

THE NON-WESTERN OF THE NEW WEST, 1973-75

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Non-Westerns of the New West, 1973-75

In the penultimate scene of Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), Peter Fonda's character, Captain America, offers the enigmatic claim: "We blew it." Interpretations of this famous line have proliferated since the movie's first release, although it's generally taken to mean that the protagonists sold out to the "establishment" by dealing in hard drugs for big money.²⁶ I argue, however, that in addition to this reading, "we blew it" refers to the degeneration and death of the Western film genre and of the characterizations of laudable American masculinity that that genre explored. I investigate a set of movies, made and set in the first half of the 1970s, which succeeded *Easy Rider* in developing this theme—*Electra Glide in Blue* (1973, James William Guercio), *Charley Varrick* (1973, Don Siegel), *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974, Michael Cimino), and *Rancho Deluxe* (1975, Frank Perry). I call my set of movies "Non-Westerns of the New West" (NWNW) because they are set in the Western United States contemporaneously to the time each is made, and their meaning is partially dependent on the history of Hollywood Westerns, although none is a member of the genre itself. These four movies, and others like them, invoke the classic Hollywood Western, as a *dead* genre, in order to study the fate of the Western hero in the New West of the 1970s.

The four movies were produced too closely together in time to mark much of a development in the sub-genre, but I discuss them in order of the increasing ubiquity and senselessness of the violence they depict, an order which parallels the increasing mystery and omnipresence of the civilized, Eastern, "system" which the protagonists attempt to escape by emulating the absent Hollywood Westerner. These are certainly not the only films in the NWNW sub-genre: they have predecessors (such as Archie Mayo's 1936 *The Petrified Forest* or Jacques Tourneur's 1947 *Out of the Past*) and successors (e.g., *City Slickers* (Ron Underwood, 1991), *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998) *Smoke Signals* (Chris Eyre, 1998), and *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005)). One might include Peter Bogdanovich's 1971 *The Last Picture Show* among them. But I focus on these four on account of their proximity in time to *Easy Rider* and the social upheavals that that movie evoked, and because they are all not only made during that time period, but also set in the time they were made.

Easy Rider depicts the cross-country motorcycle ride of pot smokers—Wyatt ("Captain America") and Billy from Los Angeles to New Orleans. The iconic youth-culture status of *Easy Rider*, the year of its release, and the route of its protagonists' journey can be read as a bittersweet goodbye to the Hollywood Western's West. In that sense, "we blew it," while still referring to trade in hard drugs and selling out to the establishment, also refers to leaving the West and crossing into the

²⁶ See, e.g., Tom Dirks, Review of *Easy Rider*, Pan-America Pictures, 1969 <http://www.filmsite.org/easy.html>; Roger Ebert, Review of *Easy Rider*, September 28, 1969, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/easy-rider-1969>; Roger Ebert, Review of *Easy Rider* October 24, 2004, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-easy-rider-1969>; J.D. Markel, "On the Road to the Ninth Circle of Hell: *Easy Rider* Merges Lanes with Dante's *Inferno* and *Faust*," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 75, February 2012, http://brightlightsfilm.com/75/75easyrider_markel.php#UdX50evhFz8; Charles Kiselyak, dir. *Easy Rider: Shaking the Cage*, Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1999.

Eastern U.S.—abandoning the frontier for an overly-domesticated, debauched, constraining civilization. There's good evidence for this reading: in addition to Hopper and Fonda's claiming as much,²⁷ the film is fairly explicit about it: The trip runs from West to East, retracing the U.S. Western expansion that inspired the Hollywood idiom. As Wyatt and Billy cross from Texas into Louisiana, Jimi Hendrix's "If 6 Was 9" starts abruptly: "If the sun refused to shine, I don't mind, I don't mind./If the mountains fell in the sea, Let it be, it ain't me. ..." The landscape changes just as abruptly, from wide-open spaces to a closed-in, aboveground Louisiana graveyard. As the Hendrix lyrics that play over the Louisiana scene tell us, the protagonists have crossed the line from the freedom, sunshine, and grandeur of the West into the oppression, decline, and death of the East. The NWNWs attempt to reclaim that Western territory, fictional though it may be, and with mixed success.

The Western Then / The West Now

According to David Cook, "If there was a death blow to the Western genre, it was delivered by the political violence of 1968, Vietnam, and Watergate, after which the heroic utopian mythography of the American West became impossible to sustain."²⁸ What followed in its wake—the revisionist Westerns, parody Westerns, and my Non-Westerns—explore the mythological landscape it abandoned. Revisionist and parody Westerns do so by reimagining the "Old" West of the classic Hollywood genre. The "Non-Westerns of the New West" do so at least in part by depicting the real landscape of the contemporary Western U.S., in which the cultural rituals of the classic Hollywood Western can no longer be practiced meaningfully, essentially a colony of the East.

"The [Traditional Hollywood] Western's essential conflict," according to Schatz, "between civilization and savagery is expressed in a variety of oppositions: East versus West, ... social order versus anarchy, individual versus community, town versus wilderness, cowboy versus Indian, schoolmarm versus dancehall girl, and so on."²⁹ Robert Warshow argues that the "Western hero ... is a figure of repose."³⁰ Money, getting ahead, social success is not a part of the genre's distinguishing conflict.³¹ According to Warshow, these central concerns that characterize the genre arise from "the wide expanses of land, the free movement of men on horses. ...the land and the horses also ... [represent] the moral 'openness' of the West—corresponding to the fact that guns are carried where they can be seen."³² Often the Westerner is depicted as the "last gentleman," who arrives "as the reign of law settles over the West and he is forced to see that his day is over."³³

All four of the films I investigate posit protagonists who emulate Warshow's leisurely, dignified, Westerner. All but John Wintergreen, the protagonist of *Electra*, avoid working for a living, and all, including John, are distinctly unambitious. They all shun refinement and civilization, understood in the 1970's idiom of "the system," associating it with exploitation, constriction of their freedom, and the East. In the New West, the opposition of cowboys and Indians has been overcome,

²⁷ *Easy Rider: Shaking the Cage* (Charles Kiselyak 1999).

²⁸ David Cook, *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 182.

²⁹ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and The Studio System*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 48.

³⁰ Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 4th ed., Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 453.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 454-55

³² *Ibid.*, 455.

³³ *Ibid.*, 457.

however, and the few who remain, far from antagonizing each other, join forces against the “system.” Warshow’s wide expanses of land and continual threat of gun violence remain in the New West, but now as nostalgic gestures, ways for men constrained by “the system” to express their freedom by identifying with wildness. Here in the New West, the reign of law has so long since settled over the West that it has degenerated into a byzantine web of corruption.

Although Schatz, Warshow, and Cook do not particularly stress the women’s movement as a contribution to the decline of the genre in the 1970s, it cannot be underestimated as such. The classic Hollywood Western was a genre about men. The classic Hollywood Western hero is a paradigm of masculinity.³⁴ But with the decline of the genre in which he made sense, the Westerner, as R.W. Connell, in his groundbreaking book, *Masculinities*, notes, failed to inspire real men.³⁵ In other words, the decline of the Western movie genre coincided not only with the political upheavals of Vietnam and Watergate; it also accompanied the rise of the women’s movement and the development of very unflattering social characterizations of men. Alongside Americans’ general cultural disillusionment, and American audiences’ consequent loss of faith in the Hollywood Western, then, came deep disorientation about masculinity—about how to be, how to recognize, and how to cinematically depict, a good man.

Distinguishing Marks of the NWNW

These movies all advertise their inheritance from the Western in a variety of ways. All four begin with an establishing shot of a vast Western landscape. In each, however, instead of horse riders or stagecoaches, a car, motorcycle, van, or truck drives through it, coming from the deep background into the foreground. In *Electra Glide in Blue*, this is preceded by a teaser of someone—we know not who—being shot. In *Charley Varrick*, a long introductory montage—like a mini-history of the region from the Old West to the New—precedes the long shot of the car moving towards us. In *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, we are shown a dreamy wheat field under the “big sky,” and then cut to the car moving toward us, passing a rural church, as the music changes from guitar to choir. In *Rancho Deluxe*, a pickup truck approaches the camera on the plains of Montana. Eventually in each case, the automobile overtakes the shot, demonstrating more and more obviously that this movie will not really be a Western, as the landscape first hinted to us, because the West is not really the “West.”

Since there is no uncivilized space to domesticate in the 1970s of these movies, their central opposition is not between “civilization and savagery,” as Schatz stated, but between overdomesticated, largely feminized space, associated with modernity (automobiles), constraint (usually economic, usually characterized as having to work a humiliating job), law and order (police), the East Coast (often depicted as the place from which the protagonist emigrated), and a nostalgia or longing for masculinity as it was depicted in Hollywood Westerns. The male heroes of the NWNWs are attempting to find or keep their honor in a humiliating world where violence may seem the most attractive way to act out against their domestication and reconnect with a Wild West in which they, including their violence, were a necessary agent of civilization.

None of the heroes in these films, moreover, is Warshow’s lone Westerner: each spends his time with a male friend. So the films are all, more or less, buddy pictures. They can be understood to take Schatz’s notion of the Westerner’s “initiate-hero” to a kind of nth degree.³⁶ Schatz describes

³⁴ See, e.g., Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 51; Warshow, “The Westerner,” 455; Connell, *Lost Illusions*, 194.

³⁵ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 214-15.

³⁶ Schatz, *Hollywood Genres*, 54-58.

the “education-of-a-man motif” as a baroque, post-war addition to the genre,³⁷ and cites *Shane* (1953, George Stevens) as a paradigm case. While in the traditional Hollywood genre, a lone man toys with the idea of joining the community, the protagonist pair of the NWNW is set in opposition to civilization, trying to get away from it, each party unable, apparently, to do so on his own. The protagonist of a NWNW feels just as out of place in the real modern West, which he desperately wants to be the mythical West of his imagination, as he did back home in the East, and he requires the reassurance of another man in order to keep the myth alive. The need for a buddy therefore, in these films, indicates an initial weakness in both the protagonists and the community, a nostalgia for the Hollywood Western myth, and an unclarity about the purpose of men. Thus, the NWNWs are at least in part reflections on possibilities for masculinity where manhood, paradigmatically depicted in the influential and long-popular Western genre, seems to have become unnecessary, even villainous.

Rancho Deluxe

Although it was the last produced, the most paradigmatic fit in my group of NWNWs is *Rancho Deluxe*, a relatively (but, I would argue, unfairly) obscure film, starring Jeff Bridges as Jack, who has left his wealthy parents and his ex-wife back East, and Sam Waterston as his friend and roommate Cecil Colson, an ex-con who introduces himself as “North American Indian,” but whose ancestry is ambiguous. Jobless, Jack and Cecil make do by trading meat that they have rustled from one of the ranches nearby their rented shack outside Livingston, Montana. Their “rustling” consists in driving up to the grazing, fenced, herd, picking off one of the animals like a fish in a barrel, butchering it on the field with a chainsaw, and driving away with the goods in their truck bed. Nothing noble about that.

The main rancher, John Brown (Clifton James), came to Montana from back East, where he used to run a set of beauty shops (his wife Cora (Elizabeth Ashley) whines at one point, “sometimes I miss Schenectady”). The Browns hire a stock detective, Henry Beige (Slim Pickens) to find the rustlers, and Beige shows up to the ranch with his chaste niece, Laura (Charlene Dallas). The Browns’ two incompetent ranch hands, Curt and Burt (Harry Dean Stanton and Richard Bright), join forces with Jack and Cecil for a big score rustling. While the caper is being planned, Curt falls in love with the comely Laura—who is really Beige’s sexy confederate—and reveals the whole plan; Mr. Beige triumphantly brings them in. The movie ends with Jack and Cecil hopping onto horses and doing some real cowboying for the first time in their lives, at the Montana State Prison Ranch.

In *Rancho Deluxe*, almost nobody is actually Western: even Cecil, who is regularly referred to as “the Indian.” At one point, Jack claims, “Cece, your relatives were primarily Honky tie hackers from Iowa and buck-toothed Squawhumpers from the East.” So, Indians are rare and mixed-race commodities, and those one finds hang out with the cowboys. The transplanted cowboy and the ambiguously-lineaged Indian team up against the big business ranchers, who do their work with helicopters and semi-trucks. Beige makes a show of his “real Westernness” wearing rococo, furry, white chaps and a white hat while riding on his white horse—but we know he’s just an ex-con himself, who lets his girlfriend do all the work.

As in all the NWNWs, the protagonists of *Rancho Deluxe* are depicted as weakened, broken, men. We get some background on the pair in the middle of the film, when they each visit their folks. Jack’s parents have invited his ex-wife to dinner, which sends Jack into a childish fit of rage during which he whines, “I’d just gotten so I could come here at all. I’d just risen to that.” Cecil’s visit with

³⁷ Ibid., 54-55.

his father does similar work. Out fishing with his son, Mr. Colson (Joseph Spinell) goes on a rant about how “this state’s poor cowboys, miners, railroaders and Indians go broke buying pickup trucks. The poor people of this state are dope fiends for pickup trucks.” In other words, all the authenticity is sapped from Montanan men (cowboys and Indians alike) in their efforts to “be *really* Western” by driving pickup trucks. Of course, Jack and Cecil drive a pickup truck throughout the film, making this rant a castigation of them.

Our protagonists come off as unselfconscious feminists. Jack and Cecil spend whatever time they don’t spend loafing or rustling smoking pot and having sex with Betty and Mary Fargo (Patti D’Arbanville and Maggie Wellman) the two attractive daughters of another wealthy rancher. In a very tense scene, Mr. Fargo, with his whole extended family in tow, goes after his daughters, who have spent the night with Jack and Cecil in their shack. Mr. Fargo marches right into the bedroom and yells sanctimonious invectives at them. In response, Jack pulls a pistol from under his pillow, shoots it at the ceiling, and orders Mr. Fargo to “fold [his] hands in front of [him] and beg [his] daughters’ forgiveness.” Here, Jack allies himself and Cecil with the 60’s counterculture represented in *Easy Rider*, as well as with the rough-and-tumble gunplay of the old West; but in this film, all this is associated with women and women’s rights to sexual freedom and privacy.

In a paradigmatic scene in a Livingston bar, Curt and Jack set the groundwork for their conspiracy while playing Pong. The entire scene is shot over their shoulders, as their reflected images merge with the video game. The scene suggests that neither of the men (nor presumably their partners, Cecil and Burt) is authentic. They’re playing a video game, for goodness’ sakes, completely allied with modernity and notably *not really* fighting. This scene, like so many others in the movie, poses its theme as a search for authentic masculinity of the Western type, in a new West that has long been settled, and now offers roughly the same entertainments as the rest of the country.



Figure 1: Jack and Curt play *Pong* in *Rancho Deluxe* (MGM Home Entertainment, 2000)

Electra Glide in Blue

Electra Glide in Blue, a cult classic that failed at the box office, stars Robert Blake as “Big” John Wintergreen, an Arizona motorcycle policeman, extremely short in stature, who deeply desires a promotion to detective (“that badge that says, ‘Boy, you’re getting paid to *think* and not to get callouses on your ass”). He and Zipper (Billy “Green” Bush), his friend on the motorcycle squad, stumble upon an old-timer, Willie (Elisha Cook, Jr.), ranting about his old friend Frank, who John

and Zipper find murdered in his desert shack. The stereotypically hard-nosed detective on the case, Harve Poole (Mitchell Ryan), recognizes John's talent and takes him on as an apprentice. Harve insists that the murder is the work of a well-known drug dealer named Bob Zemko (Peter Cetera³⁸), but he pursues his investigation largely by beating up Zemko and the hippies who Harve believes will lead him to the dealer. Big John reasons out, however, that Willie himself must have killed Frank out of jealousy over Frank's new-found hippie friends. Willie confesses, and Johnny tells Harve off. Zipper, whom John discovers stole \$5000 out of Frank's shack, goes on a shooting spree, and John, in the course of his duty, shoots and kills Zipper. Back on his motorcycle, disillusioned but not bitter, John stops a couple of hippies on the highway through Monument Valley, and lets them off with a warning. Realizing that he still has the driver's license, he follows the VW bus after it pulls away, waving and flashing his lights. The passenger pokes a shotgun out the back window and shoots John in the chest, and in an almost seven-minute shot, the camera pulls back from John, dying, to the vastness of Monument Valley, and fades to black and white, solidifying both its references to *Easy Rider* and to John Ford.

Here, as in *Rancho*, the protagonist pair is confronted with inauthentic Westernness on all sides. Where *Rancho* used comic incompetence to establish the inauthenticity of its characters, *Electra* uses stylization; almost every scene is a set piece. *Electra Glide* was generally panned when it came out, largely for this operatic character: "Upon this slender plot," claimed one reviewer "is grafted lots of excess cinema, and a really unfair share of meaning."³⁹ This inauthenticity is emphasized by the fact that, echoing *Rancho*, no one seems to be from the little, fictional town of Stockburn, Arizona in which the movie is set.⁴⁰

Harve, in particular, is operatic, shown at one point turning toward the audience in a mock T.V. detective pose, spouting the hackneyed, "we've got a murder on our hands!" In the local bar on John's first day of work, Harve delivers a long, preposterous, and offensive speech describing the perpetrators of crimes as "cop-killers, cop haters ... a conspiracy reaching national proportions. ... the sooner we deal with it, the sooner I get to save your precious ass from some nigger waiting in the bushes to nail ya." Of course, almost no one in the movie, nor apparently the town, is African-American, and there doesn't appear to be enough communication among anyone in the film to form a conspiracy, so this is all smoke.⁴¹

³⁸ The primary profession of James William Guercio, the director of *Electra Glide* (this was his only film), was producing records, and the band Chicago was a major client; several members of the band, and others he produced, appear in the film.

³⁹ Roger Greenspun, "Screen: Guercio's 'Electra Glide in Blue' Arrives: Director Makes Debut With a Mystery," *The New York Times*, August 20, 1973, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9807E7D61631E63BBC4851DFBE668388669EDE>

⁴⁰ This is also noted by Mark Shiel, "Banal and Magnificent Space in *Electra Glide in Blue* (1973) or an Allegory of the Nixon Era." *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 2 (2007): 98.

⁴¹ Only the janitor mentioned in the next paragraph is African-American.



Figure 2: Harve overdoes the cowboy-detective act in *Electra Glide in Blue* (MGM Home Entertainment, 2005)

As in *Rancho*, the protagonist of *Electra Glide* is marked as inadequate, here through his extreme shortness, of which much is made throughout the film. Here as well, although they are employed, John and Zipper really have nothing to do. Big John's tickets, delivered at the beginning of the film to establish character, are all for small infractions and always on a deserted road where no one could possibly be endangered. Zipper is depicted as lazy (he prefers to sit in the shade reading comic books to performing his duties), prejudiced (he subjects a hippie to an unnecessary inch-by-inch search), and materialistic (responding to John's desire to be a detective, Zipper describes his dream—a pimped-out stroker motorcycle—in comically long detail). Zipper is also unstable; his breakdown at the end of the film is not a surprise. While they are roughly the same age, then, we have another initiate-hero – protagonist pairing in Zip and John.

Here the feminist strain is associated with satisfying a woman sexually. In a very early scene, we observe John in bed with Jolene (the main female character, who will turn out to be Harve's girlfriend). She is apparently extremely satisfied by his prowess, squealing "John, you're no superman. You haven't got it in you." But we find that he *has* got it in him: later on, in a scene where Jolene reveals her unfulfilled Hollywood dreams—drunk, in front of Harve and John—she praises John's lovemaking and criticizes Harve's. The scene is very unpleasant, and frankly seems out of place in the film; but it establishes John's affiliation with women, in specific contrast to Harve and the inauthentic, television, urban (and hence, Eastern), modern masculinity that Harve represents.

A particularly nice illustration of *Electra's* take on masculinity comes in a pair of scenes set in what we figure to be the only bar in town. The first begins with a medium shot of a Western river shining under the moon at night. We notice there's something funny about it, but are nonetheless surprised when the camera moves downward and we see that it's a neon Coors Beer sign. From there, the camera wanders around among a very large number of men, mostly very old, mostly in cowboy hats, smoking, drinking, laughing, and talking. Over the scene, we hear Mark Poelstra's "Song of Sad Bottles." The scene doesn't advance the plot at all. Rather, Conrad Hall's loving, aimless camera places us in sympathy with this obsolete community of old men. In stark contrast, Johnny enters the bar on his first day of work with Harve, about fifteen minutes later in the film. This time, we are introduced to the bar with a shot of a lone old man, staring straight ahead of himself. There is no music. The camera moves quickly away from the old man to the left, where a group of Harve's policemen buddies play poker. Harve enters, we hear the toilet flushing; he launches into the paranoid rant described above. The scene is not smoky; the camera picks out all the crumpled old pictures, highway signs, painted and repainted walls and woodwork, and

Jolene's exposed midriff in considerable detail. It's an unpleasant, off-putting, somewhat depressing scene, where the old man is cast aside, and the "big boys," the "real job," the new "West" that John has been dreaming of entering, is depicted as anything but: playing poker to pass the time and badmouthing various groups of people.

Charley Varrick

Charley Varrick stars Walter Matthau as the eponymous anti-hero. The movie begins as Matthau gets out of a yellow Lincoln, an old man with a cast on his foot. We see Jacqueline Scott, playing Varrick's wife Nadine, behind the wheel. Varrick enters the Tres Cruces bank, and we discover that he is there, in costume, to rob it. Meanwhile, outside, Nadine shoots a police officer inquiring about the stolen car; she in turn is shot and mortally wounded. Charley and Harman Sullivan (Andy Robinson), the last member of his crew, then, become our pair of male protagonists.

Charley and Nadine, we discover, used to be a husband-and-wife aerobatic team, doing stunts in old-time biplanes for airshows and circuses. When they decided to settle down, they started a crop-dusting business, aptly nicknamed "The Last of the Independents" (the film's original title). They couldn't compete, however, with the big chemical companies, and turned to a life of crime, robbing small town banks whose losses would get little attention. Charley realizes immediately, however, that the Tres Cruces take—over \$750,000—is suspicious, and that the bank must have been a drop for the Mafia. The mob's truly frightening hit-man, Molly, is played by Joe Don Baker (the femininity of his name is noted by characters in the movie, and marks the mafia as a feminized man). The rest of the movie chronicles Charley's attempt to protect Harman and outwit the mob. Siegel's first film after *Dirty Harry*, *Varrick* disappointed at the box office, but is now regularly recognized as a strong representative of the director's *oeuvre*.

The setting—dusty New Mexico suburbs—is once again the first gesture of *Varrick's* NWNW status; it's a car movie (in fact, particular makes and models of cars occupy some of its dialogue); it has a pair of male protagonists without jobs. Charley's nostalgia for the old days is a signal image in the film—he's "the last of the independents" and flies a bi-plane. Charley's primary heroic quality is his intelligence, as he outwits both the cops and the mafia. In this film, the new West is more sinister, however, than in *Rancho* or *Electra*. The "system" here is a violent and omniscient business-mafia conglomerate. Thus, *Charley Varrick's* conception of a good man is as nostalgic as that of *Rancho* or *Electra*, but unlike those films, it necessitates violence.

The hit-man Molly is used to represent the feminized men of "the system." At one point, Molly holds up at a brothel to await further instructions. Addressing the Madam (Monica Lewis) as a servant, Molly asserts, "When I awake I'd appreciate two three-and-a-half-minute eggs, a piece of dry whole-wheat toast, and a pot of hot herb tea [he pronounces the 'h' in 'herb']." Agreeing to the request, the Madam adds, "If there's anything we can do for your pleasure..." to which Molly responds—"I don't sleep with whores. At least not knowingly." Beyond his woman's name, Molly's attitude in this scene allies him with the prissy Eastern women in traditional Westerns for whom the Westerner and his ilk are dirty, uncivilized, animals, e.g., Lucy Mallory (Louise Platt) in *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939). These brothel scenes establish Molly as a stark symbol of the over-civilized, over-feminized, and consequently violent, male "system" of the 1970s.

Throughout most of the movie Charley is Harman's protector and friend, keeping the movie in line with the other NWNWs as an initiate-hero picture.



Figure 3: Charley and Harman are in it together in *Charley Varrick* (Universal Home Entertainment, 2004)

Harman's relative immaturity leads to his torture and death at Molly's hands. We can see Charley's fatherly relationship to the young man in his facial expression when he finds Harman's contorted dead body stashed in the closet of their trailer. Thus, here as in *Electra*, the hero's young initiate is a weak character, not very bright and a little disturbed. Again, as in *Electra*, his death is a motivating factor in the hero's decisions.

Charley Varrick, if not exactly feminist, allies with the women's movement against the feminized but still chauvinist business-mafia conglomerate. In his aerobatic, crop-dusting, and bank-robbing businesses, Charley partnered with his wife, Nadine, on equal footing. One subtle gesture on Charley's part is of particular note in this regard: after Nadine dies, Charley removes her wedding ring and places it on his left pinky, next to his own, and it remains there for the rest of the film. Thus, he essentially manages the revenge and escape "in her name," allying Charley's nostalgia not only with the old West, but with commemorating women.

Like the "Pong" scene in *Rancho* or the bar scenes in *Electra*, the atmospheric beauty of a tangential scene in *Varrick* epitomizes for the audience its NWNW message. In it, the president of the bank (and lieutenant of the conglomerate), Maynard Boyle (John Vernon), and the nebbish bank manager, Harold Young (Woodrow Palfrey), pull over to the side of a deserted country road. We see a rising hill on left screen, and a seemingly endless white fence run from the right screen foreground off into the far distance. The only visible building is a very distant farmhouse with a high silo, evocative of a church steeple. They have come out to the boonies to get away from the relentless supervision of the business-mafia conglomerate. In their clean business suits and ties, Boyle and Young are clearly out of place. The Western landscape is alien territory to these citizens of the New West. They are stuck this side of the fence, looking on as if this were a scene on TV.

For the remainder of the scene, Boyle, from his high pulpit on the fence post, preaches down to Young about how the conglomerate is likely to react to the bank heist, indicating terrible fire and brimstone will hail upon the bank manager, once—Boyle implies—Boyle pins the breach of security on Young. As Young realizes the danger he's in, he approaches Boyle, as if to plead his case at court. "I'm not an ambitious man," argues Young:

I don't need very much. I've been very happy here in Tres Cruces. I've become a part of the community. People appreciate, not just the day-to-day business of banking, but the way I've *restored* the bank. I've made it a part of the living historical heritage of the community. For the first time in my life, I've found a place that I love. Why would I jeopardize that?



Figure 4: Bank-President Boyle intimidates the manage of the Tres Cruces branch in *Charley Varrick* (Universal Home Entertainment, 2004)

Young is telling the truth, of course; the robbery was a coincidence that nobody, including Charley's gang, wanted. But of course, Young is also telling a larger truth, the theme of the NWNW: the small Western community prized by our American ancestors according to the Hollywood Western was worth fighting for; even if it was not precisely historically accurate, at least it was evocative and meaningful. It has redeemed this sinful bank manager, who spent his career in cahoots with gangsters. Once Boyle finishes his sermon, Young returns to the bank and shoots himself in the head. In this lovely, tangential, scene, Siegel seems to be making his eulogy for the Hollywood Western. Once the new, feminized, malevolent, violent, New West has gotten its claws on American men, what hope do they have left?

Thunderbolt and Lightfoot

In the first few minutes of *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (Cimino's first movie, whose moderate box office success can be attributed to his sponsorship by its famous star), we are given parallel cuts

between John Doherty, a.k.a. Thunderbolt (Clint Eastwood), preaching to the congregation of elderly folks inside the "Spirit Lake, Idaho Community Church," and Lightfoot (Jeff Bridges) walking from a rundown industrial park to a used car lot and flagrantly stealing a white Trans Am. In a shot reminiscent of John Ford, we watch a man in the frame of Doherty's church door pull out a gun and shoot directly at Doherty, who runs for his life out the back door of the church through a wheat field. As the two approach the road on which Lightfoot is speeding along in his stolen car, Doherty waving frantically for him to stop, Lightfoot turns off into the field and runs down Doherty's pursuer, killing him. It turns out that Doherty's pursuer, Dunlop, was a member of his old gang, which had robbed the Montana Armored Transit Warehouse seven years previously.

Two members of the gang remain, Goody (Geoffrey Lewis), and Red Leary (George Kennedy), vengeful and in hot pursuit of Doherty. Doherty takes Lightfoot to Warsaw, Montana to get the money that, only he knows, was hidden behind the blackboard of an old one-room schoolhouse. When Doherty and Lightfoot get to the site of the old schoolhouse, however, they find that it has been replaced by a modern school. Red and Goody have followed them, and the four of them team up to rob the Montana Armored all over again. They work menial jobs in order to raise the money for the giant 20mm cannon needed to shoot through the walls of the vault, from which Doherty derived his nickname. After the successful heist, Red betrays the gang, with particular hostility toward Lightfoot, whom he beats up and kicks in the head. As they wander out of the woods where Leary has left them, Doherty and Lightfoot come to the highway, where low and behold the old one-room schoolhouse has been moved in its entirety, now a quaint tourist attraction. After they retrieve the money, and get not more than a few minutes out of town, Lightfoot dies of a brain hemorrhage from the kick in the head.

Again, the landscape sets the movie into conversation with Westerns. Again, it's a car movie. Again, we have a pair of male protagonists with nothing to do. So, on all the basic points, *Thunderbolt* is a Non-Western. The first words in the film we hear distinctly are sung by the congregation of the Spirit Lake Church: "Hallelujah: what a Savior." Thus, we know right from the beginning that this is a story about redemption, about how a man rectifies himself before God. It will turn out that Lightfoot will be Doherty's savior, both metaphorically in the film, and literally, in his Trans Am. Their relationship draws out most poignantly of all my set of movies the homosexual undertones of such a pairing. Their relationship also evokes a father-son relationship most strongly of the set, which places the film in an intimate conversation with the classic Westerns Schatz discussed, like *Shane* and *The Searchers*.

It's not entirely clear what Thunderbolt looks for redemption *for*, but we know that he has not returned for the money in the seven years since the heist, and that by the time we meet him he seems to have been preaching at least partly in earnest. At any rate, we know that Doherty feels old (Eastwood was forty-four when the movie was released, and Bridges twenty-five). So, here again, we are asked to identify with older men, and an older time; but here, the older generation of men is rapt in guilt, however vaguely, over the events of the past. Contrastingly, Lightfoot has no background. At some point, he ran away to New Orleans with a woman. "Two weeks later," he tells Doherty, "I wake up in a fleabag hotel ... So after her, things looked good..." This is a peculiar story: who gets abandoned by his young love in a strange city, and thinks things "look good"? Lightfoot is here depicted as an unusually upbeat young man. While his cheerfulness will be tested during the film, particularly by Red, Lightfoot dies content, after a remarkable speech: "We won. We made it," he says from the passenger seat to Doherty, driving away from Warsaw. "I don't think of us as criminals, y'know? I feel we accomplished something. A good job. I feel proud of myself, man. I feel like a *hero*."

Of course, there's also the fact that this cheerful youth is named *Lightfoot*. When he first introduces himself, Doherty asks, "you Indian?" "Nope. Just American," he responds. So, as in *Rancho*, we have a main character evoking an Indian heritage, whose lineage is ambiguous, paired

with the white man—here not a cowboy, but definitely an *outlaw*. Almost as soon as Lightfoot's finished introducing himself, we hear the movie's theme song (written and sung by Paul Williams): "If I knew the way, I'd go back home./ But the countryside has changed so much, I'd surely end up lost."

T&L, then, addresses the quandaries of the NWNW thus: the old Hollywood West, now unrecognizable, is also foolish, retrograde, and even shameful. Redemption comes in the form of a young man's recognition of its glory. This theme is reiterated in the scenes at the two schoolhouses: when the pair first finds the new school that they believe has replaced the old one with the stash in it, Doherty says sarcastically, "Progress." When they find the old one-room schoolhouse, transplanted and now a mere tourist attraction, Doherty laughs, "History. History, damn it." Thus, in the terms of the film, progress is an unwelcome change that empties both the past and the future of value. History has become a tourist attraction, merely evocative of the pioneer community that meant so much to the Westerner of Old Hollywood. But with Lightfoot's help, the hidden value in that old schoolhouse can still be salvaged.

The issues of new masculinity are also forefronted in *T&L*. In the first instance, this is depicted through the four men's relation to honest work. Here as in all the other NWNW, honest work is associated with "the system," the New West, and is humiliating. Lightfoot gets a job working lawn maintenance, and at one point, a woman who has been watching Lightfoot through her sliding glass back door appears for his entertainment entirely naked. Lightfoot tells the gang about this incident later that night. Goody and Red are riveted, almost drooling. Red pushes Lightfoot, despite Lightfoot's reluctance, to tell them what he "*did* about it." In response, Lightfoot holds his hand up to Red's mouth, covering it, and mocking a sexy kiss on Red's lips, kisses the back of his own hand. Thus, Lightfoot's sexuality is very unclear. On the one hand, we have this awkward mock-kiss of Leary. On that same side we might put Lightfoot's flashy attire, which comes to a climax during the heist, when, in order to get into the Western Union office where the Armored Warehouse alarm is housed, he must lure the fat, porn-addicted attendant to open the door by dressing in drag.





Figures 5 and 6: Lightfoot in drag, and seducing the Western Union Clerk, in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (MGM/UA Home Entertainment, 2000)





Figures 7,8, 9: Some risqué shots of Lightfoot in drag, including the tools awkwardly stuck in the back of his pantyhose in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (MGM/UA Home Entertainment, 2000)

The film thus implies both Lightfoot's effeminacy and his homosexuality. In his review of the movie in *Jump Cut* at the time of its release, Peter Biskind even read the film as an unabashed apology for homosexuality, representing all the heterosexual men and their sexual styles as laughing stocks.⁴²

On the other hand, this climactic drag show also marks the nadir of Lightfoot's cheerful, devil-may-care demeanor. For the first time in the movie, Lightfoot seems pessimistic and afraid. "I don't know if I can pull this off," he says. "How am I supposed to know what to do?" So it seems that Lightfoot's heterosexual masculinity is crucial to his identity. This is echoed in several other places in the film. At one point, Doherty suggests to Lightfoot that he might later find some recreation with a prostitute. "I never pay for it," Lightfoot insists. Earlier, Lightfoot provided evidence for his claim by easily picking up two attractive women for Doherty and himself.

What are we to make of all this? We never actually observe Lightfoot having sex, although Doherty's sexual encounter is covered in some detail. Lightfoot clearly loves Doherty, but he makes no overt or insinuated sexual advances. He knows how attractive he is to women, but no men in the movie are depicted as attracted to him (unless one wants to read Leary's homophobia as latent homosexuality). As I read the film, Lightfoot is still a child; hence his being called "Kid" throughout the movie by Doherty and the rest of the gang. Hence his extreme discomfort at Red's questioning about his naked admirer. Hence Lightfoot's question, "How am I supposed to know what to do?" That Lightfoot never pays for sex doesn't preclude the possibility that he has never had sex. His braggadocio about sex certainly doesn't undermine this reading. The film portrays Lightfoot as a sexually pure character. Only after the heist does he change his party dress for Goody's dark suit, wearing a dead man's clothes, in which he himself soon dies.

The initiate-hero functions in this movie, then, as a redeemer. Lightfoot may be taken as arriving out of nowhere, with no family background, pure, and with far too much knowledge of the West for his age—an angelic figure.

⁴² Peter Biskind "Sexual politics in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*: Tightass and cocksucker," *Jump Cut*, 4 (1974): 5-6.



Figure 10: Lightfoot about to steal the angelic Trans-Am in *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (MGM/UA Home Entertainment, 2000)

This is first indicated in the Trans Am: it is white, with a blue eagle painted on its hood, so that Lightfoot actually arrives to save Doherty's life in white on wings. And while all the other initiate-hero figures in my films have established histories with their older hero-figure, Lightfoot appears in the beginning of the movie out of nowhere, almost as if he were sent from above.

The two women Lightfoot picks up are the only two women in the movie with whom Doherty and Lightfoot have any real interaction, but it is not satisfying and does not form a community. In fact, for Doherty, it is alienating and humiliating. Doherty needs the recognition of a young man. The "respectable" woman is represented in a very short scene late in the film, in which a woman riding a motorcycle takes a hammer out of her pack and pounds the side of Lightfoot's truck with it, denting it badly. Then she rides ahead, giving Lightfoot the finger. "Progress," Lightfoot states about her, evoking Doherty's comment about the new school, and associating it with a kind of feminism antagonistic to men. Three other women appear in *T&L*, all in cars with their husbands. All three husbands treat their wives poorly, with no tenderness or sexual gestures.

The "Wild West" in *T&L* is depicted as frenzied, humiliating, and ominously frightening. A scene in which Doherty and Lightfoot hitch a ride in a souped-up Plymouth Fury may demonstrate this best. Lightfoot opens the passenger-side door to get in and notices that the passenger seat is occupied by a caged raccoon. The driver (Bill McKinney) tells Lightfoot to "never mind the raccoon," just to get in the back in a hurry; once Doherty and Lightfoot are settled in the back seat, he races off in various directions, on and off the road. He yells a lot in a celebratory fashion, mostly incoherent. Soon, Doherty and Lightfoot begin coughing, realizing that he has turned the exhaust inside the car. Eventually the driver runs the car off the road into a gully, turning it over 360 degrees. No sooner has the car landed back on its wheels than the driver gets out of the car with a shotgun in hand, walks to the back of the car, and opens the trunk, revealing dozens—maybe hundreds—of white rabbits there. Shooing them out of the trunk with the butt of his gun, he starts shooting at them. When Doherty and Lightfoot finally make their way out of the car, and Doherty knocks out the driver, they release the rabbits, and Lightfoot, in the passenger seat, sets his hand down in raccoon shit.

How should we understand this very disturbing scene? It adds nothing to the plot or to Doherty's or Lightfoot's characters. It seems to be in the film solely to represent the New West in which our protagonists find themselves, the one that has changed so completely that Doherty is lost in it, according to the song. This West has no community, just a lone gunman and a couple of hitchhikers. The countryside is unpoliced, but not really wild; and there are no ideals, no nations,

and no settlements struggling for the space to live a meaningful life. In fact, the Wild West in *T&L* is merely feral; it's a tamed domestic animal, like this driver and his trunkful of rabbits, gone out of its mind. The Westerner is no longer Warshaw's loner, no longer an agent of community and settled life. Instead, he has run away to the West only to find a feral, violent, new East. The New West is tamed but unprotected, male-dominated but feminized; the New Westerner exerts his power over helpless domesticated creatures. The driver's treatment of the rabbits is reminiscent of Jack and Cecil's "cattle rustling" tame pastured cows in *Rancho*; reminiscent of Harve beating up hippies and drug-dealers for no reason and without evidence in *Electra*; reminiscent of Molly torturing Harman or treating prostitutes like disgusting slaves in *Varrick*. In all these cases, the New West's "wildness" is depicted as a mere violent perversion of Eastern "civility" in which the "New Man" unnecessary ill-treats those weaker than himself (including women). The "wildness" that New Men in the New West seek in order to assert or rediscover their masculinity in what they feel is a feminized world is just legitimized violence.

"We Blew It": The Feral "System" and the Wild West

Thus in all four of these movies, our protagonist pair is offered as an alternative to the feminized, overly-tame, Eastern "system" of the New West. In none of these movies is the hero confident about his value as a good man. But neither is he reassured in his manhood by women, however complimentary women may be of his sexual prowess. Instead, all four heroes "find" their courage in the admiring friendship of a young initiate with whose protection they are entrusted. The initiate-hero is a weak or fragile figure, a little disturbed, and a member of the youth culture whose challenge to "the system" has failed, as it did for the protagonists of *Easy Rider*. "Protecting" the initiate, then, amounts to instilling an appreciation for the "old" ways, understood in explicit reference to Hollywood Westerns, even as—as in the character of Red Leary in *T&L*—the old ways are also subject to criticism.

The New West in all these films is represented as having trampled over the values of community and dignity that the Old Hollywood Western extolled, perverting them into an increasingly humiliating, malignant, mechanistic, "system." These values include the sanctity of marriage and the protection of women from violence and abuse, as in *Varrick*, and the defense of women's sexual autonomy, as in *Rancho*, *Electra*, and *T&L*. Although the movies strive to offer characterizations of good men, they share with the 1970's women's movement its belief in a malevolent and ubiquitous patriarchy. In these movies, however, the patriarchy is a feminized, over-civilized, over-settled male presence, inevitably—and in my organization of these films, increasingly inescapably—violent. By contrast, the "Old" Westerner represents some kind of "true" feminism in these films, one that has been abandoned but can be evoked through appreciation of old men and nostalgia for the old ways. However, insofar as *Electra*, *Varrick*, and *T&L* all require the death of the young initiate in order to bring out the goodness of the hero, they also take a pessimistic view of the possibilities for good American masculinity after the death of the Western. Each one seems to take *Easy Rider*'s ominous closing line as its premise.

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