

# TWILIGHT OF FREEDOM

## Four American Movies

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**S**AM Goldwyn got it all wrong. "Got a message? Send it Western Union", he is reported to have said. The exegeses of this high priest of clichés and myths continue to pour out of Hollywood directors' mouths. Quips Ross Hunter, "I don't want to hold

They delved beneath the plot, subject matter, content and style and searched for recurrent internal themes and motives which thematically link the films of a specific director. Such an analysis will show, for example, that director John Ford's attitude towards



up a mirror to life as it is. I just want to show the part that is attractive — not freckled faces and broken teeth, but smooth faces and pearly white teeth". Goldwyn, like many of his colleagues didn't understand the nature of his own industry. The American film contains a gold mine of analytical data on American society. It took the French New Wave critic/directors to tell them that. Film-makers like Jean-Luc-Godard, Francois Truffaut, Alain Resnais and Claude Chabral developed their theories and films on the assumption that the American movies, even those made under the oppressive uniformity of the studio system, were worth studying in depth.

the Red Indian underwent a complete reversal over a period of thirty years of film-making. Jim Kitsis reports:

The Indians of *Drums Along the Mohawk* and *Stagecoach*, devilish marauders that threaten the hardy pioneers, suffer a sea-change as Ford's hopes wane, until with *Cheyenne Autumn* they are a civilized, tragic people at the mercy of a savage community.

I am not concerned here with the films of one director but rather the link between a number of apparently diverse and totally different films and their relations with American society. A relevant

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film criticism will study the content (plot and its resolution, archetypes) and style (photography, editing) and their links with the political, economic and social experiences of the society in question. It will decipher messages and themes and relate these to social phenomena.

Anti-establishment *Easy Rider* is a conglomerate of myths. The ambivalent meanderings of a confused but naively idealistic traffic cop cruising on his *Electra Glide in Blue* appears at first glance to be a crime story. *Lawman* is a western, perhaps, and *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, a military based psychological thriller. These films are linked by the American dream — the sanctity of freedom. Freedom for America. God bless America. Sub-currents connect the films through a concern for America's role in Vietnam, foreign policy, hypocrisy and discrimination. The heroes are the outlaws, assailed from all sides by the violent and dangerously upright law and order — devoted — establishment American public. All of the outlaw heroes end up getting themselves killed. That's what America is doing — killing itself. The outlaw heroes, whether pop culture or military, all clash with the manifest, thoughtless brutality of a nation that talks exhaustively about freedom but

which does not tolerate radical expressions of it, and is capable, at times, of ruthlessly crushing dreams and aspirations which it does not comprehend or approve. On a superficial level *Easy Rider* is what the establishment would call the degenerate pop culture. The film is a revelation of two marijuana and acid tripping sex-crazed chopper bike saddle tramps who appear to be aimlessly wandering through the interminable American desert-scapes. Breaking through the superficiality barrier the movie assumes the trappings of a western and is as naive as it is brutal. The motorcycles are incidental — they might just as well be horses. The breathtaking landscape exudes the spirit that is the American dream. The riders breathe the limitless space of the highway — the Road to Freedom. The theme is conflict: long scruffy greasy hair versus cleanshaven crewcuts; beads versus debonaire shirts and motorbikes versus Pontiacs. The two riders are searching for a purifying sensory experience and a refreshing intimacy with the country and its people. But it's a pilgrimage to nowhere. Their journey sweeps through a society of contradictions, hypocrisy and ultimately, death. The camera follows with an almost *cinéma-vérité* realism. Writer/director Dennis Hopper relates some of his experiences:

I was in the freedom march, man, Selma to Montgomery, and there was this guy at the side of the road who was urinating on us as we passed, and yelling "white trash" and I thought, "wow", can't he get it together? We only look different, we're





Robert Blake, Elisha Cook in *Electra Glide*

all part of the same herd. He kept shouting at me, "Hippie, Commie, long hair!" Wow. I mean I don't care if he has short hair . . .

I walked into a bar and immediately a guy swung at me, screaming, "Get outta here, my son's in Vietnam," and the local sheriff was right behind him, screaming that his son was in Vietnam, and I said "Now wait a minute", that I was an actor and there with a movie, whereupon the boy's high school councillor started screaming to get out, that his son was in Vietnam . . . so I said, "okay, I'm hitch-hiking to the peace march", whereupon eight guys jumped me. Incredible.

Freedom from hypocrisy, tolerance and altruistic behaviour can't be bought, even with the lucrative proceeds of drug peddling. It can't be found by doing other things like riding motor-cycles, smoking pot or acid tripping. Dropping out is no good unless it attains a higher level of order and purpose. "Don't be scared", says Dennis Hopper, "go and try to change America, but if you're gonna wear a badge whether its long hair or black skin, learn to protect yourselves . . ."

The traffic cop in *Electra Glide in Blue* didn't learn to protect himself. He was killed too, by dropout dope peddlers. He was just trying to be friendly. This cop tried to change America in his simple small town way. He graduated from the two wheeler traffic department to the four wheeler homicide squad.

This time the highway didn't even pretend to be anything other than a killer-trap of hypocrisy, lies and deceit. The landscape was the same spirit of America. The concerns of this film though, are a little wider – a direct comment on America's ability to perceive a problem and then to foul the solution up, despite good advice. Here a murder is discovered and the tried and traditional methods of blaming, assaulting and killing commie hippies covers up for a trial of red herrings and illogical conclusions by the officer in charge of homicide. The newly graduated traffic cop becomes dispirited and resigns himself back to the highway. His *Electra Glide* becomes his hearse and he is shot by the very people he is trying to protect. The cop falls off his bike and he lies on the highway as the camera tracks back for a full eleven minutes. The landscape changes colour and the spirit of America fades to the tunes of *God Bless America*.

Step in *Lawman*. The law is absolute. Nobody is above the law. America (the U.S. Marshall) is that law. The law is to be revered and upheld whatever the cost. The Marshall has a licence to kill. Why does he kill? To maintain law and order. Why does he so ruthlessly maintain law and order? Because no-one is above the law. Why is no-one above the law? Because the U.S. Marshall says so. Why does the Marshall say so? Because the Marshall likes to kill. Why does the Marshall like to kill? . . . Isn't he the lawman? Extrapolate. Why does America kill in Vietnam? To maintain law and order. Why does America maintain law and order in an insignificant part of the world? Because no country is above the law. Why is no country above the law? Because America says so. Why does America say so? Because America likes to kill. Why does America like to kill? . . . Because America must prove itself capable of inhuman behaviour to convince the enemies of law (the communist Russians) that the United States will never yield to law breakers and disorder.

Enter the future, 1981. *Twilight's Last Gleaming*. America is held to ransom. A renegade U.S. Airforce General has captured a Titan nuclear missile base and threatens to blow up the Soviet Union. His motivation: the truth will set America free; the people have a right to know. He speaks to the U.S. President, "there is no time left . . . The doctrine of Presidential credibility . . . the licence to lie . . . destroyed America's real credibility". The President must make public the contents of NSC document 9759 which explain the real reasons why 50,000 Americans were sacrificed in Vietnam – a deliberate act of inhumanity to deter the Russians. The President, a naive and simple patriot, who was unaware of this document agrees to make public its contents and allows himself to be taken hostage pending the safe release of the renegade General and his colleagues. The President believes in this mission, trusts the humanity of his advisors, and upholds the American ideal of the

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freedom of the people and the right to know, whatever the cost. Unfortunately, his advisors and generals do not. They have become slaves of "law and order". They are the law. Not even the President is above their law. They are dangerously upright, self-righteous and violent. The Titan missiles aimed at Russia are openly defiant of that law. The missiles were built to protect the spirit of America. That spirit must be subjugated in the interests of the law. The generals deliberately gun down the hostage President and his captors when they emerge from the base and thereby secure the secrecy of document 9759. Freedom dies with the President. Hypocrisy reigns supreme.

The four movies reflect the consciousness of the American nation — its contradictions, its motivations, its failings, its attitudes, its guilt and its beliefs. Nobody is exempted. Prejudices are ripped open at the seams. The ambivalence of American society is laid bare. The very people who run the country and determine America's mission in the world are open to devastating examination. This is the freedom of America. The ideal, the spirit will live forever; it is an integral part of the filmic myth and other art-forms. The spirit of America is identifiable and this is its strength.

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## "Snot en trane" . . . a society that lacks mirrors and recoils from self-examination.

Back home to South Africa. A topsy turvy world. Our cinematic myths are empty, superficial, mindless, still at the "snot en trane" stage. Past that we are into an unreality of security: nothing need be exposed; indeed nothing can be exposed. Thanks to *Kaptein Kaprivi* and *Mirage Eskader* everything is nice and cosy. *Tigers don't Cry* confirms our ambivalence with Black Africa, *The Angolan File* tells it gently and the prophecies of *Land Apart* are put into cold storage lest they become a security risk. *The Guest*, in this milieu, becomes an allegory and like *Jannie Totsiens*, relates the plight of Afrikanerdom. *Suffer Little Children* fits comfortably into the U.S. West Coast counter-culture. Lacking in local visual imagery this film may well be a consequence of a society that lacks mirrors and recoils from self-examination.

Got the message?

It's there somewhere.

