. With the AIDS crisis was underway, this rationale gained legitimacy. The grit and grime on display in American cities was likewise a physical manifestation of the crisis of American spirit. Russell, who changed the script of *Crimes of Passion* to make Peter Shayne a reverend rather than a film buff, presents an alternate vision of American deterioration. He consciously deploys the





Figure 4.6 The television glow of the suburban living room mimics the tinted colors of the red-light district in *Crimes of Passion* (1984).

iconography of decline to critique a deeper problem in US life: the commodification impulse of late capitalism, middle-class conformity, and hypocritical religiosity.

Core to reading Russell's work is the opposition between the domain of nightlife and that of the ordinary world. The world is starkly divided in Russell's film between American consumerist "clean" order and the exhibitionism and garish grime of the street (shot in downtown Hollywood). The street is repugnant, sweaty, and filled with broken people. But so then are suburban households. Indeed, the visual parallels deployed throughout the film are used to point to the similarities between the two.

It is not the street that is the problem, indeed the street is where people retreat to escape the deadening life of consumerism and suburbia. For Russell, the human catastrophe has been brought on by the desire to commodify everything in American life, from feelings to the human body. He thus fuses the traditional home with tones of vulgarity. The theme is imparted most bluntly in a music video interlude in the early part of the film in which a newly married couple, surrounded by their wedding gifts of fine china and a songbird transform into skeletal visages in front of their poolside home.



Figure 4.7 On the left, China Blue as she first appears to the audience in the guise of Miss Liberty. Envisioned as a Miss America figure, she stands in for a perverted American cultural vision of the idealized woman. On the right, China Blue stands up to Reverend Shayne while dressed as a nun. The image, in which she rejects his designation of fractured whore, inverts the opening scene's subjected woman meant for male pleasure.

The character of Bobby (an all-American ex-college football player) and Joanne (a high-paid fashion designer) are the manifestations of the unhappiness brought on by pursuing the American Dream. Bobby is caught in a profoundly dispirited, failing marriage. As his home life collapses, he visits group therapy sessions where he claims not to understand the hang-ups people seem to have in their relationships. Despite going through the motions to attain a middle-class life, he is blindsided by the unravelling of his marriage. By the end of the film he embraces the fear and insecurity that he masks at the opening. Similarly, Joanne seeks out a life as China Blue, despite her daytime success. She appears stoic in her working-woman shoulder pads and her ultra-modern home, living a prosperous life. The rigidity of their home lives manifests in pent-up sexual frustrations which only begin to release when they meet.

Russell, like his protagonists, sympathizes with the sexual underworld and the fantasy it allows, but this is not to detract from its feminist position. It is surprising that feminists would hate the film, as it is particularly critical of the commercialization of sex, the perversion of human sexual relations in American society specifically as a result of commodification and middle-class, bourgeois values toward love that are both harmful and hobbling, presenting real communicative distrust between genders. Russell's is a form of cultural feminism that finds difference between women and men acceptable, if perhaps poisoned by weighted gender conventions. One critic lamented, "It goes without saying that the film's two central women are grotesque caricatures, either frigid hags or skittish nymphomaniacs."[305] But this misses the multifaceted nature of China Blue. Indeed, China Blue might be read as a forgotten feminist icon.

[305] Patrick Goldstein, "A Tale of Sex, Squalor in 'Crimes of Passion'," *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1984.

As China Blue states of her street persona, “I can be anything I dream of, because it’s not me.” The liberatory power of the night, in which identity can be taken on an off like clothing, is the attainment of a type of individualism core to the American promise. It is not surprising then that this is why China Blue adopts as one of her aliases, Miss Liberty. Indeed, we are first introduced to the character as Miss Liberty, with her legs in a gynecological examination chair and a client’s head situated between them. She is giving a soliloquy about spreading liberty throughout the world. Here she stands in as a type of idealized American female form—and for her clients she attains a type of deified status as the perfect woman, defined as she is by her ability to sexually please men through her adoption of multiple identities.

Throughout the film, despite being a fractured personality, China Blue repeatedly rejects the subjectification of whore and victim. This is most clearly stated in a confrontation with the Reverend Shayne, as he cowers beneath her as she tells him to go ahead if he needs to manipulate women to feel like a man. She breaks him down and forces him to come to terms with his own perversion and hypocrisy, albeit pushing him further into instability. In another scene she sodomizes a police officer with his own baton. But her relationship to the victim status is best articulated in perhaps the film’s most problematic scene. At one point China Blue is followed by a shadowy figure from the glistening, garbage-strewn street to the rented room where most of her work takes place. As she blows bubble gum, a hand suddenly reaches over her mouth—China Blue is assaulted and raped by the same man who stalked her on the street. The audience soon realizes however that the rapist is in fact a returning customer, and one whose rape fetish China Blue emboldens. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?,” he asks as they lay on the bed. “Next time don’t walk so fast. It’s hard to keep up,” he implores.

"Maybe I should rape you, huh," she responds. Taken on the surface, this is indeed a repulsive proposition—offensive to women, glossing over the violence of the sex industry, and seeming to glorify or at least play too flippantly with rape. But it establishes China Blue's subversion of the codes that women are meant to play. She constantly undercuts the discourse of victimization that she herself doesn't accept. That is not to say that the film condones violence against women. China Blue might roll her eyes at this client, but it is clear that the sex industry has quite nastily blended the lines between sex and violence, and Russell likewise eviscerates it for this reason.



Figure 4.8 The commodification of the female body is tied directly to violence against women in Ken Russell's *Crimes of Passion* (1984).

There is no glory to be had in the red light district as Russell films it. The highly stylized settings are meant to impart perhaps the most repugnant and grungy depiction of prostitution and its domain. Indeed, *Crimes of Passion*'s depiction of the sex industry would seem to be in line with several feminist critiques of the industry, in particular the commodification of women's bodies for male pleasure. More than other films covered here, it reifies Dworkin's manifesto, "In the male system, women are sex; sex is the whore." Take for example a scene in which

the Reverend stabs to death one of his victims in a drug-fueled rage. We see a peep-show dancer transformed back and forth between a real, flesh body and that of a blow-up sex doll, literally transformed into an object. Moreover, the Reverend's poem about whores reads like an anti-pornography manifesto: "She falls, she mends, she crawls, she bends, she sucks it, fucks it, picks it up and licks it, you can whip her, beat her, maw her, mistreat her, anything you want so long as you don't touch her."

The fact that Russell embeds his critique in a work that distastefully straddles the slasher genre and erotic pictures is what makes it particularly profound. By using imagery and subject matter caught up in the discourse of decline and moral panic, Russell is able to critique the parameters of debate as articulated by both moral majority conservatives and their liberal detractors. The film relishes in upending the logic of conservative backlash. The problem is not decline as articulated by Reagan (loose sexual mores, permissiveness, gender upheaval) but the stifling conformity of American commercialism and the meretricious fantasies of happiness that it promises. Similarly, the black and white positions laid out in relation to pornography tend to fall apart in Russell's picture. As much as China Blue stands in for a kind of empowered woman, the film is not so easy as to suggest that China Blue is a healthy or fully actualized woman. In the film's final scenes (which adopts full-on slasher logic) the Reverend invades Joanna Crane's apartment, ties her up and threatens to kill her. He demands that she come to terms with the meaning of China Blue, a vessel that he claims is not an escape, but a hiding place. In his final sermon he laments that gendered violence created her. He then asks her to kill him. Joanne, dressed as the Reverend and the Reverend dressed as China Blue, stabs him to death with the spiked dildo. It is a cathartic moment wherein she is able to become the person who has abused, haunted, and abducted her. She

adopts a final persona and literally kills herself as prostitute, putting to death China Blue. The film defiantly uses uncomfortable content to make a profoundly feminist statement, extremely critical of the commodification of sex, stifling gender roles, and dangerous sex work. Russell thus uses decline imagery to tell a satisfying story about finding identity and what makes us unhappy in the contemporary America.

It is likely not by chance Anthony Perkins was chosen to portray the antagonist of *Crimes of Passion*. Perkins's most famous and inescapable role as Norman Bates provides a kind of gravitas to the role of Reverend Shayne. The film relies on it in many ways, not least in the connection between madness and repressed sexuality. Intended or not it also adds a degree of intertextual circularity to the piece. Specifically, it summons up the slasher film. In 1984, gore and violence in slasher films was profuse. Putting Norman Bates (arguably the first slasher) into *Crimes of Passion* adds a secondary layer of critique. It forces the film into the intersecting debates about violence, the horror film, and sexuality. What it actually says is harder to place. It most clearly reminds us that it is possible to have smart films that deal with the tropes of slasher films and also critique the broader society. Horror was a receptacle for repressed fears, anxiety, social commentary, and conflict.

The horror elements covered here are important for understanding the problem facing mediated images in the 1970s and 1980s from both the right and the left. Horror pictures in the 1980s, when the genre was at its most culturally resonant, were both the conveyors of meaning about the culture and the objects of derision (at least in part for carrying the message).

"In Europe, a criminal is an unhappy man who is struggling for his life against the agents of power, whilst the people are merely a spectator of the conflict: in America, he is looked upon as an enemy of the human race, and the whole of mankind is against him."

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

I assume then, that films are true to the medium to the extent that they penetrate the world before our eyes.

Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*

Conclusion: The Decline Ornament

When Alexis De Tocqueville visited the young United States in 1831, he commented on the "few" mechanisms of authority that existed for the apprehension of criminals. "Yet I believe," he wrote, "that in no country does crime more rarely elude punishment."[306] He found this was due to the fervent interest of ordinary folk in the prosecution of justice. Tocqueville was on his trip to foreseeably investigate the prison systems in the United States, which became the model for the penitentiary system that would define the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth in western societies. But in the course of his travels he came to write more about the society he found, in particular the customs, prejudices, and cultures of a budding democracy. In relation to criminals, he found that "in America, he [a criminal] is looked upon as an enemy of the human race, and the whole of mankind is against him."[307] One cannot read too much into this statement, as it is couched in a larger disquisition on the nature of provincial liberties, or the diffuse character of governance in the United States. Tocqueville was concerned with the tendency toward despotism and central authority. A criminal is the enemy of mankind specifically because he disrupts the ordinary functions of the people—they have the obligation, (in Tocqueville's context because they knew personally the criminal) to dispense with justice.

[306] Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Signet Classics, 2001), 75.
[307] Ibid..

It might be folly to seek out centuries-old measures of the American character, but the purpose is to apply Tocqueville's notion to a wholly different context. This tendency to other the criminal in such a drastic fashion, in a cultural sense, still haunts us today, but with the power of a centralized authority to back it up. Ronald Reagan lambasted "the emergence of a new privileged class in America, a class of repeat offenders and career criminals who think they have a right to victimize their fellow citizens with open impunity."[308] Today there are a plethora of avenues for dealing with the criminal, who still has the whole of mankind against them, and it is done so by a much less diffuse authority. Indeed, the criminal is now at the hands of an immense punishment regime. As the social services that had been core to the social welfare state recede along with the final vestiges of the New Deal Order, most Americans interact with government through the lens of physical security.[309] Not security from want, the expansion of which was central to FDR's vision of postwar America, but security from who. How have we arrived to this place?

Daniel Rodgers's notion of a disaggregated society begins to answer that question. At least on the level of terminology—in concepts, metaphors, and language—the end of the twentieth century was understood in a new cultural framework. As he points out, the old metaphors were dead—the Great Society, the mass society, the power elite, etc. But we should add to them another key component. The transformation of the criminal is part of the same story. James Q. Wilson's screed of "broken windows" called for punishing individuals and locking them up. It reeks of the same inability and unwillingness to think in terms of

[308] Ronald Reagan, Remarks Announcing Federal Initiatives Against Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime, October 14, 1982.

[309] Jonathan Simon points out that while the Department of Defense had served as the clearest rationale for government during the Cold War, it has been largely replaced by the mechanisms of the criminal justice state. The Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the FBI, Immigration and Naturalization Services, and the US Marshals Service are front and center in American life. See Jonathan Simon, *Governing Through Crime: How the War on Crime Transformed American Democracy and Created a Culture of Fear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

structural forces like poverty. How we think of prisons and punishment relies on the shabbiest of intellectual work—a vision of criminality that presupposes there are few structural parameters that define the limits and possibilities for individuals. Choice and deviance are the words of the day.

Coming to accept those premises was part of a long cultural wrestling match with decline. The late twentieth century has seen what postmodern theorists describe as the fragmentation of the social and the self and the dawning of a "schizoid" sense of psychic life and "biographical experience."[310] There were many causes: the coming to fruition of the psychology of the bomb, the therapeutic tendencies of late capitalist culture, the profusion of mediated images, the rise to prominence of the hyperreal. It was a nightmare of subjectivity to be true, but there was a materialist transformation as well, the rise of neoliberalism and the wrestling away of real democratic control over the flow of capital was perhaps the most deeply felt shift to begin in the postwar period. These historical shifts prompted decline to its hegemonic role. To borrow the language of David Harvey, the evaporation of the modernist "single world" and the opening up of a "pluralism of worlds" and "other worlds" is what typified the postmodern moment. Decline offered a cohesive framework of understanding in that moment.[311] Moreover, politics ratcheted on to crime as an accurate barometer of the state of this new world. Within that framework were multiple and sometimes competing meanings. "But to accept the fragmentation, the pluralism, and the authenticity of other voices and other worlds," writes Harvey, "poses the acute problem of communication and the means of exercising power through command thereof."[312] At precisely the moment of postmodern

[310] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 53.
[311] Ibid., 48.
[312] Ibid., 49.

ontological crisis we see the rigid formations of danger, criminality, and victim grind themselves in to the national consciousness. The problem is to appreciate the real fragmentation and fracture at the same time recognizing the constructive responses and dialogue made possible by such history.

This is why cinema is so useful. It is, as I hope the project has shown both declensionist and constructive, reflective and generative. This might be expressed in a final example.

Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* (1985) is a good corollary to *Taxi Driver*. The film follows a word processor, Paul Hackett, through an ill-fated night in Soho. The film picks up with an innocent phone call to a number provided by a casual run-in at a coffee shop. After losing his money in a cab ride, Paul is stranded and his night cycles downward through a series of unfortunate encounters, primarily with women and potential love interests. The film follows a dreamlike logic, intensified by the eerie score and the use of sped-up sequences that play with the viewer's subjective position, jumping from one event to another, only half-following through on intended motives before



Figure 5.1 *After Hours* (1985) is saturated in decline imagery, making for an ominous journey. In the upper image, mid-1980s SoHo appears in full gutter aesthetic. In the lower, Hackett casually witnesses a lover's quarrel in the apartment across the way in which a woman murders her husband.

moving on to something else. Paul is bombarded by a series of what were by 1985, decline filmic "tropes," a gutter aesthetic, that Scorcese himself helped create. Here they appear in dark comic form, both playing with their constructedness but also the meaning beneath. He deals with the drug-suicide of his original love interest, becomes implicated in a string of robberies, is hunted by a vigilante mob (literally taking back the night from what they believe is a womanizing burglar), assaulted by punk rockers, and slowly breaks under the pressure of the assaulting environment of dive bars, trash-strewn gutters, and all-night diners. But Paul Hackett is no Travis Bickle. The city here and its assault on the middle class life is rejuvenating. It decenters the character from his sense that all is normal. His night in the nasty, rundown part of town is surreal and adventurous. The film opens and closes on Paul in his staid office environment typing at a computer, a counterpoint to the liveliness of the street scene.



Figure 5.2 In the upper image, a plaster artwork unsettles both Paul Hackett and the audience. In the interior world of the film it represents Paul's emotional response to his night trapped in SoHo. By the end of the story, Hackett is capable of lugging it around as an albatross, accepting in some way his curse. At the end of the film he is literally entombed within it by an acquaintance. The film charts the complete deconstruction of a character via a journey through the muck. But it is a liberating journey.

Like many Scorsese pictures, *After Hours* revels in decline imagery. Indeed, most of the tropes are here: dingy streets, ominous strangers and young punks, graphic and seemingly meaningless conflict, and gendered violence. But the world is full of dissonance. Paul finds casual sex, meets friendly acquaintances and warm shoulders, and trusting strangers (such as the local bartender who gives Paul the keys to his apartment). There is also dark comedy to the entire affair. When Paul calls the police and informs them, "I'm in Soho being persecuted by a vigilante mob," the police hang up on him (as in *Death Wish*, but without the concomitant repercussions). Indeed, the mob is chasing him for a series of misunderstandings in which he is thought to be a burglar. Even the community wanted poster that bears his image was drawn by an acquaintance expected to be a love interest. And this is how the film largely progresses—as a fluke of decline tropes at the same time it embodies most of them.

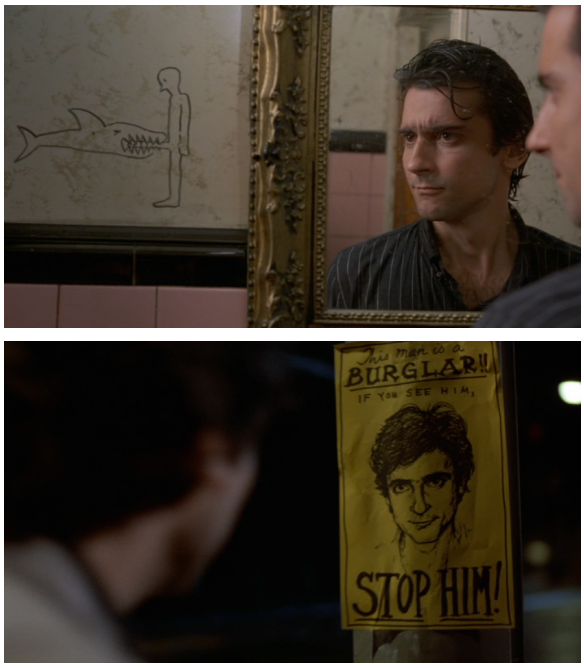


Figure 5.3 The comic turn of events in *After Hours* undercuts its declensionist tropes. Gender politics are skewered, as Paul becomes the one endangered at night—literally chased by a female-led mob. A portrait done in a romantic setting becomes the basis for Paul's wanted poster.

After Hours could only appear in 1985, and only in part because Soho would soon shed any semblance of decay. Whereas *Taxi Driver* (1976) captured urban blight and post-Vietnam weariness through realistic depictions of gun violence, political disenchantment, grunginess, and the social spaces of sex theaters, *After Hours* and similar entries such as Jim Jarmusch's *Night on Earth* (1991), Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild* (1986), and Susan

Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) came as the filmic representation of a particular moment of urban crisis in American history was passing. And like those films, it finds rejuvenation and joy in the midst of decline. Each even uses a similar narrative twist, some fluke of chance leads the protagonist into a rejuvenating experience, a walk on the wild side as it were where the ordinary parameters of life are temporarily suspended. As Paul Hackett's casual love interest tells him, "Different rules apply when it gets this late. It's like, after hours." In *After Hours* it is a chance meeting in a café, it is the same in *Something Wild*. In *Desperately Seeking Susan* the protagonist finds a locker key that opens up the odyssey of nightlife. Indeed, there are clear parallels in all of these films that seem to celebrate, if we take their surface-level expressions, their times. They each could and were understood as films concerned with grime, crime, and decay, but the actual relationship to dominant narratives is more complex and opens up the potential not only for re-reading the films but an alternative reality that was also there and available historically.

How do we read these images? Is it that society is dangerous? Zygmunt Bauman suggests that the dramatization of crime in this era has been so overwhelmingly negative in its depiction of the proportionality of criminals to ordinary citizens that "the whole of human life would seem to navigate the narrow sea-passage between the threat of physical assault and fighting back the potential attackers."[313] Indeed, the preponderance of mediated images of crime in these decades is astonishing. While the point of the project is not to directly link the explosion of punishment in America to the crisis of decline I have tried to elucidate, there is nonetheless some correspondence between the two. While that relationship might be impossible to quantify, I would go so far as to suggest that Jean Baudrillard is correct in suggesting we have entered some form of hyperreality in relation to mediated images, chief

[313] Bauman, "Social Issues of Law and Order," 215.

among them cinema. The distance between what is mediated and what is "real" are increasingly hard to decipher with so much bleeding between the two. This too is what I mean by the postmodern moment, it is not just one of postmodern social experience or postmodern critique, it is the state of society in which the nature of reality is open to multiple worlds. Resistance today cannot take the form it took in the 1960s. The imagination itself has to be remade. In privileging film artifacts I attempt to elucidate some of these potential worlds—contradictory and rarely totalizing. This is evident even within a single source that can meld both crisis and liberation.

Together these chapters, or thematic case studies, form a snapshot of decline tropes and how they were structured and given meaning. I focus on sensibilities, images, symbols, and intention to understand how structural changes at the end of the twentieth century fed certain anxieties and indeed popular narratives in a declensionist framework of meaning. Of course, nothing is final in a system of multiple worlds. Norman Mailer was able to see the potential for liberation and the portents of danger in the same cultural moment. The modern (and now postmodern) experience has always been both liberating and terrifying.

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