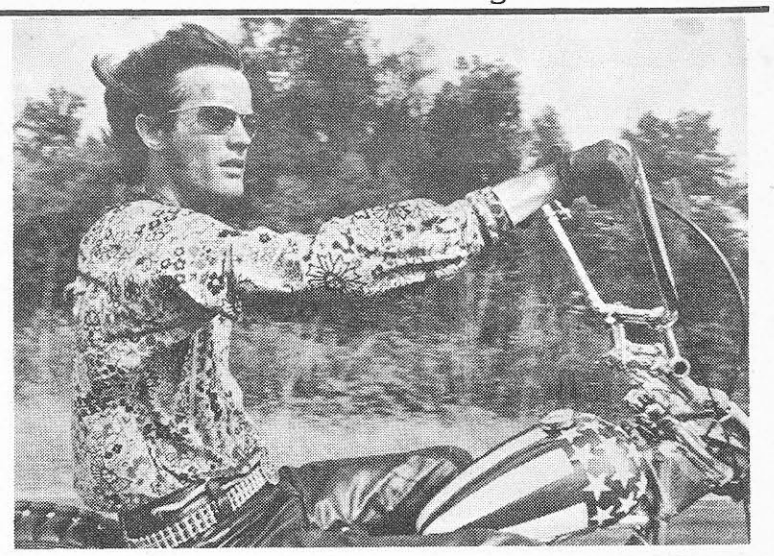
PAUL SCHRADER
EASY RIDER



In a recently published book-length interview with Jorge Luis Borges the Argentinian poet told how he had first met Federico Garcia Lorca when they both were young, and how Borges had taken an instant dislike to the Spanish poet-playwright:

> "Lorca wanted to astonish us. He said to me that he has very much troubled about a very important character in the contemporary world. A character in whom you could see all the tragedy of American life. And then he went on in this way until I asked him who was this character and it turned out the character was Mickey Mouse. I suppose he was trying to be clever. And I thought, that's the kind of thing you might say when you are very young and you want to astonish somebody. But after all, he was a grown man, he had no need, he could have talked in a different way. But when he started in about Mickey Mouse being a symbol of America, there was a friend of mine there and he looked at me and I looked at him and we both walked away because we were both too old for that kind of game, no? Even at the time."

In Dennis Hopper's EASY RIDER, Hopper asks hippie commune leader Robert Walker, "Have you ever wanted to be someone else?" After a contemplative pause, Walker solemnly replies, "I've often thought of being Porky Pig." And the group falls into a respectful silence. "Easy Rider" is permeated with the sententiousness Borges found in the young Lorca, the sophomoric desire to astonish (not in Cocteau's sense), the self-congratulatory piety of an aphorist who has just demolished a series of straw men.

"Easy Rider" is a very important movie—and it is a very bad one, and I don't think its importance should be used to obscure the gross mismanagement of its subject matter. Dennis Hopper's film about two drug-culture motorcyclists (Hopper and Peter Fonda) who, in the words of the "Easy Rider" ad, "set out to discover America," has captured the imagination of the above and underground press alike.

The underground identification was instant and understandable: "Easy Rider" fueled the paranoia which is the staple item of the youth culture (often rightly so). As a friend said, "It's a picture that doesn't cop out," presumably meaning that the young idealists are senselessly massacred and the audience is left without hope. The reservations of the "Life" and "Newsweek" reviewers were over-ridden by their eagerness to agree with the film's propositions. As Joseph Morgenstern wrote, "Easy Rider's essential truth is brought home by what we ourselves know of our trigger-happy, hate-ridden nation in which increasing numbers of morons bear increasing numbers of arms." The mass media, having exploited every other youth truth, was now usurping youth's paranoia.

My complaint is that "Easy Rider," for all its good intentions, functions in the same superficial manner "liberal" Hollywood films have always functioned. "Easy Rider's" superficial characterizations and slick insights stem from the same soft-headed mentality which produced such anathema "liberal" films as Elia Kazan's "Gentleman's Agreement" and Stanley Kramer's "Defiant Ones." But because liberals and leftists of all varieties so desperately need the strong statement "Easy Rider" makes, they are willing to overlook the film's shallow, conventional method of argument.

"The Defiant Ones" (a 1958 sincere, mushy fable about race relations) had a fleeting sociological value (like "Easy Rider"), but its value as art was negligible and today nobody would take its black-and-white moral seriously. The characters of "Easy Rider" will become a joke too because Hopper has not taken the first step to protect them from the ravages of time, he has not withdrawn them from the puppet world of propaganda and made them real human beings.

"Easy Rider" draws its characters and situation from a bag of stock movie tricks which have historically been used to "prove" any number of contradictory premises. Haven't you met all these characters before?—the good-hearted prostitute, the simple man of the soil, the bully cop, the redneck townsfolk, the good-natured drunk, and the stolid picaresque hero who is constantly staring into the future. The flapper movies of the Twenties always included a scene of a whimsical character actor getting drunk, spilling over himself, making faces, and finally conking out.

Today we have Jack Nicholson, the small town, ACLU lawyer, momma's boy, getting high on grass, making faces, and finally conking out. The sentiments are the same, and so are the giggles. (And when he said with a straight face, "You know this used to be a hell of a good country. I don't know what happened," I, for one, couldn't stop laughing.)

When the freshly-turned-on Nicholson is murdered and Peter Fonda mumbles something about his being a good man I thought I could see for one fleeting moment, in double exposure, the bulky figure of John Wayne hovering over the trusty old Walter Brennan's fresh grave. We are deep in the heart of the old West when Fonda visits a hippie commune and tells the seed-sowing inhabitants, "They're going to make it."

Instead of the musical redundancies of Max Steiner, we now have Jimi Hendrix and the Steppenwolf to reinforce every thematic passage. One could take such trite set-ups in a better spirit if Hopper hadn't revealed his sensitivity to be sophomoric at most every turn. He crudely intercuts the shoeing of a horse with the changing of a motorcycle tire, dwells on graffiti about Jesus in a jail and a statue of Christ in (of all places!) a whorehouse.

Hopper's idea of making a point is something like this: long tracking shot of rich white Southern mansions: cut: long tracking shot of poor black hovels. Even poor Stanley Kramer, who is every film student's stock example of liberal pretentiousness, is more subtle than this. Hopper finds no new metaphors for the drug culture, but simply adapts moviedom's hoary situations to the contemporary scene. The liberal cliches have changed, but they are still cliches.

Hopper's villain is every liberal's favorite scapegoat: the redneck. There is no need to motivate, characterize, or develop the killers—movie past has taught us that Southern poor whites commit such heinous crimes as a matter of course. Fonda has said that they could have just as well set the killing in the North. This is true, but it would have made Hopper define his villains more precisely (unless he wanted to transport Southerners to the North), and would have deprived him of the fun of whipping the Southern stereotype. Surrounded by majorettes (a sure sign of decadence) and speaking in a drawl, the redneck is the ideal villain for a jejune director—being for that villain would be like being against, for gosh sakes, LOVE.

The college students who complain about Sidney Poitier's two-dimensional Superspade gobble up Hopper's Superbigots with no qualms. I guess it matters which side of the paranoiac fence you are on.

A friend of mine who likes "Easy Rider" admits the film is superficial, but says, "That's the beauty of it. It gets only about one inch into these hippie characters, but that is all there is to them anyway." I refuse to believe that anyone is as superficial as Hopper's hippies and rednecks—even when they act that way. There are feelings (perhaps undesirable) I share with both groups and I want a film to explore and comment on that identification.

What makes "Easy Rider" look like every other gutless piece of Hollywood marshmallow liberalism is Hopper's refusal to play with anything but a stacked deck. You cannot lose when you plot stereotypes against straw men. The problem for a propagandist like Hopper is that humans are always more infectious than slogans, and to risk characterization is to risk failure. If the characterization is too honest the audience might not identify with the right group, as in the first half of Leo McCarey's 1952 anti-communist film, "My Son John," where McCarey portrayed communist Robert Walker too conscientiously. One can imagine the format of "Easy Rider" being used to convey any type of agit-prop.

It could be a Nazi film with Hitler and Goering reviewing their choppers through the Rhineland, finally being gunned down by a rabid, motley, heavily-accented

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the jocund direction of John Hol-

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group of Jewish bankers, scientists, and artists (at least it would have been funny that way). At the risk of being facetious one could say that "Easy Rider" was a Sam Yorty fund-raising film. The right-wing voters would have filled Mayor Sam's coffers after one viewing. There is no danger that conservatives would be moved or changed by seeing the film; they react as automatically as the leftists.

"Easy Rider" deals with the most important issues facing America---and for that reason its superficiality is the more deplorable. I find it helpful to make a distinction between documentary and fiction films about political trends. I recently saw a powerful documentary called "American Revolution 2" which dealt with an attempt to unite two ghetto militant organizations, one poor Southern white, the other the Panthers. "American Revolution 2" goes no deeper into its characters than "Easy Rider" and is just as superficial, yet I was much more affected by it than by "Easy Rider". There is a need for an honest portrayal of events which, however superficial, can inform viewers of trends around the country. But when a filmmaker weaves people and places out of his own imagination, he is responsible for much more—he is responsible for their souls and minds as well as their actions.

"Easy Rider" would have been a powerful film if Hopper had been able to catch these events as they happen (and I don't doubt they do happen), but as a work of art and imagination it falls completely short. I demand more of art than I do of life; I desire the sensitivity and insight that only an artist can give. And the more important the subject matter, the more crucial that insight becomes.

If the mass media decides to exploit the Hopper-Fonda paranoia it will acquire something as worthless as last year's mod fashions and nude plays. Hopper and Fonda are too infatuated with the idea of themselves as pundits, Christs, martyrs, and Porky Pigs to examine their heroes, villains, or themselves —and this form of harmless paranoia is easily stolen and marketed throughout the media. But we are all too old for this kind of game, no?