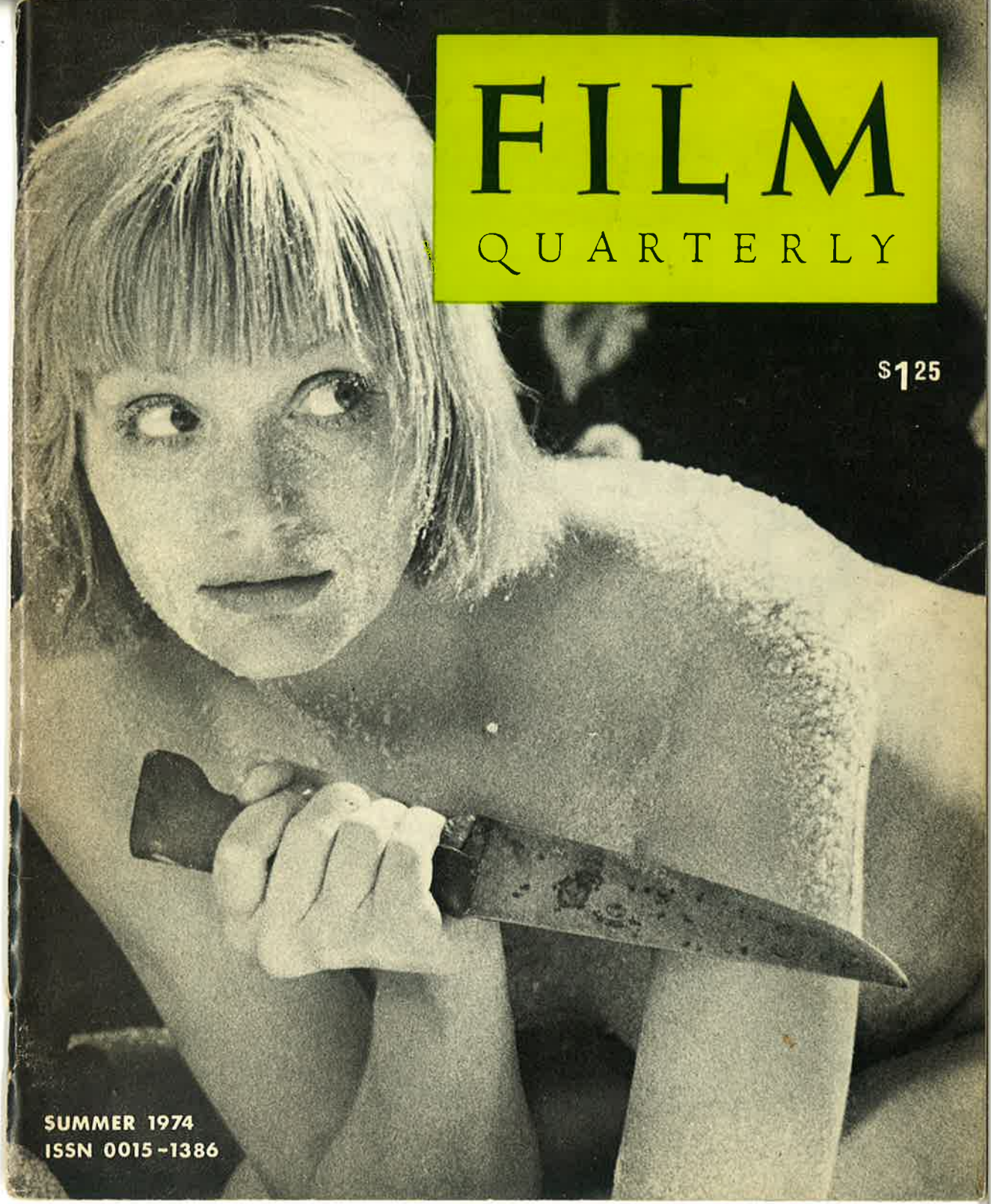

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ARTICLES

REVIEWS

COVER: From Dusan Makavejev's new *Sweet Movie.*

Editor's Notebook

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NEW PERIODICALS

Jump Cut (3138 West Schubert, Chicago, Ill. 60647, $3.00 per year domestic, $4.00 per year foreign) is a new publication in illustrated tabloid format. The emphasis of the first issue is on developing a political film criticism which is aware of structuralist, semiological, and Marxist approaches, but individual pieces give attention to auteurist analysis and indeed to performers. Most of the issue is devoted to current films, but there are also articles on older films, on the pre-1957 background of *la politique des auteurs*, on video, etc.

FILM STUDY

Persons interested in studying film theory and history in Paris, on either graduate or undergraduate level (proficiency in French is required) may obtain further information from: Mary Milton, Council on International Educational Exchange, 777 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017. Tel.: (212) 661-0310.

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MARSHA KINDER

The Return of the Outlaw Couple

The outlaw couple is on the comeback trail. Reaching the screen almost simultaneously, *Badlands, Thieves Like Us,* and *The Sugarland Express* have striking similarities. What kind of trend do they represent and why has it arisen at this particular time? Strongly influenced by *Bonnie and Clyde,* all three films focus on a pair of appealing young lovers who boldly break the law. Ultimately the young man is executed by lawmen, while the woman survives to take care of baby or record their adventures. All three films are set in rural America sometime in the past: *Sugarland* takes place in Texas in 1969 and is based on actual events; loosely adapting well known news stories, *Badlands* follows a westward journey from North Dakota to Montana in 1959; the plot of *Thieves* (a remake of *They Live by Night*) is set in Mississippi in the thirties. Outbursts of violence are juxtaposed with humor or nostalgia, creating a very distinctive tone. Despite all the vigorous action (robberies, prison breaks, killings, and chases), the special quality of each film is determined primarily by the rich visual surface. The world in which these characters move is defined by strange white houses and stylized furnishings, car lots and motor courts, desolate roads and idyllic landscapes.

These films seem to be reacting against trends that currently dominate Hollywood. As if to counter the forces of Gay Lib and the Women's Movement, commercial American films have recently been focusing on "love stories" between a couple of male friends (*Papillon, Bang the Drum Slowly, Scarecrow, Mean Streets, The Sting, Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, Easy Rider, Midnight Cowboy, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,* and most blatantly *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*). Of course, the heroes aren't really "fags," and to prove this the film will usually include a scene ridiculing homosexuals, yet at the same time indirectly suggesting the latent sexual dimension of the friendship. Women may be included, but they are always restricted to minor roles. In the fifties the male couple was mythologized in the highway romance of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, a prime source for sixties road movies like *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane Blacktop.* Although they are "straight," most of these male heroes are lawbreakers or nonconformists, yet ironically the same pattern is popular in the "cop" films (e.g., *The French Connection, Electra Glide in Blue, The Laughing Policeman, Busting, Magnum Force*) where the "partners" develop their relationship within the close quarters of a cop car. Instead of overcoming the opposition of disapproving parents, they must struggle against a corrupt or misguided establishment, personified by a Captain or Inspector who tries to inhibit their actions or break up the pair. The film's homosexual is either the perverted killer (*The Laughing Policeman*), the pathetic outcast who deserves to be busted (*Busting*), or part of the corrupt police (*Magnum Force*); women are whores or victims.

Replacing the gangster and private-eye genres, the cop movies have made the hero a member of the establishment who still retains some characteristics of the outsider. He is individualized, ethnic, and sometimes even freaky (especially in *Serpico*). Basically honest, he is confronted with an impossible situation—how can he fight the dangerous killers, perverts, and dealers (who pose a real threat to society), and maintain his own integrity while he is a member of a corrupt institution? He can quit the force and join the indifferent public (as in *Serpico* and *Busting*), but then the dangerous criminals will continue to flourish; he can take the law into his own hands (as in *Dirty Harry*), but then he too becomes corrupted (and a sequel like *Magnum Force* has to be made as a corrective); or he can continue as a cop in this weak position, forced to accept minor successes (*The Laughing Policeman*), major defeats (*Kojak and the Marcus-Nelson Murders* and *The French Connection*), or even death (*Electra Glide in Blue*).

SUGARLAND EXPRESS: *Goldie Hawn*

This double-bind situation reflects our political realities. In the late sixties, we began to suspect that someone within the establishment might be more capable of exposing its corruption and breaking it down than outside radical forces. The antiwar movement shifted its focus from the draft resisters to the GI protestors—the enlisted men who refused to fight, the soldiers who revealed that they had witnessed or participated in grisly massacres, the wounded who exposed the horrors of the veteran hospitals. In the civilian ranks, we witnessed Daniel Ellsberg being transformed from an elite war strategist to a heroic outlaw exposing the lies and corruption at the highest levels of government. In the Watergate affair, John Dean underwent a simliar transformation, but the public was less certain whether to consider him hero or villain. We persistently wonder what is the effect of all this exposure—things go on as usual, Nixon still survives, and if he is finally thrown out of office, he will be replaced by someone just as bad. The internal forces fighting against corruption may turn out to be impotent after all.

The cop genre transfers these political issues to the safer context of law enforcement. The films that have dealt with them most successfully *(Serpico* and *The French Connection)* are based on actual events. Yet most of these films cop out and support the forces of fascism. Despite their claims to liberalism, all of them attack court rulings that protect the rights of the suspect and argue in favor of strengthening police power. In *Magnum Force,* for example, the distinction between "Dirty Harry" and the rightwing vigilantes he purges from the force is extremely fuzzy. The heroic vice-cops of *Busting,* a Jew and a Chicano no less, lament the injustice of the system; classy white whores and arrogant Italian racketeers with connections manage to get off while only outcast blacks and gays are killed or sentenced. The heroes' idea of justice is having *everyone* susceptible to their entrapment and deception, as they playfully enforce laws against victimless crimes.

In this context, *Badlands, Sugarland Express,* and *Thieves Like Us* attempt, not only to revive the heterosexual couple, but to move the romantic protagonists, however diminished their powers, back outside the law. Hence, these films look back, not to the saccharine *Love Story,* but to movies like *You Only Live Once* (1937), *They Live by Night* (1949), *Breathless* (1959), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and *The Honeymoon Killers* (1969), which deal with the way ordinary people confront frustration and impotence. The movement backward is reflected in the nostalgic settings of rural America, in contrast to the cop genre which produces "now" movies typically set in New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco. *Badlands* and *Thieves* explore the present by considering its connection with earlier periods when people felt similarly powerless—most notably, during the thirties depression and the dormant fifties. It is no accident that these two periods have been chosen for a faddish revival in the seventies. Yet neither

Robert Altman nor Terrence Malick is cultivating nostalgia for its own sake or as a means of escape (the other choice led to extraordinary commercial success in *American Graffiti*); in fact, they comment on the revival through their visual style. While the outlaw films develop a highly sensuous visual texture (frequently referred to as a "feminine" style), the cop movies are fast-paced action films, with a lean, muscular structure (characteristics of the so-called "masculine" style). This stylistic masculinity seems to compensate for the final impotence of the protagonist; no matter which path he chooses, the cop is bound to lose, and usually he whines about it to whoever will listen (particularly in *Serpico*). In contrast, the outlaw movies stress the value of choosing your own path and accepting the consequences without any whining at all. In *Sugarland*, the young mother decides she wants her baby *now*, not when the authorities say it is all right, and she is willing to do anything it takes to fulfill that goal. The young bank robber in *Thieves* is equally bold, breaking into prison to free his accomplice. Ironically, even the man he is freeing can't understand how a simple country boy can pull off such a daring feat and jealously begrudges him his power. Lost in the desert, the young killer in *Badlands* throws a stick to decide which direction to follow. Then he changes his mind, declaring that if he's not good enough to decide for himself, then it doesn't matter what happens to him. He also chooses the precise moment of his capture, deliberately building a rock monument to commemorate the event. In contrast to the cops who are beset by conflicting loyalties, these outlaws commit themselves totally to a single goal of their own choice, which necessarily implies the sacrifice of other values. That is the source of their power. In all three films, it takes a whole army of police to subdue an individual with this kind of commitment.

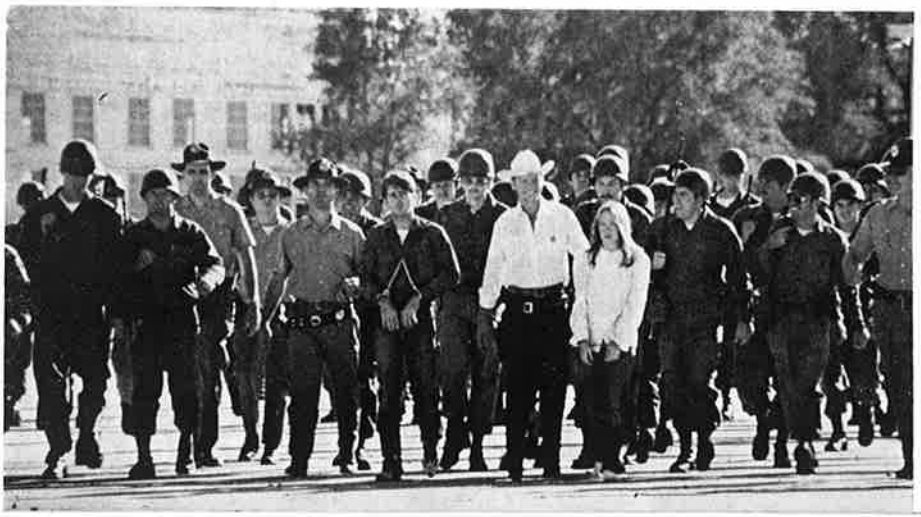
In some ways, *Walking Tall* combines the cop and outlaw genres. Set in a small Southern town but focusing on plot rather than visuals, the film presents a marine returning home after the Vietnam War and falling victim to the local vice rackets who are in league with the law, a corruption which extends all the way to the state capitol. Although he is a family man, our hero is a rugged individual—he talks softly but literally carries a big stick. Determined to destroy the Evil regardless of the consequences, he first acts as an outlaw taking personal revenge. Then he is elected sheriff and begins to reform the establishment. This superman has two weaker partners, who draw from his strength: a black man who becomes his deputy, and a timid wife who begs him to run away. Ultimately his innocent wife is murdered, but the Man, who is stronger in mind, body, and spirit, survives massive assaults and numerous assassination attempts. He succeeds in cleaning up the town and transforming the local citizens into a cooperative vigilante mob (perhaps reviving the KKK). This romanticized cop film offers a morality as simplistic and reactionary as the one in *The Exorcist*—but here the forces of Good are led by the local sheriff rather than the local priest. This is precisely the kind of power fantasy rejected by both the cop and outlaw movies.

All three outlaw films emphasize the high price paid for any power whatsoever. They include elements from the cop movies, which qualify the actions of the outlaws and soften the sharp contrast between the two genres. Unlike *Bonnie and Clyde*, these films do not present cops as malicious killers, but treat them almost sympathetically. Both cops and outlaws reflect the outer society. In *Sugarland* the humanized police are faced with the difficult problem of dealing with criminals who are harmless young kids trying to get back their own baby. Of course they sympathize, as do the people in the small towns along the road who treat the outlaws as heroes; yet the couple is willing to go to any extreme (kidnap, robbery, prison break) to get what they want. Somehow the cops must uphold the law. The officer in charge wants to prevent anyone from getting hurt and tries to make a deal with the couple, who are holding one of his men hostage. Yet the radical actions of the outlaws force him to reveal what lies beneath his liberal facade—he breaks his promise and arranges an ambush, resulting in the husband's death. The young hostage is even more likable than his chief. Befriending the couple, he helps to break down the barriers between them; yet, like his

superior officer, he is powerless to prevent the final killing. This impotence of the law is repeatedly emphasized by the long parade of police cars pursuing the two criminals; it suggests the kind of overkill that failed in Vietnam. As in that pathetic war, after the wasteful killing was over, the surviving underdog finally achieved the original goal. The film ends with a shot of the young cop, looking into a sparkling river, perhaps reflecting on what has happened and his own role in the absurd adventure.

In *Badlands,* since one of the outlaws is a mass murderer, the cops have no real conflicts—they simply have to hunt him down. The killer immediately establishes rapport with the young handsome officer who captures him, for they are both show-offs who long to be heroes. Most of the police are taken with his charm and find him very likable, yet this has no bearing on his fate. Their impersonality exactly parallels the killer's attitude toward his victims and that of the good soldier toward his enemy. In all three cases, the man may have nothing personal against his victim, whom he may even like; but he'll kill him in an instant if he thinks it is required by his moral code. The only difference is that the lone killer is operating by a set of personal rules (which reflect the larger society) whereas the cop and soldier follow institutional orders. During his adventures the killer is polite and neat, he quotes familiar aphorisms, he makes apologetic speeches that always stress the positive side (reminiscent of Nixon's performances at times of crisis); he would really like to be a police officer and, when he is finally captured, he is extremely cooperative and fits right into the military rituals. Although friendly and sociable, he is forced into alienation by his criminal path. Yet, like a Charles Whitman, Lee Harvey Oswald, or James Dean (his heroic model from the fifties), this rebel without a cause is only a pathetic reflection of a sick society. Even his individuality is a romantic illusion. He represents the banality of evil, personified by Nixon.

Cops play the least significant role in *Thieves.* They are ordinary people with families and funny quirks, just like the outlaws. Before being kidnapped, the prison warden has a leisurely dinner with his wife. Once aware of his situation, all he can think about is how bad this will make him look with his superiors; instead, he is murdered. Everyone in the film has problems; after all, the country is in the middle of a depression. In times of crisis, people have to stick together; that's what FDR tells America on his radio broadcasts. The idea of alienation or the question of which side of the law you're on is not taken seriously within the family. Rather, the issue is how narrowly or widely you define your allegiance. Do you restrict it to the nuclear family, or do you broaden it to an extended family, a gang, a class, a race, a nation, a species? It is especially crucial in times when we are beset by corrupt institutions, for then all rules are called into doubt and we tend to



BADLANDS

rely more heavily on personal loyalties.

Although focusing on the heterosexual romance, the outlaw films also present a competing male friendship. The conflict is central in *Thieves Like Us,* for the title refers, not to the couple, but to a gang of male bank robbers, one of whom is always rhapsodizing, "They'll never again get three like us together." When the young hero gets married, his wife wants him to quit the gang and settle down. He tries to maintain both sets of loyalties, but she interprets this as a betrayal. Later, he is betrayed by another woman who also restricts her loyalties to the nuclear family. After her brother-in-law is dead, she feels she owes nothing to his friends; so she sells out the young man, who still considers her family, in order to get her husband out of prison. After he has been shot down by the police, his pregnant wife again feels betrayed, not by the woman who set up the ambush, but by her dead husband, for he was killed as a result of allying himself with the gang. Only two of the robbers try to develop these double loyalties; both enjoy life and are gunned down by the police. The third is lonely, miserable, and jealous of the others; the only real killer in the group, ironically, he is the one who survives.

In *Sugarland* and *Badlands* both men are committed to their women, which they prove by breaking the law. In *Badlands,* Kit kills Holly's father when he tries to oppose their relationship. In order to fulfill his wife's desire of getting back their baby, the young husband in *Sugarland* escapes from prison even though he has only a few more months to serve. His good friend tries to stop him, but is foiled by the woman. Yet, the heroes of both films express the desire to be policemen, to join a militaristic male society that would separate them from women. The films almost seem to suggest that commitment to a woman is against the law. This idea is developed more fully in *Sugarland* through the friendship between the husband and the hostage cop. But every time there is a crisis, the young man reaffirms the priority of his loyalty to his wife. After his death, however, we wonder whether the young cop is not as deeply affected as she.

Although the woman has an important role in all three films, the nature of her strength is ambiguous. Undeniably, she is the one who survives and she demonstrates some form of creativity — in having a baby *(Sugarland* and *Thieves),* directing the action *(Sugarland),* or recording their story *(Badlands).* The woman is strongest in *Sugarland.* She provides the motivating force to free both of her men—to get her husband out of prison and her infant son out of the foster home. She may need her husband's help, but whenever he falters, she has the energy to take over the wheel or the gun, or even to slap him around till he does what she says. We are not used to seeing such power exerted by women in movies, and I must say I find it refreshing. Of course, she can also be seen as an irresponsible child, dominated by whims; her willfulness is expressed not only in getting back baby, but also in collecting trading stamps or choosing the most inconvenient moment to take a piss. When she wants something, she wants it *now*—regardless of the context or the consequences. She may be the manipulator who sets things in motion, but it's her husband who pays with his life, partly because she refuses to see practical realities. Yet she bravely succeeds in fighting the system and retrieving her baby.

In *Thieves Like Us,* the woman is not a rebellious outlaw, but a naive, lonely country girl who wants a conventional life with husband and baby. Despite the fact he's a killer, she nurses her young man back to health and gives him her loyalty because he's willing to marry her and he's the only beau she's ever had. She loves him while he's alive, but renounces him as a betrayer after his death. Letting fate dictate her destination (she does not share the self-determination of the male outlaws), she takes a train to Texas, where she hopes to raise her baby and deny the truth about his father. Although she demanded total loyalty from her husband, her closed-minded restrictiveness prevents her from remaining true to his memory. This country flower is contrasted with the blowzy beautician, who marries one of the other outlaws and reaps material rewards, and the strong sister-in-law, who runs the family while her husband is in prison but ultimately betrays the hero to the

cops. Whether passive or aggressive, frail or robust, women are portrayed as essentially timid creatures who cannot see beyond the narrow limits of the nuclear family. Motivated primarily by self-interest, they all survive; but so does the lone killer.

Badlands presents the most negative portrait of a woman. Unlike *Thieves,* here she is not morally inferior to her mate, but rather is the perfect companion for a pathological killer. Pretty, but unpopular because she has nothing to say, Holly feels very fortunate to have the affections of this young man who looks so much like James Dean and who has so many strong opinions. The main difference between them is that while he is a passionate romantic, she is incapable of feeling any emotion whatsoever—not for her lover or any of his victims, not even for her murdered father. Malick accentuates the flatness of her affect by making her the ironic narrator who tells this story of horror in passionless tones (an extremely effective device reminiscent of Ford Maddox Ford's *The Good Soldier*). Her passivity is as pathological as his aggression; they are equally callous to the murders. She evokes memories of the Genovese case where numbers of people watched a girl being murdered without doing anything about it. Like the silent majority of the sixties and seventies, she denies all responsibility for the killings performed by heroes or villains, even if she has some influence over their behavior. She is shrouded in the kind of ambiguity that surrounds Patricia Hearst—is she merely a passive victim who has been dragged along by her criminal captors, or has she been romantically transformed and infected by the outlaw mentality? After her lover is captured and finds his proper place among the military ranks of the police force, Holly retreats into middle-class respectability. She ends up marrying the son of the lawyer who defends her, realizing Kit's fantasy of joining the law. The final irony is that both of these "outlaws" really belong *within* society.

In describing this genre, one can exaggerate the similarities among the three films. Although they all grow out of *Bonnie and Clyde,* each emphasizes a separate line, which results in important differences in tone. *Sugarland* develops

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the farcical dimension, which stresses the comic resilience of the outlaws who always bounce back after each explosion of violence like characters in a cartoon (the most common form of cinematic farce). Combining aggression and humor, farce discharges anxiety and fear through laughter. *Bonnie and Clyde* is punctuated with hysterical outbursts in which characters are screaming in pain, howling with laughter, or shrieking in terror. After each dangerous battle, we are comically reassured by Keystone-cop chase sequences where harmless police cars roll over and nearly collide while the Barrow gang escapes across the state line to the joyful picking of Flatt and Scruggs. There are similar collisions in *Sugarland.* In fact, every time we see that long parade of police cars, we can't help but laugh and hope that everything will turn out all right for the young couple. From the opening shot where we see someone working futilely on a wrecked car at the side of a desolate country road, we can predict that automobiles will provide the setting for the actions (e.g., the shootout in the used-car lot and the final death scene) and will function as important characters (e.g., the twin darlings of the out-of-state patrolmen, which are totally demolished when they join the pursuit). In the final chase, some of the cop cars are almost personified (like inanimate objects in cartoons) as their front wheels helplessly dangle over the edge of a dirt ridge. The casting of Goldie Hawn as the young mother also gives the character a dimension of the cartoon caricature, with her stylized goofiness. In the sequence where she and her husband spend the night in a camper, they watch a Bugs Bunny cartoon. We see the couple in

huge close-ups as they giggle with delight while the reflections of animated violence are superimposed on their faces. Suddenly the husband stops laughing as he realizes that these farcical catastrophes foreshadow his own doom. She may be a cartoon character who can bounce back, but he is not. Both are so warm, vital, innocent, and childlike, that we want to believe in their survival. Yet after all, *The Sugarland Express* is not really a Road Runner cartoon, even though it uses many of the same conventions.

Making his directorial debut, Steven Spielberg also draws upon the conventions of the contemporary road picture, which reveals a small corner of American life with its own special rituals, jargon and style (e.g., *Five Easy Pieces, Two-Lane Blacktop, The Last American Hero, Payday;* interestingly, *Dead Head Miles,* which was written by Terrence Malick but never released, also belongs to this genre). Frequently slick, these films rely heavily on the visuals to define the special qualities of the world being explored. Vilmos Zsigmond (who has worked as cinematographer on earlier Altman films) does brilliantly, especially in handling the cars and in giving the strange white house (which is the death trap) exactly the right combination of the ominous and the ordinary. As a first film, *Sugarland* is impressive, but *Badlands* is remarkable.

Acknowledging Arthur Penn in his credits, Terrence Malick develops the mythic dimension of *Bonnie and Clyde,* but with significant alterations. The elements he adopts from Penn are all treated ironically, for the dominant mode of *Badlands* is satire; hence, it is pointless to attack the film for a lack of warmth (as many critics have done) since this is characteristic of most satire, which tends to be a highly controlled intellectual form. Malick wrote, directed, and produced the film and went through three cinematographers in order to get what he wanted. (After the frustrating experience with *Dead Head Miles,* he probably wasn't taking any chances.)

In *Bonnie and Clyde* the young lovers are mythical Robin Hoods, who inspire the poor with hope that they, too, can do something about their abject poverty. The strong bond between them is based on the mutual recognition of their specialness. Highly conscious of publicity, they frequently take PR photographs and follow their press in order to control their public image. Bonnie succeeds in publishing an idyllic ballad about their adventures, which restores Clyde's sexual potency. He joyfully exclaims: "You told my whole story, right there . . . you made me somebody they're goin' to remember." In the final ambush, the cops riddle their bodies with countless bullets because it isn't easy to kill a legend. Their death scene is undeniably romantic—with birds, togetherness, and slow-motion photography. Although Malick's romantic young hero yearns to live out this fantasy, he fails to make it appealing to his apathetic girl friend. After all, he is not an ex-con like Clyde, but an ex-garbage collector. Although he is more competent at sex, his Lady is still disappointed; she doesn't have Bonnie's hearty appetite for experience. After losing her virginity—an event which Kit would like to commemorate with a joint suicide, or at least a rock monument—Holly asks: "Is that all there is to it? Then what's all the fuss about?" It's as if all of Kit's romantic extremism, which ultimately leads to mass murder, is trying to compensate for the apathy, banality, and silence that dominate the land; but it brings no hope or comfort to anyone, not even to the woman he loves. In fact, we wonder whether he really loves her (especially since she is such a blank), or whether he is more enamored with the romantic idea of having such a passion. When they are pursued across the desolate Badlands by fast cars and whirlybirds, he once more asks his love to join him in a romantic death. Instead, she refuses to go any farther and breaks their alliance. We learn that he is executed, but we never witness a glorious death—only the vile murders he commits. Nevertheless, Kit tries to work on his public image. Anytime he has access to a tape recorder, he makes a statement for the public, stressing that he and Holly are making the best of it. He imitates the gestures and mannerisms of the irresistible James Dean; even the arresting officer notices his resemblance. He generously praises the courage of his captors and tosses me-

mentos to the press, assuming that he at last has achieved heroic stature. As in *Bonnie and Clyde,* it is the woman's account of the adventure that gets mass circulation. Instead of writing a laudatory ballad, Holly tells a passionless story; her unconsciously ironic perspective stresses the banality rather than the romance.

Despite the undercutting of the mythic dimension, it is the main source of the film's visual richness. *Badlands* is an *American Graffiti* turned gothic—à la Grant Woods. The studied selection of locations, architecture, details, and camera angles creates a strange tone—almost a witty surrealism. The first encounter between Kit and Holly's father (a painter) opens with a fairly close shot of the older man working outdoors on a painting. When the camera pulls back, it reveals that it is not a canvas as we assumed, but an outdoor advertising board in the middle of nowhere. In this scene the artistic father has been "popped"—a pun which Kit later uses when he shoots him, making it three layers deep. When Kit and Holly burn down her house after the murder of her father, the camera dwells lovingly on the fire, capturing its sensuousness and energy at the same time that the religious and mystical associations are mocked. We watch the destruction of dolls that look almost human and the antique furnishings and memorabilia (which would bring such a good price at a local swapmeet). The visuals encourage us to be fascinated with the spectacle, but at the same time we are aware that the nostalgia and ritual are slightly overdone, almost reaching an exaggerated expressionism. This taste for ritual and romance lies at the heart of Kit's violence; Malick's visuals show us that we are also susceptible to their charm. A similar combination is present in the jungle sequence, where the young outlaws build a tree house and play Tarzan and Jane in a lush green setting. Yet here, too, the idyllic primitive fantasy leads to vile murder. Malick seems to be exploring the dangers of these romantic myths, which glorify killers. He draws, not only from *Bonnie and Clyde,* but from many genres which embody these fantasies—westerns, jungle films, horror movies, cops and robbers, adventures of Marco Polo and other wanderers, American road

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movies, James Dean classics. Dominating movie screens throughout America, they provide the popular mythology of *Badlands.*

In contrast to Malick, Robert Altman uses the mythic dimension of *Bonnie and Clyde* positively, not to glorify killers, but to explore the values of family commitment. *Thieves Like Us* can be seen as a companion piece to *The Long Good-Bye,* another Altman remake which is also an exercise in nostalgia. The hero of this earlier film is the alienated Philip Marlowe, a private eye whose only companion is a cat who abandons him; when he acts on behalf of his sole friend, Marlowe is betrayed and ultimately kills the betrayer. He ends up as the lone survivor with no commitments whatsoever. In contrast, *Thieves* focuses on a character who seeks as many commitments as possible, but who is ultimately betrayed both by his gang and his wife. Even the stray dog he picks up on the road runs off with a redneck; he consoles himself with the thought, "He wasn't really *my* dog." As in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller,* although the hero does not succeed and ends up dying alone, the film seems to reaffirm the values of commitment for it is the one thing that distinguishes men from animals.

Conflicting loyalties between gang and family are also central to *Bonnie and Clyde.* The gang sticks together, but is beset by family problems. Bonnie must learn to overcome her hostility to Blanche because Blanche is Buck's wife and Buck is family. Running around with Clyde makes it dangerous for Bonnie to visit her mama, whom she longs to see. Ultimately the gang is betrayed by Blanche and by C. W.'s father. The ideal is to have both loyalties overlap as they do with the Barrow brothers and with Bonnie and Clyde. But this ideal is never achieved in *Thieves.* As the gang separates after

THIEVES
LIKE US

a job, one of them quips, "See ya at the family picnic." This line evokes the scene from *Bonnie and Clyde,* which most strongly influences Altman: the poignant family reunion where Bonnie sees her mother for the last time. It presents the lost community which she sacrifices for her commitment to Clyde and their life of crime. From this point on, he becomes her only family and they realize that they have no real destination. The nostalgia for this lost community is heightened by the visuals, which contrast with those of the rest of the film; the muted colors, the filters, the soft focus, the use of authentic locals rather than actors make the picnic scene look like an actual period photograph by someone like Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans. These are precisely the visual qualities that dominate Jean Boffety's cinematography in *Thieves.* Yet, instead of government-sponsored photography, the style evokes the popular art of the thirties—magazine advertising (particularly Coke ads), movies (like *You Only Live Once*), and radio shows (like *The Shadow* and political speeches by FDR and Father Coughlin). The casting, costuming, and art direction are brilliant in capturing the texture of authenticity down to the smallest detail. Even the lanky bodies and plain wholesome faces of the young lovers are very convincing. Yet, we are definitely seeing the thirties through a seventies filter—which is as obvious as the painted screens that frame so many of the shots; the radio static that dominates the sound track; and the mirror shot of the tap-dancing, which reflects the revival. The carefully chosen period furnishings don't look new, but old, as if they are already antiques. *Thieves* is a sophisticated version of an earlier naive form, a sentimental art (to use Schiller's term); yet *Bonnie and Clyde* was also sentimental for it was getting back to American gangster movies through the filter of the French new wave (particularly *Breathless*). It is not surprising that Altman recovers romantic elements from Penn's death scene: the young man with mythic power is gunned down in slow motion by an army of law men; his body is wrapped in his wife's family quilt, which her grandmother made with her own hands. Altman cultivates the thirties nostalgia, not purely for aesthetic delight, but because we in the seventies have something to learn from this period about commitment and survival.

Despite the range of individuality and experimentation in *Badlands, Sugarland,* and *Thieves,* these movies begin to form a definable genre that is highly self-reflexive and nostaglic. They allude to "real history," to past films, and to past films about "real history." The pattern is hopelessly circular: the past portends the present, and the present repeats the past; films reflect cultural norms, and cultural norms are shaped by films. While the cops are helplessly enmeshed in a web of conflicting moralities, the desperate, romantic outlaws try to cut themselves loose, to choose freely an individual course of action. Yet, even their rebellion is culturally determined; like the police, the outlaws merely reflect the society and its limitations.