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Artikel

Thorsten Carstensen

After the Fall: Hollywood Cinema and the Redefinition of America in the 1970s

Abstract: This manuscript traces Hollywood's response to the disintegration of U.S. national consensus in the 1970s under the spell of Vietnam and Watergate, with a strong focus on the representation of masculinity. In my comparative reading of several canonized movies of the 1970s (*The Deer Hunter*, *Dirty Harry*, *The Godfather*, *Rocky*), I demonstrate how Hollywood cinema, amid America's struggle to redefine its shared values and regain its self-confidence, advocated a return to myths of the past in order for the country to rewrite what historians have called the narrative of "victory culture." As it is, arguably, in popular culture where societal changes manifest themselves most readily, I look at these films in the wider context of 1970s television, demonstrating connections with TV dramas such as *Bonanza* and *The Waltons*. I conclude with an outlook on the Reagan presidency and the rise to prominence of right-wing sequels such as *Rambo II* and *Rocky IV* as the seemingly inevitable consequences of 1970s disintegration.

Keywords: Hollywood Cinema; Popular Culture; American Studies; Television Studies; 1970s United States; Film criticism

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"There's a slow, slow train coming up around the bend," sang Bob Dylan in 1979, suggesting an inevitable crash. Wondering "what's happenin' to my companions," Dylan expressed a sense of looming apocalypse that dominated American popular culture in the aftermath of Vietnam. During the 1970s – an era of incoherence, uncertainty, and fears about the future – American society seemed to have reached what Robin Wood calls "a state of advanced disintegration" (2003, p. 44). According to Wood, the Vietnam War had both led to "a questioning of the entire social structure" and opened up the possibility that "the whole world might have to be recreated." By 1974, the country had been ravaged by a string of unsettling events that called into question the American myth of progress: the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., the authorities' vehement response to student and civil rights protests, the Watergate Affair and the final unmasking of Richard Nixon as a "crook," and the OPEC oil embargo of 1973. All of these events contributed to a general sense of decline epitomized by defeat in the jungles of Vietnam. Indeed, the American narrative of moral superiority had been rendered implausible, and yet, Wood argues, "there was no serious possibility of the emergence of a coherent and comprehensive alternative" (2003, p. 44).

My article traces Hollywood's response to the disintegration of national consensus. In my comparative reading of several key movies of the 1970s, I will demonstrate how amid America's struggle to redefine its shared values and regain

its self-confidence, Hollywood cinema advocated a return to myths of the past for the country to reaffirm what Tom Engelhardt calls its "victory culture." According to Engelhardt, for centuries, this narrative of triumph – manifesting itself, for instance, in the myth of the frontiersman under attack by a savage enemy – had shaped the country's self-image. Then it collapsed into political and social turmoil following the postwar years of suburban complacency. 1970s Hollywood productions eagerly engaged with this narrative, often flaunting the idea of redemptive violence. By doing so, films would either convey conservative messages about middle-class white America's assumed longing for robust authority or critique the fascist undertones of this law-and-order rhetoric.

This postmodern transformation of a cultural myth is particularly noticeable in the then newly-emerging cop film genre, whose protagonists were designed as modern gunfighter heroes tasked with reestablishing law and order in urban communities under threat. *Dirty Harry* (dir. Don Siegel, 1971) supported the conservative notion that the crime wave flooding American inner cities resulted from the loss of authoritarian structures after the upheavals of the 1960s. Depicting the big city as a morally bankrupt environment, the new "cinema of urban despair" (Kirshner, 2012, p. 131) reprised the classic frontier story in which, as Engelhardt asserts, "the lone white frontiersman gained the right to destroy through a sacramental rite of initiation in the wilderness" (1998, p. 5). Urban criminals replaced the Indians of the

frontier narrative, while detectives continued the job of the undaunted gunslingers by single-handedly bringing justice to a society whose official legal system was perceived as beyond repair.

The redefinition of masculinity is another dominant theme in 1970s Hollywood cinema. While *Dirty Harry* relished in marketing a new phallic militarism as a solution to urban crime, *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, 1978) used Western tropes to link the trauma of Vietnam to a crisis of masculinity with homoerotic undertones (Wood, 2003, p. 260). Adapting and recontextualizing elements of James Fenimore Cooper's *Deerslayer*, this war drama presents us with a loner figure, Mike, who finds solace in his local Pennsylvania community after returning from Vietnam. Similarly, the 1970s rogue cop is a lonesome hero without family ties or other close social bonds. The cop genre suggested that when push came to shove, the "ideal man" was a proper police officer (Rafter, 2000, p. 79) who devoted himself to his job, and thus, to the well-being of society – an idea that was strikingly different from the much more family-oriented masculine figure promoted by television series like *The Streets of San Francisco*, *The Waltons*, or *Bonanza*.

After two decades of unprecedented prosperity, economic crisis threatened the dreams of the American middle-class. With films like *Rocky* (dir. John G. Avildsen, 1976), Hollywood set out to present an alternative to real-life downward mobility by reminding viewers that the American Dream was still attainable. *Rocky* is arguably the most prominent cinematic example of the Carter and Reagan years to revive an American success ethic that the first two parts of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* trilogy (1972 and 1974) had portrayed as fundamentally perverted. Based on what Boggs describes as "old-fashioned modes of heroism and redemption, a glittering cinematography filled with bright images and positive messages, glorification of patriotism, and traditional 'family values'" (2003, p. 53), *Rocky* restored aspects of 1950s next-door wholesomeness to the American Dream narrative. Rocky, the relatable blue-collar hero, showed audiences that the old dream still worked if you truly believed in it. At the same time, the film reconciled individualistic and communal values by emphasizing that the boxer's success depended on his quaint embrace of friendship, commitment, and true love.

I will conclude this essay by looking at the Reagan administration's attempt to combat national pessimism, restore the victory culture narrative, and provide a new basis for the nation as an *imagined community*. While Reagan himself adopted cinematic language and staged his presidency as a media event, Hollywood was ready to support the fight against the "evil empire," as the release of two blockbuster movies in 1985 suggested. Both *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (dir. George P. Cosmatos), a revisionist fantasy that "ends up denying the painful lessons America should have learned in Vietnam" (Bates, 1996, p. 109), and *Rocky IV* (dir. Sylvester Stallone) directly aim to restore America's lost pride. Imbibing the spirit of the Reagan presidency, these movies asserted that "the United States would stand tall again" and thus "reclaim its stature as the dominant power on the globe and win the fight against communism" (Schulman, 2001, p. 221).

1 "I was just a kid": Coming Home from Vietnam

In his song "Brothers Under the Bridge," an outtake from his folk album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995), Bruce Springsteen tells the story of homeless Vietnam veterans who "ain't lookin' for nothin', just wanna live":

I come home in '72
You were just a beautiful light
In your mama's dark eyes of blue
I stood down on the tarmac, I was just a kid
Me and the brothers under the bridge.

One of several Springsteen songs that deconstruct the "warrior myth" (Stur), "Brothers Under the Bridge" offers a poignant portrayal of broken men. Although the narrator is "just a kid" when he returns home, the Vietnam experience has undoubtedly destroyed his innocence.¹ Coming back to his hometown, he sees "the same coke machines" from his childhood, but everything has changed. Unable to reintegrate into American society, he decides to drop out:

Had enough of town and the street life
Over nothing you end up on the wrong end of
someone's knife

Now I don't want no trouble
And I ain't got none to give
Me and the brothers under the bridge.

The disastrous war in Vietnam cracked the façade of the American victory narrative. As Engelhardt puts it, "Ultimate triumph out where the boundary lines were still being drawn was a given; and victory, when it came, was guaranteed to bathe all preceding American acts in a purifying glow" (1998, p. 4). By the end of the 1960s, it was evident that Vietnam would not have this kind of purifying effect. On the contrary, the war poisoned the nation and its value system. Reviewing Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), a *Time* critic summarized the war's damaging effect on the American identity as follows:

Welcome back to the war that, just 20 years ago, turned America schizophrenic. Suddenly we were a nation split between left and right, black and white, hip and square, mothers and fathers, parents and children. For a nation whose war history had read like a John Wayne war movie - where good guys finish first by being tough and playing fair - the polarization was soul-souring. Americans were fighting themselves, and both sides lost (Corliss, 1987, p. 55).

The John Wayne war movies perpetuated an American victory narrative that could be traced back to the early settlers' struggle for survival on the new continent. Military involvement in a country that most Americans had been unable to find on the map unmasked this myth. Appearing "so natural, so innocent, so nearly childlike," the John Wayne narrative had provided the United States with a paradigm that allowed the population to identify with a glorified version of American history. This framework collapsed, however, when the Cold War mission in Vietnam turned into a nightmare, and the United States faced worldwide anti-war protests. In April 1975, when the last helicopter lifted off from the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon, Americans were exposed to the victory narrative's hollow core. G.I. Joe was no longer the freedom-bringing hero of World War II, but a war criminal.

1970s Hollywood cinema responded to the loss of innocence by framing Vietnam veterans as (anti-)hero-victims. Juxtaposing everyday life in the fictional steel mining community of Clairton, Pennsylvania with the killing fields of Vietnam, Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* provided viewers with grim images of the damage the war had done to

a typical American blue-collar town and its inhabitants. The film's release was followed by a serious debate over its historical verisimilitude and its poetic, unrealistic elements. Many reviewers criticized the film for its alleged racist implications and for telling a story that had nothing to do with the events that were "still fresh in the memory of a nation" (Buckley, 1979, p. 88). The former Vietnam war correspondent Peter Arnett wrote: "Absent are the disillusion at home, the bitterness of those who served, the destruction of a country, and any other factors that might lessen the epic theme" (Bourdette, 1990, p. 166). The movie indeed creates a blurring of fact and fiction, of historical and epic truth. It combines authentic footage of the fall of Saigon with a fictional sequence of forced Russian roulette borrowing from the Indian captivity narrative (Hellmann, 1982, p. 425). However, when Leonard Quart accuses *The Deer Hunter* of not taking a critical stance towards the war in Vietnam (1990, p. 166), he misses the fact that the film does criticize the absurdity of the war by focusing on individual victims, akin to *Coming Home* (dir. Hal Ashby, 1978).

The Deer Hunter draws on archetypal elements of the Western genre to unmask the projections inherent in the American frontier myth (Hellmann, 1982, pp. 419-429). The protagonist, Michael Vronsky (Robert de Niro), is an outsider who, at the beginning of the film, lives in a trailer on the edge of town between civilization and wilderness. He is a detached observer, reluctant to commit himself to any stake in the community. As Quart observes, he is "chaste, honorable, forbearing, revering the mountains and nature, and given to a purity of purpose embodied in his deer-hunting gospel of the one-shot kill" (1994, p. 160). Michael's "one shot" ethic endorses a morality of discipline, endurance, and self-reliance. When, in the first third of the film, which is set in Clairton, Michael and his fellow steelworkers go deer hunting, it becomes clear that these men are descendants of the lone frontier-hunters, namely "men of solitude, men whose intense privacy sets them temporarily or permanently against the social order" (Slotkin, 1973, p. 559). For these hunters, the wilderness constitutes an alternative to both the protections and restrictions of civilization. At the same time, *The Deer Hunter* links the nineteenth-century frontier myth with the post-1945 myth of the American working class. Both a modern version of the

individualistic gunslinger and the embodiment of the American blue-collar worker, Michael is American mythology personified.

While *The Deer Hunter* indulges in a celebration of working-class values, it also implies that the dual narrative of geographic and industrial conquest – the basis for American triumphalism – is a thing of the past. The film suggests that the American myth has been undermined by the deindustrialization of home regions such as the Rust Belt as well as by the military and humanitarian catastrophe of Vietnam. Given this sociopolitical malaise, both individual and national healing presuppose the embrace of community values. In his elaboration on the epic character of *The Deer Hunter*, Bourdette argues that the movie is concerned with a struggle typically present in classical epics: “the costly, problematic but essential struggle to assert the value of *community* in the face of forces hostile to that humanizing value” (1990, p. 169). It is only after returning from Vietnam, where Michael has seen most of his friends die in combat, that he transcends the frontier myth by reconciling his desire for solitude with the need to contribute to his community. As Hellmann writes, “Michael, like the western hero, is a man of extraordinary virtues and resources, which are dangerous unless properly channeled into a role protective of the community” (1982, p. 422).

But despite its various affirming images of community – such as the steelworkers emerging arm in arm from the mill, or the older women preparing a wedding cake – *The Deer Hunter* conveys a sense of fragmentation that precedes the horrors of Vietnam. Most importantly, the film debunks the myth of the harmonious, cohesive American nuclear family that post-1945 television had been eager to advertise. In Clairton, domestic violence serves as an outlet for frustration, as suggested in an early scene in which Linda, one of the men’s girlfriends, is beaten and insulted by her drunken father. The war in Vietnam will further brutalize both the nation as a whole and small communities like Clairton in particular – both of which were never innocent in the first place.

Upon discharge from the army, Michael makes a deliberate attempt to restore his hometown community by seeking to reunite his fractured group of friends. Not only does he persuade Steven to leave the veterans’ hospital, he even returns to Saigon searching for his best friend

Nick (Christopher Walken). However, when Nick kills himself in front of Michael, the erosion of the Clairton community becomes an unquestionable fact. Michael’s attempt to rebuild the community has failed (Bates, 1996, p. 27). The end of the film, which depicts Nick’s funeral and the subsequent gathering of the surviving friends in John’s tavern, conveys a deep-rooted sense of loss. It reveals a world in which, as Frank Burke puts it, “everything worth loving has died, and all that remains is love for the dead” (1992, p. 256). The local community has thus become as disintegrated as the nation itself. When the friends sing “God Bless America,” it is not an affirmation of American triumphalism, but a collective hope for the American Dream in its nascent form. It expresses a deep longing for a nation before the fall, a nation of moral innocence. With this redefinition of what it means to be patriotic, the film’s final scene emphasizes the country’s need for a restored collective identity.²

First Blood (dir. Ted Kotcheff, 1982) provides yet another telling example of the victimization of the Vietnam veteran in popular culture. Seven years after his return from Vietnam, the movie’s protagonist, John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone), is still traumatized by his war experience. Unable to transition from serving his country as a perfect killing machine to leading the life of an ordinary citizen, Rambo cannot escape the war that remains within himself. Having “nowhere to run, nowhere to go,” as the narrator of Bruce Springsteen’s 1984 song “Born in the U.S.A.” laments, the former Green Beret has become a drifter, an aimless wanderer seeking inner peace. The images of him walking down empty roads, as well as the fact that all of his comrades have died, evoke the same alienation one encounters throughout *The Deer Hunter*.

Gregory Shafer argues that the *Rambo* series “invited audiences to redirect their anger toward foreign sources that were reminders of their impotence” (2001, p. 33). The flashbacks showing Rambo as enemy soldiers torture him imply the inhumanity of the Vietnamese and draw a clear line between victim and victimizer. These torture scenes recast Rambo as the victim, supporting the narrative of American innocence. As Jordan puts it, Rambo soon “became a worldwide symbol of the Reagan administration’s hawkish military initiatives in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Central America” (2003, p. 1). Shafer rightly

notes that Rambo's anger had a therapeutic effect on the audience: he was "hitting people they couldn't hit, laying waste to institutions too nebulous for them to know" (2001, p. 34).

Not only did *Rambo* rescue the American population from Kennedy-era philosophy by promoting the Republican victim narrative (Hellmann, 1990), the film also endorsed the conservative backlash against liberal politicians and anti-war protesters. Rambo becomes the mouthpiece of the political Right by accusing these two groups of abandoning him and his fellow soldiers. In a key scene, he tells his former commanding officer about his daily struggles with memories that threaten to overwhelm him. This battle with post-traumatic stress disorder becomes even more poignant given that America's involvement in Vietnam turned out to be a tragic mistake – and was deemed so by the majority of the population as early as 1969. As Rambo claims, "We did what we had to do to win, but somebody wouldn't let us win." Many U.S. veterans would have shared his belief that a left-wing anti-war coalition had undermined the American war effort:

It wasn't my war. You asked me, I didn't ask you. And I did what I had to do to win. Then I come back to the world, and I see all those maggots at the airport protesting me, spitting, calling me baby killer and all kinds of crap. Who are they to protest me? Unless they've been me and been there?

In summary, both *The Deer Hunter* and *First Blood* contrast communities with solitary heroes who embody the American frontier myth. However, while Michael undergoes a change of character and finally embraces community values, John Rambo remains an outsider, failing to adapt to a world that tries to avoid contact with him, as his violent encounter with a local sheriff shows.

In what follows, I will argue that 1970s movies of urban crisis are similarly rooted in the mythical frontier narrative. Portraying a world that is violent and morally corrupt, these films depicted figures of loneliness seeking to restore American innocence.

2 Urban Cowboys: Bringing Order to the City

In the 1970s, many major US cities were suffering from the dire consequences of deindustrialization

and errors in urban planning. Crime rates were increasing rapidly, neighborhoods were deteriorating, and public spaces were in disrepair. New Hollywood cinema responded to these alarming trends by shifting the American frontier from the western plains to inner-city streets. As Westerns lost their appeal to large audiences, urban cop movies enjoyed increased popularity. Struggling cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York City emerged as the backdrop for the re-staging of archetypal American myths in the context of urban decay. As Lawrence Webb observes,

the American city in decline, transition and renewal provided seventies cinema with a grounded, densely textured fictional world and narrative space, a powerful symbol of America's wider social malaise, a subject for exploration and ideological critique, and frequently, a source of aesthetic inspiration and visual fascination (2015, p. 10).

The new wave of cop movies was inaugurated by Siegel's *Dirty Harry*, a "reactionary Nixonian law-and-order fantasy" (Kirshner, 2012, p. 127) featuring a vigilante detective with the San Francisco Police Department who, as a quasi-sacred figure, is prepared to die in order to avenge America's sins. Modeled on the myth of the heroic gunfighter as portrayed by Gary Cooper in *High Noon* (dir. Fred Zinneman, 1952),³ Harry is devoted to bringing order to a morally deteriorating environment: he gets "every dirty job that comes along." Unlike his more conventional predecessors, he fuses stern self-reliance with a striking contempt for the boundaries of the law and abstract moral concerns. In Harry's mind, in a society as violent and corrupt as contemporary America, exceptional crimes allow for unorthodox measures. This is particularly true of his most recent assignment: he is tasked with hunting down Scorpio, the serial killer who has thrown San Francisco into a state of terror, and thus, must rescue the city's inhabitants from the constant threat of random violence. Harry's disaffection may stem from the fact that he is part of a legal system that he sees as being "soft" on criminals, but his profound loneliness also hints at a more personal tragedy. The film suggests that Harry is himself the traumatized victim of life's randomness, for his wife was killed in a car accident by a drunk driver – another manifestation of a society gone awry.

Advocating zero tolerance policies, *Dirty Harry* was in step with the political zeitgeist. Released in

1971, the film reflected the growing conservative concern about postwar liberal policies that were seen as furthering moral decay and urban crime in contemporary America.⁴ In her review for the *New Yorker*, Pauline Kael characterized *Dirty Harry* as a "right-wing fantasy" that provided "a remarkably single-minded attack on liberal values, with each prejudicial detail in place."⁵ In fact, Scorpio himself is the ultimate embodiment of what conservatives thought was wrong with contemporary America. His identification as a rather feminine hippy with an anti-war penchant – his long hair and peace symbol belt buckle serve as unambiguous indicators – underlines the film's reactionary equation of 1960s sexual liberation and freedom of speech with moral crisis. Meanwhile, in this world of urban liberalism – represented, for instance, by a gay man in the park, a naked girl in an apartment, and bare-breasted "Hot Mary" – Harry Callahan comes to the rescue of the "Silent Majority." In perhaps the film's most intriguing sequence, Harry meets the sniper underneath a large cross on San Francisco's Mt. Davidson. After being handed the ransom, Scorpio is ready to kill Harry. When a second police officer interrupts the scene, Scorpio is able to escape, leaving the half-conscious Harry lying at the cross's foot. Undoubtedly, the image of the beaten-up detective, groaning and bleeding, carries religious implications: Harry is framed as the city's martyr who sacrifices himself for the sins of liberal America.

This aspect of martyrdom notwithstanding, *Dirty Harry* contradicted the American narrative of moral innocence that had been "essentially defensive" (Engelhardt, 1998, p. 5). While according to this narrative, American violence was required for self-defense, Clint Eastwood showed American audiences that, as Peter Biskind writes, "we not only didn't have to be shot at first to shoot back, but that we could shoot in the back if we felt like it. Killing in self-defense was for jerks" (2000, p. 342). In *Dirty Harry*, low-angle shots and close-ups continuously heroize Eastwood and his gun; his ultramasculine police officer executes his job with a "grim devotion to duty" (Greenspun, 1971). Due to spreading bureaucracy and the authorities' inefficiency, the liberal justice system has become an obstacle in the battle against urban crime, and Harry has no qualms about transcending laws and violating civil liberties as long as these transgressions serve the goal of America's renewal.⁶ His

determination and stoicism border on a "fascist" moral position (Kael, "Dirty Harry"), and his sadistic excitement shines through in his cynical game with a wounded bank robber ("Do you feel lucky, punk?"). By adapting to the rules of the urban jungle, Harry emulates the lone frontiersman's adoption of "the Indians' most useful traits, including their love for the wilderness" (Engelhardt, 1998, p. 5). Two sequences show Harry driving his Ford through the red-light district, the city's very own sphere of wilderness. Both disgusted and fascinated, Harry becomes a voyeur himself.

Harry's transition into a world in which common laws no longer apply is most obvious in the scene at Kezar Stadium. After Harry discovers Scorpio's living quarters, he chases him through the empty stands and across the football field. He then shoots at Scorpio and hits his leg. What follows is a sinister sequence demonstrating that Harry is indeed "a hero with no use for established authority" (Lev, 2000, p. 37). Scorpio begs the approaching detective for mercy, but Harry instead aims his .44 Magnum at the suspect, steps on his injured leg, and keeps repeating the one question which, according to Harry's philosophy, renders all concerns for human rights negligible: "The girl, where is she?" The camera now zooms out, thus reframing what is an obvious act of torture (and what must have reminded viewers of televised real-life police brutality such as the infamous riot during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago) by rendering it more abstract. When viewed in a larger context, the film seems to suggest the discomforting truth that a policeman torturing a suspect is a necessary transgression. The film's very next scene shows the retrieval of the missing girl's body, who – unknown to Harry – had already been dead at the time of the "interrogation." Would she have lived if the authorities had been less focused on respecting civil liberties? While Harry is reprimanded for searching the suspect's home without a warrant, torturing him and denying him legal counsel, the district attorney is forced to release Scorpio – circumstances that let Harry conclude that "the law is crazy." Convinced that Scorpio will kill again, Harry tails him day and night. Referencing *High Noon*, the film ends in a final showdown between Harry and the killer. Scorpio has been chased to the yard of a quarry company, where he seizes a young boy who is fishing by a sump pit. After Harry's first

bullet hits Scorpio's shoulder and allows the boy to escape, Harry shoots his antagonist point blank, sending him into the pit's muddy waters. As Kael observed in her review of *Dirty Harry*' first sequel, *Magnum Force* (dir. Ted Post, 1973), "Harry doesn't bring anyone to court; the audience understands that Harry *is* the court" (1974).

The 1970s genre shift from Westerns to police drama also affected US network television as popular cop dramas began to dominate prime time slots that had previously been occupied by Western series such as *Bonanza* (1959-73) and *Gunsmoke* (1955-75). One notable example of this new trend was *The Streets of San Francisco* (1972-77), a cop show whose main characters – a pair of buddy police detectives – were committed to battling crime, albeit without the law-and-order attitude that shaped conservative Hollywood cinema at the time. Both *Dirty Harry* and *The Streets of San Francisco* were filmed on location, but while the film explored the city's underbelly, the television show seemed eager to use the urban landscape, with its winding streets, steep hills, and impressive Golden Gate Bridge, as a beautiful backdrop. Another obvious difference concerned characterization. Rather than portraying detectives as lone-some urban cowboys, the TV series presented Mike Stone, a widower with years of experience on the job and a heart in the right place, and his college-educated, juvenile partner Steve Keller as a likeable and dependable duo. Immune to cynicism, these two cops were proof that the hard-boiled detective and his methods were, as Maurice Charland writes, "not suited to television" (1978, p. 214). Whereas 1970s Hollywood was interested in crime as a manifestation of evil, contemporary television tended to treat police work as "a vehicle for a human interest story" (Charland, 1978, p. 213), focusing, for example, on a criminal's moral struggles.⁷ And in contrast to *Dirty Harry*, whose questionable methods make him a target for internal investigations, the moral rectitude of Keller and Stone is never in doubt.⁸

3 Deconstructing the American Dream: The *Godfather* Movies

Chinatown (dir. Roman Polanski, 1974) epitomizes the post-Watergate loss of faith in American institutions. Revolving around murder, incest, real-estate

fraud, and profiteering, the film projects the dark mood of the Nixon years onto 1930s Los Angeles. Its protagonist, the private eye Jake Gittes, uncovers a conspiracy by corrupt local politicians and land developers to divert the city's water supply. *Chinatown* thus deconstructs the American Dream by showing that its very premise – the transformation of wilderness into habitable land – is rotten to the core. True to the 1970s sense of a country in rapid decline, the film presents the viewer with a postmodern noir world in which corruption and deceit are rampant. Nobody can be trusted; in fact, Gittes himself is a somewhat shady character, lacking the moral commitment of, say, a Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe. He earns his living by investigating divorce cases, which is the kind of work the hard-boiled detective of Old Hollywood would have been sure to refuse. *Chinatown* thus undermines the conventions of the hardboiled detective genre. It dissolves the classic dichotomy between the detective's code of honor and the corrupt values of his environment. The film closes with the killing of an innocent victim, and Gittes is forced to realize that everything has spun out of control. Confronted with almost universal corruption, the private detective can no longer bring justice, which he is reminded of in the film's final scene: "Forget it, Jake; it's Chinatown."

Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) can be viewed as a similarly unrelenting denouncement of the state of American society in general and American capitalism in particular. Set during the decade following the end of World War II, *The Godfather* deconstructs the myth of 1950s wholesomeness by projecting the moral corruption of the American Dream onto the fictional Corleone family – one of five Italian-American "families" operating crime syndicates in New York – and their Machiavellian manipulations. Foreshadowing TV dramas such as *The Sopranos*, *The Godfather* humanizes the violent underworld by intertwining "business" and family. Kingpin Don Corleone surely is a violent patriarch, but his commitment to securing his family's well-being also makes him the perfect immigrant. Thus, we encounter him exercising his domestic role while officiating as father of the bride, shopping for groceries, and playing with his grandson.

While alluding to this patriarchal image, the very first scene of *The Godfather* highlights one of the film's main themes: the failure of the Ame-

rican institutions of justice. The audience is introduced to Amerigo Bonasera, who has come to see Godfather to ask him for support in a personal matter. His daughter has been violated by her non-Italian boyfriend, and now Bonasera wants Corleone to bring about justice. "I believe in America," the Italian immigrant begins his little speech, "America has made my fortune." However, while he might still believe in the idea of America, experience has taught him not to trust the institutions tasked with reinforcing it:

I went to the police like a good American. These two boys were arrested and brought to trial. The judge sentenced them to three years in prison, and suspended the sentence. Suspended sentence! They went free that very day. I stood in the courtroom like a fool, and those bastards, they smiled at me. Then I said to my wife, for justice, we must go to the Godfather.

Thus, *The Godfather* suggests that in a society in which the judiciary's application of the law no longer guarantees that justice is being served, people will inevitably resort to an ersatz ethics. It is in a later dialogue between Michael and Kay that the film's total indictment of contemporary American politics is revealed. When Kay criticizes Michael for endorsing his father's work, his sharp retort – "My father isn't different from other powerful men" – suggests that power will always transcend the law. Kay remarks that "presidents and senators don't have men killed" – a view that Michael dismisses as "naïve."⁹ Not only does this conversation illustrate Coppola's projection of mafia-like structures and methods onto American society as a whole. Michael's answer also anticipates the killing of American soldiers, sent there by their government, in Vietnam. Vito Corleone thus emerges as the embodiment of the underside of an American Dream built upon the acceptance of crime and violence as necessary means. *The Godfather Part II* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) takes this comparison a step further by introducing politicians who are as corrupt as the mafia itself, which the example of the hypocritical Senator Geary illustrates.

As Slotkin writes, *The Godfather* evokes a sense of "nostalgia for an idealized pre-capitalist past" (1992, p. 639). When asked about parallels between the structures of the Mafia and society as a whole, Coppola replied that he "always wanted to use the Mafia as a metaphor for America."

Coppola sees America as a country that has traded moral concerns for a super-pragmatic attitude that is rooted in the desire to preserve the capitalist system:

Basically, both the Mafia and America feel they are benevolent organisations. Both the Mafia and America have their hands stained with blood from what is necessary to do to protect their power and interests. Both are totally capitalistic phenomena and basically have a profit motive. (Farber, 1972, p. 223)

In addition to equating corporate capitalism with organized crime, *The Godfather* also draws striking parallels between religion and violence. For the members of the Corleone clan, religion has become ritualized; it is part of everyone's life but is without deeper meaning. This is most obvious in a sequence towards the end of the movie in which a major assassination takes place during the baptism of Michael Corleone's nephew. Again, these two narrative strands are intercut, suggesting initiation both into the church and into the realm of violence. The intercutting, it has been argued, also emphasizes the Catholic church's inability to act when confronted with its members violating fundamental laws (Hess, 1975).

While in *The Godfather*, Michael stresses the importance of family when he tells his brother Fredo never to "take sides against the family," *Part II* portrays the utter spiritual disintegration of the Corleone clan as the ultimate consequence of an empire based on Darwinian principles. Michael tries to hold onto the institution of family, but when push comes to shove, he subordinates everything to the preservation of his own power. If in the first part, the threat to the family was external, consisting of other families' aspirations to power in New York, the second part shows the threat to be internal, exemplified by Fredo's betrayal. Romanticized in the first film, the Corleone family now seems to be able to survive only if Michael can eliminate the dangers from within. The institution of family, in the first part characterized as a sanctum, is shattered "from the inside," as Coppola himself stated (Farber, 1974). The final sequence of the first part had already revealed the gap between Michael and Kay, who can no longer tolerate her husband's involvement in the family's criminal activities. In *Part II*, this conflict leads to their separation and Michael's utter isolation. This characterization is advan-

ced through a transition between a flashback to a family gathering before Michael has actively joined his father's business and an image of the older Michael at the Nevada family resort. While the first sequence shows Michael sitting alone in the family's dining room after his brothers have left the table to welcome Vito for his birthday dinner, the second sequence portrays an equally isolated older Michael on his Lake Tahoe estate after ordering the killing of his brother Fredo.

Michael's spiritual fall is the result of his obsession with unrestricted power and his tendency to overstretch the family's empire. The Corleone family, with its internal conflicts, its inner corruption, and its moral disintegration, thus reflects American society as a whole. As Glenn Man writes, "Michael's tragedy is not merely his own; it is America's tragedy as well" (1994, p. 132). Dark-lit, decadent interiors stylistically emphasize the family's descent, whereas the flashbacks that show Vito's rise in Little Italy are filmed in warm colors and soft-focus. Both the stylistic difference and the frequent framing of Vito looking admiringly at his young sons suggest a fundamental contrast with the older Michael who sacrifices his marriage for the sake of power. Michael has successfully protected his absolute power and transformed the New York family business into a multinational corporation – but only, as Auster and Quart put it, by turning "the American Dream into a nightmare of alienation and dissolution" (2002, p. 104).

While films such as *The Godfather Part II* depicted the disintegration of the American family, Vito's dictum in *Part I* that "a man who doesn't spend time with his family, he can never be a real man," echoed the promotion of traditional family values on postwar television. Among the shows that wholeheartedly embraced these values was *Bonanza*, the iconic primetime Western that ran between 1959 and 1973. Set in the picturesque Nevada mountains near Lake Tahoe, *Bonanza* revived the spiritual space of the post-Civil War era by reconciling genre archetypes with an attention to community and family. Unlike the lawmen in *Gunslinger*, the show's protagonists are homesteaders who operate a sprawling timberland ranch while standing up for justice whenever lawlessness is about to strike. Ben Cartwright, the three-time widower and patriarchic owner of the thousand-square-mile Ponderosa ranch, and

his three sons form a close-knit family in which unconditional allegiance across generations is taken for granted. While Hollywood movies such as *Rebel Without a Cause* depicted teenagers as rejecting their parents' lifestyle, the Cartwright sons were loyal to their father, regarding him as a teacher and role model.

When *Bonanza* disappeared from the screens, the police procedural was ready to fill the gap. At the same time, *The Waltons* (1972–81) continued *Bonanza*'s mission of reaffirming traditional American values and restoring the pioneer spirit. Set in rural Virginia during the Great Depression and World War II, *The Waltons* revived a world before America's fall – a world of moral innocence that, with its pastoral character, foreshadowed Reagan's nostalgic "Morning Again in America" campaign. In a time of economic malaise, the Walton family, undeterred by daily hardship, served as an example for the American people. The show engaged in the creation of a romanticized, mythical past and thus celebrated a lifestyle that was simple yet fulfilling. Although it is clear that the Waltons are poor – the eldest girl's purchase of a baseball glove, for instance, has to be budgeted carefully and far in advance – their world is not the poverty-ridden one of Steinbeck's Tom Joad. Rather, the series focuses on the family's confidence, spiritual candor, and sense of community as safeguards against the struggles of everyday life posed by the Depression. As Robert E. Ziegler writes, the home of the Walton family "seems fortified and protected behind a wall of tradition, goodness and good fortune" (1981, p. 104). Moreover, while an urban sitcom such as *All in the Family* (1971–79) turned contemporary ideological differences between a conservative blue-collar father and his progressive children into comedy, *The Waltons*, relating the harmonious co-existence of three generations under one roof, thwarted America's real-life generational gap. The credit sequence, in which John Walton arrives home and is greeted by the whole family assembled outside the white clapboard farmhouse, reinforces this emphasis on family values. Rituals like the joining of hands around the dinner table and the good night wishes that conclude every episode confirmed a quaint sense of community, which in 1970s America had been replaced by an ethics of individual self-realization.

4 Going the Distance: Rocky, a Hero of (and for) the People

As we have seen, urban crime movies of the 1970s depicted an America that had lost its status as an imagined community built upon the myth of moral innocence. This apocalyptic vision of America was disturbingly rendered by Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), perhaps the most iconic neo-modernist noir.¹⁰ Combining the trauma of Vietnam with the moral deprivation and grime of New York City, the film offered a devastating assessment of the state of the nation (Sharrett, 1993, pp. 220-235; Man, 1994, pp. 165f.). "Manhattan is a thin cement lid over the entrance to hell," Vincent Canby observed in his review of the film, "and the lid is full of cracks" (1976a). Several scenes in *Taxi Driver* zoom in on Times Square, the grand plaza that would become "Disneyfied" in the mid-1990s and is now an icon of globalized entertainment tourism. In the 1970s, the neighborhood was home to pornography and prostitution. By the time Major Lindsay created the Times Square Development Council to renew the urban center in 1971, it was already publicly defined by pornography and other forms of X-rated entertainment. "All the animals come out at night," says the film's protagonist, taxi driver Travis Bickle, about Times Square, "whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal." It seemed as if one day, as Travis famously puts it, "a real rain" would have to come "and wash all this scum off the streets."

An alienated Vietnam veteran, Travis lacks direction and a sense of purpose. His failure to communicate with others and form meaningful relationships emphasizes his inability to fit into a changing American society: "All my life needed was a sense of someplace to go. I don't believe one should devote his life to morbid self-attention but should become a person like other people." Travis is a Dostoyevskyan underground man (Sharrett, 1993, p. 222), a figure that "fuses the western hero with the horror film monster in the context of urban *film noir*," as Wood writes (2003, p. 249). His self-created mission is to wash America clean from what he perceives as the dark underbelly of human existence – a city "full of filth and scum; scum and filth. ...like an open sewer." We can interpret Travis both as God's "avenging angel," who cleanses urban society with violence,

and as a mirror-image of the corrupt city itself (Man 1994, p. 166). As he says, "I'll go anywhere – the Bronx, Brooklyn, Harlem. Each night when I return the cab to the garage I have to clean the cum off the back seat – sometimes I clean off the blood."

The 1976 Academy Award for Best Movie did not go to *Taxi Driver*, but to John G. Avildsen's *Rocky*, a film that is both nostalgic and hopeful. Recapturing both the economic promise of the American Dream and the spirit of triumphalism, *Rocky* evoked a world before the fall. Sylvester Stallone, who played the lead role (and also wrote the script), claimed that *Rocky*, unlike many other Hollywood releases at the time, presented audiences with a much-needed positive hero who embraced values that were conspicuously absent from contemporary cinema. Perhaps inadvertently, Stallone captured the film's paradoxical nature when describing its fairy-tale story, about a loser fighting for eternal fame, as a symbolically charged celebration of "real" America:

People require symbols of humanity and heroism. Yet today, a man brings his family into a theater, and there he sees a man pull out his knife and cut a kid's head off, and a woman is being run over by a Ford Mustang and the man in the theater says, "Is there anybody here I can identify with? Is there anything here I want to see?" And the answers are no, no. But he sees "Rocky" as a simple man, a man he can identify with, a man who doesn't curse and who likes America, a man who's a real man. That's what people want to see these days (Canby, 1976b).

Hence, *Rocky* is more than "the sentimental little slum movie," as Canby called it in his review for *The New York Times* (1976c). Rather, it is about "stifled ambition and broken dreams and people who sit on the curb looking at their dreams go down the drain," as Stallone maintained. In the post-1968 era, when the liberal consensus disintegrated and Vietnam and Watergate shattered the nation's pride and self-confidence, *Rocky* conquered theater screens as a hero of and for the people, evoking a past in which the promise of the American Dream still held true. Combining, as Quart and Auster note, "the body of a circus strongman with the saintliness of St. Francis" (2002, p. 115), *Rocky* sported the appearance of a Christ-like martyr willing to suffer for the rehabilitation of the American success story. Moreover, *Rocky* elaborated on the Western trope of regene-

ration through violence, which becomes obvious during the film's stylized boxing sequences.

In the post-Vietnam years of "storylessness" (Engelhardt, 1998, p. 15), *Rocky* engaged in a retelling of the American innocence narrative. Most importantly, the film offered images that could be interpreted in the context of the nation's hope to recapture "a lost identity of triumph" (Engelhardt, 1998, p. 15). With its Philadelphia setting and the staging of its hero's pivotal fight on the day of the American bicentennial, the film celebrates the redefinition of the nation, foreshadowing what Jimmy Carter would later call "the rebirth of the American spirit." When the film was released in 1976, the United States was politically and racially divided; millions of working-class Americans felt the painful consequences of the nation's loss of economic hegemony. It is in this context of socioeconomic depression that Rocky emerges as the personified Horatio Alger myth: he is the all-American working-class hero, an Italian immigrant who transcends poverty to become a national icon. He is a man who seems to be directionless, but then – through luck and thanks to sheer will – triumphs over his fate and creates his own "rags to riches" story. Stallone himself, who proudly told the media that he had written the script in three and a half days, became the symbol of the rehabilitated American success story. In his interview with Vincent Canby, Stallone pointed out the film's parallels with his own evolution from a sometime actor living in a shabby apartment into a Hollywood celebrity:

There are certain parallels. [...] Rocky had drive, and intelligence, and the talent to be a fighter, but nobody noticed him. Then when opportunity knocked, everybody said, "Hey, there's Rocky, he's good." That's what happened to me. The fact that we both went the distance when we were finally given the opportunity, that's the main parallel (1976b).

The film's images and rhetoric project racial stereotypes into the boxing arena, thus exploiting the Carter era's white backlash against the goals and concerns of the civil rights movement. As Chris Jordan argues, Rocky Balboa is a "champion of the people molded by practical experience rather than formal learning." As a "Reagan-era incarnation of the natural aristocrat," he "achieves class mobility by redeeming the hostile racial other and the inner city from moral depravity"

(2003, p. 64). In political terms, the film stages the fight between Rocky and Apollo Creed as the populist revolt of the Silent Majority, giving a white working-class hero the chance to fight an arrogant black warrior. Rocky might not be the brightest bulb in the box, but what he lacks intellectually he makes up for in honesty and likeability; he even consults a priest prior to his fight. Rocky is fighting for his country and his wife, as well as for a local community that admires him. Apollo, in contrast, is associated with the increasing economic exploitation of his sport. (In *Rocky II* [dir. Sylvester Stallone, 1979], Apollo employs a whole publicity apparatus, whereas Rocky refuses to shoot TV ads.) The film's most iconic sequence shows Rocky running through the streets of Philadelphia, cheered on by everyone he passes, until he finally sprints triumphantly up the steps of the Museum of Art – an effort which, just a few weeks earlier, would have completely exhausted him. As a representative of the white working-class' heartfelt struggle with economic malaise, Rocky can count on the support of the Silent Majority. He thus revives Richard Nixon's 1968 campaign promise, "the great objective of this Administration" (quoted in Schulman, 2001, p. 23): he is able "to bring the American people together." By contrast, Apollo is perceived as the personification of a newly emerging black middle class that, thanks to the implementation of affirmative action and the relative success of the civil rights movement, poses a threat to white America. As Canby wrote upon the film's release, "by making the Ali-like fighter such a dope, the film explores areas of latent racism that just may not be all that latent" (1976c).

The *Rocky* movies celebrated another key aspect of the American Dream by emphasizing the importance of traditional family values. Whereas domestic horror movies like *Rosemary's Baby* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1968), *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974) depicted the family as a source of violence, the contemporaneous rise of conservatism in America also resulted in more directly affirmative renderings of family relations in Hollywood cinema. Interestingly, *Rocky* does not reinforce the myth of the harmonious suburban family generated by television; on the contrary, the film acknowledges the disintegration of the nuclear family by high-

ighting Adrian's strained relationship with her brother. And yet the movie made clear that the American success story depended on restoring family values. Rocky derives his confidence from his relationships with his girlfriend (and later, in the sequels, his wife) Adrian, her brother, and his coach and ersatz-father Mickey (May, 2004, pp. 70-72). It is this community that provides him with a sanctuary and serves as a basis for his "will to survive," as the soundtrack of *Rocky III* puts it.

Mickey's advice for Rocky is to "go the distance," to keep fighting for all fifteen rounds. It is this persistence – the will to "stay hard, stay hungry, and stay alive," as Bruce Springsteen sang in "This Hard Land" – that was seen as crucial virtue in the crisis-ridden 1970s America. *Rocky* reflects the country's need to renew its confidence and belief in its values. Jimmy Carter based his 1976 campaign on this national longing, telling the people to use their will and spirit to renew America. After Nixon, whose lies had upset the public and destroyed the nation's faith in its leaders' integrity, Carter presented himself as a man of character and promised never to deceive the American people. Rocky symbolizes a nation that is "down and out" but equipped with a strong will, allowing it eventually to rise from economic and moral malaise.

Rocky seemed to anticipate Jimmy Carter's famous speech on July 15, 1979, by advocating a code of honor that fused humility with confidence. This recipe for triumph in the boxing ring could, of course, be easily applied to the everyday struggles of all hard-working Americans. According to Carter, the "fundamental threat" to the nation's "social and political fabric" was a domestic, not a foreign one:

The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.

According to Carter, one of the central problems was the individual's desire for material rather than spiritual fulfillment: "In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and con-

sumption." Carter linked the moral exhaustion he analyzed to the demise of the American victory culture narrative, which was brought about by a series of tragic events:

We were sure that ours was a nation of the ballot, not the bullet, until the murders of John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. We were taught that our armies were always invincible and our causes were always just, only to suffer the agony of Vietnam. We respected the presidency as a place of honor until the shock of Watergate.

With his "malaise speech," Carter echoed Christopher Lasch's psychoanalytical interpretation of 1970s American society. In his 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Lasch provided a crushing critique of an utterly self-absorbed society that had lost sight of traditional values.¹¹ *Rocky* reflected Carter's goal to restore the nation as an imagined community and advocated what Lasch called a "return to basics:" nature, family, togetherness, and self-reliance. Hence, Rocky's triumph in the boxing arena is more than a personal victory. As the first boxer to "go the distance" against Apollo Creed, he embodies the triumph of the American spirit.

The *Rocky* series – as well as the *Rambo* films, for that matter – epitomizes what Susan Jeffords has called the "remasculinization" of America after the Vietnam War. Jeffords speaks of "a revival of the images, abilities, and evaluations of men and masculinity in dominant U.S. culture" (xii). *The Waltons*, for instance, engaged in an affirmative renegotiation of masculinity by thematizing the gender continuity between John Walton and his teenage son John-Boy, the series' protagonist. In the 1973 episode "The Hunt," John-Boy is invited to join his father in the hunt for a Thanksgiving turkey. While his mother rejects the idea of her oldest son using a gun, his father refers to the frontier narrative, claiming that "part of being a man is providing food for his family" – thus invoking the gun as not only a necessary tool for protection in everyday life but also as a symbol of manhood. John-Boy, however, cannot bring himself to take the first shot at the turkey. As a result of this aborted rite of passage, his father lectures him on life's Darwinian underpinnings: "Life is a mystery, a sacred mystery. Part of this mystery seems to be the struggle we all have to stay alive. But to keep

life in ourselves and those we cherish sometimes we have to take life.” This speech foreshadows events that will give John-Boy a second chance at proving his manhood. When a giant bear attacks his father – it is, in fact, the biggest bear Grandpa Walton has ever seen up in the mountains – John-Boy is quick to react and slays the animal before it can inflict any serious harm. Assuming the role of the armed man who, as he himself realizes, must stand “between his family and anything that might hurt them,” he effectively inserts himself into the frontier narrative.¹²

While John-Boy Walton learns that sometimes a man must shoot first in order to stay alive, Rocky, the “Italian Stallion,” establishes his manhood by showing up for the hardest fight of his life – a fight that implies his willingness to sacrifice his body for the restoration of the white American Dream. The film’s unambiguous gender formula was Stallone’s way of responding to what he saw as a recent tendency of men to become “limp-wristed librarians.” In his interview with Canby, Stallone lamented the “trend toward a sleek, subdued sophistication,” thereby mocking more feminine conceptions of masculinity that had emerged since the late 1960s:

In discos, men and women look almost alike, and if you were a little bleary-eyed, you’d get them mixed up. I think it’s wrong, and I think women are unhappy about it. There doesn’t seem to be enough real men to go around.

Hollywood’s machismo was a perfect cue for Ronald Reagan, the former Western actor who came to occupy the Oval Office between 1980 and 1988. Determined to preserve the values of American Exceptionalism and reintroduce the idea of manifest destiny, Reagan staged his presidency as another Western in which freedom, capitalism, and democracy must be defended – and good must defeat evil.

5 Coda: Reagan and the Restoration of Victory Culture

America’s longing to become once again an innocent yet powerful nation constitutes the underlying tone of 1970s Hollywood cinema. As we have seen, this myth regards the United States as exceptional and associates “God’s own country” with capitalism, freedom, and democracy. This

desire for a restored American victory culture logically resulted in Ronald Reagan’s landslide victory over Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election. During the years following the retreat from Vietnam, Americans suffered from the collapse of a metanarrative that had provided them with a national history that they could identify with unproblematically. Vietnam had turned the story upside down. Thousands of American soldiers had lost their lives in a war that had been unconvincingly sold to the population as yet another fight for democracy. As Bruce Springsteen would put it in his 1995 song “Youngstown”: “We sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam, and now we’re wondering what they were dyin’ for.” When the last American helicopter lifted off from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon, the seal was set on a defeat that had long been inescapable.

What followed was what Carter in his 1979 famous speech came to call “a crisis of confidence” – a crisis reflected in literature and popular culture alike. John Updike described this state of the union in his novel *Rabbit is Rich* (1979), whose protagonist finds himself in an America shaped by a downward spiral of rising prices, gas shortages, and general spiritual depression. This is how John Leonard characterized the America of the novel’s anti-hero Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom in a *New York Times* article from 1981:

The Iranians hold us, and Harry, hostage. On television, everything’s a rerun, especially the situation-comedies, and at the movies everything’s a sequel, except for ‘Breaking Away’ and ‘Starting Over.’ No gas, no ideas, no God, just gravity.

With similar vividness, Billy Joel captured the seemingly endless malaise of the late 1970s and early 1980s in “Allentown,” his 1982 song about the recession-plagued Rust Belt city. With its closing steel factories, Allentown served as a metaphor for the disheartening downward mobility of working-class families following the end of the postwar economic boom. Joel reminded listeners that in America, every child used to have “a pretty good shot to get at least as far as their old man got.” However, “something happened on the way to that place”; the American Dream had been diminished to a broken promise: “Well we’re waiting here in Allentown/For the Pennsylvania we never found.”

It was high time for a convincing retelling of the American victory culture narrative, and

Ronald Reagan seemed to be the right man for the job. During the crisis-ridden decade of the 1970s, Hollywood had created urban cowboys who came to town in order to bring order to a world spun out of control. Reagan, the former Western movie star, fit that persona perfectly. As Schulman writes, Reagan embodied the "man on a horse come to save America at the last moment" (2001, p. 142) – a cowboy whose mission it was to restore the American war story. During his presidency, the boundaries between historical fact and Hollywood fiction became permeable. Not only did Reagan create a montage of cinematic visions of an innocent America in his 1980 presidential campaign (c.f. Slotkin, 1992, p. 643), he even borrowed his political rhetoric from movies, echoing George Lucas' 1977 blockbuster *Star Wars* when denouncing the Soviet Union as an "evil empire."

In the eyes of many voters, Reagan held all the characteristics that his predecessor lacked. Having failed to free the hostages in Iran and having allowed the Soviet Union to expand its communist empire by invading Afghanistan, Carter was perceived as weak. With Reagan, a politician emerged onto the national stage who had already proved himself a hardliner as Governor of California and who now made clear that he was anything but soft on communism. Abandoning the attempts of the Carter administration to relieve the tensions between the USA and the Soviet Union, Reagan launched a drastic rearmament program and thus revived a conflict that had been gradually cooling down. Hollywood gratefully reflected this new policy of confrontation. Right-wing fantasies such as *Rocky IV*, which stages the conflict between the two Cold War regimes as a boxing match, and the *Rambo* series became expressions of a conservative culture based on clear-cut antagonisms and images of enemies.

In his 1980 campaign, Reagan insisted that the war in Vietnam had been a "noble cause" and had only failed because non-patriotic Americans on the home front undermined the war effort. Reagan thus sought to appeal to a nation whose wounds still lay open. Hollywood was quick to exploit this message, as the box-office hit *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985) demonstrated. This time, Vietnam veteran John Rambo is tasked with bringing home POWs still held in Vietnam. *Rambo* reflected Reagan's revisionist view of the Vietnam War and, as Canby rightly noticed, was designed

to rewrite history: "Though the movie doesn't say so, it's designed to win the war that officially ended 10 years ago in humiliating defeat" (1985). Stallone believed that the message of the film was that "frustrated Americans were trying to recapture some glory. The vets were told wrong. The people who pushed the wrong buttons all took a powder. The vets got the raw deal and were left holding the bag" (Kern, 1988, p. 53).

While in the 1980s a conservative president and right-wing Hollywood directors sought to rewrite history and restore the American myth of innocence, popular music continued to deconstruct this myth. In "Goodnight Saigon" (1982), one of the most memorable anti-Vietnam songs, Billy Joel depicted a nightmarish landscape of war in which "we would all go down together." Two years later, Bruce Springsteen released his statement on the war in Vietnam with *Born in the U.S.A.*, an album that combined fist-pumping drums with lyrics about veterans who had "nowhere to run" and hometowns "with whitewashed windows and vacant stores." Ironically, when the title track first came out, it was misinterpreted as a patriotic affirmation of the American way of life. Reagan was eager to enlist Springsteen for his reelection campaign, but the singer critiqued the president's TV ads ("It's morning in America") as a false portrayal of the economic situation, reminding him of the continuing urban decline experienced by the residents of Steel City and the Bronx: "And you say, well, it's not morning in Pittsburgh. It's not morning above 125th Street in New York. It's midnight, and, like, there's a bad moon risin'" (Loder, 1984). With "Born in the U.S.A.," Springsteen showed how the mythic America that Reagan tried to revive had lost its innocence – an innocence that has yet to be restored.

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Endnotes

- 1** Time and again, Bruce Springsteen's songs emphasize familial community as the cornerstone of manhood (Stur, 2012, p. 116). Another forceful song about a Vietnam veteran, "Shut Out the Light," a non-album b-side for the 1984 hit single "Born in the U.S.A.," reveals the trauma of "leaving home and not being able to find your way back," as Springsteen explained when he first performed it during his 1985 stadium tour. The lyrics evoke the terror of profound loneliness: "Oh mama mama mama come quick / I've got the shakes and I'm gonna be sick / Throw your arms around me in the cold dark night / Hey now mama don't shut out the light."
- 2** Susan Jeffords argues that the group chorus is "meant literally by Cimino but overinterpreted by uneasy film viewers as ironic." She terms the film as "embarrassingly straightforward" (1989, p. 96) and describes its message as "an affirmation of unity through the achievement of masculine bonds and the fulfillment of their promises" (1989, p. 97).
- 3** While *Dirty Harry* celebrated the male myth of the lone-some fighter for a cleaner America, *Midnight Cowboy* (dir. John Schlesinger, 1970) challenged these assumptions. The film's Texan protagonist Joe Buck, a would-be John

Films/TV Series Discussed:

- All in the Family*. Cr. Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin, 1971-79.
- Bonanza*. Cr. David Dortort, 1959-73.
- Chinatown*. Dir. Roman Polanski, 1974.
- Columbo*. Crs. Richard Levinson and William Link, 1968-2003.
- Coming Home*. Dir. Hal Ashby, 1978.
- The Deer Hunter*. Dir. Michael Cimino, 1978.
- Dirty Harry*. Dir. Don Siegel, 1971.
- The Exorcist*. Dir. William Friedkin, 1973.
- The French Connection*. Dir. William Friedkin, 1971.
- The Godfather*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972.
- The Godfather Part II*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974.
- Gunsmoke*. Cr. Norman Macdonnell and John Meston, 1955-75.
- High Noon*. Dir. Fred Zinneman, 1952.
- House of Cards*. Cr. Beau Willimon, 2013-2018.
- Magnum Force*. Dir. Ted Post, 1973.
- Midnight Cowboy*. Dir. John Schlesinger, 1970.
- Platoon*. Dir. Oliver Stone, 1986.
- Rambo: First Blood*. Dir. Ted Kotcheff, 1982.
- Rambo: First Blood Part II*. Dir. George P. Cosmatos, 1985.
- Rocky*. Dir. John G. Avildsen, 1976.
- Rocky II*. Dir. Sylvester Stallone, 1979.
- Rocky IV*. Dir. Sylvester Stallone, 1985.
- Rosemary's Baby*. Dir. Roman Polanski, 1968.
- The Streets of San Francisco*. Cr. Edward Hume, 1972-77.
- Taxi Driver*. Dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976.
- The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974.
- The Waltons*. Cr. Earl Hamner Jr., 1972-81.

Wayne figure lost in an unambiguous American past of traditional gender roles, arrives in New York City. In a city suffering from urban decay and the loss of moral innocence, Buck ends up as a 42nd Street male prostitute. The movie's tone is set in the opening scene. Riding on the bus east, Buck listens to a radio show on which the interviewer asks a woman, "What's your idea of a man?" The woman replies, "My idea of a man is Gary Cooper, but he's dead." At the end Buck sheds his cowboy outfit, thus freeing himself from the American myth that had kept him captive.

4 Joe Street's recent study, *Dirty Harry's America*, explores these aspects in greater detail.

5 Director Don Siegel distanced himself from his movie's protagonist by describing him as "a racist, a reactionary." Some policemen, he claimed, "are like Harry, genuine heroes whose attitudes I abhor" (Frayling, 1992, p. 93).

6 In *The French Connection* (dir. William Friedkin, 1971), the motif of the city as a landscape of corruption is laced with class resentment (Lev, 2000, p. 28). Popeye Doyle, a New York police detective working to achieve a large-scale narcotics bust, is the archetypal hard-working, lower-middle-class cop. One scene shows Doyle waiting outside a restaurant, eating fast food and drinking cheap coffee,

while the upper-class criminals dine within. His masculinity-derived from his power as a policeman-compensates for his lack of financial status. Much like Harry Callahan, Doyle at times considers himself above the law, having no qualms about beating up African-Americans if it serves the ultimate case of justice. As Lev writes, the cops in Friedkin's movie "have a subculture of their own" that may include occasional violations of the law (2000, p. 29).

7 While *The Streets of San Francisco* frequently dealt with social and political issues, other television cop shows were rather depoliticized. A case in point is *Columbo* (1968-2003), which had its protagonist investigate stylized crime in the hyperreal spheres of the rich and famous in the Los Angeles suburbs. Rather than critiquing class divisions or social inequality, the series focused on intricate plots.

8 In the very first episode of *Streets*, "The Thirty-Year Pin" (1972), the two detectives search for the man who killed one of their fellow cops.

9 Recently, the popular and critically acclaimed Netflix drama *House of Cards* (2013-2018) has taken the hollowing-out of political institutions to an extreme.

10 For a reading of *Taxi Driver* in the context of film noir, see Spicer 2002: 145-147.

11 The growing individualism that Lasch detected was evident in the change of tone in the lyrics of former counter-cultural icon Bob Dylan. The time of anti-war songs seemed to be over, and Dylan, once both the poet and prophet of the civil rights movement, now primarily turned to themes of love and companionship. In an article for the British newspaper *The Sunday Times* on February 3, 1974, Derek Jewell reflected upon the artist's development from protest figure to an artist of the marketplace: "Dylan's standing today is paradoxical. He rejects, yet is accepted by millions. And isn't he, despite his evolution, still a man of his age? There is an inward-turning mood today [...] characterized by noninvolvement, a search for privacy and a tendency to look backwards" (quoted in Shelton, 1986, p. 436).

12 The complex issue of John-Boy's masculinity was recently taken up by Mike Chopra-Gant in his comprehensive study on *The Waltons*. According to Chopra-Gant, John-Boy - who will grow up to become a writer - embodies the struggle between different modes of masculinity (2013, pp. 106-110).