

POSTMODERN NARRATIVE CINEMA: AENEAS ON A STROLL

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Central to an understanding of postmodernism is the notion of the spectacle (as this term comes to us from Guy Debord¹) and its changing configuration. While Baudrillard's concept of spectacle is probably correct in that the theatrical experience and the adjacent sense of the social are obsolete topics in the wake of cable television and the VCR,² there is little question that an essential feature of postmodernism is the hegemony of the image. An evolving strategy in approaching postmodern culture is the examination of the technological and ideological direction of media and the construction of the bourgeois subject by them. I will argue that the depiction of the protagonist in current film narrative provides a sense of the particular ideology of postmodernism, the place of narrative in the recent milieu, and the changing notion of the self in the media landscape.

As we have learned from Laura Mulvey³ and others, the human image depicted in the cinema has often functioned as projection and ego ideal for the bourgeois subject. This notion must be contextualized, however, in a specific phase of image production and political economy. Postmodern cinema, even with the "nostalgia mode" which attempts to evoke longing for the "innocence" of the recent past, contains a contradictory view of the individual which ultimately cannot offer the solace of dominant ideology. While capitalist ideology is commonly asserted in the reactionary '80s, it is in contention with the culture industry's exhaustion, its self-referentiality born out of the dearth of ideas as the demand for satisfactions increases while received myths supporting bourgeois narrative are desiccated.

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What follows is necessarily tentative and heuristic: a typological approach toward mapping a particular cultural manifestation of the bourgeois self with attention to the notion that postmodernism is not one movement as such. Indeed, the cognitive mapping which Fredric Jameson has undertaken proves how extraordinarily complex postmodernism is as evidence of a major shift in world culture, and how previous strategies of historical periodization are obviously inadequate (while I am in agreement with Jameson's notion of a "spatialized" approach to postmodernism, I will suggest herein the importance of Reaganism, the 1980s, and the half-hearted attempt to recoup credibility for master narratives to the formation of postmodern experience). Nevertheless, this analysis must pay attention to the technological, economic, and cultural changes of the last ten years in particular for their evidencing of the climate of postindustrialism outlined by Daniel Bell and others, and more particularly for the tidal wave of reaction associated with the present massive cultural inversion. While there are compelling arguments for postmodernism as subversive (that is, as an extension of modernism, as a death knell for authorship, truth, all forms of representationalism), a dialectical approach makes postmodernism primarily the broad framework for a crisis in credibility both in the state and artistic production.

The nature of the postmodernism debate is for the most part well known, but the central points need to be recapitulated and situated vis-a-vis the role of narrative. Thus far postmodernism has been approached principally by examining major changes in critical theory and interpretations of mass culture. There are, at this stage, two lines of thought on the development of postmodernism. The French school, represented by Jean Baudrillard and Jean-Francois Lyotard, might be termed neo-Nietzschean in its assault on totalizing theories of history and language systems. Baudrillard's rhetoric, even with its extensive traces of Marxism, evidences the nihilism in much discourse of post-'68 France. At the heart of Baudrillard's analysis of culture is the notion of the simulacra — signifying practices empty of meaning, and end-product of Western representationalism — which he associates with an apocalyptic crisis of language.⁴ Although Baudrillard sketches the development of sign systems through various stages of capitalism's evolution — equating, for example, early iconic representation with feudalism, simulacra (computer graphics, media images) with the cybernetic revolution and corporatism — he stops short of programmatic response. While his analysis of the media is cogent, debunking both McLuhan's global village utopia and Orwell's omniscient police state, his key contribution is the notion of media "imploding," with meanings at odds with each other, cut off from any sense of referentiality. Baudrillard's ideas become important to an appreciation of cinema's gradual destruction of narrative line (reducing it to phantasmagoria), its illusiveness (even as the history of cinema is lost), and its preoccupation with its own technology.

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Lyotard's position, while less nihilist, is also lacking in revolutionary response (aside from his recommendation of the *petit recit* as a substitute for discredited master narrative) and inclined to take for granted the failure of Enlightenment ideas, including both radical social programs and totalizing notions of truth. For him postmodernism is oddly cyclical, a fallow or regressive period preceding the renewal of modernist commitments. At the center of his theory is the "crisis of legitimation," or the impossibility of "grand narratives" which previously gave credibility to the Enlightenment project and entire traditions of the West.⁵ The legitimation crisis encompasses broad concepts such as the idea of progress and more discrete narratives within them, for example, the myth of the questing hero. While also refusing traditional Marxist polemics (and that method's sense of the social), Lyotard suggests that delegitimation is not some organicist concept associated with cybernetic technology overtaking the centered, bourgeois subject, but a crisis caused by bourgeois society's confrontation with its myths (at one point Lyotard draws attention to the failure of the patriarchal narrative after Watergate, suggesting that society cannot find solace in myths perpetrated by the state apparatus, certainly not such current and bald manifestations as the Trilateral Commission⁶).

It is in the second school of thought represented by Fredric Jameson⁷ and, more recently, Terry Eagleton,⁸ that we find a truly syncretic approach to postmodernism, able to synthesize the work of the French Nietzscheans, but aimed more precisely at the Marxian analysis of culture and its relationship to economy. The Jameson project is forceful in viewing postmodernism as a site of struggle. Heavily influenced by Althusser (and Lacan), Jameson focuses on the construction of the bourgeois subject and the importance of the superstructure to the formation of ideology. His approach to postmodernism is that of a historical materialist, periodizing it within the development of late capitalism (as defined by Ernest Mandel) and the hegemony of supranational corporatism, while at the same time modifying a traditional historicist perspective considering postmodernism's manifestations in consciousness and in desperate cultural forms. Multinational capitalism's challenge to nation-state economics is finally a threat to the integrity of the bourgeois monadic subject; this postulate is the basis of Jameson's view of postmodernism's relation to self. For Jameson, the most important tendency of postmodernism is the ultimate reification of alienation, the attempt to co-opt all adversarial culture, to assert alienation as accepted state of being since the subject is cut off from any historical sense — lacking an understanding of causality, and asked to accept that utopian or radical options are naive or outdated. The subject is rendered "schizophrenic"⁹ in that his/her signifying chain and therefore historical consciousness are ruptured. The struggle of this new bourgeois subject provides the essential dissonance and "incoherence" of postmodernism which we find manifest in cultural phenomena such as cinematic narrative. Jameson's approach is useful in a number of ways, not the least of

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which is its attention to the formation of a hermeneutics that acknowledges and incorporates poststructuralism's criticism of meaning, while at the same time sidestepping poststructuralism's move toward a new subjectivism. Jameson's Marxism is especially important to interpreting changes in causality and narrative closure in the current cinema, the function of which would be less available to us with many poststructuralist strategies.

The Failure of the Actantial Model

In applying the term "incoherence" to postmodernist cinema I am borrowing more from Robin Wood than Jameson in trying to suggest contemporary culture's conflicting, unresolved struggles of ideology.¹⁰ By "incoherence" I do not mean that certain texts are hopelessly confused and unreadable, but rather that they contain a number of positions in tense opposition, preventing narrative closure and the bourgeois realism to which Hollywood cinema aspires. This is not necessarily a laudable situation, since the incoherence of a work represents most often the unwillingness to part company with artistic conventions and the cultural assumptions supporting them rather than the depiction of a complex world-view. The destruction of narrative closure is a rather typical feature of modernism, co-opted by much commercial art. Yet the gestures of Artaud, Beckett, and Wilson, of Resnais, Buñuel, and Antonioni were very purposeful, questioning for the most part bourgeois consciousness while working consistently in the realm of representationalism. The incoherence of the Hollywood cinema of the 1980s is involved in the crisis of representationalism reduced to elements of its effects, acknowledging the self-referentiality of the avant garde while attempting to steer clear of a presentationalism which would suggest a new political awareness of the spectator. Also evident in this incoherence is that Hollywood cinema of the '80s continues to advance dominant ideology even as it demonstrates that previous notions of ideological consensus no longer exist; the impulses within *Taxi Driver* (1975) are far more pronounced, disturbing, and "schizophrenic" in *Rambo* (1985). Far from being an environment of surface gloss free of all adversarial signification, a domain of "hyperreality"¹¹ cut off from political and economic circumstance, postmodernism is, as Jameson asserts, a logical product of late capitalism. More specifically, it can be approached as dominant culture's attempt to restore capitalism's legitimacy by effectively forgetting the last twenty years of history (hence the penchant for the 1950s, retro fashion, short hair, machismo, etc.). The project of "sealing over"¹² Vietnam and Watergate is undermined, however, by the divided nature of texts, the schizophrenia of the subject.

The issue of the function of schizophrenia in postmodern culture is troublesome, with the predominant school, represented by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,¹³ arguing that "the stroll of the schizo, his glorious wandering, engenders a world created in the process of its tendency, its

coming apart, its decoding."¹⁴ The Deleuze/Guattari attack on psychoanalysis has become a central feature of postmodernist criticism and is important for its further conjuncture of the personal and the political. Unfortunately, the attack on both Freud and Marx becomes another chaotic, subjective revival of Nietzsche as it attempts to valorize the fragmented subject of late capitalism, the atomized self divorced from a code, without moorings, transformed into a "desiring machine." Terry Eagleton has termed this thinking the "most banal anarchist rhetoric," holding that Deleuze's and Guattari's "insistence upon desire's diffuse and perverse manifestations"¹⁵ and their refusal of hermeneutics effectively validates the ideology of consumer capitalism. The subject as described by Deleuze/Guattari seems quite close to Jameson's image of the postmodern self as consequence of the failed signifying chain. The major distinction here is that Deleuze/Guattari advances schizophrenia in a reevaluation of bourgeois interpretations of consciousness, also accepting the imperviousness of capital to revolutionary change. What is correct in both analyses is the transition in the model of the subject. The representation of the problem is clear in the cinema, where the traditional function of the subject is disrupted, and not in ways associated with, say, the existential anti-hero of late modernism (one thinks of James Bond, or the Man With No Name of the Sergio Leone westerns). The disruption of the protagonist's role tends to support Jameson's idea of postmodernism as cultural dominant¹⁶; the commercial cinema applauds the various manifestations of the schizophrenic hero and refuses to see the necessity of closure to the narrative, even when there appears risk to the ideological enterprise. Tiresome linear exposition dependent on notions of narrative causality is obviated in the age of video. Traditional bourgeois strategy is realized in the divorce of the subject from narrative (history), in distorting or repressing the causal factors which create the subject. Postmodernism as dominant mode suggests that the adversarial tendencies of modernism and the avant garde are eroded; this rather simplistic idea pays insufficient attention, however, to lawful historical processes and the site of struggle which postmodernism actually is.

The schizophrenic subject of postmodernism can be diagnosed with the aid of A.J. Greimas's actantial model,¹⁷ the failure of which in the current environment tends to refer us to Lyotard's legitimation crisis. In Greimas's classically scientific structural narratology, traditional narrative derives its force from the notion of a send/actant, a representative of symbolic values, who gives a message to the subject, who in turn is able to make choices (good vs. evil, etc.) and to disperse this knowledge to receivers, as well as confront oppositional factions and finally to achieve the desired object. Put simply, the figure is viewed as repository of specific social forces rather than individual subject as such. Greimas provides a sample of this schematic¹⁸ which might apply to a basic "grand narrative" from Lyotard's formula:

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Subject	philosopher
Object	world
Sender	God
Receiver	mankind
Opponent	matter
Helper	mind

Obviously there is implied in this schematic a consensus regarding received notions of order. While the actantial model may be seen as reducible to language alone, the idea that it is involved, as Fredric Jameson notes, in the production of meaning draws our attention to its value at a time when meaning is evacuated from narrative even as certain formal structures occasionally remain. Elements of essential Western narratives (the rise of the charismatic figure, the quest, the destruction of the other) depend on traditional conceptions of truth and its repositories. Structural models are among the grand narratives which have been under seige in the recent period, but Greimas's argument is proven in the obverse. The protagonist of postmodern cinema cannot receive a message since there is no sender (God, law) to transmit it, no social order to answer to, and no objective to attain, although the framework and motions of all the above remain reasonably intact (this is in contrast to avant-garde drama, which forces us to recognize the futility of the heroic function by destroying narrative structure).

The PSYCHO Sequels: Fanfare for the Schizophrenic

As Alfred Hitchcock finds a secure place in the pantheon of film directors (during a time when the legendary Hollywood *auteurs* are seen as part of a dead cultural past), with the chief work of his late period canonized,¹⁹ it is significant that *Psycho* (1960) should become the object of industry fetishization. The two recent "sequels" to Hitchcock's film, Richard Franklin's *Psycho II* (1984) and Anthony Perkins *Psycho III* (1986) both expend upon and dilute the original film's sense of pervasive psychosis in bourgeois culture. The films move Norman Bates to center stage, valorizing him as a kind of patron saint for the psychotic killers who have dominated the horror film of the last two decades (as the psychotic changed from monster to recognizable other), and, by so doing, present him as a representative bourgeois figure. That this point should digress so much from the ideas of the original *Psycho* causes us to view the new films in a specific cultural context.

Norman Bates is indeed the hero of these films, an overarching presence, the "Hamlet of the horror film."²⁰ Bates's appearance roughly in the middle of the first film, creating what at first seems to be a new narrative line, works to demonstrate the victimization of Norman and Marion Crane (and indeed most of the major characters of the film) by patriarchy and capital-

ism, by the forces of repression. The social apocalypse²¹ of the film is only tangentially to do with Norman; he is primarily a figure acted upon, as is Marion, by vicious social forces constituting the mockingly absurd vision found in the first glimpses of the avant garde (Buchner's *Woyzeck*). The unrecuperability of society suggested in the final images of *Psycho* (the death's head grin, the car emerging from the swamp) are used in a parodical fashion in *Psycho II* and *III*, but a parody drained of irony (for all the visual references to Hitchcock) and critical objective, giving us Jameson's notion of pastiche. *Psycho II* reaffirms the uselessness of psychoanalysis, of "knowing" anything about behavior, thus bolstering a central premise of the contemporary horror film. This idea is even more extreme than in *Psycho*, with an emphasis on circularity: Norman ends up where he began twenty years earlier. Also reaffirmed, through Lila Loomis's attempt to destroy Norman, is *Psycho's* sense of the pervasiveness of schizophrenia. The focus of criticism is not, as in the original film, bourgeois culture (Hitchcock referred to Marion Crane as a "perfectly ordinary bourgeois"²²); rather, the concern is with the original *Psycho* as object. Hollywood recycling its past material during a time of cultural regression and bankruptcy does not at this stage seem unusual, nor does the constant allusion and *hommage* (all these now seem familiar indices of post-modernism); valorizing Norman and creating a situation of the schizophrenic triumphant (while at the same time removing *Psycho's* vision of society at a standstill) give the two sequels a kind of centrality in the postmodern cinema. While neither *Psycho II* nor *Psycho III* acts as prelude to a new phase of filmmaking in the manner of Hitchcock's work, they represent very adequately Hollywood's current situation as well as bourgeois society's confrontation with the notion of madness as consequence of repression. Norman Bates's predicament no longer places him as an adversary to dominant culture (in *Psycho* he is certainly perceived as a threat); in the sequels, particularly Perkins' film, Bates is a sympathetic figure representative of madness as a cultural given, especially with *Psycho III's* peculiarly millennial notion of a complete cycle in time, with Norman entrapped and forced backward in time by transpsychical crisis.

Psycho III goes so far as to address religion as the foundation of patriarchy and repression (the first words uttered as the screen remains black are "There is no God!"). The plight of Maureen to free herself from the ultimate patriarchal institution is a much more deliberate, a mannered rendering of Marion Crane's flight from Phoenix. The psychopathology of Norman's helper Duane (his sadism, fetishism, scopophilia) carries further the two films' depiction of pervasive insanity and apocalypse. Yet this situation, with Norman moving through the world as chronic victim and as simultaneously evil and benevolent overseer, never allows for a critical practice. Attention does not diverge from these films as cultural celebration of themselves, culminating in the "apotheosis" shots at the end of both films. The final shot of *Psycho II* — Albert Whitlock's animated illustra-

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tion of the Bates house with Norman alone on the top step — becomes a signature still devoid of the spectral aspect of the original black-and-white publicity shot for Hitchcock's film. This last image is a model of explanation in understanding the film's relationship to the original. The specific "anxiety of influence" the film projects effectively transforms the work to which it refers. By so doing, *Psycho II* gives us an example of postmodernism's transformation of the protagonist. The collection of shots (the shower sequence, the peephole, the staircase and cellar of the Bates house) in *Psycho II* and *III*, with their excessive "insider jokes" and *hommage* (which assume that the audience consists of cineastes) give Hitchcock's film a new status as cultural artifact but destroys its historical position as a work of art. The postwar anguish which *Psycho* projects so well (elucidated in Robin Woods's *Hitchcock's Films*) is erased as *Psycho* now becomes merely the first film in a series, outside the historical context. Jameson's thinking is especially applicable here: Norman Bates is no longer schizophrenic, nor is he representative of existentialist anomie, alienation, or burn-out. He is a megastar phantasm above all; as such his ailment makes him no more adversarial to dominant culture than the Iran-Contra scandal, *Wheel of Fortune*, Frankie Goes to Hollywood — all have a moment in the hyperreal media setting. The real shock of *Psycho*, so well examined by Robin Wood, is that film's sense of the absurd in the wake of Hiroshima and Auschwitz, of a world not governed by vague metaphysical forces. *Psycho* is absurdism's central contribution to popular culture. *Psycho II* and *III* remove absurdism's moralism and nihilism, quieting the last great voice of modernist anxiety as the popular cinema asks us to acquiesce to a madness which it refuses to analyze.

The Disruption of the Quest

The impossibility of the chivalric quest, with its notion of the destruction of the other or its incorporation into the dominant order,²³ has become a feature of genre art in postmodernism. Certain genres which depended heavily on the chivalric quest for a depiction of the civilizing experience have disappeared except for some transmogrified forms — the western is the most obvious example. Other genres which still have some relevance to the contemporary sense of the social show a marked disruption or involution of the quest, causing a difficulty in the construction of the protagonist, his/her identification with the other, audience identification with the protagonist's purpose, and the logic of the narrative enterprise. William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985), ballyhooed as the "French Connection of the 80s," indeed contains some ideological and structural similarities to the Vietnam-era crime film, but with a configuration peculiar to the current cultural situation. The attempt by Secret Service agent Richard Chance to crack a counterfeiting ring operated by a

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particularly pathological villain named Masters provides the framework on which the *film policier* is traditionally structured.

The obsessional behavior of Chance and his similarity to Masters is not so much an extension of Popeye Doyle's relationship to Charnier, nor is the "descent into inferno" element of *To Live and Die in L.A.* a summation of ideas in *French Connection* (1972) and *Cruising* (1981). The hero's conduct, his sense of self and very metabolism, seem affected by the specific ideological and cultural circumstances inscribed in the postmodern temperament, specifically:

1. The age of Reagan as controlling backdrop. The opening scene shows the secret agents escorting the President to an engagement at a Los Angeles hotel. The soundtrack contains excerpts of Reagan's "Second American Revolution" speech (on tax reform), transmitted over the hotel's public address system. Reagan is a saturating presence, one not challenged by the central characters of the film (in contrast, say, to the disrespect for authority in *Dirty Harry*). Reagan icons appear regularly, along with numerous patriotic symbols (the flags on the Presidential limousine are among the film's first images). The ideological tension of the Reagan period's affirmation of "traditional values" is explicit to every motif of the film, including the central image of the dollar bill (given an especially privileged montage sequence in Masters' counterfeiting lab) and the protection and acquisition of capital at any cost, summarizing the survival-of-the-fittest ethic of entrepreneurial free enterprise. This ethic is finally exploded with the counterfeiting motif itself, the confusion between "real" and "fake" money, between the real and simulation. The evacuation of reason from political discourse, the public figure as fleeting media celebrity, and the increased interconnection between consumerism and the spectacle are sufficient to involve Reaganism in the mapping of the postmodern.
2. The break-up of rational, calculated thought and the jumbling of cause and effect. Much has already been made of this film's reliance on the aesthetics of the rock video, with the over-emphasis on quick insert shots not as an Eisensteinian dialectical synthesis, but as a piling-up of stills, of very discrete "fictive acts"²⁴ to substitute for narrative. The de-emphasis of narrative does not follow modernism's project of calling into question traditional diegesis; rather, it caters to the diminished audience interest in matters of cause and effect as the image takes precedence in the field of the spectacle.

The fragmentation of Chance as recognizable genre protagonist is effectuated by elements of the film's text growing out of these two categories. During the agents' protection of Reagan, Chance corners a suicidal terrorist who is "ready to die." Without contexting this moment, the film's attack

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on causality is associated with the dominant ideology's fostering of an apolitical, irrational view of political violence.²⁵ This ahistorical approach to diegesis is essential to the film. While there is no sense that Chance or his partner John Vukovich are in opposition to the dominant ideology, both their construction as characters and their operation in the film's narrative set up enormous contradictions. The strategy of casting a virtual unknown (William Petersen) in the role of Richard Chance undermines both traditional expectations of protagonist centrality and audience identification. The intertextual resonance of Chance's name (John Wayne in *Rio Bravo*) is no doubt lost on the contemporary audience; for cineastes the reference is subverted by Chance's rather pathetic situation. More important, the narcissism inscribed in the character (the posturing in tight jeans) is a hyperbolic play on the history of male eros in the cinema, here conjoined to the sense of overwhelming avarice consuming the world of film. This sensibility is visible in the film's every gesture, including Chance's brutal mistreatment of a young woman acting as his informant; his cavalier plan to rob a diamond smuggler (resulting in the murder of a fellow agent); and, most significantly, his sudden, brutal murder at the conclusion, marking the "erasure" of the protagonist as the narrative's unifying principle. That a quick shot of Petersen should be inserted following the end credits invites us to contemplate the film's relinquishing of the idea of protagonist, and of the star as purely decorative icon. This final image of the film works as coda, just as the video-influenced main title sequence introduced images central to the film's plot, much in the manner of the "teaser" prelude to the television police show. This coda is unusual in its reference to the traditional subject of fascination in the various action/adventure genres. The quick shot of Chance's face suggests the figure which can no longer be recuperated.

Jameson's notion of pastiche has relevance to the film's play on exposition. The use of titles to signify the passage of time ("Tuesday, 11:35 a.m.") becomes a gratuitous graphic device since little is added to suspense, and the decorative aspect of the titles (a different typescript is used each time they appear) becomes less than a conceit, lacking any usefulness as a reference of genre convention. The sequence in the studio of the dwarf artist (whose workplace is a literal pastiche of styles) and the "music video" sequence of Masters producing counterfeit plates are among the moments whose vacuousness and grotesquerie amplify the ideological tensions of the film. Chance's careerism and (it would seem) acceptance of the political and economic system are counterposed with shots of L.A.-as-junkyard, random destruction of consumer goods, the acceptance and co-optation of kinky sexuality (the behavior of Chance, Masters, and their girlfriends), the eventual acceptance by the relatively moral Vukovich of his dead partner's role as "protector" of Chance's informant (who attempted to betray the two agents to escape her sexual bondage). The car chase sequence, an "updating" of the famous *French Connection* scene, may be emblematic

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of the politics of the film, with the manic Chance driving directly into oncoming traffic, in suicidal opposition to the society his office supposedly protects. (Repetition-compulsion and the associated death wish figure prominently in the characters' overall behavior and are represented best by Chance's bridge-jumping hobby).

As a summary statement on the self-destruction and utterly amoral aspect of late capitalism, *To Live and Die in L.A.* would be a brilliant work, particularly in its debunking of the protagonist as a figure acting as a repository of social consensus. The talisman the hero traditionally pursues, which establishes his potency and centered position as effectuator of historical change, has gradually disappeared along with the source of mythic power which validated the hero once the talisman had been achieved. While frustration associated with a collapsing sense of the social impedes (and moves to the fringe) the heroes of *The French Connection* and *Dirty Harry*, Chance and Vukovich are in a more precarious position according to notions of order embodied in genre conventions. Popeye Doyle is able to crack a drug ring; Harry Callahan tracks down and kills the psychotic kidnapper/assassin. Chance's action, in contrast, is circular. At no time is he in possession of an object whose symbolic value authorizes him as protector of the social, even the disintegrating social reflected in the worlds of Popeye Doyle and Dirty Harry. The stolen satchel of cash (stolen, as it turns out, from a colleague), which Chance smashes open with frustrated abandon, contains nothing. The attempt to trap Masters' ring, confused with Chance's desire to avenge a dead partner, results in Chance's own death, the "resurrection" of Vukovich as Chance's replacement, and the repetition of the same cycles in time. Most interesting is the depiction of the revenge motif and the code of male camaraderie and professionalism on which it depends. *To Live and Die in L.A.* might be called a "revenge film" since its action depends on Chance's drive to avenge the murder of his partner/mentor Jim Hart. Chance's rapid (and easy) transformation into a thief and murderer (accompanied by hysteria and near-madness) suggests the pathology under numerous male action/adventure genres. Still, the ennui that emerges from the film's sense that all bets are off (an ennui similar to "Miami Vice," itself dependent on the derivative angst elements of *Blade Runner* and neo-film noir) is overwhelmed by a decorative signification.

The portrayal of the quest in narrative art becomes difficult (from the standpoint of supporting received notions of patriarchal myth, hierarchy, and bourgeois order) as texts exhaust myths by repetition and self-referentiality. The self-destructive enterprise of "naming" myth, as Barthes and Levi-Strauss have informed us, has destroyed its usefulness as a support mechanism for realism, yet this process is at the heart of much contemporary filmmaking. Walter Hill's *Streets of Fire* (1984) and Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider* (1985), remakes of *The Searchers* and *Shane* respectively, represent an extreme phase of narration wherein myth is deliberately foregrounded, but not for the purpose of calling into question

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assumptions of dominant culture which enforce myth. Walter Hill invokes Borges to describe *Streets of Fire* (subtitled "a rock and roll fable") as a "mick-epic...about Soldier Boy rescuing the Queen of the Hop from the Leader of the Pack."²⁶ The site of struggle within this work is its attempt to form an apotheosis out of postwar pop culture. The assumption is that rock and roll represents the last heroic art form; although the enterprise of constituting rock culture as founding myth seems sensible on the face of it, the project has already been done both by critics (the work of Greil Marcus²⁷) and by various contemporary stars who attempt to appropriate the mythic aspects of their forebearers (Bruce Springsteen's amalgamation of Dylan, Elvis, and Motown; Michael Jackson's and Price's allusions to the Beatles; David Bowie's pop-star-as-messiah construction). More significant than the failure of this mythic invocation is the allusion not to the traditional narrative of journey and recovery, but to John Ford's westerns, with Soldier Boy (Michael Pare) corresponding to Ethan Edwards, supporting actors filling the Jeffrey Hunter, Natalie Wood, and Henry Brandon roles (William Dafoe is Scar as cycle outlaw — this aspect of the counterculture is portrayed as wholly villainous rather than as the surviving free spirit of the frontier common to 60s mythology). The most obvious comparison is with *Taxi Driver*, which has also been examined in terms of its reference to *The Searchers*.²⁸ While *Taxi Driver* inflects the myths of journey and recovery, coming at last to an ideological statement representative of the tense circumstances of the mid-70s, *Streets of Fire* suggests postindustrial America as a place capable of recouping myth although it is strategy made empty by its self-consciousness.

Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*, a scene-by-scene remake of *Shane*, is quite problematical as a work of the new cinema of allusion.²⁹ On the one hand, the attempt to appropriate the charm and myths of Stevens' film seems both mercenary and of a piece with the recouping of patriarchal myth in the Reagan period; however, Eastwood's film at points verges on progressive tendencies in deconstructing the genre and the actor/director's star image (a similar project is evident in Richard Tuggle's *Tightrope* (1984), which shows the Eastwood-detective character as pathological and alienated, a notion only suggested in *Dirty Harry*). In *Pale Rider*, the Eastwood character (the Preacher) is much more overtly involved in invoking myth than Stevens' film, going so far as to refer both to the narrative of the knight errant and, biblical apocalypse. Yet the Eastwood character's inflation of mythical attributes of the hero (compare, for example, the boulder-smashing sequence [rather Arthurian] with the stump-raising scene in *Shane*) is peculiarly offset by his sexual encounter with Megan, giving him the connotation of fertility god. If the Preacher is an evocation of both Christian and pagan myths, his symbolic function as a radical potentiality in the community returns these myths to a progressive stature. While the Preacher's final showdown with Stockburn and his deputies is depicted as an epic good vs. evil confrontation, it is significant that evil is situated squarely

in the figure of the lawman, and the lawman as defender of industrial capital. The only precedent for such an idea is the revisionist western of the late 60s and early 70s, such as *The Wild Bunch* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*; Eastwood has rarely been thought to share the complex sensibility of Peckinpah and certainly not the counter-culture attitude of Altman. The diegesis suggests that the awareness of the mythic figure as metaphor (the rallying of the miners) and the Preacher's farewell, while repeating the last scene of *Shane*, forces the mythic content to the limit and calls into question the validity of the messianic figure as prime mover. Yet we are left with the figure of Eastwood and the primacy of the star figure. The ideological tensions in the construction of the protagonist are much more severe in *Pale Rider* than in *Streets of Fire* in regard to associations with genre conventions. *Pale Rider's* referentiality takes it beyond the surface gloss and the emptying-out-of-history within *Streets of Fire*.

The Mad Max films of Australian director George Miller are somewhere in the middle of this group in their pastiche of elements from postwar mass culture and their attention to the formation of mythic consciousness in the age of mass media.³⁰ *The Road Warrior* (1982) and *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) both tread a fine line between parodical comment on the archetypal narrative of journey and recovery and a pastiche which attempts a new myth out of the wreckage of popular culture. *Beyond Thunderdome* is by far the most allusive of the Mad Max cycle (with references to *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Sergio Leone's westerns, *Lord of the Flies*, and TV game shows) suggesting the genre film's increased consciousness of itself as text. While Mad Max is portrayed as the "timeless" hero in the manner of the "wandering knight, samurai, or gunslinger,"³¹ the self-consciousness of this enunciation disrupts the subject's credibility as myth. In *Beyond Thunderdome* the authority of the charismatic hero is challenged since Max is explicitly a product of projection; the Crack in the Earth sequence, where Max is seen as a savior to the lost tribe of feral children is a remark on the messianic impulse as a fundamentally regressive and ahistorical tendency. By sending up this predominant myth of the narrative tradition the Mad Max films have an alluring and radical cast, but the dangerous notion of the post-nuclear landscape as both wasteland and the new wilderness filled with potential has reverberations not only of Eliot but of the conservative narrative the films seem to parody. But his film represents the inexorable tendency in popular and high art (this distinction has dissolved) to present narrative as sheer text.

Like films such as *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai* (1984), the Mad Max films invite us to take pleasure in contemplating conventions for their own sake — as a free play of signifiers, if you will — recognizing the exhausted nature of genres. Yet, like *Blade Runner* (1982), a comparatively progressive work, nostalgia for lost innocence saturates the Mad Max films, and the hero, although depicted as a fabrication, is ultimately restored (both

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The Road Warrior and *Beyond Thunderdome* conclude on the image of a solitary Max). This tension is emblematic of the struggle between representation and presentation that has taken on new characteristics on postmodernism, as the boundary between art and life blurs in a way counter to the utopian ambitions of modernism.³² Mad Max is explicitly a pastiche not for the legacy he inherits from the heroic epic, but for his figuration as end-product of media culture. The references to the television western, biker movies, and punk culture remove these forms from the province of discrete, individual works or cultural tendencies. The synthesis of these forms is problematical. While this fusion in the Mad Max films represents the achievement of a significant modernist goal (contemplation of received myths as pure narrative), the characteristic postmodern attributes of celebrating a disrupted alphabet, the hodge-podge of styles, genres, and language systems, is equally apparent and implicitly reactionary. The Mad Max films, more than most of the current science-fiction genre, address the messianic impulse and the artistic conventions the impulse has generated in narrative. Once we perceive the failure of the master narrative of the messiah and the bankruptcy of its conventions, the question remains as to whether a non-mythic understanding of narrative (and history) is preferable; *Beyond Thunderdome*, while thoroughly sending up the myth of the hero now mediated by the cinema, suggests that cultural entrapment by patriarchal myth is inevitable.

The Cult of the Body and the New Patriotism

The most representative films of the 1980s (aside from *Flashdance*, *Porky's* and coming-of age films aimed at the adolescent audience or the spectator-as-adolescent) are those which attempt to restore, like the political climate which produces them, the full, unchallenged authority of the charismatic, patriarchal male.³³ The oiled-muscleman-with-machine-gun genre, with its wish-fulfillment violence and rewriting of failed U.S. adventurism, may appear simply an outgrowth of 80s reaction rather than a manifestation of anything as extraordinarily complex as postmodernism. Yet these films are as much of a piece with the postmodern temperament as the recycling of "Leave it to Beaver," or the restoration of the father with a few concessions to the shards of the liberal consensus in "The Cosby Show." The place of these films in the current discourse is secured because the hero narrative is strained not by a clever process of deconstruction (as in *Beyond Thunderdome*), but by the most deliberate, vulgar hyperbole which pushes the action film protagonist beyond the apparent ideological agenda, into the realm of parody and pastiche. The male is depicted as accomplished professional, so fully developed mentally and physically as to suggest the New Man or similar notions associated with classical fascism; the idea of the hero as divinely-ordained emissary further enhances a kind of master-race mentality driving the full recuperation of the pro-

tagonist in the mainstream cinema of the decade. The representative examples here are, of course, the Stallone/Schwarzenegger cycles. As in the earlier examples cited, the contradictions often appear puzzling since, unlike the Mad Max films, the ideological agenda of these films does not invite us to view them as pure discourse.

The ideological basis of the Stallone/Schwarzenegger cycles proceeds naturally from (a) the narcissism and inversion of the new cult of the body (aerobics culture, dieting, etc.) as "the body, beauty and sexuality are imposed as new universals in the name of the rights of the new man, emancipated by abundance and the cybernetic revolution,"³⁴ and (b) the attempt at a clear demarcation of self and other which returns the spectator to the primal myths of the American civilizing experience (e.g., the inherent evil of specified racial and political minorities). This project is undermined, particularly in *Rambo* (1985) and *Commando* (1985), by contradictions which must be seen simply as the result of the attempts actively to suppress the past twenty years of history, the lessons of which are becoming apparent in a period of recuperation. More important, repetitive emphasis on machismo and patriotism has the effect (noted earlier) of destroying myth by successive enunciation and transformation into narrative.³⁵ The process is evident in the pivotal sequence of virtually all the Stallone/Schwarzenegger films, which consists of a montage of the hero "suiting up" in ritualistic fashion, the camera focused tightly on sections of well-oiled torso rapidly adorned with knives, bandoliers of ammunition, grenades, and the like, culminating in the camera's confrontation with a full figure of the protagonist, a kind of apotheosis effect. This type of sequence has more affinities with a scene in *Dawn of the Dead* (the survivalists raid a gun store) than with Kurosawa's samurai films or the final-march-to-the-showdown of *The Magnificent Seven* (1962) or *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Since the Stallone/Schwarzenegger films lack the conscious parody of George Romero's zombie epic, the "suit-up" sequence ends with the Schwarzenegger character's glance at himself in a full-length mirror; this narcissism and reduction of the male to object of the gaze support the salvific function of the protagonist and the politics of the neoconservative cinema of the 1980s. It should be noted that the male-as-object-of-the-gaze has appeared earlier in works where the male figure functions as a threat to the status quo (cf. *Picnic*, *The Fugitive Kind*). The fixation on male beauty was associated with the male's incipient androgyny and a presence disruptive to bourgeois moves. The beefcake of *Rambo*, *Commando*, *Cobra* (1986), and *Raw Deal* co-opts that tendency, interpolating it into the new cult of the body and a very tired definition of "cool." Yet this fetishism effectively destroys the charismatic authority of the hero (one could hardly imagine a "suit-up" beefcake sequence in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* or *High Sierra*) whose status depended on mythical values.

An extension of the fetishistic approach to the star/hero is the blurring of the male protagonist in the commodity landscape, the circumscription

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of action by the world of commodities, and the increased sense of the work itself as product. The Stallone/Schwarzenegger films concentrate heavily on new, state-of-the-art weaponry and transportation (the press kit for *Cobra* spotlights the guns and autos used by the Stallone character). Given the control of studios by transnational corporate concerns, films are virtual advertisements for consumer capitalism. *Rambo*, produced by Tri-Star (interfaced with Coca-Cola), features Coca-Cola products in several privileged scenes. *Cobra* advertises Pepsi products during the supermarket shoot-out, and a rooftop chase privileges large, *Blade Runner*-style neon billboards. *Commando* advertises a variety of sporting goods and specialized weaponry. The star quality of Stallone/Schwarzenegger (and the politics they ostensibly represent) runs into conflict with their construction as salesmen and ultimately as commodities. While this commodification process may be seen as a natural development of the dominant ideology, the issue here is the contradiction within this ideology in terms of fulfilling its purpose of guaranteeing the hegemony of corporatism. The charismatic, autonomous hero and the myth of the civilizing experience and the bourgeois normality he represents are disturbed as attention drifts to the surface gloss of the image, and particularly to the hero as mass-produced simulation. The prologue to *Cobra* is heavily dependent on *Magnum Force* (1973), yet the urgency and despair of the Dirty Harry films is lost, since as *Cobra* suggests a world overcome by barbarism, with crime depicted from a non-sensical perspective divorcing it from historical process or potential cure. Marion Corbetti (Stallone) is not Dirty Harry since he is not a fringe figure of the power structure (police work is fun rather than alienating or demoralizing, and he is therefore into the traditional rightist vigilante); the pastiche element comes largely from an essential ignorance of genre conventions and the foregrounding and self-absorption of the star. Pastiche here is born not from parody but from Hollywood's tendency to repackage and hyperbolize previous images.

The political agenda of the Stallone/Schwarzenegger cycle is consistently skewed in several directions. Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood* (1982), which introduced Stallone's enormously successful Rambo character, might be termed the capstone to the cycle of incoherent texts of the 1970s and 80s noted by Robin Wood. The traditional cult of individualism in this film is interwoven with a portrayal of the explosion of the bourgeois community and the hero's unwillingness to halt the catastrophe. The progenitor of this tendency is probably *The Chase* (1965),³⁶ but a more immediate influence on *First Blood* is *Rolling Thunder*, with its sense of the warrior returning to a corrupt America against which he must use his military skills. *First Blood's* step beyond *Rolling Thunder* is its depiction of the town sheriff as symbol of ideological contradiction. Sheriff Teasle's pointless war against returning veteran John Rambo suggests society's wish to divest itself of all responsibility in the Vietnam War. While the film exploits the image of the veteran as psychotic killing machine, *First Blood* is notewor-

thy in depicting the full force of the veteran's rage directed at the community. The tide of rage is stemmed at the conclusion by the recuperation of the military's image in the person of Colonel Trautman, who, although an almost risible Dr. Frankenstein ("I created him") is a focus of sympathy as he emerges as Rambo's father-figure and therapist. The credibility of the military³⁷ and social normality are restored by Trautman's mediation; Rambo's last outburst of anger is directed at "those maggots at the airport" and the protest movement of the sixties. Although the bulk of the film portrays the veteran as victim and as counterculture figure, the characterization is deliberately cut in half and motivations abruptly reversed. The impetus is the exploitation of rage and cynicism in the post-Watergate period simultaneous with recognition of the new tide of reaction.

Rambo: First Blood Part II is a more forceful recuperation of the dominant ideology and American myth, but with contradictions remaining concerning the construction of the protagonist.³⁸ The film's ahistorical depiction of the Vietnam War and the attempt to draw the audience into the fantasy of Rambo's revenge as a payback for lost honor ("this time he's fighting for all of us") are secondary to the recreation of mythic landscape. Rambo, we are told, is part American Indian (noble savage whose magic and survivalist instincts have been appropriated), part German (ideal disciplined warrior romanticized, not ironically, by postwar American cinema). The myth of journey and recovery is enhanced by the other (Vietnamese, Russians) recognizable by racial characteristics rather than political convictions. The overtly propagandistic tone of the film is disrupted not only by the trotting-out of some very ragged myths, but by the ill-defined sense of Rambo's symbolic origins, the "sender" (in Greimas's term) supplying the hero's narrative value. It can be argued that *Rambo* in the end restores truth in the self, with the hero cast adrift in the tradition of frontier individualism. But Rambo's threat to the CIA bureaucrat Murdock and the frenzied assault on the computer bank represents not so much rightist individualism but the anxiety of the depoliticized proletariat and middle class. The frustration and schizoid political vision of these classes in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate are effectively marshalled by the film. There is little question that the chauvinism planted in the narrative and the film's advertising ("the film that has all America cheering") have been successful, both in terms of the film's box-office profits and its advancement of false consciousness. Yet *Rambo's* reactionary project is informed by the same contradictions as the majority of films of the period, with the interne-cine conflicts of the dominant order leaving the self directionless.

Similarly, the films featuring former body-building star Arnold Schwarzenegger are involved, through their texts' conflicts, in the erasure of the hero at the same time that they assert a particular vision of the monadic self to bolster patriarchy and "traditional values." The politics of a film such as *Commando*, a shameless exploitation of the *Rambo* phenomenon, are polyglot and synthetic in a way which depends on the utter naivete and

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depoliticization of the audience. In this film Col. John Matrix (Schwarzenegger) is forced by Latino thugs to rescue a right-wing Latin-American dictator the CIA apparently *deposed*; the impulse here is the revision of the CIA's image from that in *Three Days of the Condor* (a post-Watergate film) and the valorization of military virtues as Matrix undertakes an impossible one-man course of action similar to Rambo's. More central to the Schwarzenegger films, however, is the sense of protagonist as object. Although Schwarzenegger's attempts at humor tend to send up his character, the goal of *Commando* and *Raw Deal* (and, even more significantly, *The Terminator*) is the utter reduction of the subject to the commodity status alluded to earlier. The careless amalgamation of genres; the fetishizing of specialized weaponry, technology, and consumer products; the incursion of rock video stylistics; the erosion of authorship Hollywood cherished in the wake of auteurism (*Raw Deal's* soundtrack is by Filmscore, a corporate entity using computerized synthesizers to create musical scores on contract) debunk the hero's role as purveyor of myth, particularly if we accept the Barthesian notion of ideology's dependence on the unconscious fusion of nature and culture in the creation of myth. The repetition of a variety of prevalent images from the media landscape commodifies even the fictive act, removing it from a referential in the mythic dimension. The tendencies coalesce in James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), which foregrounds the inevitability of apocalypse seen in the Mad Max films, without those works' sense of reflexivity. The aggressive nihilism of this film rejects the assertion of *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Robocop* (1987) that the human soul will survive its incorporation into the cybernetic technology of postindustrialism. The killer-robot protagonist (Schwarzenegger) signifies more particularly the co-optation of punk/new wave culture into the dominant tendency of reified alienation; punk is depicted as essentially nihilistic and self-destructive rather than genuinely adversarial, and is strongly associated here with the body fetishism of the rest of the Stallone/Schwarzenegger cycle.

The cult of violence, narcissism, and chauvinism circulating around *Rambo*, *Commando*, *Cobra*, *Predator*, et al; on the face of it represents a regressive cultural tendency, particularly in the restoration of phallocentrism and the charismatic male authority figure. As in the other works, the signification here is increasingly emptied of meaning. The exploits of television's World Wrestling Federation exemplifies on a similar scale the same tendencies and contradictions: sport and entertainment, politics and spectacle blur to a point that credibility in the form's ideology deteriorates. The lumpenized elements originally constituting the wrestling audience have receded somewhat to include the middle class as the rightist and vigilante ideology (the state [referee] is never trustworthy) television wrestling capitalizes on in the Reagan period becomes the underpinning of the form. The interchangeability of good guy and bad guy, the scrapping of rules, the commodification of superstars serve, like Rambo, to demonstrate the des-

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truction of a referential base in the midst of a negative political education. While such phenomena exploit reaction, they also ultimately call into question the assumptions underneath larger, "legitimate" entertainments (in this case sports overall) and their role in perpetuating false consciousness.

The Decentered Subject and the New Pop Underground

An unusual feature of the cinema of the late 1960s-early 70s was the underground cult film, or midnight movie, probably inaugurated with the long run of Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1971) at New York's now defunct Elgin Cinema. A variety of films, from avant-garde classics (*Un Chien Andalou*) to provocative, obscure works of the Third World cinema (*Antonio das Mortes*, *Viva la Muerte*) became part of a concelebration at the witching hour. The gesture involved the creation of an avant-garde cinema appealing to upper middle-class urban and suburban youth whose tastes ran increasingly toward shock effects rather than the experiments of, say, the New American Cinema. The market for the midnight movie has remained constant, although fare available for this audience has changed in its configuration. While certain films seem explicitly designed for cult status for a relatively large urban audience (*Subway*, *Repo Man*, *Liquid Sky*, *Eraserhead*), theaters are finding that a number of mainstream films fill the midnight slot very well (*Apocalypse Now*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*). What is most compelling is the eventual reach of the cult film, with *Repo Man*, *Liquid Sky*, and others attracting a large suburban audience particularly as they appear on videotape. The emergence of the cult film,³⁹ eventually incorporating tacky Russ Meyer and Edward Wood schlock, suggests not the birth of an improvised or ready-made avant-garde cinema which would be the province of radical youth, but an attention to cinema for particular aspects of its spectacle and ultimately, in the terms of postmodern theory, its loss of affect.

While such films as George Romero's zombie trilogy (*Night of the Living Dead*, et al.) contain the apocalyptic vision attractive to the mid-night commune of the 80s audience, the punk/new wave trends of the late 70s introduced a style that would run counter to the nihilism and rage of the post-Watergate horror, sci-fi, and war films, and certainly against the quasi-mystical esoterica of some of the Third World cinema. Films such as *Liquid Sky* (1983) and *Repo Man* (1984) seem almost to have used Jameson as a blueprint in defining a celebration of alienation, or, rather, in defining boredom and insentience as states of consciousness replacing alienation's implied protest of industrial society. Jameson's comment on the passing of the Edie Sedgewick burn-out case as paradigm of late modernist *angst* is realized in *Liquid Sky*'s vision of the Warhol scene (especially Anne Carlyle's "Mayflower stock" monologue as she masks herself in fluorescent make-up). The twins portrayed by Anne Carlyle depict not the liberation of androgyny but blank inversion, narcissism, masochism.

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Schizophrenia without any sense of crisis is represented in the monotone of the dialogue ("got any drugs?"); the transcendence previously ascribed to the drug experience is dissolved in the empty science-fiction device of the alien saucer, an idea used also in Alex Cox's *Repo Man* to suggest the wasted effort of narrative closure and the silliness of the genre film's utopianism. Luc Besson's *Subway* (1985) makes use of a *Star Wars* image to effect a similar comment on the emptiness of genres and the social assumptions supporting artistic convention.

Among the more popular of the new cult films, *Repo Man* contains a rendering of the subject influenced strongly by punk/new wave, a cultural tendency whose "coolness" has caused it to be seen as synonymous in many respects with the spirit of the postmodern. The "beyond alienation" attitude and nihilism of much punk/new wave have made it available for absorption by media (as is apparent in the case of *The Terminator*); as co-optation proceeds, the tendency continues to exemplify the contradictions of postmodernism. *Repo Man*'s portrayal of punk culture is heavily interwoven with a parody of American history as mediated through film genres. Otto, the young grocery-clerk-turned-repossession-man, finds himself on a contemporary adventure of journey and recovery in the Southwestern wasteland, except that the Grail turns out to be martian-controlled sedan loaded with radioactive material, and El Dorado is the grimier, chintzy sections of Los Angeles. Bud, Otto's repo mentor, fills the old man/young acolyte construct of countless westerns, particularly as played by Harry Dean Stanton. Stanton's presence as kind of deracinated, Beckett-like frontiersman of latter-day genre films is noticeable, especially with his performance in Wenders' *Paris, Texas*). Otto is portrayed by Emilio Estevez, whose obvious physical resemblance to his father Martin Sheen has resonances; Sheen's own place in American film was established with *Apocalypse Now*, that epic of the failure of the Grail narrative and the entirety of American myth.

Repo Man is not, however, concerned with a further attack on the consumer wasteland and the demise of the American dream. Instead, the film uses the sarcasm of punk/new wave to demonstrate the disappearance of the demarcation line between adversarial and mainstream culture. Otto's punk haircut is appropriate to his job as grocery clerk and to his night life as slam-dancing punker. Otto's partner at the grocery store sings a 7-UP jingle, interchangeable with rock and roll, which is depicted as absolutely co-opted and commodified. The film's one moment of anguish is Otto alone in the night singing a modified version of a TV theme song about kids' "dedication to [our] favorite shows" ("The Jeffersons! Saturday Night Live!...") Otto's gestures of defiance at the family and media culture (he makes sarcastic cracks as his stoned-out parents watch a TV evangelist) and at organized religion (he casually tosses a plastic Virgin Mary out of a repossessed car) are subsumed under the larger idea that Otto joins "the team" (the repo men). The jab at careerism and corporate culture (wives auto

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matically become "repo wives") is undermined by Otto's own acquiescence, by his random assaults on the property of the poor simultaneous with his pranks at the repo headquarters or repossession of a thug's Chrysler. Otto's shift from sub-culture to the arrogant, depoliticized petit-bourgeois does not place him in the position of the acted-upon comedic subject of absurdism even as diegesis constantly tends toward the absurd with causality attacked. Otto's movements are essentially his own; he is soulless and utterly adaptable, able to incorporate his anger (largely aimed at the self) into survivalism. The facile sci-fi comedy that gives the film its deliberately fake dénouement has nothing to do with Otto, since Otto as centered subject has little to do with the film.

Subway, like Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva* and *The Moon in the Gutter*, might be termed a European equivalent of *To Live and Die in L.A.* and similar "rock video films"; the manic pace of the American films is mitigated somewhat, but the assault on received wisdom (the use of Shakespeare, Sartre, Aristotle, and Frank Sinatra in the epigraph), the emphasis on gloss, and the primacy given to the sense of the film as aggregate of shots make the correspondence noticeable. In *Subway*, a young con artist (Christopher Lambert) flees in a tuxedo from police and former prey to take refuge in the metro. He quickly integrates into the bizarre underground city life (including a rollerskating bandit, a superhuman strongman), resumes a relationship with his *haute monde* girlfriend, and, for unspecified reason, forms a rock band. The band's reggae-like song "It's Only Mystery" forms a set-piece of the film (the song's opening lyric queries, "Why do we go on watching this fucking TV? We're so bored, we don't even care what we see"). The tradition of the alienated criminal/dandy of the postwar French cinema (the New Wave but particularly Jean-Pierre Melville) is the backdrop for this exercise, much as the crime films of Don Siegel are for *To Live and Die in L.A.* and *Cobra*. The Lambert character's particularly French anomie becomes so exaggerated that he dissolves into the narrative, to be recuperated mockingly in the final frame; the gesture is similar to Richard Chance's (*To Live and Die in L.A.*) recuperation after the hysterical amorality extending Dirty Harry's sense of a cop as disaffected outsider. In *To Live and Die in L.A.*, however, the protagonist has some direct, logical links to a generic tradition which allows, at least for a time, for a sense of monadic self. In *Subway* the Protagonist is con man, roue, bum, entrepreneur, hipster, finally no one at all, a cipher seen as sum of generic conventions.

Beineix's *The Moon in the Gutter* (1983) shares with *Subway* the preoccupation of French postmodern cinema with allusion to cinematic styles, even specific images from earlier films, to a point where interest in the protagonist's fate is subjugated. Where *Subway*'s point of reference is the crime film and some elements of the *fantastique*, *The Moon in the Gutter* refers to, among others, Van Sternberg and the film adaptations of Tennessee Williams's plays. Like Lambert, the Gerard Depardieu character of

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Beineix's film is a vaguely resonant icon of cinema's past; even the film's tempestuous emotions and sexual dynamics are rendered as devices by their bold elaboration (In one shot of the film, the camera pans up very slowly from Depardieu's feet to his head, lovingly revealing the isolated, forlorn male figure much in the way Brando and his progeny were used by a generation of filmmakers).

The loss of affect and preoccupation with allusionism are increasingly components of "mainstream" cult films such as Nicholas Roeg's *Insignificance* (1985). The relevant feature of Roeg's film is that, like the novels of E.L. Doctorow, it addresses the notion of the disappearance of "real history"⁴⁰ as history becomes pop narrative, confined and distorted by mediation. *Insignificance* (in the logo, "sign" is written in boldface) may be the first self-conscious gesture of the cinema in demonstrating for the mass audience the disruption of signification by turning into free play a well-organized form (the history play) that deals with a specific period of the American past and the "meeting" of historical personages. In the film Marilyn Monroe, Einstein, Joe McCarthy/Roy Cohn, and Joe DiMaggio meet in an imaginary 50s which is simultaneously a landscape of the imagination where past, present, and future merge as creation stands at the brink of apocalypse. The idea of historical figures meeting in the ante-chamber of hell has roots in tradition, but its postmodern manifestation in the plays of Tom Stoppard and Sam Shepard, and the films of Hans-Jurgen Syberberg suggests *historical figures* as projections, and the impossibility of learning from history. For some artists (Syberberg) history has simply been annihilated; for others (Doctorow) a concern for social progress has evaporated. The kind of anxiety in both of these modes is shared somewhat by *Insignificance*, which reverses the patriarchal notion advanced by Hollywood that the individual shapes history. The Great Man concept is replaced here not by the idea of the individual as product of historical forces, but by the idea of the existence of the past only as media apparition. The discourse here is neither grand nor abstract (the film is minus, for example, the epic sexual encounter of Billy the Kid and Jean Harlow of Michael McClure's *Star*); the political resonances of McCarthy/Cohn's brutal assault on the Monroe figure are diluted as the characters are returned to a pop imaginary. Einstein's recriminations ("I didn't choose America. I don't care") don't constitute a radical depiction of what a progressive consciousness might have thought (this would move the film too close to tragedy); rather, they reinforce the character as a subject of collective fascination, a "famous" person whose peculiarities as well as convictions have been amplified by media culture until the figure becomes a simulation. The legends surrounding Einstein become equal to Monroe's *Seven Year Itch* pose, McCarthy/Cohn's unctuous, belligerent manner, DiMaggio's swagger. Personal style supercedes the historical moment: McCarthyism only vaguely encompasses the Monroe calendar photograph and Einstein's absent-mindedness as the historical referential is trivialized. The irony of the ap-

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proach of *Insignificance* to the historical personage is that while the film overturns Hollywood's depiction of the individual as prime mover (the main thrust of the epic and similar genres), its point is the impossibility of apprehension. The trashing of traditional representational narrative strategies, ultimately advancing the disappearance of the protagonist, is ironically key to the emergence in art of a depoliticized, ahistorical consciousness that can be seen as a culmination to the bourgeois world-view.

That the cult or "limited audience" film should become central to an understanding of bourgeois ideological drift in the 1980s is reflected in David Byrne's *True Stories* and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (both 1986). While both films are aimed at the urban "up-scale" audience, they have received the kind of notoriety associated with image proliferation in the current culture industry, and more particularly with the increased taste for the *outré* which has made the lower budget cult film, previously at the firing of industry economically and ideologically, the touchstone for the political temper of postmodernism. The protagonist's position is important to both films as an indicator of the reactionary and progressive poles of the new style. In rock star Byrne's *True Stories* the protagonist/narrator is actually a traditional authorial *raisonneur* and a means by which Byrne ("rock's renaissance man" according to *Time* magazine) can be showcased as genius and as chronicler of the new situation. Assembling (stealing?) numerous narrative devices from sources ranging from Fellini to Syberberg, Byrne assumes a disingenuous, affected role of disinterested raconteur of late capitalist *Kitsch* and alienation as he takes the audience to a bicentennial celebration in a suburban Texas town. Byrne's deadpan stroll through staged vignettes (a woman who lives in bed, a couple who communicate only through their children, a grotesque *Roma*-style fashion show in a shopping mall) has the effect of introducing to the mass audience the cool distance associated with Warhol, along with alienation-as-state-of-being central to Warhol's attitude. The force of Warhol's films and paintings came, however, from an awareness of the horrors of alienation basic to modernism. Warhol's celebrity portraits and his *Death and Disaster* series, while aware of their position as simulacra, had enough bearing on the real to establish a genuine moral force. Warhol the stroller was always close to the dissipated nineteenth-century habitue of salon and street, now hiding his illness and torpor behind sunglasses. Byrne, on the other hand, offers what can be seen dramatically as straightforward (and not too insightful) parody, while simultaneously suggesting good health in himself and society. Pastiche is complete in *True Stories* since the film, in trying to remove itself from any ideological project, lacks a moral center. We must modify this, however, since the film has no controlling aesthetic. While parody is present, it does not have an educative, critical function; rather, it evokes a snide laughter from the upwardly-mobile urban bourgeoisie at lumpen bourgeois elements. At the same time the film is sewn together with rock videos and elegant, campy still-life (derived from the style of William Eggleston) which

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this same audience consumes as postmodernism's aggrandizement and commodification of the banal accelerates.

David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* makes use of postmodernism's retro mode to suggest rather forthrightly the underside of bourgeois culture. Unlike *True Stories*, which also associates the 1980s with the 50s, *Blue Velvet's* images form a conjunction of the psychological and the political to effectuate criticism amidst a very disjunct narrative. The protagonist Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan), another strolling schizo, wanders from "Leave it to Beaver's" suburbia into a hellish across-the-tracks metonym for the Id. While the MacGuffin for this journey is Jeffrey's "need to know more" about a possible murder plot, the need is linked to a wish to obliterate the father, beginning with the opening image of the father's stroke on the oversaturated green of Jeffrey's front lawn (followed by the macrozoom into the turbulent unconscious of the earth), ending with the fall of Frank (Dennis Hopper), the terrible father who caricatures the head of the primal horde. The impotence and impending fall of this father is suggested by his "loss of breath" (his inhaling from a plastic oxygen mask) and his perversion of the primal scene which the "child," Jeffrey, witnesses. The arrival of utopia, still suburban 50s but primarily matriarchal, is subverted by the appearance of artificial robins which fulfill, in a very presentational manner, the wish-dream of Jeffrey's girlfriend. *Blue Velvet*, with its use of the retro-mode to suggest the foolishness of patriarchy, signifies the progressive tendencies surfacing in the fringe cinema; *True Stories*, on the other hand, evidences the chic reaction of the 80s as it satirizes alienation while refusing to admit to an ideological agenda, or a critical project of any sort.

Conclusion

A concern of this paper has been the characteristics of postmodern culture as much as the representation of a certain facet in the cinema. Obviously the debate over postmodernism, although already treated with a kind of collective yawn as the *au courant* topic of academe, is vital to an understanding of the current political/economic situation internationally. Jameson and others (particularly the group associated with the *New Left Review*) are convinced at this point of postmodernism as an index of the dynamics of late capitalism; the notion of the site of struggle previously mentioned may indicate something far more severe in terms of the impossibility of bourgeois myths as they are mediated by art, even as image producers attempt to resurrect and prop up these myths with a vengeance during a period of reaction and recuperation. The death of the hero and the coming apart of the actantial model in bourgeois narrative art must suggest to us the bankruptcy of patriarchy and its ability to transmit symbolic values. Whether it is the absurd contradictions and worn-out signifying methods of *Rambo*, or the tendency of *Streets of Fire* and *Mad Max* to treat conventions and the myths generating them as pure text, it is clear that a cri-

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sis point is approaching. It would be foolish and precipitous to take heart in this as we face a period of great intellectual impoverishment in the cinema, but the evidence is such that the postmodern style, in form and elsewhere, is a prelude to a non-mythic consciousness of art and history.

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Notes

1. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red Press, 1983).
2. See Jonathan Crary, "The Eclipse of the Spectacle," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (Boston: Godine, 1984).
3. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, Trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
5. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984). The notion of the legitimization crisis is central, of course, to Habermas's theory of late capital.
6. *Ibid.*, 14.
7. Jameson's most significant work on this topic thus far is his "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," in *New Left Review* 146 (July/August 1984): 53-94.
8. Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism, and Postmodernism," *New left Review* 152 (July/August 1985): 60-74.
9. Jameson, 71.
10. Robin Wood, "The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the '70s" in *Movie* 27/28 (Winter 1980/Spring 1981): 24-43.
11. The term is associated principally with the work of Baudrillard. It has been appropriated recently by Umberto Eco in his *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1986).
12. See Robin Wood, "'80s Hollywood: Dominant Tendencies," in *CineACTION* 1 (Spring 1985): 2.
13. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983).
14. Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), p.216.
15. Eagleton, 69.
16. Jameson, 55.
17. A.J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schiefer, et al. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1983), pp.197-221.

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18. Ibid., 208.
19. This canonization (and the return of a species of autism) is discussed in Robert E. Kapsis, "Alfred Hitchcock: Auteur or Hack?" in *Cineaste* XIV (February 1986): 30-36.
20. Anthony Perkins has frequently made this remark in reference to the character. See Art Michaels, "Psycho III", *Cinefantastique* 16 (October 1986): 83.
21. R. Barton Palmer uses the term in his "The Metafictional Hitchcock: The Experience of Viewing and the Viewing of Experience in *Rear Window* and *Psycho*," in *Cinema Journal* 25 (Winter 1986): 18. See also my "Apocalypticism in the Contemporary Horror Film" (Ph.D. dissertation: New York University, 1983) 30-54.
22. François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 211.
23. The function of the quest is discussed in Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), xiii.
24. See Dana B. Polan, "'Above All Else to Make You See': Cinema and the Ideology of Spectacle," in Jonathan Arac, ed., *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minnesota Press, 1986), 59.
25. This view is encouraged, not ironically, by government officials and sectors of the media. In the current period, the depiction of terrorists as Other is accomplished usually by association with socialist ideology; a fairly common strategy, however, is to portray the terrorist as product of an amorphous although objective evil for the purpose of debunking ideology itself and its relationship to violence. A representative example is Claire Sterling, *The Terror Network* (New York: Berkley, 1982). Sterling attributes to Mehmet Ali Agca (convicted of shooting the Pope) the remark "I am neither left-wing nor right-wing. Ideology doesn't interest me. The important thing is to be an international terrorist (297)." For Sterling, Agca's remark "went far to illuminate the decade ahead to us."
26. Liner notes to the soundtrack album of *Streets of Fire* (MCA-5492)
27. Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock and Roll Music* (New York: Dutton, 1976).
28. Robin Wood, "The Incoherent Text," 26.
29. See Noel Carroll, "The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)," *October* 20 (Spring 1982), 51-83.
30. See my "Myth, Male Fantasy, and Simulacra: The Hero as Pastiche in *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13, no.2 (Summer 1985), 80-91.
31. This idea is suggested in much of the publicity material for the film. See Michael Stein, "George Miller on *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, *Fantastic Films* 45 (August 1985), 20.
32. The notion seems basic to recent discussion of postmodernism. See Michael Newman, "Revising Modernism, Representing Postmodernism: Critical Discourses of the Visual Arts," in Lisa Appignanesi, ed., *Postmodernism* (London: ICA Documents, 1986), pp. 32-51.
33. See Robin Wood, "'80s Hollywood."
34. Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans., Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), p.97.

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35. The idea is investigated at length in Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans., Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Want, 1972). Perhaps more central to this discussion is Claude Levi-Strauss, "How Myths Die," *New Literary History* 5, no.2 (Winter 1974), 269-81. See Also Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p.12.
36. See Robin Wood's discussion on *The Chase* in his *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985) pp.11-25.
37. See Claude J. Smith, "Clean Boys in Bright Uniforms: The Rehabilitation of the U.S. Military in Films Since 1978," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 12, no.4 (Winter 1984), 144-152.
38. An insightful investigation of *Rambo's* conflicting ideologies is Elizabeth Traube, "Redeeming Images: The Wild Man Comes Home," *Persistence of Visions* 1, nos.3/4 (Summer 1986), 71-95.
39. Danny Peary, *Cult Movies* (New York: Dell, 1981). Peary's work (now two volumes) is part of a growing body of fan material attempting to define a film subculture.
40. See Jameson, p.68.