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Representations of the American Sublime in a Selection of Films, 1968-1992

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NOTTINGHAM TRENT

PhD

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ABSTRACT

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Through exploring Burkean and Kantian formulations of the sublime, my thesis aims to establish a visual and verbal rhetoric of Americanised versions of sublimity as an iconoclastic language and ideology of limitless possibility. I also examine the ways in which filmic representations of American sublimity both draw from and contribute to conventional representations of the American Sublime.

Identifying a recurrent 'edge motif' operating with traditional and recent, filmic representations of the American Sublime, my thesis, building on work by Rob Wilson and Elizabeth McKinsey, links the motif to the etymological roots of the sublime, as well as to the experience of the American Sublime as a dynamic of negation and recreation. Addressing what can be described as the politics of the American Sublime, however, my thesis also connects the use of the edge motif within the selected films to contemporary anxieties about American techno-corporate imperialism. In this way, I discuss how the selected films can be regarded as critiques of the current dominant economic order which is portrayed, with different emphasis, as a totalising, artificial and delimiting power structure.

My thesis also argues, however, that the American Sublime, as a discourse celebrating newness and self and national aggrandisement, is complicit in the kind of marketplace ideologies and practices which it seems to oppose. Incorporating the iconography of the American sublime into their critical strategies as a figure of liberation and self-empowerment, the majority of the selected films, I contend, are thus severely constrained in their attempts to resist imaginatively the current American economic and cultural hegemony. Through analysis of a filmic inversion of American sublimity in the final chapter, and developing a line of argument advanced by David E. Nye and John F. Sears, this thesis concludes that the American Sublime, as a discourse of self and national identity and power, is a habitual mode of thought and practice which deadens, rather than raises, political consciousness.

Acknowledgements

I should like to convey my thanks to my supervisors, Richard J. Ellis, for his incisive criticisms and perseverance, and Sandra Harris, whose advice and encouragement were also valued. I am also grateful to The Nottingham Trent University for awarding me the bursary which made this thesis possible.

Thanks are also due to staff at NTU's Visual Services for frequent use of equipment, and for their advice and patience, and to the library staff, who I always found helpful.

Finally, many thanks to my partner, Christopher Welch, for his support and understanding. I dedicate this thesis to him.

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Introduction

As a concept, the sublime refers to both an illimitable reality and exalted state of being that lies beyond the limitations of ordinary human cognition. Yet the meaning of the sublime is actually contingent upon time and place. It is, to borrow from David E. Nye, historically and culturally constructed.¹ Most writers on the sublime agree that its tradition begins with the ancient Greek *Peri Hypsous* (*On Great Writing*), usually attributed to 'Longinus'.² According to Longinus, 'Sublimity is always an eminence and excellence in language', which, whether written or spoken, is capable of transporting the reader or listener into a higher realm of consciousness: 'it is a fact of Nature that the soul is raised by true Sublimity, it gains a proud flight upwards, it is filled with joy and exultation'.³ After Longinus, interest in the sublime dwindles until the eighteenth century, though, as Nye points out, 'sublime' in the fifteenth century was used as 'a verb meaning to act upon a substance' in order to produce 'a higher states of perfection'.⁴ This, along with Longinus's association of the sublime with strong emotion, is retained by modern versions of the sublime, including the American Sublime.

The American Sublime inherits from an eighteenth century reinterpretation of sublimity, the most influential being Burkean and Kantian theories of the sublime. This reinterpretation, as David B. Morris writes, emerged out of a social and cultural milieu made vibrant by new scientific and political theories and, in England, by the transition from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. Within this general mood of excitement and expectation, Morris states, the sublime 'liberated the eighteenth century imagination from all that was little, pretty, rational, regular and safe – although only for as long as the moment of intensity could be sustained'.⁵ Defining the sublime in 1757, Edmund Burke asserts, in a way evocative of Longinus, that 'it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling'.⁶ His formulation of the sublime, however, was influenced by a Calvinist reappraisal of the natural environment – itself stimulated by scientific discovery – which viewed irregular, mountainous landscapes as the manifestation of the Divine Mind, rather than as 'deformities of a fallen world'.⁷ In place of great writing, Burke, like other eighteenth century theorists of the sublime, substituted 'vast objects of Nature – mountains and oceans, stars and cosmic space – all reflecting the glory of Deity'.⁸ Thus, confrontation with 'these great though terrible scenes', Burke argued, 'fills the mind with grand ideas'.⁹

Immanuel Kant's theory of the sublime builds on the Burkean model, especially Burke's emphasis on the infinite as the true source of the sublime. In a way similar to Burke, Kant stresses that the sublime, 'in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained in any sensuous form'.¹⁰ Distinguishing, like Burke, between the sublime and the beautiful, Kant explains that the sublime belongs to the sphere of the noumenal, the

supersensible substrate underlying all appearances which exists beyond our ordinary mental capacities.¹¹ Since the sublime is that which is 'contra-final' it is the opposition of the beautiful which belongs to the dimension of the phenomenal, the ordinary sensuous world of appearances: 'The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid in form ...'¹²

To Kant, however, the Burkean theory of the sublime includes a fundamental error. Locating the sublime in what is 'affecting to the imagination', Burke's theory of the sublime was also shaped by Lockean materialism which regarded human emotion as the sensory impressions left by external stimuli: the greater the object, the greater the sensory impression made.¹³ Merely acted upon by external objects, the subject, in the Burkean sublime, is rendered passive. Emphasising the sublimation, rather than the subjection, of the subject at the moment of the sublime, Kant, as Elizabeth McKinsey explains, removes the 'mechanism' of the sublime 'from the sense impression received from external objects to the activation of something innate in the human psyche'.¹⁴ Thus, Kant asserts: 'all that we can say is that the object lends itself to the presentation of a sublimity discoverable in the mind'.¹⁵ Yet, paradoxically, this discovery hinges on the recognition of the gulf between our 'phenomenal perceptions' and the 'totality of existence'.¹⁶

This paradox can be explained by reference to Kant's theory of the 'mathematical' sublime and 'dynamical' sublime, distinct forms of the sublime which, nevertheless, induce what he calls the 'negative pleasure' of sublimity.¹⁷ In his definition of the mathematical sublime, Kant distinguishes between numerical and aesthetic judgement – belonging to the faculties of imagination and reason respectively – of magnitude. According to Kant, in the true estimation of magnitude, numerical measurement is inadequate because all numerical measurements are contingent and relative:

In the estimate of magnitude we have to take into account not merely the multiplicity (number of units) but also the magnitude of the unit (the measure), and since the magnitude of this unit in turn always requires something else as its measure and as the standard of its comparison, and so on, we see that the computation of the magnitude of phenomenon is, in all cases, utterly incapable of affording us any absolute concept of a magnitude, and can, instead, only afford one that is based on comparison.¹⁸

From this, Kant argues, it follows that numerical estimation of an object of great magnitude could continue indefinitely, without ever comprehending it in its entirety: 'In the successive aggregation of units requisite for the representation of magnitudes the imagination of itself advances *ad infinitum* without let or hindrance'.¹⁹

Struggling to comprehend an object too vast to be grasped 'in a whole of intuition', Kant argues, the mind becomes overloaded with sensory data, becoming painfully aware of its inability to provide a true and complete estimation of the object, rather than a relative and

limited one.²⁰ Yet, crucially, the mind's very recognition of its inadequacy triggers, at the same time, an immense mental leap, in which feelings of deficiency give way to 'emotional delight'.²¹ For, according to Kant, perceiving the limitations of the imagination to give a real estimation of the object's magnitude, the faculty of reason recognises the need for – and thus intuits simultaneously – a fundamental measure that is '*beyond all comparison great*' and '*in comparison with which all else is small*', what Kant terms the 'absolutely great': the sublime.²² Kant:

it follows that where the size of a natural Object is such that the imagination spends its whole faculty of comprehension upon it in vain, it must carry our concept of nature to a supersensible substrate (underlying both nature and our faculty of thought) which is great beyond every standard of sense.²³

Awareness of limitation, then, points to the existence of an illimitable reality beyond it. Yet, in a further twist of the Kantian drama, this intuition of the infinite leads ultimately to the discovery of the sublime within the mind since

the mere ability even to think the given infinite without contradiction, is something that requires the presence in the human mind of a faculty that is itself supersensible.²⁴

In this way, Kant concludes, 'the Subject's very incapacity betrays the consciousness of an unlimited faculty of the same Subject'; hence 'instead of the object, it is rather the cast of the mind in appreciating it that we have to estimate as *sublime*'.²⁵ In the sublime experience, the mind turns inwards ('recoils upon itself'), rather than outwards, only to find there its own illimitable capacities, its ability to think the unthinkable: limitlessness as a totality – 'a self-contradictory concept, (owing to the impossibility of the absolute totality of an endless progression)'.²⁶ Since 'all estimation of the magnitude of objects of nature is in the last resort aesthetic (i.e. subjectively and not objectively determined)', the result is a triumph of mind over matter, an extreme self-resourcefulness which takes the mind's capacity as an absolute standard:

the estimation of magnitude involves in itself a reference to something *absolutely great*, consequently a reference also to the law of reason that this alone is to be adopted as the supreme measure of what is great.²⁷

Significantly in respect of the American Sublime, as I shall argue, in analysing Kant's theory of self-sublimation, Thomas Weiskel observes that the mathematical sublime describes a power struggle between subject and sublime object, involving a three-phase process which negates and recreates the subjective self, culminating in the individual's identification with the sublime other. In the first phase, the mind is in a state of 'normalcy' where the relation between mind and external world 'is habitual, more or less unconscious

... and harmonious.²⁸ This phase mirrors the relation between the subject and the beautiful object which, being easily comprehended, signifies its attainability to the mind. In the second stage, this 'smooth correspondence between inner and outer' (subject and object) is radically disrupted. The mind encounters a phenomenon too vast to be comprehended, inducing an acute awareness of a discrepancy between the insignificance and enclosed space of subjective consciousness as against the immeasurability of the object confronted:

the habitual relation of mind and object suddenly breaks down and there is an immediate intuition of a disconcerting disproportion between inner and outer. ... a natural phenomenon catches us unprepared and unable to grasp its scale.²⁹

The result is a crisis of the imagination: the mind balks at the excess of signifier and the absence of a corresponding signified, the object disclosing only its unattainability. Mind and body are frozen in shock, and the subject seems threatened with annihilation. In Kant's words, where

the beautiful is directly attended with the furtherance of life, ... the feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being brought about by a momentary check to the vital forces ... and so it is an emotion that seems to be no sport, but dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination.³⁰

The third stage in the sublime scenario, however, involves the recovery from mind-numbing amazement, and the restoration of a balanced relationship between mind and external world. This recovery, Weiskel explains, is not simply a return to normalcy. This prior state has now been negated and is irrecoverably lost, for the sublime experience has engendered a profound mental transformation. The force that threatens to overwhelm a comparatively puny ego, that is, compels the mind to respond with an act of imaginative resistance through mimesis:

The mind recovers the balance between outer and inner by constituting a fresh relationship between itself and the object such that the very indeterminacy which irrupted in phase two [of the dialectic] is taken as symbolising the mind's relation to a transcendent order.³¹

The object that induces self-paralysis, in other words, triggers the mind to resist annihilation by expanding in order to match the immensity of that object, whereby the unattainable in nature (the supersensible other) is 'duplicated as an inner structure'. 'In what amounts to a metaphorical intuition', sublime power is internalised.³²

Kant's explanation of the dynamical sublime, which involves a confrontation between a subject and an object of natural might, describes the same kind of loss-gain scenario. Emphasising, like Burke, that the threat to the subject must never be actual ('it is

impossible to take delight in terror that is seriously entertained'), Kant lists the kind of natural phenomena that can excite feelings of the sublime:

Bold, overhanging, and ... threatening rocks, thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals, volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes leaving desolation in their track, the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force, the high waterfall of some mighty river, and the like...³³

These phenomena, Kant points out, 'make our power of resistance of trifling moment in comparison with their might.'³⁴ Comparison with natural power, that is, forces us to recognise our 'physical helplessness' since, if the threat were actual, we would certainly die.³⁵ In a way similar to the mathematical sublime, the dynamical sublime entails the potentially crushing realisation of a huge discrepancy between puny subject and sublime object, whereby the mind feels itself disempowered. Yet, again, as in the mathematical sublime, the realisation of our fragility enhances, rather than diminishes us because, Kant asserts, it also 'challenges our power' to recognise and then transcend our preoccupation with trivial things, lifting our thoughts to 'higher questions and principles', related to divine mind and purpose:

we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the forces of the soul above the height of vulgar commonplace, and discover in us a power of resistance of quite another kind, which gives us courage to be able to measure ourselves against the seeming omnipotence of nature.³⁶

Once again, the mind retreats from the sensuous world of forms, finding the sublime to reside within subjective consciousness, rather than without:

nature is here called sublime merely because it raises the imagination to presentation of those cases in which the mind can make itself sensible of the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its being, even above nature.³⁷

Kant's theory of self-sublimation, as I shall argue, provides a useful model with which to consider American versions of the sublime. One element of the Kantian sublime, however, is crucial in respect of my selection of filmic representations of the American Sublime. According to Kant, in contrast to the beautiful, the sublime object 'strains the imagination to its utmost, whether in respect of its extension (mathematical) or of its might over the mind (dynamical).'³⁸ This idea is contained within the word 'sublime' itself. As Mary Arensberg explains:

the sublime describes a way of knowing beyond the human threshold. *Limen*, boundary or threshold from the Latin, is both the etymological and philosophical root of the sublime.³⁹

Similarly, Rob Wilson writes:

The etymology of *sublime* in the Latin word *sublimis* suggests ... [the] straining toward a limit: not so much a ridiculous sinking (though this risk remains) but an imperious rising or elevating of self to some *limen* (threshold) of greater consciousness.⁴⁰

In my analysis of the American Sublime in film, I have found that the depiction of this straining toward the limits of consciousness and being at the moment of the sublime turns upon the use of what I call an 'edge motif', arguably the *leitmotif* of American sublimity. Constituting a remarkably recurrent pattern of representation in a wide variety of film, this edge motif sets up 'the *mise en scène* of a mental flight, transcendence, a fall upward' which, broadly, signifies the attainment of self-transcendence and liberation from constraint.⁴¹

Within America's frontier tradition, as I shall show, the use of this edge motif as a symbol of re-creation and freedom has a particular resonance. However, I also want to argue that the function of 'the edge' in my selection of films from the late 1960s to the early nineties expresses an anxiety about an expansive, invasive post-war complex of power which emerged during this period, and which seems intent on creating a 'dedifferentiated' and 'borderless world' – what is now commonly referred to as 'globalisation'.⁴² Thus, in a way similar to John Berger's analysis of modern conditions of existence, the selected films represent, with different emphasis, the fear that 'the culture in which we live is perhaps the most claustrophobic that has ever existed; ... there is no glimpse of an elsewhere or an otherwise.'⁴³ In this context, the edge motif in each film represents the appropriation of the visual rhetoric of the American Sublime to symbolise a yearning for an alternative to and existence beyond what is projected as a dominant, totalising power structure.⁴⁴

My exploration of the American Sublime in film is divided into five chapters, for which the following offers a brief summary. Taking as its focus the film *Eagle's Wing*, Chapter One begins to establish a verbal and visual rhetoric of an Americanised sublime, connecting, in particular, the film's strategies of representation to an American tradition of landscape painting and photography. Examining the crucial role of the edge motif in configurations of the sublime in *Eagle's Wing*, Chapter One also shows how the edge, as a symbol of renewal and freedom, symbolises what can be seen as the iconoclastic impulses of the American Sublime. Building on this analysis, and anticipating discussion in Chapter Two, Chapter One, in addition, shows how *Eagle's Wing* appropriates the language of the American Sublime in its critique of what the film presents as the insidious effects of American capitalist imperialism. At the end of the Chapter, in preparation for Chapter Two, a key problematic of the American Sublime is introduced.

With overall reference to the film *Jeremiah Johnson*, Chapter Two continues to explore the use of the American Sublime as a discourse of redemptive possibility. Arguing that

Jeremiah Johnson functions allegorically as a critique of contemporary American economic and political ambition, Chapter Two seeks to show that the American Sublime is a highly politicised ideology and practice. Working toward a closer analysis of the terms and tropes of American sublimity and their reconfigurations in filmic techniques, Chapter Two further maintains that it is precisely the politics of the American Sublime that undercuts *Johnson's* critique of American capital and the American state. Developing this analysis, Chapter Two argues – drawing on Weiskel's three-stage model of the sublime as power struggle, and situating the discourse within a period of rapid economic and industrial growth – that the American Sublime is infused with a sense of self and national superiority, functioning, in particular, as the signifying agent of American expansionism, masculinist competitiveness and free enterprise. Within this discussion, Chapter Two also argues that, while the American Sublime experience seems to engender self-empowerment, contradictorily, it actually works to produce the opposite – an issue that is explored throughout the thesis.

Chapter Three opens discussion out to a consideration of American technological sublimity through an exploration of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the Science Fiction genre. Expanding on a subject introduced in Chapter Two, Chapter Three examines the ways in which the American Sublime, describing an imaginative transference and interiorisation of power, seeks rhetorically to establish human superiority over nature, expressing and justifying a real desire to utilise America's abundant natural resources through technological means. Through close analysis of *2001* and its critique of what it presents as a techno-corporate totality, Chapter Three seeks to argue that, while American technologies have been heralded as the redeemer of self and nation, technological progress, controlled by state-supported monopoly capital, can be seen to effect the diminishment, rather than the enlargement, of the individual self. Yet, in a way similar to *Jeremiah Johnson*, by adopting the language of the American Sublime, *2001*, Chapter Three argues, ends up reproducing the dominant power structure it seeks representationally to challenge.

Using a wider selection of filmic genres, Chapter Four argues that the kind of problematics produced by *2001* and *Jeremiah Johnson's* deployment of the language of the sublime occur frequently in films that similarly set out to critique America's dominant structure of power. Building on analysis carried out in previous chapters, while establishing thematic continuity, Chapter Four suggests that the American Sublime constitutes a habitual way of thinking about and representing America which works to conceal the real relation of the individual to America's techno-capitalist hegemony.

Concentrating on *The Reflecting Skin's* critical exploration of the use of nuclear weapons technology as a manifestation of a national will to power, and its representation of the effects of this technology on collective and individual consciousness, Chapter Five expands on the ways in which the American Sublime can function as a means of concealment and deception. In this way, Chapter Five argues that, unlike the majority of films discussed in the thesis, *The Reflecting Skin's* strategies of inversion effectively

disclose the actual relation between ordinary selfhood and structures of American power, presenting technological and commercial domination as the twin forces of American imperialist ambitions.

Notes

- ¹ See David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.3.
- ² See, for example, Mary Arensberg (ed.), *The American Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp.3-4; Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp.4-5, 12-13; Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp.31-32.
- ³ Longinus, quoted in Arensberg, op. cit., p.3.
- ⁴ Nye, op. cit., p.5.
- ⁵ David B. Morris in Nye, *ibid.*, p.1.
- ⁶ Edmund Burke (1757), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, edited with an introduction by J.T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p.39.
- ⁷ Nye, op. cit., p.5. As Nye explains:

For centuries mountains were thought to be the deformities of a fallen world whose surface had been smooth at the creation. ... But this attitude began to change as astronomers demonstrated the existence of mountains on the moon and the planets and as geologists proposed theories that explained the formation of mountains through natural processes. [*Ibid.*, p.5].

- ⁸ Marjorie Hope Nicolson, quoted in Nye, *ibid.*, p.2.
- ⁹ Edmund Burke, quoted in Nye, *ibid.*, p.6.
- ¹⁰ Immanuel Kant (1790), 'Analytic of the Sublime', Part I Book II, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated with Analytical Indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp.92. As Burke put it: 'Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime.' Yet 'There are scarce any things which can become the objects of our senses that are really, and in their own nature infinite. But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were so.' Burke, op. cit., p.73.
- ¹¹ See David Hawkes, *Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.70, 65.
- ¹² Kant, op. cit., pp.92, 90.
- ¹³ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1987, p.127. See also McKinsey, op. cit., p.34.
- ¹⁴ McKinsey, *ibid.*, p.34.
- ¹⁵ Kant, op. cit., p.92.
- ¹⁶ Hawkes, op. cit., p.71.
- ¹⁷ Kant, op. cit., p.91.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.95.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.101.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.103.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p.100.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp.97, 94.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p.104.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.102.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.107, 104.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.100, 104.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.98, 106.
- ²⁸ Weiskel, op. cit., p.23.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.23, 23-24.
- ³⁰ Kant, op. cit., p.91.
- ³¹ Weiskel, pp.22-24.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p.23.
- ³³ Kant, op. cit., p.110.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.110.

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- ³⁵ Ibid., p.111.
³⁶ Ibid., p.111.
³⁷ Ibid., pp.111-112.
³⁸ Ibid., p.120.
³⁹ Arensberg, op. cit., p.1.
⁴⁰ Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p.169.
⁴¹ Wilson, *ibid.*, p.210.
⁴² Fredric Jameson, 'Globalization and Political Strategy', *New Left Review*, No. 4 (July/August 2000), p.54, and Michael Taylor, 'The Dynamics of US Managerialism and American Corporations', *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in the Projection of American Power*, edited by David Slater and Peter Jay Taylor (Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p.55.
⁴³ John Berger, 'Against the great defeat of the world', *Race and Class*, Vol. 40, Nos. 2/3 (October 1998/March 1999), p.3.
⁴⁴ I do not argue, however, that the edge motif makes no appearance in films prior to this period – it is, for example, used in the 1946 version of *The Razor's Edge* (Edmund Goulding) as a symbol of transcendence. Rather, I suggest that its use, in relation to the threat of globalisation, becomes more marked and frequent after the late sixties.

Chapter One

Towards an American Sublime

Synopsis *Eagle's Wing* (Anthony Harvey, 1979).

New Mexico, circa mid nineteenth century. Pike, a young man from the East, heads West after being thrown out of the army, searching for a new beginning and freedom by working for a fur company as a trader. He and his partner (Henry), however, are attacked by Kiowa. During this attack, their horses are stolen and Henry is killed. Continuing on alone, Pike chances upon a funeral ceremony for a Comanche brave where he sees a magnificent white stallion intended for sacrifice. Entranced by the stallion, Pike steals him, only later to have the horse stolen by a Kiowan, White Bull, a drunkard who gradually recovers his dignity and roots through possession of the stallion. After pursuing White Bull obsessively, and fighting with him, Pike eventually loses the horse. The film ends with White Bull galloping the stallion away into the wilderness.

The film's opening *mise en scène* reveals *Eagle's Wing* to be dominated by an idea of sublimity and provides a starting point from which to approach the issue of a uniquely 'American Sublime'. The film begins with a panoramic shot of a New Mexican landscape, the dark foreground and background of which are separated by a lighter body of water. In the background, to the left of the frame, a range of mountains are silhouetted by the glow of the sun, just off frame. After a few seconds, the camera begins a near 360 degree pan of the surrounding terrain, revealing a vast and empty scene. [Figs 1-9]. The pan completes its rotation with the sun in the right hand side of the frame, the camera panning upward slightly to catch this effect. As the sun comes into view, rays of light shoot frame left and down, bright yellow light spilling over a dark cloud formation just above the sun and over a low range of mountains below and reflecting in an area of water in the middleground.

Significantly, when asked about the 360 degree pan, director Anthony Harvey described what was important to him about the West as landscape: 'You could turn a camera 360 degrees and not see a single sign of humanity. That's how fascinating and beautiful, primitive and stunning that land is.'¹ Harvey's remark evokes the sublime because he identifies the American landscape as being in 'the realm of things beyond ourselves, the dimension of otherness we can never know', and because he finds the extent of unbroken wilderness, overwhelming ('stunning', 'fascinating').² The camera pan, then, is intended to encapsulate this sense of sublime otherness and vastness. In doing so, the pan represents an attempt to circumnavigate a major obstacle in figuring the sublime, to negotiate, that is, Kant's dictum that 'nothing that can be an object of the senses is to be called sublime.'³ To explain how I reach this conclusion, and before I go on to explore the opening camera work and *mise en scène* further, I must delineate an American tradition of representing the sublime in American landscape painting within which these filmic strategies are located.

Within America's 'first recognized, indigenous aesthetic movement', the American School, critics have noted that, despite its productive diversity and its appeals to an 'intellectual elite' as well as to popular audiences, paintings produced by the School share significant formal traits.⁴ These shared characteristics emerged out of the demands of representing what painters regarded as essential about and unique to the American landscape, to find an art form that could communicate effectively its vastness. In this way, inherited, picturesque art forms, which sought to contain representations of natural landscapes tightly within the picture frame, proved constraining. As Elizabeth McKinsey explains:

English picturesque conventions did not prove adequate to paint the American landscape. After all, the conventions were developed after landscape gardening became widespread and inculcated a taste for unified, controlled vistas.⁵

Painters adhering to picturesque traditions usually organised their compositions to lead the eye in toward the middleground of the painting (through vertical and diagonal lines, and light and shade) and, in particular, deployed an enframing coulisse to suggest unity – in John Trumbull's *Niagara Falls from an Upper Bank on the British Side* (c. 1808), formed by tall trees on each side of his canvas. [Fig. 10]. Painters of the American School, however, broke away from this tradition, aiming instead to give an impression of great breadth by drawing the eye outward along exaggerated horizontal features of the landscape, suggesting that these continued beyond the limits of the frame. McKinsey describes how this works in an early canvas by John Vanderlyn:

... Vanderlyn in *View of Niagara Falls* [1803] ... depicts for the first time in art the true breadth of the cataract and the vast extent of the whole scene. ... here we have a sense of the actual spaciousness of the place. This Vanderlyn accomplishes by eliminating the picturesque coulisse element and by minimalizing the diagonal recession into space. Instead, he emphasizes the nearly parallel horizontal lines at the horizon, at the brink of the Falls, and at their base, and echoes them with an almost horizontal foreground bank. The turbulent river overflows the conventional bounds of the middle ground pushing the cataract back in the distance and some of the foreground forward out of the picture. The result is a vast, panoramic sweeping scene ... that he had first despaired of painting.⁶ [Fig. 11].

Significantly, by suggesting that the scene sweeps beyond the picture frame, Vanderlyn's strategies construct the landscape as an uncontrollable excess. This excessiveness applies both to what McKinsey terms the 'panoramic' and 'monumental' elements of the work – the exaggerated horizontal lines and the surging, overflowing nature of the water – which correspond to Kant's mathematical and dynamical sublimates (respectively, sublimates of limitlessness and of awesome power).⁷

The landscapes of the American School are characterised by this sort of openness and fluidity of form which, as McKinsey writes, produce an 'illusion of illimitable space

extending beyond the painted scene', achieving a kind of 'space feeling' which contributed to conceptions of the significance of American landscape.⁸ In order to produce these effects, landscape painters like Vanderlyn, McKinsey points out, appropriated some European aesthetic practices in their representations of sublimity. In particular, McKinsey traces the influences of the panorama – 'a circular canvas completely surrounding the viewer, depicting a full 360 vista from a single vantage point', popular in London in the early-nineteenth century – in Vanderlyn's work.⁹ In his *View of Niagara Falls*, she argues, Vanderlyn,

like the panorama, ... breaks the "45 degree rule" that the prospect view had always observed – that one cannot depict in a single picture more than one can see without turning the eye. For the *View* is not a single vista, governed by one set of perspective lines. Instead, like visitors actually on the scene or the audience in a circular panorama, picture viewers must sweep their eyes across the painting to see both Falls. ... [W]e feel compelled to look several places at once, overwhelmed by the simultaneity of so many objects and forced finally to sort them out for ourselves. ... By placing the foreground figures strategically in the exact centre of the picture, at the focal point of the panoramic scene, the artist seduces viewers into placing ourselves there also and feeling the expanse, as it were, not just in front of but around us.¹⁰

Also observing the links between the American School and the panorama, Barbara Novak terms this emerging American aesthetic a 'motion art' since its aim, like the panoramas it borrows from, was to produce scenes whose 'totality could not be apprehended instantaneously' but gradually, requiring an effort of movement from the viewer in the way that McKinsey describes.¹¹ With respect to the sublime, Novak's terminology is highly apt. Kant's theory of the negative pleasure of the sublime, drawing on Burke's idea of 'delightful horror', describes the sublime experience as a dynamic in which the mind, shifting between attraction to and repulsion for the sublime object, finally extends itself outward to its farthest reaches.¹² In contrast to the beautiful, which induces 'restful contemplation', the sublime sets the mind in motion.¹³

Widescreen formats in film – such as the Panavision process used for *Eagle's Wing* – inherit from what Novak calls the 'kinetic or cinematic aspects' of the panorama and the American School's strategies for representing the sublime in American landscapes.¹⁴ The compositional elements of the opening of *Eagle's Wing*, effectively reproducing this kind of motion art, make this inheritance apparent. The image of the sun as the camera pan completes its rotation, with its powerful rays flooding over and partially obliterating other areas of the *mise en scène*, can be seen to reimagine a monumental, or dynamic, sublimity presented in Vanderlyn's canvases in which he tried to reproduce the full force of Niagara's natural sublimity. The initial shot reproduces the fluidity achieved in the panoramic paintings of the American School, presenting the viewer with more than can be apprehended in a single look, and, in particular, leading the eye to sweep along its

horizontal lines toward the edges of the frame. The camera pan, however, having its roots in the aims and objectives of the original panoramas, reworks the 'motion art' of its nineteenth century precursors more explicitly, presenting, in a similar way to those circular canvases, the landscape as an all-encompassing vista. Imparting to the scene a sense of limitlessness because 'we are always subliminally aware of the area outside the frame', the pan presents a sublime landscape that is resistive to framing.¹⁵

The film's opening configuration of illimitable space is reiterated by a small section of narration. As the camera pan ends, the character, Pike, narrates: 'Long before the myths began, it was primitive, unforgiving. But in that vast, limitless space, man had one ally: the horse.' Together with the camera pan, this dialogue significantly contributes to and defines the themes that circulate throughout the film. The opening image of a vast expanse of desert is recapitulated in the dialogue: visual and verbal meet in a representation of sublime excess. Importantly, in the context of an American Sublime, the words 'vast, limitless space' set up a negation, imaginatively cancelling out the possibility of limitation. As Terence Martin points out, the idea of sublimity is inherent in the idea of 'space without limit' which is at once 'negative' and 'transcendent'.¹⁶ Significantly, the negation in the film's opening lines also fuse together an idea of the illimitable with a conception of primal origins: a moment of detextualised as well as dematerialised blankness. In the first line the word 'primitive' is defined by what it lacks ('myth'), defining primal origins as a time prior to and displaced by story-telling – or language itself. This lack undergirds the film's presentation of sublimity since the sublime, being beyond form, including language forms, is silent.¹⁷

These negations – the blankness signified by the opening shot and reiterated by the voice over – are crucial to representations of American sublimity.¹⁸ As Rob Wilson argues, the discourse of the American Sublime is 'founded in a mythology of detextualized whiteness', articulating a desire 'on some primary level ... for a phantasmic blank ground, or *tabula rasa*'.¹⁹ Martin similarly maintains that, as a mode of thought and practice, negation is deeply embedded within an American cultural tradition. Exploring the continuity between nineteenth century American Romanticism and present-day advertisements, Martin shows how an idea of negation is bound up with a corresponding idea of regeneration. Negation, he argues, is part of an effort to 'reach back to a condition of purity and simplicity' in order to

cancel out what others have done to limit or compromise our world to strip away phenomena that have been produced in time, be they artificial flavours, elves, monarchies, or images of the Unique Cause, and thereby arrive at the concept of an original, uncompromised reality – an ontological beginning for some, a societal beginning for others, a point of generative power for all.²⁰

Perpetually striving toward a state of dematerialised whiteness, negating prior discourses and habits – like the Kantian sublime it appropriates – the American Sublime

stands within an iconoclastic tradition of Protestant theology, the 'traditional Protestant polemic against the worship of graven images'.²¹ As David Hawkes argues:

It is not hard to discern a quasi-religious motive behind [Kant's] ... desire for an ultimate, unified reality lying beneath the disparate surface appearance of things. Kant is heavily influenced ... by the Protestant proscription of idolatry, and the biblical injunction to eschew the worship of "the works of men's hands". For the sublime is that desire which refuses to be satisfied by anything material. Kant is perfectly explicit about the potential of the sublime as an iconoclastic force.²²

Hence Kant himself wrote:

Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc.²³

Kant's religious beliefs are discernible in his insertion of a moral imperative in his quest for reality beyond the limits of sensory perception which underlies appearance – both the absolute totality and, importantly, the essential 'thing-in-itself' – because he associates this quest with freedom from superstition and political oppression.²⁴ As David Hawkes explains:

Our awareness that we cannot give a conceptual account of the sublime drives us beyond the appearance of the object in search of its supersensible substrate, which is also the quest for the totality: the ultimate ground and source of the noumena. This quest is a moral good, and to obstruct it by fixating on material appearances is ethically wrong.²⁵

The tendency to mistake and privilege appearance for and over reality would, by the nineteenth century, be described as a fetish, a term

directed against the endowing of inanimate objects with values and powers which properly belong to human states of mind and feelings. As such, it ... comes ... to suggest itself as the word or concept most suited to describe the operations of a misguided and miscreating society. ...

The dominant feature of an idol or a fetish ... is that, by being a material embodiment of a human aspiration or motive, it tends by the fact of its objective form to cause its creator or employer to forget that he is himself responsible for its creation or continued existence.²⁶

Importantly, as David Simpson explains:

Both the word itself, and the syndrome it describes, become important in Romantic models of perception as ways of specifying what must be avoided in individual acts of representation and in the social interactions based on them.²⁷

Exploring the convergences of Protestant and Romantic iconoclastic impulses, Simpson describes similar concerns with the 'essence of things' and a deep suspicion of the mere 'semblance and form of things' – which also finds expression in *Eagle's Wing*.²⁸ Taking up Kant's Protestant polemic against icons and images, anti-fetishism in Romanticism, Simpson argues, stems from the same awareness that the selective and mediatory nature of the mind produces a partial and limited representation of the totality. In the following passage, Coleridge defines the dangers inherent in representation, the temptation to fetishise forms, mistaking them for the totality they are meant to represent:

[mankind] is inevitably tempted to misinterpret a constant precedence into constant causation, and thus to break and scatter the one divine and invisible life of nature into countless idols of the sense; and falling prostrate before lifeless images, the creatures of his own abstraction, is himself sensualized, and becomes a slave to the things of which he was formed be the conqueror and sovereign. From the fetisch of the imbruted African to the soul-debasing errors of the proud fact-hunting materialist we may trace the various ceremonials of the same idolatry, and shall find selfishness, hate and servitude as the results.²⁹

This iconoclastic impulse is discernible in the writings of Thomas Cole, making it possible to understand why, like other paintings produced by the American School, his canvases present his 'profoundest feelings about nature' and the American landscape.³⁰ In his 'Essay on American Scenery' (1835), Cole argued that American landscapes were special because they represented 'the pure creations of the Almighty'.³¹ Connecting, like the opening voice-over in *Eagle's Wing*, primitive, pre-verbal origins to an idea of transcendence, Cole wrote:

for those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, affect the mind with a more deep toned emotion than aught which the hand of man has touched. Amid them the consequent associations are of God the creator – they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.³²

True to this Protestant-Romantic ideology, Cole clearly values one kind of materiality (the natural world as the objectification (and sign) of God's unsullied work) over another (the defiling objectifications of 'man's' labour). In this way, Cole contrasts the American West favourably with (by implication) a cluttered, crowded European landscape, anticipating the iconoclastic urges of *Eagle's Wing*:

He who stands on Mount Albano and looks down on ancient Rome, has his mind peopled with the gigantic associations of the storied past; but he who stands on the mounds of the West, the most venerable remains of American antiquity, *may* experience the emotion of the sublime, but it is the sublimity of a shoreless ocean un-islanded by the recorded deeds of man.³³

Importantly, then, Cole finds value and meaning in the American West because of what it lacks: text and boundary. Rob Wilson traces this kind of euphoria to an earlier 'Puritan sublime', an emerging and collective effort to fill the New World void with meaning. To overcome the fear of emptiness, Wilson argues, writers like Anne Bradstreet found what she perceived as America's vacancy to be both the source of her rapture and the meaning of America. At first anxious in a textually vacant environment, Bradstreet is finally (if timidly) able to overcome her fear by troping America (as would Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Cole) into God's and 'nature's nation'.³⁴ In this way, to achieve unmediated perception of the land was to achieve communion with God and the purification of the spirit. Contemplation of the freshness as well as boundless American landscapes brings the individual consciousness closer to an understanding of God and the totality.

Significantly in respect of *Eagle's Wing*, this kind of Protestant-Romantic iconoclastic energy would later be expressed by Frederick Jackson Turner's 'negative' conception of the American West as a vast, dehumanised, detextualised expanse of 'free land': as he put it, 'the land which has no history'.³⁵ Turner's highly influential idea of the Western frontier reimagines, like Cole and Emerson before him, a conception of America which reaches back to the earliest colonial period and which would be displaced onto the West itself. Conceived of as a detextualised blankness, where nothing is 'yet mapp'd nor written down, nor ever by the majority of Mankind seen' in this way, America is turned, as Thomas Pynchon has recently articulated, into a dreamscape of pure possibility, a space 'for subjunctive Hopes, for all that *may yet be true*'.³⁶ Seemingly empty and vast, America becomes, as Eric Heyne puts it, a space of unlimited freedom where 'anything is possible ... including ... human perfectibility'.³⁷

While the film's presentation of vast and empty landscapes clearly rehearses this negative conception of the American West, its other emblem of detextualised whiteness is, of course, *Eagle's Wing* himself. Representing an illusive, dematerialised otherness in which absolute freedom can be attained, his whiteness reconfigures 'the "dumb blankness" of Ishmael's white whale incarnating a dehumanized abyss'.³⁸ Indeed, the film's narrative of pursuit and its representation of the white stallion is clearly inspired by Melville's novel, *Moby-Dick*, especially the chapter 'The Whiteness of the Whale'. Here, the protagonist Ishmael, pondering the supersensible otherness represented by the whale, compares him to the mythic 'White Steed of the prairies' who roamed the 'unfallen, western world' and who 'to the eyes of the old trappers and hunters revived the glories of those primeval times when Adam walked majestic as a god'.³⁹

Like Ishmael's imaginary steed, whose whiteness invokes both 'worship' and 'nameless terror', *Eagle's Wing* also symbolises the dual nature of the sublime, evident when he is first introduced into the action during the Comanche chief's death ritual. His luminous whiteness accentuated against a backdrop of dark storm clouds, the stallion's appearance is punctuated with a clap of thunder, turning him into an 'object of trembling

reverence and awe'.⁴⁰ [Fig. 12]. Figuring the fear and wonder dynamic of the sublime, Pike, who is stealing a look at Eagle's Wing from behind some rocks, exclaims 'My God!'

'Eagle's Wing' is not actually the name of the stallion, however. Significantly, the film's title derives from a section of dialogue in which Henry compares the extraordinary speed of a horse owned by a Comanche chief to an eagle, troping the stallion into a figure of transcendental sublimity: 'He's got a horse like a Goddamn eagle's wing, no ordinary man's going to stop him.' Subsequent shots of Eagle's Wing also turn him into a figure of the sublime. One scene, in which Pike gallops Eagle's Wing across a wide plain, includes a striking close-up shot of the horse with sunlight immediately behind him so that his head is suffused with light and his mane transformed into the 'flashing cascade' of Ishmael's mythic white horse.⁴¹ Combined with Pike's triumphant exclamation – 'I'm an eagle now!' – the shot sublimates Eagle's Wing into a symbol of flight and freedom and, referring back to the image of a primal sunrise at the beginning of the film, connects him with primitive, pretextual and prehuman origins. In this way, the shot reiterates the connotative meanings of the stallion established at the beginning of the film. As Pike's narration ends, the image of the mountain range at dawn dissolves into a shot of Eagle's Wing, mounted by the Comanche chief, so that the horse and the primal dawn are synecdochically fused, giving the impression that the subsequent depiction of a savage struggle over the possession of horses takes place in prehistoric (unstoried) context.⁴²

The film's symbolic reiterations of dematerialised whiteness also extends to its treatment of individual self-hood in a way that foregrounds the American Sublime as a moral idea. In doing so, *Eagle's Wing* explores what Martin describes as an American cultural will to 'measure the integrity of the individual, stripped to an essential self, against the artificial values of a society that trims and compromises by its very nature.'⁴³ In order to illustrate his point, Martin quotes from Emerson's discourse on Thoreau. Proposing Thoreau, whom he admired, as the site of uncorrupted, uncompromised blankness, as an individual bared to an 'essential self', Emerson wrote that Thoreau

was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the state; he ate no flesh, he drank no wine, he never knew the use of tobacco He had no talent for wealth, and knew how to be poor without the least hint of squalor or inelegance He had no temptations to fight against; no appetites, no passions, no taste for elegant trifles No truer American existed than Thoreau.⁴⁴

American Romanticism, then, can be seen to express a thrust toward the achievement of 'empty spirit' in a 'vacant space', toward a self free of contingency via a return, as Turner argues, to more simple, 'primitive', way of life.⁴⁵

This desire to return to a state of nature in American Romanticism can also be seen as an expression of a more abstract philosophical dilemma. The impulse to achieve inner emptiness and the fear of compromise in American culture, especially with regard to

Transcendentalist thinkers, again derives partly from Kantian philosophy. Kant's Idealism, his narrative of the mind's triumph over nature, was influenced by contemporary debates about the relationship of the subjective self to the material world. At stake was individual agency and autonomy. Privileging mind over matter in his theories of the sublime, Kant was attempting to defend the idea of the autonomous subject against materialist and determinist theories which rendered self-hood passive, jeopardising individual will. In this way, Kant believed, as Thomas Weiskel explains, that 'the sublime saves our humanity from "humiliation"'.⁴⁶ Kant's theoretical rescue of individual agency, however, was achieved at a cost, imprisoning even as it seemed to liberate subjectivity. Hawkes explains the Idealist predicament as follows:

By claiming the mind imposes its categories on the world, and that these categories produce what we can know of reality, Kant at once bestowed an unprecedented freedom on the subject and firmly limited the scope of what that subject might aspire to know.⁴⁷

In Romantic thought, the idea of an unattainable reality, coupled with the idea of nature as untouched and pristine, produced an ardent desire for unmediated contact with the natural world.

Though such a Romantic desire does representationally circulate through *Eagle's Wing*, the film's main preoccupation, in common with the Western genre as a whole, is the meaning of frontier freedoms in relation to both an old and a newly emerging order, which feature equally as symbols of restraint. Significantly, in respect of my analysis, Jim Kitses argues:

what gives the [Western] form a particular thrust and centrality is its historical setting; its being placed at exactly that moment when options are still open, the dream of a primitivistic individualism, the ambivalence of at once beneficent and threatening horizons, still tenable.⁴⁸

The film's exploration of uncompromised individuality within a wilderness environment repeats some of the traditional 'antinomies' of the Western genre identified by Kitses: between wilderness and civilisation; freedom and restriction; self-knowledge and illusion; integrity and compromise; nature and culture; purity and corruption; the West and the East. In this way, Pike's presence in the West is the result of his effort to break away from the rigidly hierarchical and organised inequalities of army life, repeatedly articulated as the desire for self-possession: 'I just want to be my own man, my own way. Can't be your own man when you're always polishing someone else's boots.'

Rehearsing the formal structure of the Western, the film clearly sets up an opposition between East (representing civilisation, falsity, compromise) and West (representing nature, reality, integrity). In particular, and in contrast to the wilderness surroundings,

Pike, 'a romantic and an idiot', represents the artifice of the East.⁴⁹ He is exposed as a liar, a drunk and a thief with a messy, dishonourable, past: though he insists that he deserted, it is strongly suggested that Pike was 'kicked out' of the army; he steals from supplies of liquor; during a conversation with Henry, he confesses that he was never a cavalryman as he boasted but a foot soldier and that the sabre he wears is stolen; he has also been involved in slave trading. Effectively, Pike is still in thrall to the power system he purportedly wants to escape, fetishising its trappings – his cavalry jacket and his sabre, in particular, symbolising Pike's penchant for 'recklessness and bragging'. As Harvey puts it, Pike, who has also been an actor in his past, is afflicted with a 'terrible false bravado' and love of pretence.⁵⁰ Related to Pike's privileging of appearance over reality is his capacity for self-deception. For, at the same time that he convinces himself that he has attained freedom through the possession of Eagle's Wing ('I'm an eagle now!'), Pike also reveals a predilection for a traditional English song ('John Peel') that evokes Old World convention-bound rituals of fox-hunting.

Utilising the East-West opposition further, *Eagle's Wing* sets up a critique of capitalism's narrow, yet totalising world view. While to Pike, the wilderness represents limitless personal freedom, to Henry it represents a resource to be exploited, a commodity to be sold. This is revealed during a key exchange, when Pike asks Henry to explain why he's out West. Henry responds, 'I came out here to make *money*. There was a big demand for furs back East, there still is, there always will be.' Within the traditional East-West oppositions of the Western genre, Henry is clearly more of an Eastern and urban figure than Pike, representing in effect the commercial future of America.⁵¹

As with the Old World order, this new power system is shown to be hostile to individual autonomy. Despite his knowledge of the wilderness, Henry is not his 'own man' in the way that Pike aspires to be. Henry, rather, is the agent and property of a remote and impersonal 'Company' which functions within the film as a symbol of capitalism's universalising, but reductive character. In this way, Henry's presence in the wilderness represents an expanding economic rationale which views all things in terms of their market value. Significantly in this respect, Henry's criticism of Pike's drinking habits is not based on moral principle but on property rights and commodity exchange. Henry and Pike carry a quantity of liquor to exchange for furs with the Comanche; when Pike helps himself to supplies, Henry orders him: 'That's enough, that's for trading, put it down'. Plainly, if Pike is to be his own man, he must also liberate himself from the grasp of big business back East.

While Pike is a long way from achieving the kind of autonomy and communion with nature he craves, as he ventures further into the wilderness, the preconceptions, habits and pretence that prevent him from achieving an uncompromised, original self-hood are stripped away. In this way, a desire to drink cool mountain water supplants Pike's drunkenness and, as the film progresses, he gradually loses the signs of an older,

fetishising culture – his jacket is stolen and his appearance grows more dishevelled and wilder looking – culminating in a moment when Pike discards his sabre, symbol of his self-delusion and fondness for appearance. And, despite Pike's ultimate failure to attain the stallion, he does come close to discovering an essential self-hood, free from the bondage of his past, in a way that re-emphasises the film's associations between negation and regeneration. Imminently, I shall examine this further. Before I do so, however, I want to explore the negation-regeneration dynamic of the American Sublime itself.

Significantly, in American Romanticism, regeneration through negation – expressed as an essentially continuous process – articulates another form of iconoclasm. In this, American Romantics again borrow from both their European counterparts and from Puritan ideology. According to Simpson, a characteristic of Romantic anti-fetishism is an 'insistence on the *changeable* nature of familiar experience', of life itself and a corresponding insistence on an active imagination. To Romantic writers, all forms of representation are necessarily fixities, congealments of continuous motion, abstractions 'beyond the reach of time and change'.⁵² Fetishism must be avoided by recognising representations of experience as a process of '*continual* creation and reactionThat "new existence" must be consciously held as a figure by the mind which made it, and never worshipped in itself.'⁵³

Importantly, in respect of the treatment of the sublime in *Eagle's Wing*, this emphasis on continual process expresses a kind of death-anxiety. All forms and representations in Romantic thought, corresponding to the limited character of the beautiful, are perceived to arrest the flux and flow of animate nature and imagination: they are essentially dead things. Since fetishism involves the worship of lifeless form, it is itself equated with death. As Simpson explains: 'its [fetishism's] true tendency is indeed toward death, which is the only ultimate fixity able to be posited from within the experience of life'.⁵⁴ This death-anxiety can be found in Emerson's writings. Stressing the dangers inherent in the material manifestations of thoughts which might congeal around and stifle their creators, Emerson wrote:

... it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself of circumstance, – as, for instance, an empire, rules of art, a local usage, a religious rite, – to heap itself on that ridge, and to solidify, and hem in the life.

In a way similar to Kant, Emerson injects a moral imperative into his anti-fetishism: to him, stasis represents corruption and the embodiment of evil: 'The only sin is limitation.'⁵⁵ The redemptive and moral quality of the sublime, therefore, lies in its refusal to except and its consequent exposure of limitation. As Derrida reminds us:

If art takes form by limiting, indeed by framing, there can be a *parergon* [an inside/outside framing] of the beautiful But there cannot be, it seems, any *parergon* of the sublime.⁵⁶

Emerson, like European Romantics, turned conceptions of sublime fluidity and flux into a model of natural law, leading him to celebrate process rather than result, action rather than end. Consequently – and importantly with regard to *Eagle Wing* – Emerson's discourse resounds with a decreative strain: all things contain within themselves the seeds of their own destruction and subsequent regeneration *ad infinitum*:

Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. ... There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees.⁵⁷

Nature, then, is governed by a law of impermanence – nature's 'secret', underlying principle: we should not be beguiled into mistaking appearance for essence, since 'every thing looks permanent until its secret is known.'⁵⁸ In this way, Emerson reaches back to and reshapes an earlier, Puritan, idea of the totality, like that articulated by Anne Bradstreet who declared that 'divers natures make one Unity' and who evoked a God 'of himselfe incapable of sence'.⁵⁹

Emerson's idea of perpetual fluidity as a governing principle of nature was also shared by Thomas Cole who, inspired by Niagara Falls, took their relentless movement as a model of nature. Cole articulates nature as a dynamic between the eternal and the ephemeral – a 'law' of 'impermanence'. Standing within an iconoclastic tradition that connects stasis with death, Niagara held considerable appeal for Cole. The Falls, Cole argued, suggest to the mind the idea of 'fixedness and motion – a single existence in which we perceive unceasing change and everlasting duration.'⁶⁰ In this way, the Falls present an essentially decreative process that is suggestive of limitlessness – the 'essence', as Howard Horwitz points out, of the sublime.⁶¹ While the Falls are taken as an icon of natural process, Cole's conception of nature as temporal as well as spatial limitlessness points to America itself; conceived of as nature's nation, it is America which necessarily embodies – and facilitates – this process without end.

Eagle's Wing precisely figures this kind of sublime fluidity in its opening 360 degree pan of a Western landscape in which beginning and ending converge into a refusal of limitation. The pan begins with an image that suggests a setting sun (the arrangement of the filmic space placing the sun just outside the frame so that its light illuminates frame left – 'West') and ends with an image of sunrise (the sun positioned to the right of the frame – 'East'). Incorporating an image of sunrise, in this way, the end of the pan contains within itself a new beginning. This fusion of endings and beginnings is also figured when Pike first discovers *Eagle's Wing* but with endings imagined as death. In one particular shot, *Eagle's Wing* stands between two animal skulls, a dying sun disappearing behind the horizon in the background. [Fig. 12]. These images of death correspond to the deaths of

the Comanche chief and a brave who struggles with Pike. But the introduction of Eagle's Wing into the action marks a new beginning, his dematerial whiteness prefiguring a resurgence in Pike's efforts to achieve 'pure self-possession', repeating Emerson's proleptic vision of natural process.⁶²

Pike's drive to negate and remake himself in this way also reimagines Emerson's belief that 'every man ... is a suggestion of that he should be. Men walk as prophecies of the next age.'⁶³ Corresponding to the limitless flux of nature, Emerson writes, subjectivity is a constant process of evolutionary change whereby freedom is in the (self) making, not the made: 'The life of a man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end.'⁶⁴ Thus, while materiality congeals around the individual, threatening to imprison and stifle, Emerson asserts:

if the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over that boundary on all sides. ... the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulse it already tends outwards with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions.⁶⁵

Within an American Romantic tradition, perpetual change is also associated with physical displacement since, as Eric Heyne points out, 'growth without displacement is ... impossible'.⁶⁶ This concept is most famously and influentially articulated in Turner's 'Frontier Thesis'. Turner's idea of the wilderness frontier ('always ... more psychic than physical') is 'negative, productive of endless beginnings'.⁶⁷ Like Emerson's conception of nature and self-hood, the Thesis describes a decreative process of negation and renewal ('recurrence of ... process', 'perennial rebirth'), each ending heralding the dawn of a new beginning.⁶⁸ Refusing the possibility of limitation, Turner's idea of the frontier is, in this way, transcendental, resisting closure even as he allows that the wilderness frontier is gone: 'He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact'.⁶⁹

Significantly, in respect of the American Sublime, Turner's version of decreative limitlessness and perpetual fluidity expresses what Heyne calls 'the repeated American motif of pushing against limits, always ... changing in some way'.⁷⁰ In this way, Turner's Thesis can be seen to articulate a 'Frontier Sublime', incorporating into his discourse of limitless change a key figure of the sublime: the edge.⁷¹ Crucially, in the context of limit and threshold, Turner's thesis is organised around a controlling metaphor of a wave of advancement sweeping westwards across the American continent and conceptualises the frontier as 'the edge', 'the outer edge of the wave', a 'single ... continually advancing frontier line', giving rise to a continuous process of change.⁷²

This kind of Turnerian Frontier sublimity is apparent throughout *Eagle's Wing* which, like the Thesis, conceives of change as continual displacement. The film achieves this by establishing a close relationship between protagonist and environment that repeats, visually,

Turner's conception of advancement and, more especially, his idea of the frontier-as-edge whereby this 'edge' operates as an anticipation of movement and change. Throughout *Eagle's Wing*, then, it is clear that the 'edge motif' (which proliferates throughout the film) has a special significance for Pike, figuring what Heyne calls 'the irrepressible American urge to travel in mind and body'.⁷³ Occurring at turning points in the narrative, it is a code within the film that signals Pike's transition from one state of consciousness to another through physical displacement. An analysis of the motif's role within a key sequence in the film will illustrate its symbolic significance.

This sequence is carefully orchestrated to establish that a long journey is taking place and that, at its conclusion, Pike's quest for self-possession takes a new and dramatic turn. The beginning of the journey-sequence begins after Henry has been killed (his death itself precipitating a new beginning) and is announced via the introduction of the main filmic score which lasts throughout the sequence, establishing continuity of action and underscoring the sequence's dramatic moments. After Pike buries Henry, the action cuts to a medium shot of Pike at night, staring into a fire deep in thought. This image then cuts away to a long shot of Pike which reveals a range of mountains in the background of the image; dark against a lighter sky, the mountains form a horizontal edge motif across the frame. [Fig. 13]. Signifying 'visible distance behind and before' to form a dual 'image of memory and hope', the edge motif visualises the turn of Pike's thoughts: lost in sorrow at Henry's death, Pike must nevertheless look forward to a new beginning.⁷⁴ As in the first shot in the sequence, the edge motif functions as a figure of anticipation but is also connected to Pike's more reflective mood caused by his experiences of the harshness of the wilderness and his companion's shocking death. In this way, the edge motif can be seen to figure the way in which Pike's mind is already being pushed toward the limits of his habitual and ordinary self.

The connection between Pike's gradual mental transformation and the motif is also, and more strongly, implied in the succeeding shot – a camera pan from left to right along a range of mountains. As the pan continues, the film music begins to gather momentum, accentuating the dramatic significance of the image. Towards the pan's completion, Pike comes into view near the top right hand corner of the frame, leading his mule along the crest of a hill following the direction of the pan towards the right. Again, the outermost edge of the hill is partially silhouetted against a lighter background, segmenting the screen. As the music shifts in emphasis, the pan is cut to a medium shot of Pike and the mule at the left of the screen, walking toward the camera. He comes to a halt, wearing an expression of deep thought. In an action that deliberately mirrors the camera pan, linking American landscape to vastness and flux, Pike sweeps his gaze from left to right in a horizontal motion along the landscape before him (and behind the camera). This is then cut to a point-of-view shot of the mountain range in which the division between mountain ridge and sky is very pronounced. The outermost edge of the mountain range is strongly contrasted

against a sky whose cloud formation echoes and emphasises its horizontal line. [Figs 14-17].

Again, as in the first shot in the sequence, the edge motif here functions as a figure of anticipation and renewal. Central to this meaning of this image, however, is Pike's gaze itself. Linked to the landscape via montage, fixing on the horizon, Pike's gaze symbolically looks forward to a future time and place. This connection between the edge motif and Pike's look is repeated throughout the sequence. The point-of-view shot of the mountain range is immediately succeeded by a shot of Pike lifting himself into the mule's saddle. Still gazing out toward the mountains, he rides off. The camera then swings behind Pike to show him riding away toward the mountain range now visible ahead, pulling his collar up around his neck as though preparing himself for a long journey. At this point, the film-music again changes in emphasis to accentuate the significance of the scene. The shot of Pike riding towards the mountains then cuts away to one in which he is shown to ride in an opposite direction – away from them and towards the camera, the mountain range now clearly visible behind him. Consequently, this montage creates the impression that Pike has passed over this symbolic edge into a new temporal and spatial dimension.

This use of the mountain range in *Eagle's Wing* is suggestive of the meaning carried by the Appalachian mountains in Turner's Thesis. Figuring a crucial divide between East and West, civilisation and nature, old and new, the mountains effectively cut the pioneer off from the interests and influences of the East. This geological divide, according to Turner, allowed the pioneer who made the difficult journey over the mountains more self-reliance: 'The settlements from the sea to the mountains kept connection with the rear and had a certain solidarity. But the over-mountain-men grew more and more independent.'⁷⁵ The edge motif in this way tropes Pike into a kind of 'over-mountain-man', figuratively severing him from his past and anticipating a journey toward independence and self-discovery.

The juxtaposition of oppositional shots in the journey sequence, manipulating time and space, then, sets up a code for Pike's progress through the landscape. The pattern is repeated in a similar way in the journey sequence until a shot of Pike riding toward the camera gradually dissolves into an image of a cliff edge overlooking a deep valley, so that for a while the two images – Pike and the edge motif – overlap. This fusion works to accentuate the special interconnectedness between Pike and the edge/frontier, its relation to his changing demeanour and attitudes. Pike then dismounts and walks to the edge of the cliff and stands, with his back to the camera, looking out across the valley. The sequence concludes with a close-up of Pike gazing outward, rapt in the scene, montage and *mise en scène* again converging gaze, edge and futurity.

As Pike gazes outward, the film score rises to a crescendo to emphasise that he is now poised on the threshold of a new experience, fusing the end of the sequence with the start of the second, and more intense, phase of his quest for freedom. As Pike continues to gaze

outward across the valley from the vantage point of the cliff-edge, the non-diegetic film score is gradually superseded by a mysterious diegetic chant coming from a point beyond the film frame, luring Pike toward it. Already, a mental and physical transformation manifests itself in Pike. Spying the Comanche funeral ceremony and Eagle's Wing, Pike's primitive, aggressive instincts are awakened. Advancing on the ceremony for the Comanche chief with sabre drawn – demonstrating that he can use the weapon for real, rather than for show – Pike wins the stallion and the possibility, within the film's conceptual frame, of uncompromised self-hood.

Preceding and anticipating this turn in Pike's character and fortunes, the use of the edge motif in the sequence establishes a visual subjunctive, representing all that may yet be. As a symbol of futurity, the motif signifies the (partial) negation of Pike's former preconceptions and habits and, in particular, his liberation from the universalising power system of capitalism: from this point onwards, the interests of the Company and its claims on Pike are forgotten. As in Turner's Thesis, the motif of the edge symbolises 'a gate of escape from the bondage of the past' and 'a new opportunity'.⁷⁶

Against this visualisation of movement and change in *Eagle's Wing* runs a counter-visualisation of stasis that recalls a Romantic suspicion of lifeless form, whereby ornament and religious artefacts are shown both to excite fetishistic longings and to engender death. One scene in particular plainly connects lifeless objects with death. Here, White Bull attempts to lure Pike away from Eagle's Wing by fastening jewels – part of his haul from a travelling funeral party he robbed a third of the way into the film – to the branches of small trees, finishing with a large stone set within a pendant. Amongst the fresh greenery of the foliage the jewels look artificial and absurdly out of place; stirred by a gentle breeze the sound of their chink and rattle contrasts oddly with the rustle of leaves and branches, contributing to this sense of their alienness. Fixed on the possession of the horse, however, Pike sees through White Bull's plan, spotting a knife-trap which is connected to the branch on which the pendant hangs.

But, while Pike remains immune to the gaudy allure of the jewels, others do not. When White Bull robs the coach, he also takes a young woman (Judith) captive, and a party of Mexicans from a nearby town set out to rescue her. One of these men is shown to be blinded with greed. Seemingly forgetting that his purpose is to rescue Judith, the man eagerly pockets gold, silver and jewels left strewn in the desert by White Bull, finally killing a member of his own party whom he perceives to be in his way. But his materialistic impulses result in his own death. The man gathers all the jewels hanging in the trees until he comes to the pendant; when he attempts to unhook it from its branch he releases the spring trap which plunges a small knife into the back of his neck. A close-up shot shows the knife (which is itself ornamental, adding another layer of meaning) dripping with blood, then cuts to a further close-up shot of the dead man's hand lying up-turned and empty, the pendant on the ground nearby. The montage pattern, juxtaposing bloody knife, fetish and

death, refers back to the man's murderous crimes committed out of a fixation with materiality, while his empty hand in the second shot sets up a reference to the emptiness of artificial form. The juxtaposition of the pendant and the dead hand in this shot, meanwhile, links fetishism with stasis – death being the ultimate fixity.

In a later scene, White Bull wounds Pike in the leg with an arrow he has constructed, using a crystal droplet from an ornamental lampshade for its point. The arrowhead pierces right through Pike's leg. In agony, he snaps the arrow in two in order to pull out the shaft, gazing with horror and disbelief at its blood-covered glass head. Referring back to the bloody knife in the preceding scene, the trinket-turned-arrowhead explicitly links artificial form with death. However, this image of the jewel smeared with blood – as dirtied – is also evocative of the way in which objects of material wealth in *Eagle's Wing* are repeatedly associated, not only with death, but also with corruption, sickness and pollution.

In an earlier scene, White Bull, assuming that he will be trailed after robbing the funeral coach, lays the first trap for his pursuers by placing a large, hollow and bejewelled crucifix over a live scorpion, an action which is shown in close-up. The finality with which White Bull performs the action – thudding the crucifix on the ground – suggests the fixity inherent in definite forms, while the gleaming crucifix itself figures the appeal of sensuality and surface appearance. Symbolically fused with the deadly poisonous scorpion, the hollowness of the crucifix is turned into a signifier of death, the close-up figuring the film's conception of fetishism as a whole. Drawn to the crucifix, a young man (another unfortunate member of the Mexican party) picks it up and is immediately stung (his puncture wound prefiguring the deadly knife 'sting' inflicted on the murderous idolater later in the action). The youth appears doomed: the last the viewer sees of him is as a receding figure galloping his horse back to his village for help, racing against the poison's deadly effects.

In this way, the film's use of the poisonous sting is highly suggestive since the word 'poison' carries with it related meanings of infection, corruption, pollution and, in a wide sense, perversion. By conjoining the poisonous sting to the crucifix, the film can be seen to imagine fetishism as a kind of contagion, the irresistible but fatal allure of material wealth, which eventually wipes out the rescue party. As the youth rides away, the man who later kills for and dies out of his love for material things, surreptitiously places the cross in his saddle bag, revealing that this symbolic infection has already spread. As the crucifix and other goods show, however, this sickness is European in origin which, with regard to the character White Bull, is highly significant. White Bull's sickness manifests itself mainly in his drunkenness. A 'boozy Indian', White Bull has a penchant for wine, within the terms of the film, a noxious, corrupting substance and symbol of European decadence. White Bull is frequently and stupidly drunk; during the attack on the coach, he falls off his horse and is abandoned by the other members of the tribe who regard him with disgust. Finding himself alone, White Bull heads towards the stationary coach to rob it. The compositional

elements of the following scene connect fetishism with death but, in particular, with corruption and perversion.

One man inside the coach (brother to the deceased) has already been killed by White Bull's companions, and White Bull easily overpowers the remaining funeral party before stripping the coach of its material goods.⁷⁷ When this has been accomplished, White Bull turns to the items of jewellery worn by the travellers. Spying the extravagant attire of one handsome woman (The Widow), he strips her of most of her jewels at knife point then indicates that he wants her dress also. Here, the film fuses the sensual allure of material objects with sexual arousal, turning the female body into the locus of fetishistic desire. The woman steps out of her dress, moving toward White Bull. She stands in front of him in her underclothes while he stands erect, chest thrust outwards and knife slightly raised in an overt representation of male sexual aggression. His subsequent behaviour toward the woman conjoins the meaning of having and taking with sexual possession and rape. White Bull's gaze travels lasciviously over the woman's body, resting insinuatingly on her cleavage. Raising his knife to her breasts he seems about to cut her before gathering up the chain of her long pendant on its point. Finally, and with a contemptuous snort, White Bull lets the woman go.

What is constructed as White Bull's greedy and perverse behaviour, however, is mirrored by The Widow's own venality. During her humiliation, the woman is entirely unflinching and she holds White Bull's gaze boldly throughout. The reason being, it is implied, is that she is herself corrupt, her attachment to her husband being motivated only by mercenary impulses. Prior to the attack – and thereafter, save for one instance – The Widow is shown to be emotionally cold, interpreted by Judith to be the manifestation of her amorality. Reprimanded by her brother for showing no regard for The Widow's feelings, Judith responds: 'When we were at that hacienda last night, I think I saw what was in her heart'.

Judith's remark suggests that The Widow's feelings have been supplanted by calculus and that her marriage is actually a species of prostitution. The Widow's fierce reaction when, later, White Bull tips gold coins from a box onto the ground and onto her brother-in-law's body (another filmic commingling of fetishism and death) is, in this respect, significant. Seeing the coins scattered on the ground, The Widow suddenly glares angrily and rushes forward, her hand reaching for the gold. Held back by her maids, however, The Widow just as suddenly recovers her composure; stone-faced, she remains unmoved when those about her panic and when she herself is subsequently humiliated. This single, greed-induced outburst hints that the woman might have killed her husband herself.

Later, when White Bull has left and Judith's brother gone for help, The Widow's calculating nature is revealed to its full extent. Waiting for help to arrive, the woman is as blank-faced as before. But as soon as rescue appears she approaches the corpse of her brother-in-law and delicately removes a handkerchief from his top pocket. Waiting for the

exact moment when she can be seen to do so, The Widow begins to dab her eyes. Like the fetish objects she craves (indeed, like the pendant she wears – later the bait in White Bull's deadly trap), The Widow is all outward show, hard, cold, and hollow. This suggests why White Bull transfers his drunken (sick) fetishistic desires onto her body; it is, as the film implies, mere commodity.

The processes of White Bull's gradual recovery from this (European) sickness is compared to Pike's throughout the film through parallel montage. In a way similar to Pike, White Bull's transformation is presented as a stripping away of that which corrupts and compromises him and as a reaching toward detextualised whiteness – symbolised by his own desire for Eagle's Wing. In order to obtain the stallion, White Bull begins to relearn Kiowan ways, reconnecting with the wilderness terrain from which European influences have alienated him. In the scene where White Bull snatches the horse, Pike, mounted on Eagle's Wing, is shown approaching a water hole in open territory. Glancing about to satisfy himself that no one could approach unseen, he remarks 'Well, nothing can creep up on us here, except the wind'. Dismounting, Pike takes his canteen from his saddle and stoops at the water hole, the action cutting to a shot of the still water. With a great rush of water, White Bull suddenly emerges from the water's depths reaching for Pike. Swiftly dealing Pike a heavy blow, White Bull rushes to Eagle's Wing, leaps into the horse's saddle and gallops away. To achieve his ends White Bull immerses himself in and becomes the wilderness. Not creeping, but bursting suddenly into the calm, his tremendous energy at once overpowering Pike, White Bull appears transformed into a sublime force of nature.

White Bull's reunion with nature continues after he takes Eagle's Wing, signalled by his symbolic negation of the material possessions taken from Pike, and by a more gradual abandonment of the stolen treasure. Riding Eagle's Wing and shouting in triumph, White Bull returns to Judith whirling Pike's army jacket about his head. Hurling the jacket to the ground, White Bull then takes Pike's rifle from the saddle, fires it and immediately throws it to the ground with a cry of derision. Dismounting, he removes Pike's saddle and dumps that on the ground also before continuing his escape. In a later scene, White Bull seizes a basket filled with bottles of wine and empties it onto the ground, smashing the bottles as he does so. As the party of Mexicans track down White Bull, these bottles come into symbolic play again when one broken bottle, shown in close-up, is revealed to be crawling with ants. In this way, the bottle functions as a metonym for European culture, reiterating, in the combination of smashed glass, ant infestation, and sticky wine stains, the film's conception of an invading European culture as inherently destructive, sick and polluting.

White Bull's destruction of the wine, then, is set up explicitly as a form of purification which brings him closer to the wilderness. Thus, immediately after he symbolically rids himself of his alcohol addiction, White Bull performs a simple ceremony to mark his possession of the horse, underscored by 'Indian music' played softly on pipes and drums. The action cuts away from the smashed bottles to a shot of a blue sky into which White

Bull lifts two white feathers, the convergence of feathers and sky evoking the stallion's connection with flight. Emphasising the connection, White Bull then places the feathers in the head band of Eagle's Wing. Next, White Bull blows gently into the stallion's nose to form a bond with him. The action then cuts away to a second shot of the sky into which White Bull now raises his hand which is coated in pigment, the conjoining of hand and clear blue sky figuring White Bull's purification and anticipating his flight into the wilderness. Lowering his hand, White Bull then places a hand print on the horse's flank before streaking his own brow with the remaining pigment. The gesture, as with the way in which White Bull breathes into Eagle's Wing, plainly symbolises White's Bull's oneness with the horse and, by extension, a renewed interconnectedness with the wilderness itself.

In this way, the ceremony forms an important part of White Bull's disburdenment of an alien and corrupting civilisation which has severed him both from his cultural origins and from nature. Later, when following a trail of things abandoned by White Bull, Pike observes the incongruity of some of the objects in relation to the thief. On finding a guitar, Pike picks it up in amazement: 'What the hell kind of heathen is this? If he's got a piano with him I'll teach him a few minstrel tunes.' Pike punctuates his remark by throwing the guitar down again where it hits the ground with a discordant and comical 'twang'. Though comic, the moment underscores the seriousness of the film's intentions, the guitar signifying White Bull's alienation both from his culture and from himself.

The extent of White Bull's self-estrangement is underlined by Pike's invocation to White Bull when he finds some discarded religious artefacts (including a priest's purple robe and a silver communion cup): 'you've been a long way from home ... a long, long way.' This discrepancy between White Bull and the discarded treasure corresponds to a repeated symbolic disjunction between thing and place in the film's *mise en scène*, setting up a visual clash between savagery and civilisation. Figuring the difference between nature and artifice, objects of material wealth – whether a bejewelled crucifix sitting alone in a vast and empty desert space or jewels sparkling within the greenery of leaves – appear absurdly out of place in the wilderness surroundings, this irreverence toward materiality contributing significantly to the film's iconoclastic rhetoric.⁷⁸ While ridiculous, however, these artefacts are nonetheless pernicious – as the jagged fragments of the broken wine bottles, or the scorpion-harboured crucifix suggest. Scattered across the desert floor, they also visually mar the appearance of the landscape, figuring as the detritus of a materially obsessed and contaminating alien culture which is creeping insidiously into and spoiling the natural terrain.

White Bull's symbolic return to nature and cleansing of this encroaching and corrupting culture utilises the edge motif – represented here by the crest of a hill – in a highly significant way. Mounted on Eagle's Wing, White Bull climbs a low but difficult hill which presents the last obstacle to his escape into a open and vast plain beyond. As he reaches the top, White Bull looks back disdainfully at Pike – who is struggling up the steep and craggy

slope on foot – then disappears over the hill crest which cuts him off from view, figuratively severing all ties between White Bull and the fetishisms of a European social and economic order. The last the viewer sees of White Bull is as he gallops Eagle's Wing away across the plain, leaving a white, comet-like, streak of dust in his wake, an image that again links the horse to ideas of flight (and sets up another explicit visual reference to the mythic white stallion in *Moby-Dick* where Ishmael imagines the 'curving comet' of the horse's tail).⁷⁹ [Fig. 18]. In this way, then, the edge motif serves finally to establish an irreconcilable gulf between White Bull and his white counterpart who remains on the hill crest, unable to make the transition into the dematerialised blankness that the plain represents; in so doing, the motif figures the sheer distance and difference between Pike and the wilderness in a way that evokes the dynamics of a Kantian sublime.

The scene is constructed as follows. As White Bull disappears, Pike continues to scramble on all-fours to the top of the hill. The loud, discordant music underscoring the emotional intensity at this point stops abruptly to foreground the sound of Pike's laboured breathing, focusing the action in on his pain and desperation. When Pike at last reaches the top, a strong gust of desert wind causes his eyes to smart and blink. Exhausted and wounded, he is plainly on the verge of collapse. Looking outward, he gasps, staggers, drops his sabre and cries out weakly, 'Help me. Please help me' and begins to weep. The compositional elements of the scene figure what Weiskel calls the second, disruptive phase of the sublime moment, the realisation of the self's insignificance in relation to the sublime object. In Kant's version of the confrontation between self and sublime other, a death-inducing scenario is described. A gulf opens up between the fragile and enclosed space of the subjective self and the sublime object; the mind suffers the shocking revelation that its powers are unequal to the sublime phenomenon and consequently the subject, feeling humiliatingly disempowered, fears annihilation. In Kant's words, 'the point of excess for the imagination ... is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself'.⁸⁰

The portrayal of the sublime moment in *Eagle's Wing*, however, is also mediated by Turner's Frontier Thesis. As I have touched upon already, it is possible to read Turner's Thesis – with its iconoclastic bent and related focus upon limitless and perpetual renewal – in terms of the sublime. In Turner's Frontier Sublime, the confrontation between puny selfhood and sublime excess is represented by the frontier itself, the dividing line and space between 'savage' otherness and 'civilisation' which constitutes the pioneer's limiting preconceptions and habits. The forces of the wilderness violently break down the pioneer's habitual relation to the world. Confronted with the sublime power of the wilderness, the pioneer's differences and weaknesses are exposed. The forces of the wilderness overwhelm ('master') the individual and threaten him with death: 'at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish'.⁸¹ The closing moments of *Eagle's Wing*, then, rework these versions of sublime excess and disempowerment. Reducing him to a weeping, pathetic figure, the

wilderness environment has plainly proved too much for Pike who finally and painfully comprehends his alienation from and insignificance to it, the moment when he drops his sword operating as a figure of his consequent disempowerment (constructed as symbolic castration).⁸² [Fig. 19].

Signifying the disjunction between the limitations of ordinary self-hood and sublime excess in the *mise en scène*, the edge motif reproduces the kind of 'divided landscapes' or 'dualistic visions' of traditional representations of the sublime moment.⁸³ Representations of the sublime in painting and photography, according to McKinsey, use the edge motif to imply a 'dualism' 'between inhabitable, improvable nature on the one hand and awesome, uncontrollable nature on the other.'⁸⁴ In paintings and photography, a 'stage-like space' is separated from a more mysterious space beyond in schematics of contrasting shade and light, symbolising the difference between ground that is 'safe', 'secure' and 'knowable' and ground that remains beyond human cognition and control.⁸⁵ And, to convey a sense of sublime terror, many paintings of Niagara Falls situate figures precariously on the edge of cliffs and rocks, their tiny, silhouetted forms contrasting with the white, surging water below.

Richard Wilson's *Niagara Falls* (1774), which includes two minute figures in the dark foregrounded area to the left of the canvas, provides an early example of these techniques. [Fig. 20]. Vanderlyn's painting, *A View of the Western Branch of the Falls of Niagara* (1804), however, is more striking in its attempt, as McKinsey argues, 'to recreate the overwhelming impact of the Falls for the viewer.' In this painting, McKinsey continues:

The keenly defined edge of Table Rock silhouetted black against the white mist indicates the abruptness of the dropoff into the chasm below, and the little gesticulating figures – one even creeps up to the edge precipice on hands and knees – depict the awe and terror one felt on the spot.⁸⁶ [Fig. 21].

In this way, Vanderlyn's painting depicts the disorientation of the sublime moment, the second, disruptive phase of the sublime experience. The relation between the tiny figure on all fours right on the edge of the foregrounded rocks and the swirling mists below recalls Emerson's terror before the abyss: the figure seems in jeopardy, about to fall.

Similar strategies of representation feature variously in photography as well, such as in William Henry Jackson's *Grand Canyon of the Colorado* (after 1880). [Fig. 22]. Jackson splits the frame diagonally into two segments, enhancing the scale of the Colorado river as it recedes into the distance on the left of the picture. Repeating the symbolic contrasts of Vanderlyn's canvas, the foreground is darkly silhouetted against the lighter, vast background. Three figures, also in dark relief, are positioned on the very edge of the silhouetted rock. As in Vanderlyn's painting, the motif of the edge symbolises the subjects' dual relation with the sublime other; close to, but essentially separate from it.

A.J. Russell's *Silver Mining District, Dale Creek (Wyoming)* (1867/68) offers a similar configurative pattern, the edge motif formed by the contrast between a rock formation in dark relief against a light sky. Standing on this symbolic intersection between human and non-human is a solitary figure, gazing out across the largely concealed, and thus mysterious, space beyond. [Fig. 23]. Alfred Stieglitz's *Equivalent: Music No. 1*, Lake George, New York (1922) is a more abstract rendering of the motif. Here the picture is divided into three segments in which a light band of cloud is squeezed between a blackened hill and a dark cloud mass which dominates the image, suggesting Kant's dynamical sublime. [Fig. 24]. In the foreground of the photograph, beneath the hill, a small house signifies a fragile human presence which contrasts with the natural, sublime, power lying beyond the hill's crest.

Significantly, in respect of *Eagle's Wing*, however, Vanderlyn's canvas and the photographs by Jackson and Russell draw attention to the act of spectating itself which, McKinsey points out, can accentuate the symbolic dualisms within divided landscapes. In attempting to convey the 'disorientating distance he had felt between himself and Niagara' in his painting *Niagara Falls* (1830), Cole similarly makes the act of looking central to the meaning of the image.⁸⁷ Thus, in the horizontal centre and foreground of the painting, Cole depicts a standing 'Indian' and a seated companion who are both positioned on the edge of a rock jutting outwards over the water, their backs to the picture viewer figuring. In this way, McKinsey argues, Cole represents their 'dual relation to the Falls – their unity with the scene as we see it and their separation from it as rapt viewers'.⁸⁸ By combining these representational strategies, Cole's painting, McKinsey concludes, symbolises how

the experiencing "I" ... recognizes and reveres the separateness and power of sublime nature while also experiencing a sense of harmony and participation with it.⁸⁹

In a way similar to these representations, the *mise en scène* in the final scene of *Eagle's Wing* has the foregrounded cliff-edge in dark relief against a lighter sky, roughly dividing the screen into two segments (the formal elements of the shots setting up a further repetition of a recurrent symbolic image in the film). [Fig. 19]. The contrast between light and dark draws attention to the outermost edge of the cliff-top, the point at which concrete and abstract (ground and sky) both converge and diverge. In a way similar to Cole's *Niagara Falls*, the motif can be seen to visualise the dualisms of the sublime, the dynamic relationship between the sensible and supersensible, the *sheer* difference between them. Recalling the way in which Vanderlyn's and Cole's figures are situated precariously on the edge of the abyss at Niagara, Pike, also in partial silhouette, stands on the very edge of the precipice, the ground dropping sharply away in front of him. Below him lies the vast expanse of the American plains, a large group of mountains rising out of the valley in the far distance.

In a filmic reworking of sublime representations, the act of spectatorship is foregrounded not only by positioning the camera directly behind Pike, but also through a montage pattern that cuts between close-ups of Pike and point-of-view shots of the vast plain beyond. [Figs 25-27]. Showing Pike looking at the scene in this way, the montages emphasise his separateness from it and, together with the oppositional relationship between dark and light in the shots, figure the fundamental difference and distance between Pike and the dematerialised blankness beyond.

However, the final scene represents an interesting and significant problematic, since this recognition of the discrepancy between self and supersensible other is an essential component of the sublime experience, leading, according to Kant to the discovery of the sublime within the self. This problematic turns on the loss and recovery of voice within the sublime moment. As Kant makes clear, the sublime is 'ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and ... [performs] an outrage on the imagination'.⁹⁰ The sublime experience is mind-numbing, speech-defying, the abyss which threatens the subject with annihilation being essentially that, as Rob Wilson puts it, 'between cognition (the language of the self)' and the sublime object.⁹¹ But, as Weiskel explains, the sublime results in a counter-manoeuve of resistance through mimesis. Crucially, in *Eagle's Wing*, this mimetic resistance is activated by the recovery of voice – paradoxically, Pike's supplication – which rescues Pike from death (silence) and opens up the possibility of his (at least partial) redemption.

Taken literally, the plea constitutes merely a pathetic cry for assistance, denoting Pike's weakness. Yet an exploration of the plea as it functions rhetorically within the scene, renders this literal interpretation insecure. When Pike delivers the utterance, his gaze is clearly not directed toward White Bull galloping the stallion across the valley below (and of whom Pike seems to be oblivious); rather, his gaze is fixed at a point straight ahead and in the remote distance. Exactly what has induced Pike's reaction is initially concealed from the viewer with shots of White Bull galloping away on *Eagle's Wing* seeming to confirm his escape as the source of Pike's despair. The moment of revelation is actually deferred: following on from the shot of White Bull's receding figure, the action cuts away from White Bull to another shot of the valley in which the camera-work and musical score together establish the source of Pike's anguish. As the music reaches its crescendo, the camera pans upwards slightly, revealing as it does so a vast expanse of desert out of which in the far distance a mountain range rises. [Fig. 28]. In this way, the actual cause of Pike's distress is revealed, because it becomes apparent that his supplication is not to White Bull – at whom he is not looking – but instead to the vast, empty wilderness itself.

Turning away from real characters to address an inanimate object in this way, Pike's speech act constitutes a Romantic apostrophe which, in part, expresses his emotional intensity⁹² Reflecting the multiple and changing functions of apostrophic utterances, Katie Wales states:

apostrophe originated in the orator's turning aside from his immediate audience to address some other person, whether physically present or not. It then came to signify a vocative address to an absent or dead person, or to an inanimate object or quality as if personified. Apostrophe is typically exclamatory and emotive, and is particularly striking in soliloquy ...⁹³

Wales's definition of the trope includes a key point for an analysis of the functions of apostrophe. Addressing inanimate objects 'as if personified', apostrophic tropes plainly do more than figure a sudden, uncontrollable outpouring of feeling. As Jonathan Culler argues, by presupposing that the inanimate object addressed is a sentient being, the apostrophising speaker effectively transforms that object into another, potentially responsive subject. In this way, Pike's invocation to the wilderness, rather than any 'real' character, effectively turns the landscape into another, responsive subject. As Culler explains, in apostrophic utterances, the 'object is treated as a subject, an *I* which implies a certain kind of *you* in its turn. One who successfully invokes nature is one to whom nature might in its turn, speak.'⁹⁴

In treating nature as a sentient being in this way, the apostrophic trope realises the Romantic desire to impel the self beyond its limitations and to reach into the dimension of the other. As Geoffrey Hartman puts it, apostrophe 'transcends the finitude of self and the fixity of self-consciousness'.⁹⁵ As a transcendental trope, apostrophe is frequently called into play by Romantic poets as part of their efforts, in Culler's words, to 'overcome the alienation of subject from object.' As such, the trope is potentially empowering, since the apostrophising speaker is one who can 'engage in dialogue with the universe.'⁹⁶ If the infinity of natural power and space are evoked, the apostrophising speaker not only transports himself into the realm of the supersensible other; entering into an 'intersubjective dialogue' with the infinite, the speaker also assumes a certain affinity with it: a union is made. Apostrophic utterances, then, imply a fusion or identification between subject and object.⁹⁷

Within the context of the sublime scenario, apostrophes can perform a highly significant function. By establishing dialogic interaction with the wilderness landscape at the closing moments of *Eagle's Wing*, Pike effectively reaches across the abyss between himself and the sublime other, impelling himself into the supersensible other. Entering into dialogue with the wilderness, Pike assumes a connectedness with sublime nature. His implied identification with the wilderness resembles the process of identification in Kant's formulation of the sublime experience. The Kantian sublime describes a process in which the mind rescues itself from annihilation by turning the sublime suggested by vast space and power into a symbol of its own sublimity, rhetorically fusing the two. While it is plain that Pike's fusion with the wilderness does not correspond exactly to the Kantian schematic, his apostrophic utterance nevertheless saves him from being overwhelmed entirely, facilitating his identification with the sublime other. In this way, Pike achieves

flight through apostrophic self-enablement, a 'counteroffensive of identification or mimesis'.⁹⁸

Pike's plea recalls a number of similar utterances made in the film with which it can be compared. Judith also makes pleas for help in three separate instances: to her brother, to the Virgin Mary and finally to Pike himself. Judith's pleas are misdirected, however. As dramatised in the robbery scene, her brother (a priest) is exposed as a sycophant and a coward who allows The Widow to be abused and Judith to be abducted. Her apostrophic plea to the Virgin Mary, meanwhile, recalls the film's associations of religious artefacts with material wealth, greed, corruption and death. Her plea to Pike for help when White Bull finally discards her as well is also wasted, since Pike is fixated upon winning back Eagle's Wing, his self-interest and obsession overriding any concern he might have for others. In all, Judith invokes that which is presented in the film as being limited in some way.

In addition, Pike's final plea can also be compared with several evocations he makes during the film to White Bull and to Eagle's Wing. A habitual apostrophiser, Pike's frequent evocations to White Bull are as misdirected as Judith's, since White Bull, up until his final escape into the wilderness, is, within the terms of the film, both contaminated and constrained by a fetishising culture. Pike's other evocations to Eagle's Wing, meanwhile, occur at the point when Pike's self-deception is at its strongest. While he connects with the stallion by treating him as a fully sentient being, Pike's apostrophes are nevertheless sullied by his own dishonesty which itself points to a barrier between him and the freedom Eagle's Wing is meant to represent.

Despite Pike's apostrophic utterance at the end of the film, however, his fusion with the wilderness is plainly incomplete. Yet, in a way similar to the sublime – where the discovery of the sublime within the self depends on the recognition of the difference and distance between subject and object – Pike's separateness from the wilderness is in itself vital. Indeed, Pike's distance from the wilderness is maintained not so much in spite of the apostrophe, but because of it. Michael Macovski is critical of studies that suggest that the fusion between subject and object figured by apostrophic speech acts are complete because, as he points out, total identification between subject and other would induce total silence (death). The subject would be absorbed into the totality of the other and the individual self lost. Difference/distance between subject and object is thus essential to the integrity of the self; it is also integral to any dialogic exchange, since the very nature of dialogue depends on interaction between others, whereas total "fusion" between "I" and other would necessarily preclude rhetorical exchange'.⁹⁹

In a similar way, explaining the connection between (poetic) voice and self-preservation in relation to the sublime, Mary Arensberg points out the undesirability of total mimesis, the total crossing over into the space of the supersensible other:

Poems get written because that threshold has never been crossed or articulated; for to transgress that boundary to speak with the tongue of a god would be to achieve the sublime and also silence.¹⁰⁰

Voice, the lyric "I" is, then, the means to achieve self-preservation, to retain self-possession. According to Macovski, since the very nature of dialogue depends on this interaction of self and other, apostrophe 'plays on authentic interaction', necessarily gesturing towards the external other and towards the impossibility of conflation between 'I' and this other in dialogic exchange. Dialogue rescues the self from silence and death: 'language alone has the power to spring the imagination'; only it can 'impel the self beyond "dumb enchantment"'.¹⁰¹ In the context of an American Sublime tradition, moreover, recovery of voice possesses a special significance. As Rob Wilson writes, in the pretextual whiteness of the New World wilderness, the poetic voice which turns blankness into meaning for self and place, fends off the awful silence: 'Poetry emerged to fill the unwritten terrain and the traumatic solitude.'¹⁰²

Pike's apostrophic separation from the wilderness can thus be seen, to a certain extent, to reaffirm the very individuation that he craves; he moves toward the sublime other, but he also stays put in a way that allows him to remain his 'own man'. Paradoxically, Pike achieves flight by assuming an affinity with the wilderness while simultaneously remaining apart from it; his loss – of the dematerialised whiteness of the wilderness symbolised by the white stallion – is in a certain sense his gain. In short, *Eagle's Wing* imagines that 'In comprehending the sublime, there is both the losing and the becoming of the self'.¹⁰³ I do not, however, wish to exaggerate Pike's self-becoming in my analysis of the concluding moments of the film. As I have already noted, it is clear that Pike has reached the limits of his physical and mental strengths and that he can go no further in his quest for unconditional freedom. I want only to argue that, while Pike is weak, injured and stranded, having been deprived of *Eagle's Wing*, his connective evocation to the wilderness landscape, unmediated now by self-deceit and bravado, brings him closer to a truer, more essential self-hood.

Pike's ultimate loss is significant in a further way because it highlights a central dilemma in frontier narratives. Pointing out that the frontier can be both a continually moving boundary ('margin'), or the space beyond it ('range'), Heyne observes that, problematically, 'the frontier-as-range exists only so long as it is uninhabited; Americans cannot have their frontier and live in it too.'¹⁰⁴ Thus, he continues,

it is the radically evasive quality of the frontier – disappearing precisely as American attempt to inhabit it – that makes it so ... compelling. The frontier is, to use Melville's term, America's "Loose-fish."¹⁰⁵

In the light of Heyne's analysis, the final moments of *Eagle's Wing* become more complex still. Emphasising Pike's failure to attain Eagle's Wing (who remains the film's own emblematic loose fish) even while it allows him to come close to nature, the film critiques the American ideal of unconditional freedom as nothing more than an impossible dream.

Yet, when placed in the context of the scene in which Pike tames Eagle's Wing, his failure can be seen to be symbolically more far-reaching within the terms of the American Sublime. Though obsessed with the horse, as Ahab is with the whale, Pike does not seek to harm Eagle's Wing, indicated by the comedic underscoring and performance of the taming scene. Yet Pike's dream of unconditional freedom clearly involves, in a literal and figurative sense, the reining-in of the stallion – for the purposes of inflating his own ego. As Pike first removes the eagle feathers adorning Eagle's Wing (symbolically clipping his wings) and begins to rub off the paint on the horse's body, the action cuts to a medium close-up of his hands holding a bridle, accentuating his intention to subdue the horse. This intention to restrain Eagle's Wing, however, corresponds with Pike's clear wish to assume the sublime power represented by the horse and its feathers for himself. Following the close-up shot of the bridle, the camera pans upward to reveal that Pike has placed the feathers removed from the horse into his own cap.

This schematic of restraint and self-empowerment continues throughout the scene. Approaching the horse, Pike roughly pushes the bridle into the stallion's mouth, in contrast to White Bull's gentleness with the horse. The action then cuts to a shot of Eagle's Wing now wearing the bridle, the camera panning upward to reveal Pike riding him, still wearing the eagle feathers in his cap. After lashing the stallion with its new reins, Pike is thrown to the ground, prompting him to use a further means of control – a saddle, which the horse first vigorously resists then finally accepts. Pike is now able to make his (albeit over-confident) claim: 'I'm an eagle now!'. In short, Pike's pursuit of the horse expresses a drive toward self-aggrandisement (figured as his compulsion to feather his own cap) through dominance which the concluding moments of the film deliberately deny him.

Suggesting in this way, to paraphrase Albert Boime, that the realisation of the American Dream implies the corruption of both the dreamer and the wilderness dreamt about, *Eagle's Wing* avoids what can be regarded as some of the more unpleasant aspects of the American Sublime – in the way that the film *Jeremiah Johnson* arguably does not. While *Jeremiah Johnson* explores the same kind of thematics as *Eagle's Wing*, the film places a very different emphasis on the use of the edge motif within its representations of the sublime moment and its protagonist's identification with the wilderness. In other words *Jeremiah Johnson* reveals – though not purposefully, as in *Eagle's Wing* – that the ambition of the American Sublime as discourse and practice is to achieve not oneness with nature, but superiority over it.

FIG:1



FIG:2



FIG:3



FIG:4



FIG:5



FIG:6



FIG:7



FIG:8



FIG:9



FIG: 11



FIG: 10





FIG:12



FIG:13



FIG:14



FIG:15



FIG:16



FIG:17

FIG: 18

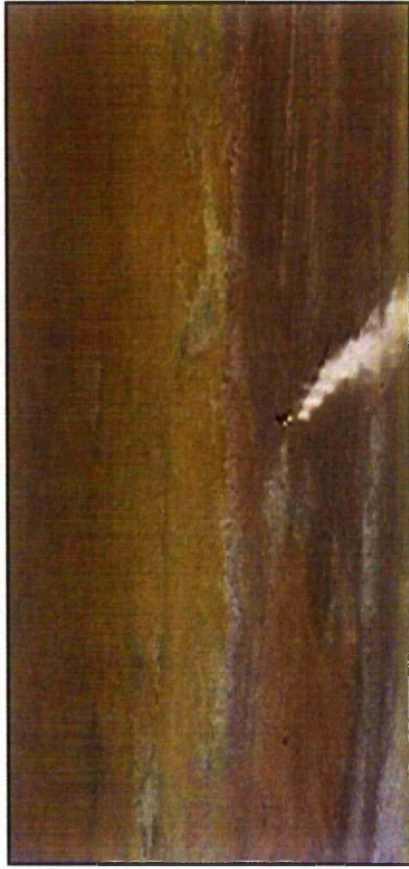


FIG: 19



FIG: 20

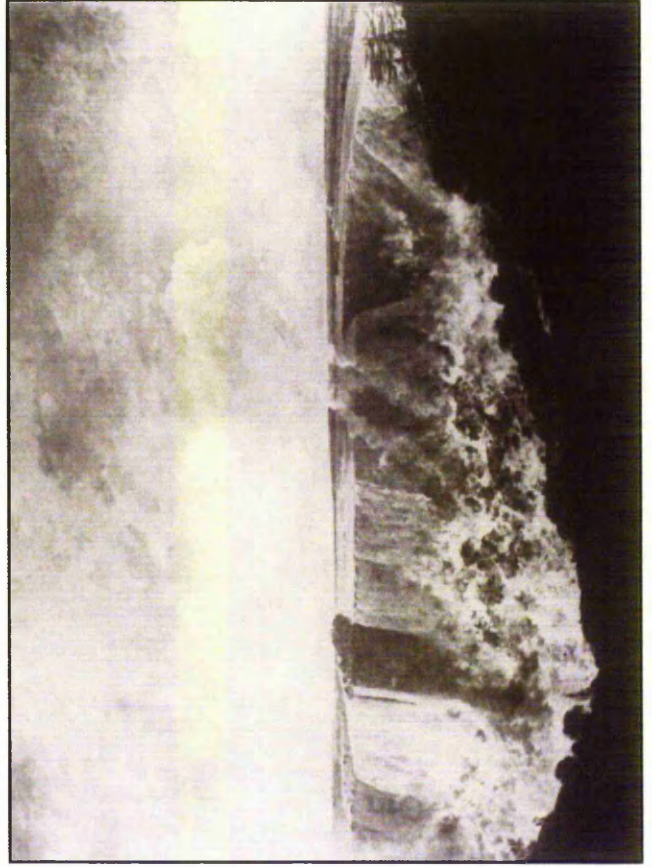


FIG: 21



FIG:22

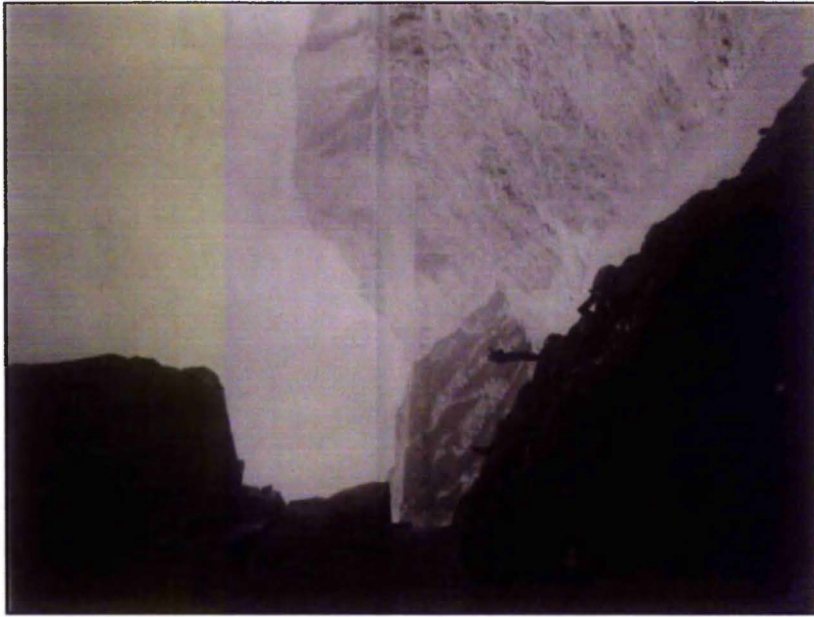


FIG:23



FIG:24



FIG: 25



FIG: 26



FIG: 27

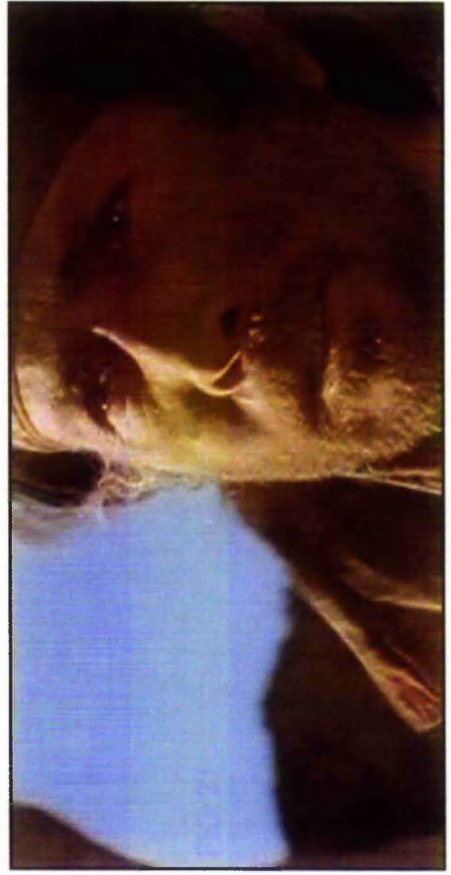


FIG: 28



Notes

- ¹ Anthony Harvey, interviewed by Richard Combs and Tom Milne, 'The Romantic Englishman', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 48, Part 4 (1979), p.214.
- ² Mary Arensberg (ed.), *The American Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p.1.
- ³ Kant quoted in David Hawkes, *Ideology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p.70.
- ⁴ Howard Horwitz *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.20. According to Horwitz, the American school was also called the New York School and, after 1879, became known as the Hudson River School. See also Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* (Thames and Hudson: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.18, 20.
- ⁵ Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (Cambridge, London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.64.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p.64.
- ⁷ See *ibid.*, pp.64-65.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p.73; Wolfgang Born, cited in McKinsey, *ibid.*, p.84.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.65-67.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.67.
- ¹¹ Novak, *op. cit.*, pp.20, 23.
- ¹² Immanuel Kant (1790), citing Burke, 'Analytic of the Sublime', Part I Book II, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated with Analytical Indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p.131.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p.107.
- ¹⁴ Novak, *op. cit.*, p.20. 'Persisting late into the nineteenth century', Novak writes, 'this art had a clear twentieth-century heir in the film', *ibid.*, p.19. See also John Belton's *Widescreen Cinema* which argues that widescreen formats 'recall much earlier inventions – the panoramas and dioramas of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries' (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.93.
- ¹⁵ James Monaco, *How to Read a Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.151.
- ¹⁶ Terence Martin, 'The Negative Structures of American Literature', in *American Literature* Vol. 57 (1982), p.15.
- ¹⁷ See Arensberg, *op. cit.*, p.1.
- ¹⁸ According to Harvey, the opening scene was shot at dawn: 'The Romantic Englishman', *op. cit.*, p.214.
- ¹⁹ Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p.11.
- ²⁰ Martin, *op. cit.*, pp.5, 8-9.
- ²¹ David Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp.4-5.
- ²² Hawkes, *op. cit.*, p.71.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p.71.
- ²⁴ I draw on Hawkes's discussion of Kant, *ibid.*, especially pp.69, 71, 74.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.72.
- ²⁶ Simpson, *op. cit.*, pp.9, 11.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.9.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.17-18.
- ²⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend* 1.518, in Simpson, *ibid.*, pp.11-12.
- ³⁰ Novak, *op. cit.*, p.18.
- ³¹ Thomas Cole, 'Essay on American Scenery' (1835), in *American Art 1700-1960: Sources and Documents*, John W. McCoubrey (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1965), p.100.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p.102.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p.108.
- ³⁴ See Rob Wilson, *op. cit.*, Chapter Three, *passim*. See also Horwitz, *op. cit.*, p.9.
- ³⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1893), in *The Frontier in American History* (1920, 1947), foreworded by Ray Allen Billington (New York and London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), pp.1, 11.
- ³⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *Mason and Dixon* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), p.345.
- ³⁷ Eric Heyne, *Desert, Garden, Margin, Range: Literature on the American Frontier* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), p.9.
- ³⁸ Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.11.

- ³⁹ Herman Melville(1851), *Moby-Dick* (London: Penguin, 1987), p.290. See also Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.79.
- ⁴⁰ Melville, op. cit., p.291.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p.290.
- ⁴² In view of the film's presentation of the sublime as dehuman void, this connection between Eagle's Wing and primal origins is appropriate. According to Stephen Jay Gould, horses had died in America prior to 'the dawn of human history in our hemisphere.' Linking the horse to a primal dawn also symbolically negates the actual, European, origin of Eagle's Wing: as Gould explains, horses were reintroduced in America by European colonisers. See Gould, *Bully for Brontosaurus: Further Reflections in Natural History* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.170.
- ⁴³ Martin, op. cit., p.15.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p.13.
- ⁴⁵ See Turner, op. cit., p.2.
- ⁴⁶ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.95.
- ⁴⁷ Hawkes, op. cit., p.74.
- ⁴⁸ Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Studies of Authorship within the Western* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p.12.
- ⁴⁹ Harvey, in 'The Romantic Englishman', op. cit., p.213.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p.213.
- ⁵¹ The casting of Harvey Keitel in the role of Henry contributes to the character's symbolic significance. Keitel, as Anthony Harvey states, 'is a very urban kind of actor, very New York, and in that period, those characters were all over the West.' Ibid., p.213.
- ⁵² Simpson, op. cit., p.15.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p.14.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p.15.
- ⁵⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Circles', *Emerson's Essays*, introduced by Sherman Paul (London and New York: Everyman's Library, 1980), p.171.
- ⁵⁶ Derrida, quoted in Wilson, op. cit., p.169. See also Weiskel, op. cit., p.45.
- ⁵⁷ Emerson, op. cit., p.167. I borrow the term 'decreative' from Wilson's discussion of Modernism. Wilson's research into the American Sublime suggests that the term can describe an American urge to negate and recreate to achieve a state of blankness, a point from which a new beginning can be initiated. See Wilson, op. cit., p.198.
- ⁵⁸ Emerson, op. cit., p.168.
- ⁵⁹ Anne Bradstreet, quoted in Wilson, op. cit., p.82.
- ⁶⁰ Cole, op. cit., p.105.
- ⁶¹ Horwitz, op. cit., p.52.
- ⁶² Horwitz, ibid., p.36.
- ⁶³ Emerson, op. cit., p.169.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., p.168.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p.169.
- ⁶⁶ Heyne, op. cit., p.15.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., p.15; also Martin, op. cit., p.15.
- ⁶⁸ Turner, op. cit., p.2.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., p.37.
- ⁷⁰ Heyne, op. cit., p.15.
- ⁷¹ I borrow Rob Wilson's term, used in 'Techno-euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime', *Boundary 2*, Vol. 19, Part 1 (Spring 1992), p.226, note 62.
- ⁷² Turner, op. cit., p.3. See also Heyne, op. cit., p.15.
- ⁷³ Heyne, op. cit., p.11.
- ⁷⁴ Emerson in Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c. 1830-1865* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), p.12.
- ⁷⁵ Turner, op. cit., p.18.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., p.37.
- ⁷⁷ The coach carries a funeral party of six: a wealthy man who is killed during the initial attack, his sister-in-law (The Widow), two maids, a priest and his sister, Judith.
- ⁷⁸ See Harvey, op. cit., p.212.
- ⁷⁹ Melville, op. cit., p.290.
- ⁸⁰ Kant, op. cit., p.107.
- ⁸¹ Turner, op. cit., p.4.

- ⁸² The gesture is itself double-edged; as I have argued below, the sabre is a sign of his weakness, not his strength. The action symbolises simultaneously Pike's castration *and* disburdenment of a culture remote from nature.
- ⁸³ McKinsey, op. cit., p.116.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., p.120.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., p.118.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid., p.64.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., p.203.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid., pp.206-207.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., p.207. McKinsey also observes how, in Cole's painting, divided landscapes, are 'images of the necessary alternation between the two psychic states'. As she argues, to Cole, the beautiful could represent the calm restored after the storm, symbolised frequently in his work by passing thunderclouds. A concern of Cole's was to achieve a balance of the sublime and the beautiful. For Cole, the picturesque held out this promise. Not merely an art form half way between the sublime and the beautiful but a balanced art depicting the painter's elevation into a transcendent order.
- ⁹⁰ Kant, op. cit., p.91.
- ⁹¹ Wilson, *American Sublime*, op. cit., p.229.
- ⁹² There is some contention about the precise definition of apostrophe. I follow Wales, Culler and Macovski in my interpretation of its meaning and use.
- ⁹³ Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (London and New York: Longman, 1989), p.32.
- ⁹⁴ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp.139, 142.
- ⁹⁵ In Michael Macovski, *Dialogue and Literature: Apostrophe, Auditors, and the Collapse of Romantic Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.14.
- ⁹⁶ Culler, op. cit., p.143.
- ⁹⁷ J. Douglas Kneale, 'Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered', in *ELH: A Journal of Literary History*, Vol. 58 (Spring, 1991), p.153.
- ⁹⁸ Weiskel, op. cit., p.5.
- ⁹⁹ Macovski, op. cit., p.14.
- ¹⁰⁰ Arensberg, op. cit., p.1.
- ¹⁰¹ Macovski, op. cit., p.106.
- ¹⁰² Rob Wilson, *American Sublime*, op. cit., p.71.
- ¹⁰³ Jay Hansford C. Vest, 'Philosophical Significance of Wilderness Solitude', *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 9 (1987), pp.322-3.
- ¹⁰⁴ Heyne, op. cit., p.9.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.9.

Chapter Two

The Politics of the American Sublime

Synopsis *Jeremiah Johnson* (Sydney Pollack, 1972).

Rocky Mountains, circa mid nineteenth century. Jeremiah Johnson, a young man with a troubled military past, travels to the Rocky Mountains in search of freedom as a trapper. While there, Johnson encounters and earns the trust of a Crow chief (Paints His Shirt Red), befriends two other trappers (Bear Claw and Del Gue), marries a Blackfoot woman (Swan) and adopts a young boy (Caleb) abandoned by his mother (The Crazy Woman). While living happily with Swan and Caleb, however, Johnson is approached by the US Cavalry in need of a guide to take them to a stranded wagon party. Johnson reluctantly agrees to guide the cavalry through a short-cut which takes them through Crow sacred ground. The Crow punish Johnson for this violation by killing Swan and Caleb. In retaliation, Johnson kills a party of Crow. Subsequently, Johnson is stalked through the wilderness by Crow warriors seeking to kill him; all attempts fail. When Johnson sees Red Shirt himself approaching, he reaches for his rifle but hesitates when Red Shirt holds up his hand in greeting. The film concludes with both men in silent and mutual salute.

In line with traditional frontier protagonists, Jeremiah Johnson is established from the outset as a restless, wilful character who is resistant to delimitation. The film opens with a shot of Indians paddling a raft down river to a trading post and rudimentary town where a fresh-faced young man alights. A spoken narrative identifies the man as the film's protagonist, articulating both the character's ambition and uncertain past:

'His name was Jeremiah Johnson. They say he wanted to be a Mountain Man. ... Nobody knows whereabouts he come from but don't seem to matter much. ... Bought him a good horse, traps and other truck that went with being a Mountain Man and said goodbye to whatever life was down there below.'

Already on the move, forward looking and his past obscure, Jeremiah Johnson is, in this way, immediately associated with futurity and possibility. Despite this association, however, Johnson carries with him the burdens of a troubled past, indicated by the film's narrative ballad which, setting up an oblique reference to Johnson's cavalry cap, jacket and breeches, provides a clue to his search for freedom: 'Jeremiah Johnson made his way into the mountains, he was bettin' on forgettin' all the troubles that he knew.'

After making his purchases, Johnson asks for directions to 'bear, beaver and other critters worth cash money when skinned'. The simplicity of the reply to his request encapsulates the meaning of the West as open space of pure possibility: 'Ride due West as the sun sets. Turn left at the Rocky Mountains.' As Johnson leaves the town, a slight camera pan upward reveals a range of mountains which he rides toward. Setting up an antithesis between civilisation-as-constraint and wilderness-as-freedom, in keeping with Western narratives, the boundary between the town and open country is clearly demarcated in the shot while the range of mountains, forming another edge motif, constructs a visual subjunctive, a symbolic horizon to new beginnings. As with Pike in *Eagle's Wing*,

Johnson is thus identified with the edge motif in a way that reiterates his striving, dreaming nature.

As the film's title sequence begins, the *mise en scène* continues to present the American wilderness as a landscape of possibility, connecting Johnson's ambition to achieve unconditional freedom with vast and empty natural spaces. Condensing Johnson's progress high into the mountains, the title sequence consists of shots which show the Rocky Mountains as a sublime landscape which dominates and exceeds the horizontal and vertical limits of the picture frame. One key shot within the title sequence itself, however, places Johnson on the ledge of a rock that juts out high over an immense scene stretching out below him. Strongly silhouetted against the lighter vista, Johnson and the rock occupy the foreground of the filmic space, setting up a familiar edge motif which divides the landscape into two symbolic halves of present and future, linking Johnson's gaze to the horizon in the far distance of the overall shot. [Fig. 29].

Yet the title sequence also demonstrates that Johnson cannot find freedom simply by following the setting sun into the mountains, pointing toward a gap between Johnson's idea of wilderness and actuality. Like Pike, Johnson suffers from a degree of self-delusion, mistaking the accoutrements of a trapper for a trapper's skill and knowledge. As such, Johnson quickly finds himself in trouble. His realisation of his predicament corresponds to an imbalance in the title sequence's *mise en scène* between the comparatively diminutive figure of Johnson and the vast mountainous landscape which towers over and dwarfs him in a way that reimagines the discrepancy between self and sublime. [Fig. 30]. The imbalance in the relation between Johnson and the wilderness is also emphasised by a long shot of Johnson crouched in front of a fire which, in the overall shot, appears tiny in comparison with the huge, looming presence of the mountains in the background of the image, indicating Johnson as a fragile human presence. To underline the meaning of this image, the action cuts to a medium shot of Johnson unwrapping a few scraps of dried meat from a cloth which is then cut to a close-up of his face, worn with hunger and fatigue.

Significantly, this small scene is framed by two shots of the mountainous landscape in which Johnson is absent from the *mise en scène* entirely, suggesting in this presentation of a dehumanised wilderness space, his imminent demise. Johnson's fragility within the wilderness also lends a different meaning to a further use of the edge motif in the title sequence. Here, Johnson, now very high in the mountains, is shown positioned on the edge of a plateau, a vast, snowy expanse of mountains beneath him. But the use of the edge motif at this point signifies less futurity than the precariousness of Johnson's existence in the wilds: attempting to bind his hands to prevent frostbite, hunched against the cold and near starving, Johnson is clearly in danger. Reconfiguring Turner's Frontier Sublime, the title sequence shows in this way that the wilderness environment is proving too much for Johnson.

After the title sequence, the action continues to emphasise the degree to which Johnson is out of place in the wild, setting him up as 'Greenhorn' in a more light-hearted manner. For example, a shot of a stream pans right to reveal a stick held out over the water with an animal trap looped over the end, this incongruous device representing Johnson's feeble grasp of fishing skills. When the device fails to bring results, Johnson hurls himself into the freezing water in a desperate attempt to catch the fish frustratingly visible beneath the water's surface. As he does so, the action cuts to a shot of the Crow chief Paints His Shirt Red who, having ridden silently to the edge of the stream, gazes down at the white man's efforts impassively, a dozen or more fish hanging conspicuously from his horse's saddle.

On catching sight of Red Shirt, Johnson panics and reaches for his gun, but by the time he has located it, Red Shirt has already taken aim with his own rifle. Dignified, stealthy, swift, and a successful fisherman, Red Shirt is clearly adapted to the wilderness environment and his appearance is meant to accentuate Johnson's difference and distance from it. Though Johnson is trespassing on Crow land, Red Shirt does not fire on him; instead, he quietly rides away and disappears back into the forest. A pathetic figure at this juncture in the narrative, Johnson is plainly neither worth a bullet nor worthy of combat.

Gradually, Johnson does become adapted to the natural world, a process of change in the film which, reimagining Turner's frontier narrative, is shown to occur as a result of spatial displacement and is marked by different people and places Johnson meets. Circular in structure, the narrative thus begins and ends with a confrontation between Johnson and Red Shirt who, like the other characters and places Johnson encounters and re-encounters, acts as a measure of his assimilation into the wilderness environment. During this assimilation, Johnson learns how to keep warm, how to hunt and skin animals, and how to abide by Crow codes until, by the middle of the narrative, he appears to have achieved the kind of freedom he desires. Before I discuss Johnson's relation to the wilderness landscape any further, however, I want to explore the film in the political, cultural and economic contexts of 1960s and early 1970s America in order to explore what can be described as the politics of the American Sublime.

I want to argue that Johnson's retreat into the mountains to find unconditional freedom configures a contemporary culture of dissent against an established order. As historians have shown, the 1960s and early 1970s were shot through with social and political tensions which a significant number of America's youth found disturbing and estranging, inducing many to attempt to withdraw from mainstream American institutions and practices. As James J Farrell explains:

Increasingly, alienated young people were drawn to the euphoric practices of freedom, while the Vietnam war, urban race riots, and confrontational politics ... pushed them away from the spiritual poverty of American society.¹

Of particular relevance to *Jeremiah Johnson's* themes, is the so-called 'countercultural' resistance to what dissenting thinkers regarded as the seemingly all-pervasive yet soulless values of the market economy.² An 'increasing trend of economic concentration' and a business-government partnership which encouraged a pattern of what Farrell calls 'compulsory work compensated by compulsive consumption' in American society, seemed to deny alternative ways of living, contributing to a sense of entrapment and to a growing resentment of the state and economic system.³ To counterculturalists, Farrell writes,

America's workers and employers had embraced the "Great Compromise," whereby laborers, in effect, agreed to do meaningless work for higher wages that could purchase higher satisfactions.⁴

Consumerism, counterculturalists argued, underpinned a culture of mass conformity, represented especially by the stifling monotony of vast, rationalised post-war suburbs, 'look-alike houses in look-alike subdivisions. ... broad streets, double driveways, and two-car garages.'⁵

Significantly, in the context of Johnson's retreat from society, many of America's dissenting youth opted for a practice of non-participation in mainstream culture. 'Dropping out' of ordinary society, according to Farrell, 'was the countercultural metaphor of resistance to a culture that believed in moving up, moving on, and getting ahead' and which, in refusing complicity with a system deemed constraining and deadening, was inherently political in nature.⁶ As Farrell continues: 'Rejecting the suburban ideal of a people of plenty, they [counterculturalists] expected to be fulfilled in lives of voluntary simplicity.'⁷ *Jeremiah Johnson's* sympathies with this countercultural rejection of the dominant economic order is evident in the film's treatment of the trading post – which is also a thriving new town – in its opening scene. Undergirded by the values and codes of the market place, the town functions as the filmic emblem of a capitalist society. The town, with its crude saloon and central store, is clearly a place where the dollar is the value that counts most, a sign over the store bespeaking an incipient consumerism:

J. M. ROBIDOUX
TRADE GOODS
WE GOT WHAT YOU WANT

In this way, the town's function as a symbol of capital makes the clear demarcation between it and the natural landscape beyond more meaningful. Figuring the very opposite of the sublime wilderness in the film's *mise en scène*, the market town connects capitalism with delimitation.

This link between capitalism and limitation is appropriate to the film's overall configuration of the market place, since, in a way comparable to *Eagle's Wing*, it recalls the association between limit, fixity, death and sin within the discourse of the American

Sublime. Within *Jeremiah Johnson's* conceptual frame, capital is clearly connected to amorality and brutality. For example, when the character Del Gue takes Indian scalps, informing a sickened Johnson that white city folk pay handsomely for them, his violence and lack of a moral centre implicates capitalism itself, simultaneously connecting the money form with death. But the film's equation between amorality, destructiveness and the market place also reimagines the countercultural concern for the natural environment. As Patterson shows, the countercultural critique of capitalism observed that modern practices of production and consumption are inherently linked to wastefulness and the devastation of the natural world, inducing what Margot A Henriksen describes as a 'renewed respect for all natural life that had been subverted, as had human life, by the bureaucratic and technological system of America.'⁸

Drawing on Romantic and anti-fetishistic conceptions of nature, dissenting thinkers argued that America's dominant mode of economic organisation substituted nature's market value for the meaning of nature itself, turning it into an object for exploitation.⁹ Significantly, in respect of *Jeremiah Johnson*, this re-evaluation of nature encouraged counterculturalists to valorise Indian culture which, in its apparent simplicity, was regarded as being closer to the natural environment, as a model for living in and with nature which also entailed a re-reading of America's history of expansion.¹⁰ As Richard Slotkin writes: "'Countercultural' radicalism identified strongly with a rather traditional vision of the American Indians as the 'Noble Savage' alternative to a civilization gone wrong.'¹¹ Thus, counterculturalists adopted 'beads and headbands' as symbols of resistance, and acted out their 'outlaw or "renegade" stance toward larger society' by becoming 'wilderness refugees'.¹²

Where in *Eagle's Wing* the opposition between capital and nature is figured by the film's association between the commodity form, detritus and corruption, in *Jeremiah Johnson's* critique of capitalism's advance into the wilderness it is the trading post that again carries largely negative connotations. Resounding with the clatter of tools, full of steam and smoke, the town signifies nature viewed as a resource to be exploited and subdued. Symbolising capital's expansion into the wilderness, the town heralds not only environmental destruction but the annihilation of a traditional, native way of life – indicated in part by a sudden shift in the filmic score at a key point in the opening scene. The shot of the raft heading down river is underscored by the sound of 'Indian music' played softly on pipes. At this moment, white settlers are absent from the scene in a way that suggests the natives in control of the craft as a so far undiscovered and gentle people. But as the trading post comes into view, the 'Indian music' is suddenly superseded by the sound of boisterous American folk music in a way that signals the arrival of a new and vigorous order. When the natives begin to unload cargo from the raft, it is clear that their culture has been absorbed into the market place. Perhaps more significantly, however, is the meaning of the sign over the town's general store which, after advertising the store as the satisfier of

wants, adds assertively: 'WHITE MEN ONLY', explicitly connecting capitalism with racist attitudes and with the negation of native peoples.

Capital is associated with destruction in other, subsequent scenes, in particular when the character Bear Claw, who Johnson meets early in the narrative, bemoans the depleted number of grizzly bear in the mountains which, as a source of revenue, have been over-hunted by white men (included, it is inferred, himself). Since the film connects the white man, like Cooper's hero Natty Bumppo, with 'wasty ways', it is significant that Johnson, who has himself come to the mountains with a view to earning 'cash money' from animal skins, adopts a native form of trade that operates outside capitalism's system of profit-making.¹³ Offering Red Shirt a deer as 'payment' for his presence on Crow land, Johnson learns to trade within a system that is anchored to social rather than economic relations. As a consequence, he comes a little closer to the Crow people and, by implication, the wilderness itself.

Just as a countercultural critique of capitalism as immoral, violent and destructive can be traced in the film, however, so Johnson's flight into the mountains can also be seen to set up a similar countercultural critique of the war in Vietnam. 'The violence of Vietnam', Henriksen writes, 'possessed all the volatile ingredients for a crisis of conscience and culture stemming in large part from the unprecedented acts of violence perpetrated by Americans in that war'.¹⁴ America's involvement in the war, Henriksen argues, was 'mired in the inappropriate, arrogant mindset of containment and in the cold war expansion of America's sphere of influence' and was 'ill-advised as an immoral interference into the internal politics of another and much smaller nation'.¹⁵ Seen as a model of violence rather than as a model of justice, Henriksen continues, 'the image of America in the world had come perilously close to an inversion of its ideal image'.¹⁶ As Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich write, a 'fundamental' truth about the Vietnam war is 'that American troops carried out mass devastation without moral regard for Vietnamese civilians'.¹⁷

Significantly, in this context of an inverted, immoral and violent America, one GI described his feelings about the War in terms of dehumanisation and alienation from both self and culture:

The thing that I feel worst about was that my own humanity was called into question, my own values, my own sense of myself as a moral, righteous person. ... I was exposed as a barbarian along with all the rest.... The war took my measure. Not just me, but me and my culture. The culture had given me a framework, a point of reference for understanding myself, ... my background and all. And I was not that person.¹⁸

Through references to the US-Mexican War, *Jeremiah Johnson* suggests that exposure to war has similarly traumatised its protagonist.¹⁹ In one early scene, Bear Claw probes Johnson about the youth's background. As he does so, his gaze falls on Johnson's cavalry breeches, a detail shot taken from Claw's point of view showing the tell-tale yellow band.

Claw comments that he must have missed another war. Johnson immediately averts his eyes and appears to withdraw into himself. His reply is subdued, evasive and full of repressed emotion: 'Didn't miss nothin'. For a moment Claw scrutinises Johnson's face, then, as if comprehending the youth's submerged anguish, changes the subject.

Toward the middle of the narrative, when an exhausted and dishevelled cavalry battalion appear on Crow land asking Johnson for assistance, the film also sets up a reference to the Indian Wars, inviting comparisons between the effects on American soldiers wrought by the state-sanctioned violence in Vietnam (most notoriously the excesses in My Lai) and the horrors of the Wars, especially the famous massacre at Wounded Knee, now 'a symbol of white aggression towards the original inhabitants of America'.²⁰ In this context of American aggression, Johnson's flight to the Rockies, citing Canada as a possible destination, can be seen to refer to a specific form of protest against the Vietnam War – desertion (which quite frequently took the form of attempted escapes to Canada). Whether acted out of fear or disgust, desertion, like draft-dodging, as Farrell points out, was a radical form of dropping-out, an essentially political act which undermined the claims of state on the individual self. Refusing to serve the interests of state, 'meant escaping complicity with structural injustice.'²¹ Johnson's retreat into the mountains to recreate himself as a Mountain Man suggests an attempt to achieve a measure of integrity in a space beyond the demands of a perverse state and military system which, in exposing its men to unspeakable barbarity, makes them strangers to themselves.

By suggesting parallels between the Indian Wars and Vietnam, and by having its protagonist imitate Crow ways, *Jeremiah Johnson* again reinterprets and revises America's expansionist years, representing one of a number of filmic revisions of the past. As Slotkin writes:

The 1960s ... saw the appearance of a substantially new genre of "anti-Custer" movies in which the traditional identification of the audience with the cavalry was inverted, and we were asked to see bluecoats as murderous "savages" and killers of women and children, and the Indians as defenders of pastoral values, hearths and homes.²²

In this way, filmmakers attempted to address what Morison, Commager and Leuchtenburg have described as the 'melancholy tale of intermittent and barbarous warfare' against a race perceived 'as an obstacle to white settlement and progress' and 'to suggest', as Slotkin writes, 'that our history embodied a fatal mistake, which could be corrected by symbolically re-enacting the past'.²³

Inverting traditional Western narratives which present the US cavalry as upholders of morality and civilisation in the face of native cruelty and savagery, *Jeremiah Johnson*'s cavalry is fronted by a Christian figure, The Reverend, a bigoted and aggressive character. Exasperated with Johnson's reluctance to lead the cavalry through Crow sacred ground to a

stranded party of settlers, The Reverend dismisses Johnson's respect for Crow custom, reminding him fiercely, 'These are *Christian* families', in a way that implicitly constructs the Crow as inferior savages. Subverting assumptions of Christian goodness, The Reverend, who also finds Johnson's marriage to Swan an abhorrence, represents the arrogant assumptions undergirding a sense of American and Christian superiority. In this way, the characterisation of The Reverend is consistent with the film's association of Christianity with imperialist ambition in general, which is shown to subjugate native peoples and alienate them from their own culture. Thus Swan's Flat Head people, referring to an earlier colonial period, are shown to worship icons of Catholic faith which, looking incongruous in the native setting, figure Christianity as an intrusion into Indian tradition.

The film's treatment of the cavalry, who clearly trespass onto Crow sacred ground, is also significant. Tellingly, Johnson (who is unaware that the Mexican War has ended) asks the Lieutenant of the battalion how the war effort is going. Puzzled, the Lieutenant responds, 'Which one?', his uncertainty pointing toward the scale of aggression against native peoples. Significantly, the Lieutenant's men are, like himself and The Reverend, plainly tired and ill. Riding through Crow sacred ground, the men are shown to slump forward in their saddles, to shiver and cough as they file slowly past the bones of Crow ancestors. This depiction of the debilitated men can be seen not only to reimagine American GIs in Vietnam as unwilling and exploited 'grunts'; their diseased condition and the conjunction of (European) sickness and (Indian) death as the battalion ride through the Crow burial ground is suggestive of another kind of destructive invasion: the introduction of Old World diseases (cholera, smallpox, measles, whooping cough) to natives peoples with no immunity which had devastating and horrific results.²⁴ Imagining, like *Eagle's Wing*, Westward expansion as the spread of disease in this way, *Jeremiah Johnson* suggests the supposed forces of civilisation as corrupt and deadly.

Johnson's assistance to the Cavalry effectively makes him complicit in this cultural-biological invasion. In this way, the filmmakers acknowledge the role of the Mountain Men who, by acting as guides and pathfinders for the army and for settlers, significantly contributed to the depopulation of native peoples in the Rocky Mountain region.²⁵ Facilitating white expansion into the wilderness, Johnson risks the destruction of that which he loves.²⁶ In this way, Johnson resembles Cooper's Natty Bumppo character who, Annette Kolodny argues, in contradistinction to an inherently destructive civilising culture, sought 'entry' into 'nature's enclosures' 'without violation'.²⁷ Yet,

the very fact of Natty's being a white man, skilled in tracking and woodlore, and having, as a result, at least *some* ties to advancing settlement, puts him always in danger of somehow aiding that settlement's violating progress into nature's enclosures. ... [For] by its very definition, civilization ... is the destruction of the wilderness.²⁸

Like Natty, Johnson's dilemma is that he feels himself "'form'd for the wilderness'" yet is still bound, however unwillingly, to an advancing civilisation. Like Natty, Johnson facilitates the violation of nature, here figured as white intrusion into wilderness space – the sacred ground of a race of people who represent nature incarnate. Johnson's betrayal of the Crow, then, reveals that his assimilation into the wilderness is far from complete. While there is too much of the wilderness in Johnson for him to identify fully with white people, there is too little of the wilderness in him to prevent his betrayal of the Crow.

In a sequence following this betrayal, Johnson is made painfully aware of his difference and distance from the natural environment during a terrifying encounter with the forces of the wilderness. This is presented in the film as the shock of the sublime. This 'sublime sequence', in which the edge motif plays a significant part, constitutes a dramatic turn in the narrative and incorporates an important symbolic fusion between Johnson and the landscape (though not, interestingly, between him and the Crow) which alters his identity, his relation to the wilderness environment and his 'own kind'. Lasting for several minutes, the iconoclastic impulses of the American Sublime tradition are clearly at work in the sequence's repetitious pattern of alienation, mimesis and resistance.

The sequence begins when Johnson leaves his family to guide the cavalry through the sacred valley of the Crow. When he has accomplished his task, Johnson leaves the men (amidst jibes about his 'squaw' and chosen way of life), the action showing him riding back toward the edge of the deep valley in which the sacred ground lies, his back to the camera. This image of Johnson's retreating figure cuts to a shot of the cavalymen watching him descend back into the valley, then cuts back to a further shot of Johnson, taken from the men's perspective, disappearing over the edge and into the valley. This combination of the cavalymen's point-of-view and the edge motif is significant: as Johnson rides back into the valley, he is cut off from view, camera position and *mise en scène* suggesting the severing of old ties and loyalties. [Figs 31-32].

In this way, in line with the America Frontier Sublime, the edge motif marks not only the end of old allegiances but also a new beginning for Johnson, in which his desire to be closer to the wilderness is realised. When Johnson has disappeared entirely, the shot lingers for a few seconds on the image of the edge which divides the frame into two symbolic spaces: in the foregrounded area are the cavalymen, agents of civilisation; beyond, the savage and mysterious forces of the wilderness, to which Johnson feels he belongs. Plainly, however, Johnson does not so simply belong to the wilderness. At this point there is an abrupt shift in the film's formerly unintrusive use of music, sound effect, montage and *mise en scène*. This dramatic shift in the film's style corresponds to the extraordinary events that take place within the narrative, helping to establish the wilderness as sublime other and constructing a series of oppositions that perform Johnson's radical alienation from the wilderness environment, here set up so as to suggest the work of dark and supernatural forces.

As Johnson rides back through the burial ground, the footsteps of his horse are isolated in the 'eerie silence' that surrounds him, broken only by the occasional cry of a bird, an effect which accentuates his vulnerability. Johnson begins to look uneasy; he stops his horse and tilts his head as though straining to hear something unseen but sensed. At the same time, a single, atonal note is introduced nondiegetically, rising in pitch and volume. Formless and tuneless, the sound-effect is disturbing, contributing to the sense of Johnson's nervousness. Meanwhile, shots of surrounding trees, stirred by a sudden breeze, imply a concealed, sinister and watching presence. Accentuating this sense of supernatural agency, other shots of human skulls, with eye sockets exaggerated by deep shadow, appear to 'look' at Johnson. Two calls of a crow are synchronised with these shots, this contrapuntal sound-effect working to imply that the cry emanates from the skulls.

The action then cuts away to medium shot of a single skull, its jaws gaping. At the same time, the discordant music rises to a peak then breaks off sharply and is replaced by another crow call. Again, and more strongly, this combination of sound (bird call) and image (open jaws) suggest that the sound – half warning cry, half mocking laugh – are generated by the skull, turning it into a 'living', active being. This medium shot is immediately succeeded by two more and successively rapid shots of the skull, each punctuated with the sound of the crow call and with the camera positioned closer to the skull with each cut. The accelerated montage pattern effectively animates the skull so that it appears to lunge toward the camera, again suggesting that it is 'alive'. [Figs 33-35]. This montage pattern culminates in a close-up of Johnson, the bird cry overlapping and linking the two images. Johnson, as though suddenly comprehending the meaning of the cry stares at the skull with an expression of dread, then gallops his horse away toward his home.

Constructing Johnson's radically alienated condition within the wilderness environment in this way, the scene repeats the disruptive phase of the sublime moment, in which the harmony between subject and object is suddenly and shockingly 'broken down'.²⁹ As within the dynamics of the sublime, however, there are positive, self-empowering, consequences to Johnson's experience. In effect, Johnson's expression of dread signals his recognition of the discrepancy between himself and the sublime other: in that very recognition, Johnson reaches back across the chasm separating him from a dematerialised, primitive past represented by the bones of the Crow's ancient dead. Johnson both responds to the call of the wild (the crow/Crow call) and propels himself into a spiritual (formless) realm. The disruption of the sublime scenario, however, is extended in the sublime sequence.

Intercut with images of Johnson galloping away from the sacred ground are shots of a dark and huge mountain looming over him which are punctuated by the strong base and drum rhythms of a loud, dissonant, music effect which rises and falls dramatically in pitch. [Figs 36-37]. In a way comparable to the previous scene, and in a way that links nature

to the malign spirits in the burial ground, sound and montage combine to figure the mountains as a conscious, hostile and terrifyingly powerful presence. Recapitulating the disequilibrium of the dynamical sublime, and the sudden, terror inducing sense of the sheer difference between subject and sublime object, Johnson's figure is puny in comparison with the mountain, symbol of sublime power, which dominates the filmic space.

A cut away to an edge motif at this point – the filmic frame sectioned into a dark foregrounded hill crest and a lighter space beyond it – amplifies this sublime dualism and anticipates the next shot in which Johnson emerges from the valley. Corresponding to a new surge in the music, the action cuts to a long take of an edge of a hillside along the frame's horizontal axis, strongly contrasted against a lighter background. A few seconds into the shot, horse and rider appear from behind the edge formed by the hillside and gallop over it and out of the valley. [Fig. 38]. In a way similar to the previous scene in which Johnson leaves the cavalymen, the edge divides the frame into two symbolic spaces, figuring the disjunction between the two. The foregrounded area represents the domesticated, familiar space of Johnson's home and family, the background represents the mysterious and terrifying forces in the valley beyond. The motif serves to indicate, then, Johnson's return from dehumanised blankness to the realm of the knowable and human – only to discover that a counter-invasion has taken place. As Johnson nears the boundary of his home, he dismounts his horse and rushes toward the cabin. As he enters the cabin, he finds the bodies of Swan and Caleb who have been killed by Crow.

After finding the bodies, Johnson lapses into a prolonged silence (which is not broken until the end of the sequence). While Johnson's reaction clearly denotes the shock of finding his family dead, within the terms of the loss-gain dynamic of sublime convention, his speech-loss can be interpreted as the mind-numbing effects of the sublime moment, for 'to be affected by sublime emotions', as Elizabeth McKinsey asserts, 'is to be rendered speechless'.³⁰ In this way, Johnson's loss of family and voice can be seen to merge into a symbolic performance of sublime deprivation which anticipates the moment of his transport into the realm of the supersensible other. In this way, the deaths of Swan and Caleb mark the introduction of one of the film's most striking presentations of sublime negation and re-creation.

After sitting trembling and silent for several hours inside the cabin, Johnson recovers sufficiently to place the bodies side by side, covering them with a blanket. When outside, he sets fire to the cabin and watches it burn. The scene constructs a symbolic act of negation: the past is destroyed and along with it, Johnson's former self. The moment marks the point of renewal in the narrative; immediately Johnson's relationship with the wilderness shifts, his identification with nature grows closer. A shot of Johnson staring into the flames of the burning cabin slowly dissolves into a close-up of his face superimposed onto a shot of a mountain, so that, for a few seconds, the two images – man and mountain – merge. [Figs 39-40].

The significance of this dissolve is that, for a moment, neither the mountain nor Johnson have precedence in the overall image, contrasting strongly with the disequilibrium of earlier shots in which the dominating presence of the mountain looms up over Johnson, dwarfing him. In the double exposure, Johnson is presented as being equal to nature; harmony between Johnson and the wilderness is restored, suggesting the final phase of the sublime experience in which 'the mind recovers the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the object.'³¹ To accentuate this sense of harmony, blues and light greys predominate in the *mise en scène*, corresponding to Johnson's evident composure and contrasting with the dark browns and greys of the burial scene which visualise the menace of the landscape and Johnson's sense of foreboding. As in the drama of the sublime scenario, then, Johnson's new relation with the wilderness is mimetic, the man-mountain merge implying a fusion or oneness between subject and sublime object. And, as the following scenes make plain, this new subject-object relation within *Jeremiah Johnson* 'has a "meta" character'; it results, that is, in Johnson's elevation into the realm of the sublime.³²

Significantly, following Johnson's symbolic identification with the wilderness, he is shown to possess the kind of sublime power that the film consistently associates with nature in a way that reimagines sublime mimesis as being an effort of mind. Rather, poetic versions of self-sublimation, such as Walt Whitman's 'Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me', in which the poet imagines himself matching power with power, are reconfigured as an influx of actual and extraordinary physical power.³³ This is illustrated in a fight scene, which immediately follows the man-mountain merge, in which Johnson is shown to avenge Swan and Caleb by killing a large party of Crow single handedly, effectively turning the brutal force of the wilderness back against itself.

In the fight scene, camerawork and choreographed action combine to figure Johnson's new-found power. Spying a party of Crow concealed in a wooded area, Johnson slides from the saddle of his horse, grasping two rifles. His approach, unnoticed by the Crow, is framed within a low camera angle, so that he appears to bear down on the viewer, dominating the frame as he strides with fixed gaze toward the group. Aiming effortlessly, Johnson fires at the first Crows that notice him, killing them. Leaping high into the air, Johnson then knocks a small group of men to the ground. One manages to jump him. They struggle on the ground and Johnson kills him. Immediately he is attacked from behind and injured. Johnson winces in pain but whirls around and kills his attacker with a shot from his pistol. Jumping to his feet Johnson pursues the one surviving member of the Crow party who flees in terror. On reaching a clearing, the Indian stumbles and falls to his knees. Still on his knees, he turns round to face his pursuer and begins to sing, as though in prayer. The action then cuts to a shot of Johnson leaping through the woods. On the edge of the woods Johnson sees the Indian and pauses. Half crouched, arms raised ferociously,

panting wildly, Johnson is the image of feral aggression. The Indian finishes his song and looks at Johnson in trepidation. Slowly Johnson relaxes and, suddenly exhausted, limps away from the warrior and back into the woods where he lowers himself to the ground and curls up – again, in animal fashion – to rest.

Johnson's identification with wildness is set up in this way as a regression into a state of savagery which is reiterated at the end of the extended 'sublime sequence'. Following Johnson's retaliatory slaughter of the Crow, individual warriors seek him out both to avenge the deaths of their comrades and to test themselves against his formidable strength. Having fought with and killed one of these warriors at the end of the sequence, Johnson suddenly cries out in pain and rage. Concluding the 'sublime sequence', Johnson's inarticulate yell finally breaks his prolonged silence, figuring a recovery of voice which sets up a figuratively self-defensive manoeuvre. Like Turner's apostrophising, imaginary pioneer who 'shouts the war cry', Johnson's animal cry represents another instance in the film of resistance through mimesis – the way in which Johnson resists self-death by becoming as savage as the forces that would otherwise destroy him. For, as in *Eagle's Wing*, the cry is not directed toward any human agent, but toward the wilderness itself, in a way that treats the landscape as a potentially responsive force.

In *Jeremiah Johnson*, however, this apostrophic process of identification is accentuated through the rhetorical device of an echo. Immediately following his scream, the action cuts away from Johnson to a rapid pan of a distant mountain range, the scream overlapping and bridging the two shots, lasting the duration of the pan. Montage, camera work and overlapping sound combine to suggest the mountains as agents that consciously imitate Johnson. In this way, the film interpolates what Leo Marx regards as a Romantic tradition of rhetorically fusing man and nature: 'The echo ... is another metaphor of reciprocity. It evokes that sense of relatedness between man and not-man which lends a metaphysical aspect to the mode'.³⁴ As in the earlier double exposure, Johnson's primal scream has a 'meta' character: regressing into a savage, animal-like state, Johnson lifts himself into the realm of the sublime, transcending the human. As Burke explains, inarticulate utterances are sublime precisely because they are formless and immediate expressions of nature:

Such sounds as imitate the natural inarticulate voices of men, or any animals in pain or danger, are capable of conveying great ideas It might seem that these modulations of sound carry some connection with the nature of the things they represent, and are not merely arbitrary; because the natural cries of all animals, even those animals with whom we have not been acquainted, never fail to make themselves sufficiently understood; this cannot be said of language.³⁵

Burke's suspicion of word-forms is shared by *Jeremiah Johnson*, which strives to present the immediacy of emotion by cancelling out spoken language. In this way, the Crazy Woman, who appeals to Johnson to take her son (Caleb) with him, is at her most compelling when using only facial expression, silencing his protests. Caleb, who has lost

his voice after witnessing the slaughter of his family, is similarly expressive, while the cultural differences between Johnson and Swan mean that they too rely on non-verbal communication. When Johnson asserts 'there ain't nothin' wrong with quiet', he encapsulates the film's sense of wordlessness as being closer to nature and primitive emotion.

Yet the film's valorisation of primitiveness, especially of brute force exemplified during the sublime sequence, is also one of its most problematic and disturbing characteristics. I want now to explore further the film's endorsement of primitivism encapsulated in the sublime sequence, especially the implications of its subscription to an idea of primitive masculinity. In doing so, I also want to begin to show how *Jeremiah Johnson's* operation within the traditions of the American Sublime entangle it in the very language and ideology it seeks representationally to escape.

In his explorations of the changing nature of American masculinity, E. Anthony argues that primitive masculinity, both as thought and practice, emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁶ The popular new idea, according to Anthony, took hold especially among educated, Northern, middleclass males and was characterised by a trend away from intellectualism toward ruggedness, virility and an increased consciousness of physique and fitness.³⁷ Masculinist conceptions of primitivism, he writes, were fuelled in part by Darwinist theory which held, controversially, that 'mankind' was not distinct from animal life but part of it, making it possible to conceive of an instinctual, repressed animal within, merely concealed under a civilised veneer. Anthony states: 'As this notion of manliness emerged, there was a growing tendency to look at men as creatures of impulse and passion, even as animals or savages.'³⁸ Significantly, Anthony points out that primitive masculinity coincided with the increasing expansion of cities and with the end of America's wilderness frontier. In Carolyn Merchant's words: 'As open land and forest receded from easy urban access, wilderness took on a positive value as a source of the rugged pioneer spirit that had built America.'³⁹

Primitive masculinity was, then, partly born out of the concern that one could become too civilised in cities, weakened through the loss of harsh frontier conditions and raw nature and debilitated by city noise, pollution, overpopulation and disease (though it was also possible to regard the city as the new frontier, the locus of savagery and struggle). Within these urban contexts, the wilderness becomes highly valued as a space in which the surface of civilisation could be stripped away and the animal within released. Young men would leave the cities 'to strengthen themselves', according to Anthony, 'by spending time in the "Wild West"', enduring extreme hardship in order to rediscover their masculinity.⁴⁰ As Theodore Roosevelt, advancing strength-through-struggle as being conducive to manliness, put it: 'Nothing in this world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty. No life is worth leading if it is always an easy life.'⁴¹ Conjoining with psychoanalytic theories of societally repressed instinctual impulses, the idea continues

as an influence in the twentieth century, especially during the revaluation of the importance of nature in the 1970s stimulated by environmental scares and sub/urban anxieties. Hence, in 1977, Roderick Nash notes with approval:

Wilderness ... reacquaints civilized people with pain and fear. Surprising to some, these are ancient, energising forces – springboards to achievement long before monetary success and status were even conceived.⁴²

Significantly, in the context of *Jeremiah Johnson's* conception of masculinity and wilderness, the idea of savage, barely containable impulses within male primitivist discourses, articulates manhood in terms of sublime excess, reimagining a Burkean formulation of sublimity which lauded 'unmanageable fierceness' as a sign of sublime and 'natural power'.⁴³ Conceived of as the refusal to accept limitation, in this way, the idea of primitive masculinity, as it emerged in the late nineteenth century, embraced a notion of manhood as being inherently antisocial and selfish. This attitude was reflected in practice; 'doing a dangerous deed for its own sake', or 'performing useless but daring acts' were applauded as 'perfect expression[s] of the male contribution to our common stock of morality'.⁴⁴

Such expressions of masculinity were conceived of in terms of 'pure struggle' entirely free from and outside of the pulls and pressures of society and correspond to Turner's conceptualisation of the frontier.⁴⁵ Turner's frontier narrative designates the frontier as an antisocial space conducive to selfish individualism: 'the frontier is productive of individualism. ... The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control' (though, revealingly, Turner is uneasy that 'the democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, ... pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds, has its dangers as well as its benefits').⁴⁶ As Slotkin writes, the kind of frontier described by Turner is expressive of a selfish desire for unconditional freedom, representing

the border between a world of possibilities and one of actualities, a world theoretically unlimited and one defined by its limitations. On one side of the line lay ... a dreamworld in which the infantile omnipotence became a possibility for the grown man; on the other side lay ... the necessity of labor and sacrifice, the requirement of sharing.⁴⁷

Turner's conception of the West as an anti-social space, where there are no rules and where savage impulses might be unleashed, articulates a desire to have, to borrow from Thoreau, the world to oneself.⁴⁸ In doing so, Turner's thesis repeats the traditional, liberal strains of sublime theory which places selfhood at the centre of power and meaning.

As discussed in Chapter One, Kant's version of the sublime was formulated partly as a response to materialistic theories which were perceived to put self-autonomy in jeopardy.

Critiquing Kant's theory of 'pure self-determination', however, Marx and Engels argued that it expressed the material interests of a particular socio-economic group, the petty-bourgeoisie, yet abstracted from and concealed those material and economic interests, reifying 'free will' into an unaccountable thing 'in and for itself'.⁴⁹ Expanding on this critique, Howard Horwitz notes the 'distinctly liberal undertaking' of Kant's model of the sublime, arguing that within the final phase of the drama of the sublime,

Exultation is a feeling of interior safety, a superiority to external threat and internal astonishment, as the spiritual movement aroused by the sublime's "violence to the imagination" ... provokes "the extension of the imagination by itself."⁵⁰

Significantly, Kant's version of the sublime is territorial: to protect itself from encroachment by a powerful, external force, the boundaries of the private self expand, pushing against and resisting intrusion of an exterior threat. Engendering a process of self-enlargement, the sublime experience confirms self-possession. As Horwitz puts it, 'Kantian transcendence, like Lockean ownership, is a compensatory economy to protect the self's borders by expanding its territory.'⁵¹ Horwitz, like Turner, notes the dangerously antisocial elements inherent in such ideas of self as private property:

the individual possess himself; the primitive individual removes all social claims on this self; this is pure self-possession, innate and necessary; it eschews social interaction necessary for exchange of goods. It can, then, be considered as a dangerous idea, bringing about a state of anarchy.⁵²

Importantly, Horwitz also points out how Kant's loss-gain dynamic can be regarded as a 'cash-value' conceit:

Kant figures this territorial clash as a utilitarian economy. Just as Bentham's career is beginning, Kant conceives sublimity in Benthamite fashion, as expenditure and return: the imagination "acquires an extension and a might greater than it sacrifices".⁵³

Articulating the language of the market place, that is, Kant's sublime scenario describes how the mind fills (invests) the signifying absence engendered by the shock of the sublime with meaning, interpreting the sublime moment as signifying not nature's sublimity, but its own limitless extent and power. As Kant explains: 'instead of the object, it is rather the cast of mind in appreciating it that we have to estimate as *sublime*'; the sublime moment thus involves 'a broadening of the mind' and, correspondingly, 'all that is great in nature ... in turn become[s] little ... sinking into insignificance before the ideas of reason'.⁵⁴

In late nineteenth century America, Kant's selfish, individualist formulation of pure self-possession and self-enlargement is reshaped into a language of aggressive competitiveness, itself conceived of as the expression of innate and barely containable

masculine-animal (anti-social) energies. This aspect of American culture was actually an intensification of established economic thought and practice:

An underlying structure of competition had, in fact, been built into men's work lives for some time. The marketplace of Adam Smith and the political framework of James Madison both relied on competition as the mainspring that made them function.⁵⁵

However, according to Anthony, 'life at the end of the nineteenth century seemed more and more to mirror a contest.' While this competitive ideology applauded team-led sport, it also emphasised 'personal achievement', encouraging an ideology of self-interest.⁵⁶ In effect, selfish and aggressive competitiveness was reified in late nineteenth century American culture into natural law which, like Kant's theories, abstracted from material actuality, turning radical self-interest into an unaccountable force.

In his analysis of frontier narratives and primitivist discourses, Richard Slotkin similarly connects the ideas of frontier individualism and pure self-possession to laissez-faire economics:

Its [Frontier Myth's] ideological underpinnings are those same "laws" of capitalist competition, ... of Social Darwinism's "survival of the fittest" as a rationale for social order ... that have been the building blocks of our dominant historiographical tradition and political ideology.⁵⁷

Significantly, in respect of *Jeremiah Johnson's* conceptualisation of masculinity and individuality, Slotkin regards aggressive and individualistic hunter figures within frontier narratives as allegorical expressions of economic ambition and contest:

The virtues of the hunter/Indian fighter are primarily those of the entrepreneur, the man on the make. He is self-willed and self-motivated, and – if controlled at all – self controlled. He stretches the boundaries of society and law by following the dictates of private will and ambition. ... He achieves and accumulates wealth not through drudgery and self-denial; but by seeking gratification in adventure, through dramatic discovery and through violent struggle with a great antagonist.⁵⁸

Representationally underpinning an idealised economic structure and form of economic activity, frontier narratives misrepresent the role of the pioneer in America's history of expansion. Valorising rugged individualism and adventure and abstracting the frontier as the site of limitless possibility and self-control, frontier mythos simplifies and obscures the social nature of American expansionism. Margaret Walsh argues that the Mountain Man (the 'white savage') proved especially adaptable to Romantic interpretations of America's history, fascinated by the hunter's supposed 'anarchic freedom' and which exaggerated his self-reliance.⁵⁹ As Christopher Brookeman puts it:

Although the trapper prided himself on his individualism as a man alone in the wilderness, he came increasingly under the control of firms like the American Fur Company, established in 1808 by John Jacob Astor In reality the trapper was in part a victim, whose labor was exploited by traders like Astor, who made fortunes out of the sale of fur as fashionable hats and trimmings.⁶⁰

Perpetuating the myth of frontier individualism, *Jeremiah Johnson* endorses the liberal ideology of self-autonomy through its presentation of Johnson's refusal to accept limitation or control, a core thematic that is encapsulated in the lyrics of 'Johnson's Theme': 'The way that you wander is the way that you choose'. Repeating the anti-social and selfish elements of primitivist and liberal discourses in its presentation of Johnson's quest for freedom, the film abstracts individuality into an idea of pure free will. As in Kant's liberal theory of the sublime, the preservation of self-autonomy within the film is constructed as a territorial struggle between the self and sublime other in which Johnson resists external threat by extending the borders of his private self – figured by the man-mountain merge. Contrasting significantly with the *mise en scène* of the film's title sequence and the scene in which Johnson gallops away from the Crow burial ground (where he appears puny and threatened in relation to the wilderness terrain), the visual effects of the man-mountain fusion, in which he appears as big as a mountain, signify Johnson's protective self-expansion.

Jeremiah Johnson's presentation of frontier individualism can also be seen to rehearse the *laissez faire* ideologies of frontier narratives in its promotion of struggle as an appropriate expression of masculinity. Already expressing masculinity as a denial of limitation, the lyrics of 'Johnson's Theme' go on to articulate the film's project in terms of contest and personal achievement – 'the day that you tarry is the day that you lose.' Indeed, winning and losing forms one of *Jeremiah Johnson's* strongest thematic undercurrents. Rehearsing the 'utilitarian economy' of the Kantian sublime and what Farrell describes as the 'culture of competition' in contemporary America, the sublime sequence is structured around a cash-value rhetoric in which Johnson, after his encounter with sublime forces, plainly gains a might greater than he sacrifices – evident in the superhuman strength he deploys against the Crow.⁶¹ Johnson emerges, in other words, as a profiteer. In this way, the film's risk-taking protagonist contrasts with Pike in *Eagle's Wing*. Despite Pike's apostrophising efforts, there is no clear moment of self-empowerment in the film; rather, the economic schematic of the sublime scenario go awry and Pike emerges as a loser. In line with its critique of Capitalism, *Eagle's Wing* attempts, in this way, to subvert the dominant language of the market place which *Jeremiah Johnson's* rhetorical scheme, in contrast, advances.

Contradictorily, however, even as the film upholds the language of the market place, it nevertheless expresses a yearning to withdraw 'to some privatized space or de-Capitalized enclave of power'.⁶² But this, in itself, arguably points to another kind of selfishness.

Representationally seeking a space outside the dominant economic and social order, *Jeremiah Johnson* eschews the possibility of collective resistance to societal problems. It was precisely this kind of anti-social attitude, critics argue, that weakened the countercultural movement's struggle against the conformity of mainstream America. Despite his sympathies with what he regards as the essentially political countercultural withdrawal from society, Farrell concedes that 'counterculturalists sometimes opted for a kind of self-actualization that could be solipsistic', and that

too often, the freedoms of the counterculture – like those trumpeted by middle-class America – were simply freedom from cultural norms and freedom for individual choice and selfishness.

Yet, significantly in the context of *Jeremiah Johnson's* critique of market place values and its simultaneous celebration of freedom of choice in 'Johnson's Theme', Farrell adds: 'When the counterculture was coopted by American institutions, it was this libertarian individualism that proved most susceptible to sales.'⁶³

Johnson's anti-social tendencies are apparent in his isolation from both his own culture and from the Crow community. This drive toward total freedom in the film, however, is also clearly gendered in emphasis. Within *Jeremiah Johnson*, the imaginary space outside of mainstream America is exclusively male, setting up an opposition between 'masculinity' and 'femininity' which is rather disturbing in its implications. Operating within the ideology of primitive masculinity, this opposition is rooted in a conceptualisation of masculinity as inherently wild, antisocial and selfish and femininity as domesticated, social and selfless. The kind of gender opposition figured in *Jeremiah Johnson* emerged in late nineteenth century America in response to the supposed debilitating effects of America's rapidly growing cities perceived, by white, middle class social groups to be weakening muscles and moral fibre alike. As Anthony explains, the idea of separate masculine and feminine spheres (public and private, active and passive) was not new but changed in emphasis at this time. In large part, the idea of separate spheres emerged to mitigate the worst excesses of cut-throat competitiveness: competition, as the driving force of commerce a 'necessary evil', could be measured against and controlled by civilising influences.⁶⁴ Yet, increasingly:

What men rejected were the notions that competition was morally destructive for men and that women were better qualified than man to nurture all aspects of male character. ... Bourgeois men felt increasingly that the notions of "civilization" that lay embedded in the doctrine of the spheres were insidious and even socially destructive.⁶⁵

Celebrating aggressive competitiveness and individuality as morally healthy, exponents of the ideology of primitive masculinity utilised a selective interpretation of Darwinian theory which, as Anthony points out, 'provided an animal inheritance to men and women

alike'.⁶⁶ According to this interpretation, female bestiality is manifested in women's biological function as childbearers and their attendant and 'instinctual' capacities as nurturers. Thus, 'determined', according to this interpretation, women are naturally social creatures: 'Woman, who is the mother, contributes living for another – the ideal of unselfishness.'⁶⁷ Imagined as the site of selflessness, the feminine sphere, necessarily delimiting, represents the antithesis of self-interested, masculine aggression; the social domain unhealthily represses natural, masculine drives and impulses. Within the discourses of frontier mythology and primitive masculinity, ideas of femininity are treated with claustrophobic anxiety and antagonism.

As a symbol, the frontier figures as the very negation of this construction of femininity. Designated as an exclusively male space, Turner's frontier hardens men – gives them 'bone and muscle' – by exposing them to the harsh conditions of the wilderness.⁶⁸ As his pioneer hero regresses into savagery, softening, 'feminine' influences are cancelled out – he shouts the war cry only when social constraints have been stripped away – this imaginative appropriation of the frontier as a male domain effectively distorting and denying the actual presence and involvement of women on the frontier.

The gender opposition in frontier and primitivist discourses corresponds to traditional theories of the sublime and the beautiful which also articulated and reinforced dominant attitudes toward the sexes. Thus, according to Kant:

The fair sex has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a beautiful understanding, whereas ours [men's] should be a deep understanding, an expression that signifies identity with the sublime.⁶⁹

In Burke's writing, masculinity and femininity appear as mutually antagonistic forces. W. J. T. Mitchell observes that in Burke's *Enquiry*,

Sublimity, with its foundations in pain, terror, vigorous exertion, and power, is the masculine mode. Beauty, by contrast, is located in qualities such as littleness, smoothness, and delicacy that mechanically induce a sense of pleasure and affectionate superiority ...⁷⁰

Burke calls the aesthetic category of the beautiful a domestic or 'social quality' because, he argues, the affinities between a beautiful object and the subject is analogous to the close relation between a mother and her offspring.⁷¹ Like a mother figure, the beautiful object is attainable and accessible, stimulating emotions of 'joy and pleasure'.⁷² By contrast, the sublime is an anti-social quality. Generating feelings of anxiety and alienation, the sublime object is unattainable and is analogous to a father figure who is remote from the sphere of the social:

The authority of a father, so useful to our well-being, and so justly venerable upon all accounts, hinders that entire love for him that we have for our mothers, where

the parental authority is almost melted down into the mother's fondness and indulgence...⁷³

From this male perspective, there is a sense in which the beautiful, indulging us, is dangerously constraining and cloying, like a smothering mother-figure. As an effortless, pleasing relationship between subject and object, the beautiful arrests the mind; it attempts to hold the infinite capacities of the mind within ordinary and habitual imaginative limits. In this context, the alienating experience of the sublime performs a vital function; forcing the mind to strain toward an intuition of its supersensible power, the sublime allows the subject to transcend this condition of mental stasis. In Schiller's words: 'the sublime affords us an egress from the sensuous world in which the beautiful would gladly hold us forever captive'.⁷⁴ As in Turner's narrative, within the language of the sublime, 'femininity' is constructed negatively; imprisoning and constraining, feminine influences must be annihilated.

In *Jeremiah Johnson*, female space and femininity are similarly constructed negatively (though not without tension). When Johnson settles with Swan into a comfortable domestic arrangement, he enters into the realm of the feminine, the nature of female space being illustrated by the film's *mise en scène*. With wife (and child) in tow, Johnson clears a space in which to build a cabin: female space, in this way, signifies enclosure – the limits of the cleared ground and the cabin walls. Freedom of movement and choice – the film's structuring principles – are arrested and compromised. In the terms of the film, this situation is undesirable. In this respect, it is significant that Swan's narrative status is undermined through visual and verbal devices that range in their subtlety. While Johnson plainly comes to love his wife, his marriage was never a matter of choice. Rather, Johnson is forced into the marriage because of a foolish mistake: Johnson gives Swan's brother a gift that cannot easily be matched, inadvertently risking insult and retribution, unless he is prepared to accept Swan as a gift. The film's code – free choice – is thus broken.

The film also sets up a tension between Swan and Johnson's gruffness. The marriage makes demands of Johnson who softens toward Swan, and modifies his habits in response to her feelings and needs, even shaving off his beard when he discovers that she is allergic to it. Swan's allergy and Johnson's personal sacrifice set up a comic opposition between the constraints of domesticity and expressions of masculinity. At the start of the film, Johnson is clean shaven; he grows his beard whilst in the wilds and it symbolises his freedom from social constraint and (relatedly) his manhood. When Johnson shaves off his beard for Swan, he looks boyish, setting up a visual reference to the beginning of the film when Johnson was an ineffectual and inadequate 'Greenhorn'. The removal of the beard thus signals Johnson's 'softening' and his renewed alienation from the wilderness environment.

This represented softening, in addition, indicates a degree of self-alienation. After Johnson shaves off the beard, Caleb and Swan fail immediately to recognise him, implying that Johnson is not himself. Significantly in this respect, when Johnson sits in shock for a number of days after finding Swan and Caleb dead, the passage of time is marked, in part, by the re-growth of his beard. Johnson's selfhood returns – and with it, his freedom to roam. This point is made, rather laboriously, when Johnson's horse arrives outside the cabin door and whinnies softly to him. Stirred from his inertia, Johnson regards the horse with interest: plainly, it is time for Johnson to move on.

Given this negative construction of female space in *Jeremiah Johnson*, the deaths of Swan and Caleb are highly suggestive, especially since they are killed precisely at the moment when Johnson crosses the threshold into the realm of the sublime other – the Crow burial ground – a transgression which should, in the tradition of the sublime, result in his own self-annihilation. Effectively, Johnson's death is displaced onto his family. As surrogates for Johnson's death, Swan and Caleb appear as symbolic sacrifices whose deaths redeem him. When Johnson sets the cabin alight and watches it burn, the soundtrack introduces the tune to 'Johnson's Theme', the song in which stasis (tarrying) is compared unfavourably with the idea of freedom of movement (wandering). Immediately afterward, Johnson is shown to fuse symbolically with the wilderness in the man-mountain superimposition and to regress further into a state of savagery, characterised by perpetual struggle and pain.

With respect to the Frontier Sublime as a gendered ideology, Johnson's represented conjoining with the wilderness is significant in a further way. Despite repeated assertions in the film that 'Nature's got *her* own way' (my emphasis), in *Jeremiah Johnson*, sublime nature is linked symbolically to masculinity.⁷⁵ This connection is especially evident during the sublime sequence in which phallic imagery – the mountain, symbol of the wilderness sublime, which appears suddenly to rear up out of the landscape – reconfigures the sublime as oedipal crisis. In a way similar to the oedipal scenario, the film's own symbolic crisis is resolved only when Johnson absorbs this masculine power into himself, figured by the man-mountain superimposition. In line with frontier and sublime discourses, this identification with male power necessitates in *Jeremiah Johnson* not merely the turning away from, but the cancelling out of femininity, since Johnson's primal energies are recovered and released only when stasis (domesticity) has been negated from the action. In this way, the film reiterates a dominant and negative way of thinking about and representing femininity that is rooted in the language of male, liberal selfhood.

A similar negation of femininity occurs in *Eagle's Wing*, though with different emphasis and intent. In *Eagle's Wing*, the filmmakers can be seen to interrogate the relationship of women to the frontier in narrative and history, especially through the sympathetic treatment of Judith, White Bull's captive. Though White Bull plainly grows fond of Judith, she is a burden to him and places his freedom in jeopardy. Along with the

jewels and trinkets, Judith is treated both as commodity to bargain with and as mere object to be discarded (negated). At the end of the film, Judith's relation to male obsession is explored subtly in the film's final shot of Judith. Offered to Pike, Judith begs him for help: 'Please, help me'. Pike hesitates only for a moment before continuing his pursuit of White Bull and the stallion. His reaction is startling, exposing the extent of his selfishness. Tracking Pike's movements, the camera relegates Judith to the background of the shot then cuts her out of the action completely, recapitulating visually Pike's indifference and White Bull's abandonment.

Judith's 'negation', however, must be set within the context of an earlier exchange between her and her brother, the priest. Judith, who is wilful and rebellious, asks her brother, 'Oh Why did I ever leave Ireland?' Her brother snaps in response, 'So that you may eat. So that you may keep your brother's house, serving him who serves God.' The filmmakers invite the audience to empathise with Judith's predicament, distinguishing between the meaning of the frontier for men and for women. For Pike and Henry, the frontier is a dreamscape, representing respectively, the possibility of freedom and profit; for Judith, the frontier represents servitude through dependency. In contrast to *Jeremiah Johnson*, *Eagle's Wing* critiques frontier myth by (at least partially) inverting the idea of male and female spheres. In *Eagle's Wing*, it is women who are imprisoned within the domain of the masculine, reiterated in the *mise en scene* where Judith is, almost throughout the film, bound and helpless and, before she is cut out of the action, still struggling with the ties on her hands.

While *Jeremiah Johnson* does not critique the masculinist ideologies of the frontier sublime, the film's projection of pure self-determination and self-possession, however, is fraught with tension. In considering these tensions, I want to build on my analysis of the meaning of a specifically American Sublime, exploring further the tradition as representation (as a set of rhetorical manoeuvres) and as practice. In particular, I want to focus on the problematical causes and consequences of ego-enlargement and to set the American Sublime further within its historical and political matrices.

The first problematic concerns the way in which *Jeremiah Johnson*, in valorising self-will, obscures the dialectical structure of the sublime drama which turns on the relation between the opposing forces of subject and object. The filmmakers idealise free will and agency while setting up the American landscape as the ground or determinant of freedom and self-elevation. 'Johnson's Theme' – repeating the film's core thematic (freedom of choice) – is introduced in the sublime sequence at the precise moment when Johnson is compelled into the wilderness by forces beyond his control – sublime nature itself. Johnson's relation to the wilderness is thus, to an important extent, metonymical, since he is the effect or index of an external causality. In this way, *Jeremiah Johnson* reproduces the tensions of Turner's version of the frontier sublime which, in opposition to its narrative of Romantic overcoming, articulates a strain of geographic determinism. In Turner's

schematic of the sublime, it is the wilderness that transforms the pioneer; the role of sublime nature is active while the pioneer's role (at least initially) is entirely passive. Like Jeremiah Johnson, Turner's hero is dependent upon an external other, exposing the concept of pure self-possession as fallacy.

Kant's liberal model of the sublime similarly valorises autotelic selfhood: by elevating agency over determination, Kant's theory projects the sublime moment as the 'extension of the imagination *by itself* [my emphasis]'. But, as with the Frontier Sublime, Kant's version of the sublime moment turns upon the process of subjective resistance to external threat; as Kant elsewhere asserts, the sublime object is 'the cause to which it [the mind] is subjected', revealing the extent to which self-transcendence is actually contingent upon an external, determining other.⁷⁶

Johnson's contingency upon an external other is exposed at the end of the sublime sequence at the moment of his apostrophising yell. According to Michael Macovski, apostrophe is a rhetorical trick which nevertheless emerges from and reproduces actual social interaction. As 'dialogic rhetoric', apostrophe '*plays on authentic interaction [It] is founded upon this authentic, anthropomorphically based exchange*', necessarily gesturing toward an external other by mimicking dialogic exchange.⁷⁷ In this way, Macovski argues that, by imitating social interaction, apostrophic speech effects undo conceptions of the self as sovereign, revealing that the Romantic "I" is strongly social in character, 'imaginative expansion' being dependent on an intervening other.⁷⁸ As Macovski puts it, apostrophe 'leads us to question the prevailing critical belief in a solipsistic Romantic self, and to suggest that this "I" must be defined in relation to discrete others.'⁷⁹

Combined with the conceit of the echo – which points directly to an intervening, external other – Johnson's apostrophising cry, as a dialogic utterance, reveals the limitations of pure self-possession as an ideal, even as it figures Johnson's self-empowerment. Yet Johnson's autotelic selfhood is also compromised by the film's presentation of his fusion with the American landscape, symbolised by the superimposition of Johnson's image onto the Rockies during the sublime sequence which is then repeated at the end of the film.

In order to interrogate the nature and meaning of this compromise, I want to set these man-mountain fusions within the problematical context of an American democratic tradition in which rhetorical strategies of individuation and social and national conjoining paradoxically coexist.⁸⁰ In effect, the man-mountain superimpositions in *Jeremiah Johnson* set up a Whitmanic transformation of puny selfhood into sublimated selfhood. Whitman aggrandises the smallest of objects – atoms, bees, blades of grass – by turning them into condensed representations of American sublimity, capable (like vast American space) of inducing astonishment and mental flight. Whitman's rhetorical strategy figures the transcendental mode of his poetry; each object – as a microcosm of America's vastness – transcends its physical boundaries and reaches out into infinity. As Rob Wilson puts it:

Linking details to vast conceptions, Whitman's poems are driven to assume ... overreaching tropes of "giganticism" Grass was ... as miraculous as a mountain, waterfalls, or stars. Each object could instigate fits of mental grandeur, vast conceptions of self and self-as-divinity, [a] state of self-transcendence⁸¹

Whitman's 'dialectic of big and small' can be regarded as an anxiety-driven response to feelings of insignificance before vast, empty landscapes.⁸² Crucially, his schematic encapsulates the drama of the American Sublime. Terrified before scenes of overwhelming grandeur, Whitman makes American vastness benign by turning it into the site of self-sublimation: 'The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen.'⁸³ To Whitman, the immensity of American space clearly demands enlargement of self.

Whitman's rhetorical scheme rehearses William Cullen Bryant's formulation of the American Sublime in 'The Prairies'. Beholding the 'boundless and beautiful' prairies for the first time, Bryant, struck by the inadequacy of inherited language forms to encapsulate their immensity, responds by imaginatively conjoining his puny self to the vastness of space:

These are the gardens of the Desert, these
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,
For which the speech of England has no name –
The Prairies. I behold them for the first,
And my heart swells, while the dilated sight
Takes in the encircling vastness.⁸⁴

Imagining himself to be a microcosmic part of a totality, Whitman's rhetoric also bears close resemblances to Coleridge's formulation of the symbol. As David Simpson writes, Coleridge's definition of the symbol was 'designed to preempt the separation of part from whole'.

The symbol is "an active and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents." It is "not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech or form of fancy," but "a living part of that Unity, of which it is the representative."⁸⁵

In respect of Coleridge's idea of the importance of the symbol, it is significant that Johnson's identification with the mountains is achieved, not by montage, but by two superimpositions. In certain usages, montages can be considered as the filmic equivalent of metaphors.⁸⁶ In his analysis of the Romantic sublime, Thomas Weiskel parallels the 'sublime or original moment' of transcendence and transformation to the creative, or *re-*creative actions of the metaphoric trope. Just as metaphor draws together disparate or even contradictory ideas and objects, creating a new idea in that synthesis, so the sublime moment culminates in a metaphoric synthesis between the mind and vast phenomenon, recreating and elevating the mind far above the limits of ordinary selfhood. In this way,

Weiskel perceives the sublime as a 'metaphorical moment' of identification between mind and sublime object.⁸⁷ Thus defined, the fusion between subject and sublime object is conceived of as similar but essentially different, because metaphors avoid reductive equivalencies between people, realms and things.⁸⁸

Metaphors turn on perceived similarities *and* dissimilarities between tenor and vehicle. They suggest that 'A is *as* B', preserving difference and distance between objects and ideas compared.⁸⁹ In terms of the cash-value economy of the sublime, something of the tenor is given up in the comparison in the interests of rhetorical enrichment; abstracted from their 'proper' semantic fields, words combine to make a new, transcendent and original meaning. In a similar way, montage can be used to create a new or 'third meaning out of the original two meanings of the adjacent shots'.⁹⁰ As with metaphor, the relation between filmic elements is characterised by similarity and difference.

Superimpositions, however, suggest a sameness between different elements within the overall image. Focusing on the problem of how to categorise superimpositions and lap-dissolves, Christian Metz suggests (contradicting Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle's analysis of filmic language) that superimpositions are akin to synecdochic tropes because they construct 'a sort of equivalence between two distinct objects'.⁹¹ In superimpositions, 'The fact of equivalence remains – equivalence that the film figures forth directly, without indicating "like", "such as", or "at the same moment ..." as language would.' Images within superimpositions, that is, 'touch', working 'to abolish the very duality of objects' by proposing a form of 'simultaneity'.⁹²

Similarly, Walter Nash terms synecdoche (like its cousin, metonymy) a "'contact' trope' because, unlike metaphor, it does not turn on abstraction; rather, as David Lodge explains, synecdochies operate as 'condensations' of a contextual and conceptual whole.⁹³ Significantly, in respect of *Jeremiah Johnson's* superimpositions, synecdoche can be regarded as the trope of identity, integration, and essence. According to M.K. Blasing, '*Synecdoche* or "taking together" substitutes either part *or* whole for part, thereby identifying quantity and quality, microcosm and macrocosm' implying 'an integral relationship, a relationship of convertibility' between them.⁹⁴ Blasing adds that, in the deployment of synecdochic tropes, 'transparent superimpositions or identities replace allegorical equivalencies, and actual metamorphoses replace metaphoric resemblances.' Put simply, synecdochic figures propose that 'A *is* B' rather than the metaphorical 'A *is as* B'.⁹⁵

The two double exposures in *Jeremiah Johnson*, then, figure Johnson's fusion with the wilderness environment by negating, in the way Metz describes, the differences between discrete objects (here, human form and wild nature). For a brief moment, the two images, man and mountain make contact ('touch'); they are not severed by montage but fuse into one image. The superimpositions establish equality between Johnson and the Rockies,

turning him into a representative part of a greater whole, a synecdochic symbol of the natural sublime.

Yet, and especially with the final lap-dissolve, there is tension in the film's appropriation of the synecdochic trope. Immediately prior to the dissolve, the film freezes on an image of Johnson reaching out toward Red Shirt in greeting, at first tentatively, then more confidently. Synchronised with the freeze frame, 'Johnson's Theme' concludes its narrative: 'And some folk's say, "He's up there still."' 'Johnson's Theme', and the freeze frame combine to turn Johnson into a timeless legend, to lift him out of time and beyond death. Directly following the freeze frame, Johnson's image quickly fades, merging with a succeeding shot of the Rockies, then disappears entirely. [Figs 41-43]. Plainly, the filmmakers want to overcome the problem of Johnson's mortality by symbolising the absorption of his spirit into the mountains where, it is implied, it will linger on. But the film asserts Johnson's self-enlargement at precisely the moment at which his subjectivity is jeopardised. In the fade out, Johnson's absorption into immense power and space is complete; effectively, he is negated. There is thus an imbalance in the loss-gain economy of the sublime: Johnson appears to lose more than he gains.

This problematic, however, is more far-reaching. To explore it fully, a further discussion of Whitman's synecdochic rhetoric will be helpful, since Whitman's strategies of self-enlargement can also be seen to represent a figurative attempt to negotiate feelings of social isolation and diminutiveness within the self-dwarfing context of American democracy. A paradox, the American democratic ideal promotes an ideal society composed of a *mass* of *individuated* bodies. Tocqueville explained the loneliness and fear felt by a democratic subject in the following way:

Each citizen of a democracy generally spends all his time considering the interests of a very insignificant person, namely, himself. If he ever does raise his eyes higher, he sees nothing but the huge apparition of a society ...⁹⁶

Significantly, Tocqueville articulates democracy in the language of the mathematical sublime:

When the inhabitant of a democratic country compares himself individually with all those about him, he feels with pride that he is the equal of any one of them; but when he comes to survey the totality of his fellows, and to place himself in contrast to so huge a body, he is instantly overwhelmed by the sense of his own insignificance and weakness.⁹⁷

According to Tocqueville, a gulf opens up between the democratic individual and this democratic mass: 'the space between [them] is empty.'⁹⁸

A lonely and 'puny democratic ego' himself, Whitman responds in the same way as he does to the immensity of the American landscape – with a self-defensive manoeuvre of self-

enlargement.⁹⁹ Infinitesimal, Whitman imagines himself the 'incarnation' or microcosmic embodiment of the 'Supreme' social and national totality, expressing an ideal of what Wilson terms 'self-as-country wholeness', a mutual absorption of self and nation: 'One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.'¹⁰⁰ Articulating the frontier as both a symbol of individualism and as a 'consolidating idea', Turner's Frontier Sublime similarly attempted to negotiate the inherent paradox of an American democracy – social yet anti-social – by expanding the 'dominant individualism' of the pioneer-hero into the embodiment of a national character, and by expanding the frontier, as signifier of limitlessness and flux, into the meaning of America.¹⁰¹

In this way, the American Sublime sets up a figurative 'visionary compact' that 'fuses' the democratic self with social and national 'massiveness' – as Tocqueville put it: 'He ... who inhabits a democratic country ... cannot turn his mind to any one portion of mankind without expanding and dilating his thoughts till it embraces the whole.'¹⁰² Whitman's prose and poetry, reconceptualising the democratic impulses of Emerson's *Over Soul*, seeks to bind America's people together as 'unnumbered Supremes' without compromise or conflict:

Did you suppose that there could only be one Supreme? We affirm that there can be unnumbered Supremes, and that one does not countervail another anymore than one eyesight countervails another ... and that men can be good or grand only of the consciousness of their supremacy within them.¹⁰³

Comprehending the social significance of a unifying and collective sublimity in the context of America's heterogeneous and individuated culture, Whitman's poetic articulates the essence of an Americanised sublime which, as Wilson argues, 'functions less as a private trope and more of a social site' on which to build a cultural and national identity.¹⁰⁴ A popular, democratised version of sublimity, the America Sublime functions in ways that distinguish it from a European and more intellectual tradition. As David E. Nye writes:

Americans have long found the sublime more necessary than Europeans, so much so that they have devised formations of the sublime appropriate to their pluralistic, technological society. Precisely because American society is so pluralistic, no single religion could perform that function. Instead, ever since the early national period the sublime has served as an element of social cohesion ...¹⁰⁵

Importantly, this Americanised sublime concerns forms of practice as well as discourse. In this way, John F. Sears observes how designated, quasi-religious, icons of American sublimity in the nineteenth century – like Niagara, the Grand Canyon, Yosemite Valley and the Rocky Mountains – served as 'altars' before which 'the members of an emerging mass society' could congregate in order to 'participate in a common national experience.'¹⁰⁶ These gatherings before symbols of American grandeur, Nye argues, generated feelings of

'infectious enthusiasm' within a crowd that resembled the excitement stimulated by rituals of religious conversion:

Because of its highly emotional nature, the popular sublime was intimately connected to religious feelings – particularly in the nineteenth century, when revivals periodically swept communities into a frenzy.¹⁰⁷

Effecting 'shared emotion' in celebrations of national sublimity, the popular sublime temporarily breaks down social and cultural differences in the moment of rapture in a way that fuses puny democratic egos together: 'At Niagara', as Elizabeth McKinsey explains, the assumption is that 'one is carried out of one's individual self to participate in worship larger than the self'.¹⁰⁸ Crucially, during such moments of collective emotional intensity before natural phenomena, vast spaces and tremendous power are taken not only as the essence of the sublime, but as synecdochic symbols of an *American Sublime* in a way that makes 'America' synonymous with 'sublimity'. Identifying with symbols of American grandeur, ordinary individuals are lifted into the realm of the extraordinary, feeling themselves microcosmic parts of a greater, national, whole. In effect, then, the American Sublime describes a moment, akin to religious conversion, of discovering one's national identity – a moment of becoming American.

Placed within the context of this democratised version of the sublime, the two superimpositions in the film that fuse Johnson with the Rocky Mountains can be interpreted as representational instances of this semi-religious American becoming. This reading is supported by the way in which Johnson is repeatedly referred to as 'pilgrim' in the action, constructing, by association, the Rockies as a sacred place.¹⁰⁹ In addition, *Jeremiah Johnson* explicitly taps into a traditional, collective conception of the Rockies as signifier of American grandeur, limitlessness and purity as a whole (despite Johnson's interest in the Canadian wilderness as an alternative). Asserting the superiority of the Rockies over European landscapes, toward the end of the narrative, Del Gue evokes the Rockies as dematerialised blankness, drawing on conventional representations of American sublimity:

'I ain't never seen 'em, but my commonsense tells me the Andes is foothills and the Alps is for children to climb. ... These here is God's finest sculpturins ... and there ain't no churches 'cept for this right here, and there ain't no priests, 'cept for the birds'

Significantly, Del Gue's speech follows and corresponds to a 180 degree pan of the Rockies, which bears a striking resemblance to the visualisation of the American West in *Eagle's Wing* as a negative landscape – empty and without limit – and which refers back to *Jeremiah Johnson's* configuration of the wilderness as open space in its title sequence.

While the film reaffirms the Rockies as an icon of American sublimity, the instances of Johnson's becoming, figured by the man-mountain fusions, owes slightly more to Thoreau

and Turner than Cole. Thoreau's retreat into the wilderness was part of his effort to escape what he regarded as dehumanising economic relations and technologies gaining ground in America. Turner's Thesis, written just as the frontier was declared closed and as cities began to expand, urges the importance of the frontier to American identity ('[it is] to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics') as though concerned that this identity was about to disappear.¹¹⁰ Expressing countercultural feelings of alienation from a nation thought to have become corrupted, *Jeremiah Johnson* reaches back, like Thoreau and Turner, to an idea of an unsullied America. Unlike Cole, that is, the film arguably figures the recovery, rather than the establishment, of a national identity.

Nevertheless, the effects of the film's part-whole consciousness are similarly problematic. Troped into a microcosmic part of a natural-national sublime via the two superimpositions, Johnson's absorption into the Rockies, especially in the final man-mountain dissolve where he is shown to fade into the landscape completely, reveals a significant tension produced by the collective discourse and practice of the American Sublime. Johnson's fade into the mountains, that is, visualises the way in which the American Sublime works to negate individual difference to and distance from a national ideal. In this way, the dissolve exposes how American sublimity can operate simultaneously as a mode of ego-enlargement and self-diminishment. In the *E Pluribus Unum* ideology of the American Sublime, the dissolve reveals, the individual is in danger of disappearing altogether.

Articulating a collective consciousness, Johnson's identification with the Rocky Mountains is problematic in another way. A further exploration of the ways in which natural phenomena became national icons will help me to suggest some possible reasons why. Significantly, Cole's rapturous promotion of Niagara as icon of the American Sublime (and 'wonder of the world') is written in the first person plural: '*Our* conceptions expand – *we* become a part of what *we* behold!' (my emphasis). In this way, Cole's description of a moment of self-transcendence and fusion with sublime power confirms a process of identification that has already taken place. Eager to claim sublimity for self and country, his exclamation suggests the extent to which the American Sublime developed as a fully conscious rhetoric of collective power.

Drawing on Weiskel's observation that, as a signifying absence, the sublime can be made to '"mean" just about anything', Wilson explores how and why sublimity was made to mean 'America' by linking discourse to international politics. Turning natural phenomena into icons of national sublimity and America itself into 'the site and trope' of sublime power, the kind of American Sublime articulated by Cole, as Wilson argues, inherits an older, Puritan, sense of American exceptionality.¹¹¹ In the early eighteenth century, in an effort to be heard and recognised in the world, Puritan poets were already seeing through the appearances of grand natural phenomena to discover what was assumed to be the supersensible and divine Idea – what David S. Shields calls making nature 'transparent' –

linking New World landscapes to God's purpose and favour.¹¹² Puritan influences should not be exaggerated, however. As Wilson argues, the emergence of an American Sublime should rather be located within the historical context of America's newly won independence and the perceived need to assert 'America' as a 'world competitive name':

... the American sublime can be seen to articulate power structures and power relations of the colonial subject within American society as it breaks away from British possession, circa 1760-1860.¹¹³

David Simpson provides a more specific context for the American Sublime, arguing that there is a close 'connection between an aesthetics of infinitude and an historical experience founded in expansion (coded positively as "progress")'.¹¹⁴ Reaching its strongest expression as expansionism intensified during the mid nineteenth century, the American Sublime can be seen to articulate a sense of America's 'Manifest Destiny'. An invented and convenient term, 'Manifest Destiny' rationalises a process of augmentation – the protection of America's interests against lingering British claims via the expansion of its boundaries – within a language of America's cosmic or divine purpose 'to bring a perfected form of democratic capitalism to the entire North American continent' and beyond.¹¹⁵ Drawn within this cultural and economic struggle, natural phenomena were consciously 'appropriated and produced for an audience hungry for national icons', and were troped into manifestations of America's special power.¹¹⁶

In respect of this process of appropriation and production of symbolic landscapes, Cole's 'Essay on American Scenery' is revealing. Significantly, Cole's thesis, promoting an idea of a uniquely American Sublime, urges the need for a nationalistic culture and aesthetic which he voices in terms of rights of ownership:

The Essay which is here offered, is a mere sketch of an almost illimitable subject – American scenery. It is a subject that to every American ought to be of surpassing interest; for, whether he beholds the Hudson mingling waters with the Atlantic – explores the central wilds of this vast continent, or stands on the margin of the distant Oregon, he is in the midst of American scenery – it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity – all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart!¹¹⁷

Imagining the landscape as a rich 'cultural resource', Cole effectively stakes a national and aesthetic claim to scenes of natural grandeur and, since no stretch of the wilderness landscape escapes his all-encompassing vision, advances the expansionist doctrines of Manifest Destiny.¹¹⁸ In a competitive mood, Cole robustly defends the splendour of American scenery, scolding Americans who disparage American landscapes in favour of European ones:

Let such persons shut themselves up in their narrow shell of prejudice – I hope they are few, – and the community increasing in intelligence will know better how to

appreciate the treasures of their own country. ... though American scenery is destitute of many of those circumstances that give value to the European, still it has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe.¹¹⁹

Significantly, Cole was a founder member of the American School, 'the nation's first art movement', in 1826 which, according to Horwitz

was virtually willed into existence ... not just to forge a national identity but to consecrate political and economic achievements. The aesthetic impulse attended the prosperity of New York and of the "new man" of business who were its art patrons and, sometimes, artists. ... The young nation and its metropolis needed an indigenous art to declare themselves, respectively, a culture and a centre of culture.¹²⁰

In this way, Cole's representations of American sublimity, like that of fellow landscape painters Church and Bierstadt (who, in particular, suffused American scenes with 'religious' light as though they were divine gifts to a chosen people), formed what Rob Wilson terms a 'visionary compact' between art and enterprise to promote an idea of American exceptionality. Celebrity landscape paintings were – and still are – culturally active, both products and agents of the ideology of Manifest Destiny, unifying symbols that lured settlers and entrepreneurs westward with idealised images of American grandeur and purpose.¹²¹ As Wilson argues, embodying a mood of 'national exultation', images produced by the American School, recapitulated in the work of America's literary nationalists like Emerson and Whitman, 'allowed this labor of collective appropriation to be hazed over with the light and immensity of divine sanction ...'.¹²² Presenting (and faking) American scenery as a dehumanised and dematerialised blankness, painters of the American School depict a landscape up for grabs.

Importantly, in view of *Jeremiah Johnson's* symbolic use of the Rocky Mountains, in describing the effect of Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (1863), Horwitz observes a similarly appropriative formal arrangement:

... in Bierstadt's canvas, the question of rightful proprietorship of western lands, a violent political controversy at the time, is suspended, or rather settled. Though Indians reside beneath it, the peak sustaining their habitat belongs – in name, which is to say, conceptually – to Colonel Lander ... and the audience. It belongs not to those who merely enjoy its material benefits, but to those able to infuse the scene with the proper imaginative and moral import.¹²³

Sears demonstrates, however, the ways in which the American Sublime, as a popular collective experience, was more directly involved in the displacement of native peoples from the landscape. Discussing the history of the Yosemite Valley, a 'magnet' to tourists after the 1850s, Sears argues:

The history of Yosemite's discovery ... is a story of the sudden displacement of a native American culture by the culture of the genteel tourist. Inevitably, this process meant misunderstanding and rejection of native American concepts of the sacred in nature and of the relationship of nature to society, as well as the imposition of white ideas about beauty, sublimity, and property on the landscape.¹²⁴

Like Horwitz, Sears also notes that the American Sublime was founded on assumptions of native indifference to the aesthetic qualities of Yosemite which, interpreted as cultural inferiority, provided a pretext for rights of ownership.¹²⁵ As part of this national appropriation of Yosemite as a symbol of American sublimity, Sears continues, individual features were renamed in a way that asserted a new 'cultural hegemony':

[the] act of naming, like the descriptions, paintings, and photographs which followed, was a means of exercising cultural power, a way of taking imaginative possession of a place.¹²⁶

The preservation of some native names, meanwhile, was done so merely to suggest an air of mystery or romanticism about a scene, while 'the Indian of fantasy' was substituted for the real one, both '[denying] Indians as they actually were and ... their subjugation and extermination.'¹²⁷ Whitman's 'Starting from Paumanok' misrepresents and conceals this process in a different but related way. Rather than resist expansionism and subjugation, Whitman's native departs quietly and without struggle; land and culture is not stolen but given up willingly:

The red aborigines,
Leaving natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds, calls as of birds and animals
in the woods, syllabled to us for names, ...
Leaving such to the States they melt, they depart, charging the
water and the land with names.¹²⁸

While Romantic writers and thinkers like Whitman would lament the effects of 'progress' and 'improvement' on native culture and on nature itself, they were nevertheless complicit with the doctrines and practices of Manifest Destiny and continued to regard progress as part of a cosmic, and thus inevitable, process. Hence, toward the end of his essay on the American landscape, Cole writes

... I cannot but express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes are quickly passing away – the ravages of the axe are daily increasing – the most noble scenes are made desolate, and oftentimes with a wantonness and barbarism scarcely credible in a civilized nation.¹²⁹

Almost immediately, however, Cole qualifies his remark in a way that abstracts progress into a law unto itself: 'This is a regret rather than a complaint; such is the road that society has to travel'.¹³⁰ Bryant similarly laments the displacement of native peoples from the

prairies, listening with regret to the 'domestic hum' of the 'colonising', immigrant bee and thinking he hears 'The sound of that advancing multitude/Which soon shall fill these deserts':

The red man ...
Has left the blooming wilds he ranged so long,
And nearer to the Rocky Mountains, sought
A wilder hunting-ground.¹³¹

But these changes are presented as a natural and inevitable process elsewhere in Bryant's poetry. As Boime writes, in 'A Walk at Sunset'

Bryant recognizes that his own sense of triumph and the source of his poetic inspiration are predicated on the suppression of ... native peoples.

"I stand upon their ashes/...Beside a stream they loved"... .

Yet he reaffirms the national progress as part of a larger historical necessity in his final salute to the setting sun:

"Farewell! but thou shalt come again – thy light
Must shine on other changes, ...".¹³²

While not exactly reproducing the sentiments of Cole, Bryant, and Whitman, *Jeremiah Johnson* is itself arguably complicit in a representational negation of Native American culture, despite the film's countercultural interventions into a tradition of stereotyping native peoples. As Robert Berhofer writes, countercultural films which feature Native Americans in critiques of the dominant American power structure are themselves responsible for the continued erasure of Indian culture since 'the Indian [appears as] a mere substitute for the oppressed black or hippie white youth alienated from the modern mainstream of American society'.¹³³ Functioning variously as a symbol of nature, as the means through which Johnson might discover his essential selfhood, as a force against which he tests and proves his masculinity and (more obliquely) as a symbol of the war in Vietnam, the Indian in *Jeremiah Johnson*, never quite appears as him or herself – a sustained misrepresentation which repeats rather than revises history, however unintentionally or indirectly. *Eagle's Wing*, it could be argued, also contributes to this misrepresentation/erasure of Native American culture by buying into the myth of the 'noble savage' in its treatment of the (redeemed) White Bull as bearer of 'natural wisdom and insight'.¹³⁴ Nevertheless, in contrast to *Jeremiah Johnson* where Red Shirt's appearance is subordinate to the narrative of Johnson's self-aggrandisement, White Bull's story is plainly as central to the film as its white protagonist's, which goes some way to counteract these failings in *Eagle's Wing*.

Jeremiah Johnson's own misrepresentation of Native Americans is more direct at times, however. At key moments in the narrative, the film's portrayal of the Crow veers suddenly

toward a traditional idea of Native Americans which legitimises the use of excessive violence against them – the doctrine, as Slotkin explains, of 'savage war' which 'depended on the belief that certain races are inherently disposed to cruel and atrocious violence':

Quite early in the history of white-Indian relations, a conception of Indian warfare developed that tended to represent the struggle as necessary genocidal. "Savage war" was distinguished from "civilised warfare" in its lack of limitations of the extent of violence, and of "laws" for its application.¹³⁵

Put simply, the doctrine of 'savage war' held native peoples responsible for their own fate.¹³⁶ A similar kind of distorted logic is discernible in *Jeremiah Johnson's* depiction of revenge and counter-revenge between the Crow and Johnson. Within the causal links of the film, it is the Cavalry who, by making unfair demands of Johnson are arguably responsible for the deaths of Swan and Caleb, drawing him reluctantly into conflict with the Crow (and turn him into another representative of the unwilling grunt). Yet, in view of Slotkin's analysis, it is significant that the murder and scalping of the defenceless Swan and Caleb by the Crow considerably outdoes any other atrocity depicted in the film, including Del Gue's amoral scalping of Indian warriors for profit. In this way, the murders appear as a contrivance which, in legitimising Johnson's own brutality, allow the filmmakers to celebrate the unleashing of his power in a scene choreographed and shot to display his physical prowess.¹³⁷

The Crow, then, appear to deserve what they get – though Johnson's mercy toward one of the warriors deliberately lessens the excessiveness of his retaliation (if not unproblematically). Yet it is clear that the savage attack on Swan and the boy was not thought sufficient to dissolve sympathy for the Crow. Crucially, during Johnson's counter-attack, all the Crow warriors are shown (in a way that departs from previous representations) with their faces painted white, a further contrivance which seeks to disguise their humanity, making Johnson's murderous activities less distasteful. With regard to the film's attempted revisions of mainstream history and society, this representational dehumanising of the Crow is highly ironic – especially, perhaps, since dehumanising strategies were deployed against Vietnamese people to justify indiscriminate killing.¹³⁸

What can be regarded as this ironic replication of 'denigrating racial stereotypes' within *Jeremiah Johnson's* schematics of struggle and power, however, specifically involves the film's utilisation of the iconography of the American Sublime.¹³⁹ Significantly with regard to *Jeremiah Johnson's* visual rhetoric, Boime, who observes the ideological current of Manifest Destiny running through the work of American Romantics, singles out motifs of height which, he argues, imply 'a will to power and control', a 'gaze of command, or commanding view' which also feature strongly in American landscape painting.¹⁴⁰ Boime acknowledges that representations of the commanding view are not unique to American, but

argues that 'nowhere do we find such a major body of visual and literary texts sharing a spatial and chronological coherence and constituting a collective expression of the "peak" experience.'¹⁴¹ In particular, Boime notes the operations of an edge motif within these representations which, he argues, link the American Sublime to strategies of appropriation and power: 'the commanding view presupposes the spectator as sightseer on the ledge or crest subjugating the boundless reality to a disciplined scrutiny'.¹⁴²

A section from Cole's 'Essay' exemplifies the schematic that Boime describes. Anticipating in excitement the accomplishments of an onward-marching civilisation, lending an altogether different meaning to the edge motif as visual subjunctive, Cole, like an 'expectant capitalist', imagines himself gazing down on some future scene of prosperity:

in looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind's eye may see far into futurity.
Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple
and tower – mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness ...¹⁴³

Elevating himself over nature in this way, Cole, as Boime points out, gives himself 'the perspective of the godhead'.¹⁴⁴ As such, he reminds us that the drama of the American Sublime, as an 'economy of power' like the 'Kantian dynamic of dispossession and possession' it appropriates, turns upon a feeling of superiority over, rather than oneness with, the natural world (the discovery 'that we are superior to nature within and ...to nature without us').¹⁴⁵

One use of the edge motif during the film's title sequence is relevant here. As described above, Johnson is shown standing on the edge of a rock jutting out over a vast landscape below, contemplating the scene. [Fig. 29]. Significantly, with regard to Boime's analysis of Romantic writing and painting, Johnson occupies the highest point of the image. Placed over and above the natural scene, the figure of Johnson reproduces what Boime calls the 'magisterial gaze', this conjunction of height and power lending Johnson the aspect of the all-seeing god-head. While Johnson is elevated over the natural scene in this schematic, the edge motif functions to maintain a crucial distance between him and the wilderness. This produces an aloofness from nature which, laid out before the tall, erect figure of Johnson, is made passive and 'feminised' in order to be figuratively appropriated as the realm of his future empowerment – as the realm, that is, of his own Manifest Destiny. As further analysis of the final man-mountain dissolve and the mutual salute between Johnson and Red Shirt suggests, this empowerment is unsettling in its implications.

Describing the Rockies as 'God's finest sculpturins', and the 'marrow of the world', Del Gue's boast, which is upheld by Johnson, explicitly evokes the American landscape as the manifestation of divine will.¹⁴⁶ In this way, it is significant that while Johnson's identification with the Rocky Mountains – not nature *per se*, but famed symbol of American grandeur, power and cosmic purpose – is complete, his symbolic fusion with Red Shirt is not. Importantly, Johnson and Red Shirt are not shown in the same shot but in a series of

montages, the gaps between these montages, unlike the man-mountain merges, comparing the two men, rather than representationally conjoining them.

This comparison, moreover, does not work to figure the men as equals, despite the way in which the mutual salute turns each man into the mirror image of the other. From the outset of this final scene, Johnson plainly occupies a higher vantage point than Red Shirt who, entering the scene on horseback in the far distance, is represented in a high-angled shot which incorporates Johnson in the left foreground looking downward. [Fig. 44]. During the salute, this difference in height is subtly maintained, the montage pattern showing Johnson, shot from a slightly low angle, gazing down at Red Shirt. [Figs 45-46]. Reconfiguring the power-reversal in the drama of the sublime, the positioning of Johnson and Red Shirt effectively inverts the relations between them at the beginning of the action, when it is Red Shirt who gazes down at Johnson. Johnson's power, the imagery suggests, is now not only equal to but above that of the Crow chief who, as representational threat, has been neutralised. In this way, Johnson's mythologisation is also a process of appropriation.

Asserting white superiority in this way, the film again representationally reproduces rather than subverts the attitudes governing the subjugation of native peoples. By contrast, as though aware of the political meanings of conventional American Sublime iconography, *Eagle's Wing* denies its humbled protagonist the final, self-empowering resolution to the sublime drama, even as it situates him over and above nature and Indian at the end of the film. With this inversion of the American Sublime and the magisterial gaze, *Eagle's Wing* is more successful in its countercultural project to revise history than *Jeremiah Johnson* is. In *Jeremiah Johnson*, power passes representationally from wilderness and native to white man. In *Eagle's Wing*, the opposite occurs, the wilderness remaining beyond appropriation and the Native American beyond (symbolic) subjugation, while the white man looks on defeated.

The conclusion of *Jeremiah Johnson* is not the only instance where Johnson's dominance over the Crow is asserted, however. The positioning of Johnson and Red Shirt in the final scene recalls the relationship established between Johnson and the Crow directly following his first synecdochic fusion with the Rockies, where low-angled, aggrandising shots of Johnson show him striding toward the Crow warriors, ready to act out his revenge. [Figs 47-48]. Working to establish Johnson's superiority over the Crow, these low-angled shots form a significant contrast with high-angled shots of the warrior whose life Johnson spares, recapitulating the power relations indicated by the situating of the two men. Kneeling and desperate, looking up at Johnson from lower ground, the native is placed in an attitude of supplication, clearly begging for his life. [Figs 49-50]. In this way, the symbolic difference and distance maintained between Johnson and the Crow – reiterating Johnson's relation to nature – depends upon elevating Johnson into a position of

height, establishing and re-establishing his superiority in a way that repeats the assumptions underpinning the ideology of the American Sublime.

Indeed, Johnson's superiority to the Crow is clearly constructed as a kind of apotheosis in scenes following his initial attack on them. In one scene, which condenses a series of struggles with the Crow into a few minutes, Johnson, who kills all his assailants, is again shown to leap and dive through these fights with superhuman strength in a way that reiterates his sublime power. At the conclusion of this short sequence, the action fades out to a shot of a native shrine which is revealed to have been placed there in Johnson's honour. The fusion of the display of Johnson's sublime strength and the shrine via this dissolve refers back to the homage paid to him by the kneeling Crow warrior, explicitly setting up Johnson as a god-like figure. When Johnson examines the shrine, his power is again plainly evoked as a form of deification, this time via an encounter between Johnson and a settler. Trembling and clearly in awe of Johnson, and gesturing toward the shrine, the settler asks: 'You're Him, aren't you? You're Him', in tones that indicate that the pronoun should begin with a capital letter.

In conclusion, *Jeremiah Johnson* can be described as a confused film, representing both a retreat into solipsism but appealing to an ideal American identity at the same time. In this, however, the film repeats, as I have attempted to show, the tensions inherent within a democratic form of the sublime, between individualism and collectivism. Yet, the most troubling aspect of *Jeremiah Johnson* is its preoccupation, within this double appeal to American exceptionality, with symbols of height and power, its valorisation of violence and masculinist competitiveness, which overshadow the film's countercultural sympathies and concerns. *Jeremiah Johnson*, then, makes plain the pitfalls of drawing on a discourse and practice that can undergird the very dominant cultural and economic mode of organisation under criticism. As David Simpson writes, commenting on the links between the American Sublime and 'the expansion of empire and capital':

there is something ethically uncomfortable at the heart of our craving for bigness and our urge to set ourselves against enormity in a process of cognizance or conquest, whether of depth, space or territory.¹⁴⁷

With reference to the film *2001*, which also sets up a critique of America's controlling power structure, I now want to explore the problematics of a seemingly different, but actually closely related, version of the American Sublime.

FIG: 29



FIG: 30



FIG: 31



FIG: 32



FIG: 33



FIG: 34



FIG: 35



FIG: 36

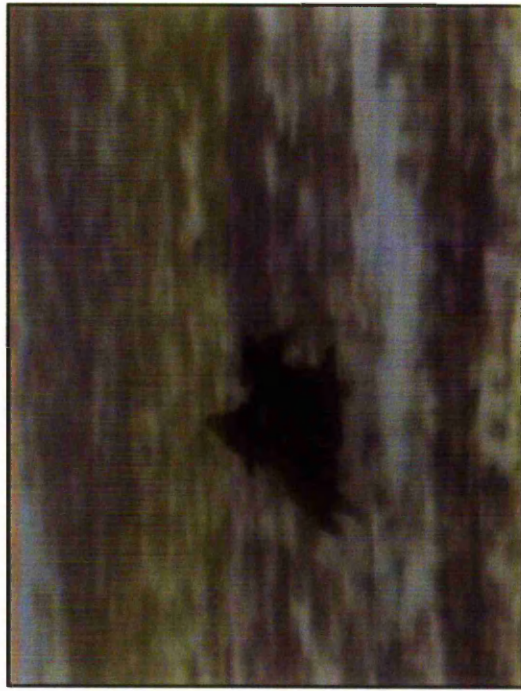


FIG: 37

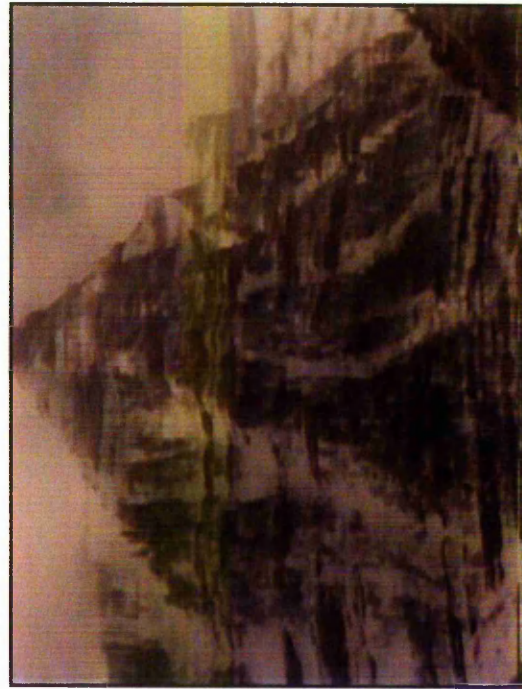


FIG: 38



FIG: 39

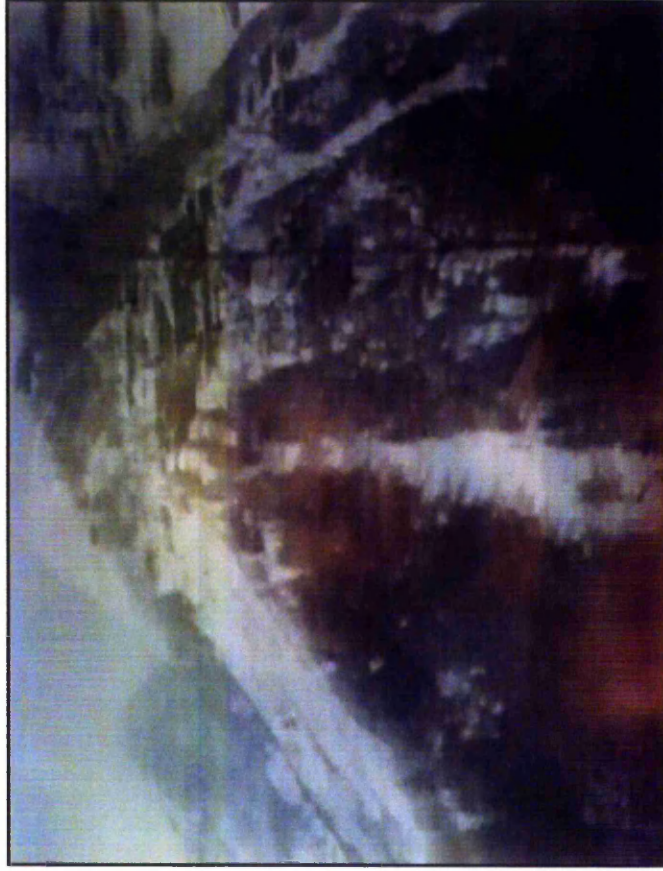


FIG: 40



FIG:41



FIG: 42



FIG:43



FIG:44



FIG:45



FIG: 46

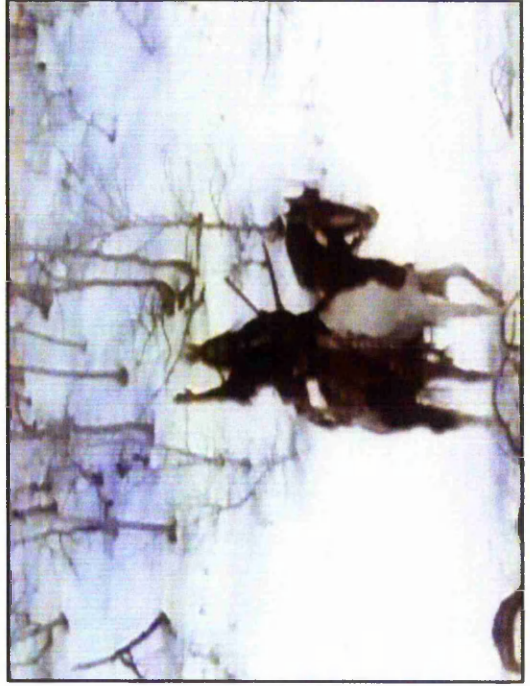


FIG:47

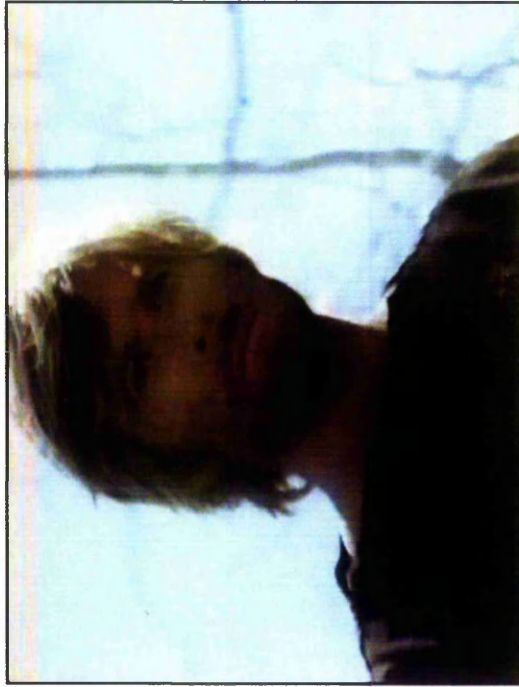


FIG:48



FIG:49



FIG:50



Notes

- ¹ James J Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: Making Postwar Radicalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp.203-204.
- ² See James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.622. See also Farrell, op. cit., pp.203, 205.
- ³ Iwan W. Morgan, 'The Sixties: From the New Frontier to Nixon, 1960-1972', *America's Century: Perspectives on U.S. History Since 1900* edited by Iwan W. Morgan and Neil A. Wynn (New York and London: Holmes and Meyer, 1993), p.164. Farrell, op. cit., p.215.
- ⁴ Farrell, op. cit., p.215. See also p.6.
- ⁵ John A. Jakle, 'Landscapes redesigned for the automobile', *The Making of the American Landscape*, edited by Michael P. Conzen (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p.302.
- ⁶ Farrell, op. cit. p.212.
- ⁷ Ibid., p.216.
- ⁸ Patterson, op. cit., p.725; Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), p.381.
- ⁹ See Farrell, op. cit., p.208.
- ¹⁰ See Farrell, ibid., p.226.
- ¹¹ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), p.17.
- ¹² Ibid., p.17.
- ¹³ Natty complains to colonists in *The Pioneers*, (1823): "... I don't relish to see these wasteful ways that you are all practising, as if the least thing wasn't made for use, and not to destroy. ... Use, but don't waste". Quoted in *Major Problems in American Environmental History: Documents and Essays*, edited by Carolyn Merchant (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993), p.177.
- ¹⁴ Henriksen, op. cit., pp.350, 349.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., pp.348-349.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p.365.
- ¹⁷ Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich (eds), *Vietnam Images: War and Representation* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p.4.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in Henriksen, op. cit., p.350.
- ¹⁹ This, indirect, representation of post-Vietnam trauma is grounded in fact. According to Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh, 'Various scientific studies have shown that the Vietnam veteran suffered a disproportionately high incidence of post-traumatic stress.' Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh (eds), *Tell me Lies About Vietnam: Cultural Battles for the Meaning of the War* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1988), p.6.
- ²⁰ Edward Buscombe (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: Andre Deutsch/BFI Publishing, 1988), p.244.
- ²¹ Farrell, op. cit., p.212.
- ²² Slotkin, op. cit. p.17.
- ²³ Ibid., p.17. Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Concise History of the American Republic* Second Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp.395-396. Thus, in the 1960s and early 1970s, a rash of films appeared which sought to challenge Western mythology. They include *Soldier Blue* (Ralph Nelson, 1970), a story based on the Indian massacres at Sand Creek (1864) and Wounded Knee (1890) and intended as an allegory of My Lai; *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970), an anti-Custer movie also, Slotkin argues, 'explicitly Vietnam oriented'; *A Man Called Horse* (Elliot Silverstein, 1970) notable, as Tom Milne states, 'for its acceptance (and detailed depiction) of Indian customs as a valid counter-culture'. See Julian Petley, *The BFI Companion to the Western*, op. cit., p.300; Slotkin, op. cit., p.17; Tom Milne, *The BFI Companion to the Western*, op. cit., p.283. In many of these countercultural films, Louvre and Walsh state, 'the Indian population substitutes mythically for the Vietnamese devastated by Rolling Thunder. America was forced to confront its own genocidal past'. *Tell Me Lies About Vietnam*, op. cit., p.5.
- ²⁴ The effects of Old World diseases on native peoples were immediate in North America. Hence in 1634, governor and historian of the Plymouth colony, William Bradford, recorded the 'lamentable condition' of native peoples in the Connecticut River Valley who had contracted smallpox through trading with Europeans and who 'died most miserably ... like rotten sheep.' In Merchant, op. cit., p.71.
- ²⁵ See Margaret Walsh, *The American Frontier Revisited* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p.45.
- ²⁶ Johnson is not the 'entirely free spirit' of Henry Nash Smith's definition of the Mountain Man, symbol 'of anarchic freedom'. Rather, he resembles what Smith identifies as the first generation of frontier heroes, whose relation to the wilderness – half in it yet half beyond it – is highly ambiguous. See Henry

- Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), p.81.
- ²⁷ Kolodny in Merchant, op. cit., p.207.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p.206.
- ²⁹ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.23.
- ³⁰ Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.41.
- ³¹ Weiskel, op. cit., p. 24.
- ³² Ibid., p.24.
- ³³ Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass*, edited with an introduction by Jerome Loving (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.50.
- ³⁴ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.23.
- ³⁵ Edmund Burke (1757), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, edited with an introduction by J.T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p.84.
- ³⁶ Anthony acknowledges that, prior to the culture of primitive masculinity, Cooper's Leatherstocking novels had satisfied 'white antebellum middleclass' male fascination 'with those who lived beyond their self-drawn lines of civilization', but argues that 'Avid curiosity was one thing and identification was quite another.' E Anthony, *American Manhood: Transformation in Masculinity From the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 228.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p.222.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p.228.
- ³⁹ Merchant, op. cit., p.383.
- ⁴⁰ Anthony, op. cit., p.227.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in Anthony, *ibid.*, p.226.
- ⁴² Roderick Nash, quoted in Merchant, op. cit., p.402.
- ⁴³ Burke, op. cit., p.67.
- ⁴⁴ Anthony, op. cit., p.226.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., pp.226.
- ⁴⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' (1893), *The Frontier in American History* (1920, 1947), forewarded by Ray Allen Billington (New York and London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), pp.30, 32.
- ⁴⁷ Slotkin, op. cit., p.45.
- ⁴⁸ Explaining the pleasures of solitude, Thoreau writes: '... for the most part ... I have, as it were, my own sun, and moon, and stars, and a little world all to myself.' Henry David Thoreau (1845-1847), *Walden* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1995), p.90.
- ⁴⁹ Karl Marx, and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (selections), edited with an introduction by C.J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994), p.99.
- ⁵⁰ Howard Horwitz (quoting Kant), *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.35.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p.35.
- ⁵² Ibid., p.36.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p.35. The phrase 'cash-value', I borrow from Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), *passim*.
- ⁵⁴ Immanuel Kant (1790), 'Analytic of the Sublime', Part I, Book II, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated with Analytical Indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp.104, 103, 105.
- ⁵⁵ Anthony, op. cit. p.244.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., pp.243, 244-5.
- ⁵⁷ Slotkin, op. cit., p.15.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., p.68.
- ⁵⁹ Margaret Walsh, op. cit., p.44.
- ⁶⁰ Christopher Brookeman, *The BFI Companion to the Western*, op. cit., p.126.
- ⁶¹ Farrell, op. cit., p.215.
- ⁶² Wilson, op. cit., p.160.
- ⁶³ Farrell, op. cit., p.230.
- ⁶⁴ See Anthony, op. cit., p.245.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p.246.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., p.230.
- ⁶⁷ Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., quoted in Anthony, *ibid.* p.226.
- ⁶⁸ Turner, op. cit., p.31.

- ⁶⁹ Kant, quoted in David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.30. While tradition decreed that sublime feelings were not fitting for the female sex, women were, of course, as capable of experiencing sublime emotions as their male counterparts. Indeed, as Nye observes, American writer and 'early feminist', Margaret Fuller, was very active in 'demanding for women the right to appreciate not only the beautiful but also the "masculine" emotions associated with the sublime.' Nye, *ibid.*, pp.30-31.
- ⁷⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.129.
- ⁷¹ Burke, *op. cit.*, p.42.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*, p.43.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.111.
- ⁷⁴ Friedrich von Schiller, quoted in Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.61.
- ⁷⁵ Femininity can be associated with wild nature, however; though, within a male-centred society, this association can be negative. See Chapter Four's discussion of *Thelma and Louise*.
- ⁷⁶ Kant, quoted in Horwitz, *op. cit.*, p.37.
- ⁷⁷ Michael Macovski, *Dialogue and Literature: Apostrophe, Auditors, and the Collapse of Romantic Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.37.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.11, 15.
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5.
- ⁸⁰ An earlier consideration of the American Sublime, rhetoric and politics using this film appears in my article 'Jeremiah Johnson and the Rhetoric of the American Romantic Sublime', *Over Here: A European Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Summer 1996).
- ⁸¹ Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp.137-138.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, p.136.
- ⁸³ Whitman, 'Preface' to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), *op. cit.*, p.439.
- ⁸⁴ William Cullen Bryant, 'The Prairies', in *The Penguin Book of American Verse*, edited by Geoffrey Moore (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p.67.
- ⁸⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge quoted in David Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), p.xiii.
- ⁸⁶ In their study of rhetorical schemes, Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle describe montage as 'metaphoric "montage"', *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1956) p.78.
- ⁸⁷ See Weiskel, *op. cit.*, pp.4, 7, 11.
- ⁸⁸ See Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *American Poetry: The Rhetoric of its Forms* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), p.4.
- ⁸⁹ See Blasing, *ibid.*, p.6.
- ⁹⁰ James Monaco, *How to Read a Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.183.
- ⁹¹ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, translated by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p.25.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, pp.277, 126.
- ⁹³ Walter Nash, *Rhetoric: The Wit of Persuasion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.119; David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p.76.
- ⁹⁴ Blasing, *op. cit.*, p.4.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 6. See also Katie Wales who explains that: 'In synecdoche the name of the referent is replaced strictly by the name of an actual part of it ... there is no transfer of field of reference as with metaphor', *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (London and New York: Longman, 1990), p.297.
- ⁹⁶ In Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.141.
- ⁹⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America, Volume III*, translated by Henry Reeve (London: Saunders and Otley, 1840), p.17.
- ⁹⁸ In Wilson, *ibid.*, p.141.
- ⁹⁹ Quoted in Wilson, *ibid.*, p.137.
- ¹⁰⁰ Whitman, quoted in Wilson, *ibid.*, p.140; Whitman, 'One's-Self I Sing', *Leaves of Grass*, *op. cit.*, p.9. As Whitman enthuses, within an American democratic system, the individual should imagine how 'his country absorbs him as affectionately as he absorbs it.' Whitman, 'Preface' to *Leaves of Grass*, *ibid.*, p.642.
- ¹⁰¹ See Turner, *op. cit.*, especially pp.15, 23, 37.
- ¹⁰² Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.142; Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p.26.
- ¹⁰³ Whitman, 'Preface' to *Leaves of Grass*, *op. cit.*, p.449.
- ¹⁰⁴ Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.27.
- ¹⁰⁵ Nye, *op. cit.*, p.xiv. See also pp.xii-xiii.

- ¹⁰⁶ John F. Sears, *Scared Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.24.
- ¹⁰⁷ Nye, op. cit., p.28.
- ¹⁰⁸ Nye, op. cit., p.xiv; McKinsey, op. cit., p.196.
- ¹⁰⁹ Such as when Bear Claw remarks to Johnson toward the end of the film, 'You've come a long way, pilgrim.'
- ¹¹⁰ See Thoreau's *Walden*, especially, pp.5, 18, 26. Turner's thesis includes the conclusions of the 1890 bulletin of the official Census for that year: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line." In Turner, op. cit., p.1.
- ¹¹¹ Wilson, op. cit., pp.24, 10. For Wilson's account of an early, Puritan sublime, see especially Chapters 3 and 4 in *American Sublime*.
- ¹¹² David S. Shields, 'The Religious Sublime and New England Poets of the 1720s', *Early American Literature* Vol. 19 (Winter 1984/85), p.241. See also p.231.
- ¹¹³ Wilson, op. cit., pp.24, 30.
- ¹¹⁴ David Simpson, 'Updating the Sublime', *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 26 (Summer 1987), p.246.
- ¹¹⁵ Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p.48. I also paraphrase Maldwyn A Jones, *The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607-1980* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.177.
- ¹¹⁶ Sears, op. cit., p.123.
- ¹¹⁷ Thomas Cole, 'Essay on American Scenery' (1835), in *American Art 1700-1960: Sources and Documents*, John W. McCoubrey (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1965), p.98.
- ¹¹⁸ Sears, op. cit., p.130.
- ¹¹⁹ Cole, op. cit., p.101.
- ¹²⁰ Horwitz, op. cit., p.21.
- ¹²¹ In support of his argument, Wilson cites a Philip Morris ad-campaign which draws on the way in which such paintings evoke feelings of national identity and collective purpose.

A CENTURY AGO THE PAINTINGS OF ALBERT BIERSTADT DREW CROWDS. ALL HAD IMAGINED THE AMERICAN FRONTIER, BUT NOT QUITE LIKE THIS. HERE WERE THE VISIONS THAT WOULD LURE THEM WEST, AND WHICH REMAIN DEEP IN THE AMERICAN PSYCHE THIS DAY. [In Rob Wilson, 'Techno-euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime', *Boundary 2*, Vol. 19, Part 1 (Spring, 1992), p.213].

- ¹²² Wilson, 'Techno-euphoria', op. cit., pp.205-6.
- ¹²³ Horwitz, op. cit., pp.30-31.
- ¹²⁴ Sears, op. cit., pp.149-150.
- ¹²⁵ Ibid., p.152.
- ¹²⁶ Ibid., p.150.
- ¹²⁷ Ibid., p.155.
- ¹²⁸ Whitman, 'Starting from Paumanok', *Leaves of Grass*, op. cit., p.27.
- ¹²⁹ Cole, op. cit., p.109.
- ¹³⁰ Ibid., p.109. Albert Boime suspects pecuniary motives in Cole's apparent inner conflict which emerged, he argues

because he profited from the mercantile mentality as one of the poets who sanctified the soil. ... To decry the despoiling of the wilderness was to indict not just the bankers and land developers but his own imaginative projections and landscape paradigm. ...

Instead, like other painters of the American School, Cole worked to conceal the worst effects of what the ideology of Manifest Destiny assumed to be the progressive factors of expansionism, especially in the 'celebrated' Hudson Valley where 'the disagreeable facts of production' were carefully hidden. [Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c. 1830-1845* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), p.8].

- ¹³¹ Bryant, 'The Prairies', op. cit., p.69-70.
- ¹³² Boime, op. cit., p.14.
- ¹³³ Quoted in J.E. O'Connor, *The Hollywood Indian: Stereotypes of Native Americans in Films*, foreworded by Lorraine E. Williams (Trenton, New Jersey: New Jersey State Museum, 1980), p.5.
- ¹³⁴ Slotkin, op. cit., p.350.
- ¹³⁵ Ibid., p.53.
- ¹³⁶ The ideology of 'savage war' survives well into the twentieth century and has received notable filmic treatments in *Northwest Passage* (King Vidor, 1940) which includes, according to Kim Newman, a

'highly racist treatment of ... Indians, who are seen throughout as sub-human monsters capable of any atrocity', and who thus deserve to be slaughtered; *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) in which brutal murder and rape carried out by Indians provides the motivation for the central character's own violent excesses (though with considerable tension); *Rambo: First Blood, Part II* (George Pan Cosmatos, 1985), which in its 'retreat into pre-Vietnam ideologies', projects the doctrine of savage war onto the Vietnam War in which an unfeeling, cruel enemy (here a symbolic confusion between Japanese and North Vietnamese armies) causes the hero to assert: 'to win a war, you gotta become war.' See Kim Newman, *The BFI Companion to the Western*, op. cit., p.287; Robert McKeever quoted in D. Madsen, op. cit., p.161. See also Madsen, p.160.

¹³⁷ This display of Johnson's awesome strength and overcoming of enormous odds can be seen to anticipate the 'super élitism', 'narcissistic masculinity' and aestheticised violence Jeffrey Walsh observes operating in *Rambo: First Blood, Part II*, a film which seeks, representationally, to reaffirm 'American manhood', competitiveness and dominance over 'inferior' racial otherness. See Jeffrey Walsh, 'First Blood to Rambo', in *Tell Me Lies About Vietnam*, op. cit., esp. pp.56, 57, 60.

¹³⁸ See Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, Second Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.294, 295.

¹³⁹ David Slater, 'Locating the American Century: Themes for a Post-colonial Perspective', *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in the Projection of American Power*, edited by David Slater and Peter J. Taylor (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), p.21.

¹⁴⁰ Boime, op. cit., pp.18, 20-21.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p.38.

¹⁴² Ibid., p.21.

¹⁴³ Cole, op. cit., p.109. I also quote Boime, op. cit., p.15.

¹⁴⁴ Boime, op. cit., p.8.

¹⁴⁵ Horwitz, op. cit., pp.34, 36, and Kant, in Horwitz, p.35.

¹⁴⁶ Del Gue explains to Johnson how he once told his mother, who disapproved of his lifestyle, that the 'Rocky Mountains is the marrow of the world, and by God I was right.' 'Yes', Johnson replies, 'you were.'

¹⁴⁷ David Simpson, 'Updating the Sublime', op. cit., p.246.

Chapter Three

American Technological Sublimity and the Wrong State of Things

Synopsis *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968).

Four million years B.C., early 'man' is at the mercy of a hostile environment until an alien artefact appears mysteriously in his midst. Contact with the monolith generates a new mental ability in the hominids which enables them to develop a crude technology, initiating man's evolutionary ascent. Four million years later, technology has allowed man to reach the moon. During lunar mining operations at Tycho, a second monolith is discovered buried beneath the moon's surface. Exposed to sunlight for the first time in four million years, the monolith emits a piercing signal to Jupiter. To determine the meaning of the signal, a mission to Jupiter is organised – though its true purpose is concealed from the astronauts aboard the mission ship *Discovery*. The mission goes fatally wrong when the ship's master computer, the HAL 9000, appears to malfunction, killing all but one crew member, David Bowman. Bowman deactivates HAL and learns the real nature of the mission. He leaves the crippled ship and continues the mission to Jupiter in a space pod. On his approach to the planet, Bowman passes through a corridor of light into another spatial and temporal dimension coming to rest in what resembles an eighteenth century bedroom. Here, Bowman quickly ages. When a monolith appears in front of Bowman as he lies dying, he is reborn as a transcendent being and returns to the solar system.

In *The Romantic Sublime*, Thomas Weiskel laments that

we have lost the obsession, so fundamental to the Romantic sublime, with natural infinitude. We live once again in a finite natural world whose limits are beginning to press against us and may well crush our children.¹

Identifying science-based technologies as the culprit, Weiskel draws on the technological achievements of space flight which, he argues, has reduced the world to insignificance:

Like Chaucer's Troilus looking down from the eighth sphere, we see in those pictures taken aboard the Apollo spacecraft "this litel spot of erth, that with the see embraced is," and we know that the ethos of expansion is doomed.²

In analysing the context of a specifically American Sublime, Elizabeth McKinsey similarly argues that the industrial desecration of nature, the weakening of religious faith by science, intensified social and cultural fragmentation and the horrors of the Civil War seriously undermined the moral and patriotic foundations of the American Sublime, '[the] faith ... that transport out of oneself into communion with the larger entity is ... valuable or good.'³ In the twentieth century, McKinsey argues, a spontaneous, unifying sublime emotion gives way to more subjective self-conscious and metaphoric modes: 'the sublime becomes even more frankly imaginative, even more thoroughly metaphoric than it was for Emerson or any of the Romantics – if it exists at all.'⁴ McKinsey maintains, however, (drawing on Wallace Stevens's renegotiations of American sublimity) that the yearning for transcendence has not dimmed but persists as a 'necessary fiction'.

Yet it can be argued that the American Sublime as an imperative to national grandeur is not 'nearly dead', that it lingers on as more than mere longing and a self-conscious aesthetic – as McKinsey herself seems to suggest. This survival, McKinsey writes, depends on the way in which the American Sublime lends itself to relocation:

When Niagara became too settled and industrialized to produce sublime emotions, the idea relocated in other still-wild natural features which in turn did their service as national icons. ... As Americans moved still farther into the "golden" West, they read their destiny in that sublime landscape, in the Grand Canyon, in Yellowstone, in Yosemite. ... Like the idea of the frontier, the idea of the sublime did not disappear with the closing of the actual frontier, but was felt again in our own generation when men walked on the moon.⁵

In this context, Weiskel's complaint that technologies have rendered the sublime obsolete seems short sighted: as McKinsey points out, the American Sublime's migration has not only been geographical, from Niagara to the moon, but conceptual, from natural to 'man-made' sublimities.⁶ This shift away from natural sublimities was anticipated by Frederick Jackson Turner who identified science as America's new frontier and who, according to Tiziano Bonazzi, maintained that 'science and nature share the same regenerative virtues', 'opening up new free spaces to a society without free lands' into which a pioneering spirit might still expand and be reborn.⁷ This migration of the Frontier Sublime from nature to the man-made was, however, always uneasy – as, I argue, *2001* reveals. Before I go on to discuss *2001*'s treatment of the American Technological Sublime, however, a brief exploration of its history will be helpful.

This transference of sublime emotions from natural to artificial forms seems curious behaviour in a nation that boasted of its close affinities with nature. But as Leo Marx has argued, natural and technological sublimities, even in nineteenth century America, were not oppositional ideas; rather they converge within an ideology of American sublimity which tropes natural landscape into a repository of exceptional, 'regenerative power' and a source of 'the virtue and special good fortune of Americans.'⁸ In this respect, the way in which an Americanised sublime describes an interiorisation of sublime power is significant. Within the scenario of the American Sublime, there occurs what Rob Wilson terms an 'energy transformation' from sublime object to representative subject who, crucially, like Whitman, Bryant or Cole, 'wires' or 'taps into' the sublime energies of American landscape.⁹

Celebrating the national landscape as an abundant energy-reserve in his formulation of the natural sublime, Whitman, however, clearly valued nature as more than the source and symbol of a national poetic. In 'Starting from Paumanok', the value of nature lies in its vast, untouched reserves of minerals, ores and precious metals, Whitman's excited rhetoric quickly turning abundant national resource into exceptional national productive capacity:

Land of coal and iron! land of gold! land of cotton. sugar, rice!

Land of wheat, beef, pork! land of wool and hemp! land of the apple and the grape!¹⁰

Similarly, Emerson values sublime nature as previously untapped and abundant resource of raw materials lying dormant and waiting to be released, troping nature into capital, the symbol and agent of America's Manifest Destiny: 'Coal ... We may well call it black diamonds. Every basket is power and civilisation.'¹¹

Bespeaking what Wilson calls a 'cultural obsession with unlocking ... power', then, Emerson and Whitman inject Romantic conceptions of nature with entrepreneurial ambition.¹² Significantly, both poets link entrepreneurial endeavour and commodity production to the release of 'certain *great natural* powers' that will regenerate a nation. In doing so, they set up an imperative to technological development, repeating an argument advanced by early advocates of industry and technology who sought to ratify technological advance by closely associating it with natural power.¹³ These early advocates of industry emphasised that America's unimaginable power – plainly too vast for a thinly populated nation to release – must remain inert without technological intervention. In this way, tapping into and drawing out the regenerative energies of nature, technology is turned into the nation's redeemer: 'Like a divining rod, the machine will unearth the hidden graces of landscape.'¹⁴ In this way, Niagara Falls came to represent not simply nature's grandeur, but a source of abundant energy that technology could unleash. As William Irwin writes:

for every visitor who hailed the Falls as a sacred, inviolate place of nature, another marvelled at its raw power and dreamed of putting it to use. ... From the 1850s to the early 1900s, tourists and engineers hailed the Niagara landscape as the fulfilment of America's promise ...¹⁵

Conceptualised as the nation's redeemer, technology became the new emblem of American grandeur and a new variation on the sublime entered an American vocabulary and consciousness. This technological sublimity was not necessarily antithetical to a natural sublime. Where the vast, natural landscape had long been evoked as the ground of the American Sublime, technological artefacts could be imagined as the materialisation or congealment of natural American energy, inventiveness and purpose. Emblems and instruments of national progress, manifestations of technological sublimity could trigger the same sense of self and national sublimation experienced before natural icons of American greatness.¹⁶

Exploring America's 'national obsession' with the machine that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, Leo Marx quotes a writer who anticipates the sublime powers of America's new railroad networks with great excitement. Imagining the awesome power and vastness of the railroad system, the writer constructs a dynamical and democratic sublime, turning the exulted object into the source of self and collective aggrandisement:

Objects of exulted power and grandeur elevate the mind that seriously dwells on them, and impart to it greater compass and strength. ...The same will be true of our system of Rail-roads. Its vastness and magnificence will prove communicable, and add to the standard of the intellect of our country.¹⁷

Similarly, Whitman's 'A Locomotive in Winter' celebrates the new, dynamic and regenerative power of the locomotive, imagined as the life-force of the nation: 'Type of the modern – emblem of motion and power – pulse of the continent'. Whitman presents the locomotive as a dynamical sublime excess, as an uncontrollable ('lawless') force both terrible (fierce, roaring, rumbling, shrieking), and beautiful (twinkling, 'golden', 'silvery', 'delicate purple' vapours), evoking the negative pleasure of the sublime.

In Whitman's democratic (and revolutionary) rhetoric, the awesome power of the locomotive excites action, awakens a people to their own dormant energies and capacities: 'rumbling like an earth-quake', Whitman's locomotive '*rouses all*'. 'Launch'd o'er prairies wide, across the lakes', cutting through storm as though it were calm, the locomotive represents for Whitman an astonishing feat of technological overcoming of the forces of nature. Yet, while the locomotive transcends nature, it is still in harmony with the natural terrain, suggested by Whitman's use of a traditional rhetorical device: the echo. The 'trills and shrieks' of the locomotive's whistle, are 'by rocks and hills return'd', implying a measure of reciprocity or correspondence between natural and technological forms, if not the ratification of technological advance by nature. Linking the locomotive to the vast emptiness and freedoms of the West, Whitman tropes technology into a fitting symbol of America's pioneering spirit: 'To the free skies unpent and glad and strong'.¹⁸

Emerson similarly and famously linked natural and technological – and commercial – limitlessness, turning technological progress into a new, continually advancing frontier:

New arts destroy the old. See the investment of capital in aqueducts, made useless by hydraulics; fortifications by gun powder; roads and canals, by railways; sails by steam; steam by electricity.¹⁹

As Peter Nicholls argues:

Celebrating the rapid expansion of Jacksonian capitalism, Emerson could find in technological progress an affirmation of the evolutionary principle of nature ("There are no fixities in nature").²⁰

This worship of the man-made within the iconoclastic traditions of the American Sublime seems strange. Turning the locomotive into the representation of American power and grandeur, admiring its gleaming surfaces and the intricacies of its design (the 'knitted frame', the complex of 'springs and valves'), Whitman displays a love of outward appearance and form in a way that fetishises the locomotive. Yet, this fetishisation of form does not necessarily contradict the tradition of an American Sublime. As Rob Wilson points

out, the idea of an '*American Sublime*' is an oxymoron since it 'stipulates what, ideally speaking, has no local habitation or proper name at all ... positing America as the ground of the sublime.'²¹ Localising the sublime in this way, giving form to formlessness, American sublimity is at once fetishistic *and* iconoclastic, materialistic *and* idealistic – as Wilson puts it, 'worldly and world-denying'.²²

This dual nature of the American Sublime can be seen to stem from a tradition which privileges sight as a mode of perception. Within the visual orientations of the American Sublime, appearance is taken as the outward sign of a hidden, noumenal otherness beneath (be it the powers of God or nature). Anne Bradstreet's early version of the American 'religious' sublime illustrates the conjunction of sight and belief in supersensible otherness: 'That there is a God my Reason would soon tell me by the wonderful workes that I see'.²³ In Cole's later model of the sublime, seeing is also intuiting sublime otherness and one's relation to it: 'And Niagara! that wonder of the world! ... in gazing on it ... our conceptions expand – we become a part of what we behold!'²⁴

For Emerson, and for Whitman in the same way, the significance of technology is not its outward forms as such (although, for Whitman, these clearly have an allure) but its implication of *newness* beneath surface appearance. Americanising and modernising the iconoclastic impulses of the sublime, they present technology as a uniquely American aesthetic, expressive of a New World project to decreate – to be always what Whitman described as 'transcendent and new'.²⁵ Yet, as David Simpson has argued, this in itself is a form of fetishism:

The designation of "fetishism" that peaked in the nineteenth century was in one of its aspects a contempt for what seemed fixed or immobile, as against the romantic affirmation of things dynamic and in flux. "Expect poison from the standing water." [Blake]. Turning this around, we should at least ponder the possibility that we worship restlessness ... and ask whether the obligation to "develop" and make "progress" might not impose extreme burdens on the individual self.²⁶

Exploring the meaning of technology and technological progress, the relationship of the individual to technology, iconoclastic and fetishistic impulses and the fetishism of the new (what might be described, oxymoronically, as a *fetishistic iconoclasm*), these are precisely the kind of questions that *2001* does pose.

'There is ... an intimate connection between the development of evolutionary philosophy and the history of sf' writes Brian Stableford.²⁷ *2001*'s odyssey, its presentation of an extended process of human development, culminating in 'The most widely seen (but by no means most widely understood) symbolic representation of evolutionary apotheosis', continues SF's fascination with evolutionary change, linking it to an idea of technological progress.²⁸ Gesturing toward an American tradition, *2001* begins by presenting technology as a redemptive and sublime power by linking it to an evolutionary process of negation and re-creation.

Appropriately, within this presentation of technological sublimity, an edge motif plays a crucial role. Thus *2001* opens with a shot, from a lunar perspective, of the moon, earth and sun, setting up what Don Daniels describes as 'a prophetic new sunrise'.²⁹ [Fig. 51]. The moon occupies the foreground space of the frame while, in the middleground, the earth appears over the moon's sharply defined horizon, and, in the background, the sun slowly rises over the earth. Overlaying this image of a new dawn, Richard Strauss's 'symphonic ode to human evolution', *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, underscores the significance of the shot, rising in pitch and volume as the sun appears over the edge of the earth's sphere.³⁰ This conjunction of edge and sun recurs in the film, configuring the dynamics of sublime negation and recreation and marking a dramatic turning point in the narrative. Here the image prefigures 'THE DAWN OF MAN' (the title of the following sequence), the beginnings of human evolution.

This opening shot then cuts to a black and soundless screen which anticipates the void – in this instance, the wilderness, primitive unconsciousness and death – at the heart of the following scenes. This black screen is immediately followed by a shot of an earthly landscape in which the title 'THE DAWN OF MAN' appears. The twelve long, mainly static shots which follow, show an empty landscape stretching toward a distant horizon; except for the sound of howling wind and occasional bird cry, the scenes are silent. In the foreground of the twelfth shot, however, hominid skulls and bone fragments can be seen littering the ground, establishing the relationship between the environment and the ape-men who struggle to sustain themselves in it. As successive scenes reveal, the ape men are passive and preyed upon. Lacking intellect, they cannot reflect on and shape the natural world to their needs and desires, depending instead on what nature provides. As such, their existence is characterised by its sameness, each day revolving around a search for and squabbles over food, inconclusive struggles with a rival group of hominids over a water hole and nightly retreats into a cave for protection. In this way, the monolith's intervention is vital. Set up as a symbol of the dynamical sublime, it functions analogously to Whitman's locomotive, rousing the ape-men into consciousness and consequent freedom. Its sudden appearance has a dramatic effect on the ape men.

Huddled together in their cave, the ape-men stare out into the dwindling light nervously while predators roam outside. One ape-man ('Moon-Watcher' in the novel of the film) is singled out by the camera and shown in close-up. This close-up cuts to a shot of the distant horizon, almost black against the glow of the sky, a familiar configuration of past, present and future which, shown from Moon-Watcher's perspective, implicates him in the profound transformations that will occur. The action then cuts to an entirely black image, signifying both nightfall and pre-conscious blankness, and cuts back to the now sleeping Moon-Watcher and the other ape-men at morning. Gradually, 'György Ligeti's "unworldly" music' is introduced on to the soundtrack. This (nondiegetic) insertion of Ligeti's composition, 'howling ... like a collage of all the world's religious music', is

unsettling. For several minutes, the soundtrack has been punctuated only by the grunts and screams of the apes.³¹ The function of the sound-effect, then, is to signal the intrusion of 'otherness', setting up the disruptive phase of the sublime.

As the sound-effect grows louder, Moon-Watcher wakes up and immediately becomes alarmed, rousing the others. This scene then cuts to a shot of the monolith. Huge, black, artificially smooth and geometric, the monolith looks out of place within the wilderness landscape. Extremely agitated by the sudden appearance of this alien object, the ape-men scream and dart about. Gradually, however, they begin to overcome their fear. Led by Moon-Watcher, they cluster around the monolith reaching out tentatively, then more boldly, to touch and stroke its surface. Shots of the ape-men exploring the surface of the artefact cuts to a dramatic, low-angled and centred shot of the monolith silhouetted starkly against the sky, the low angle of the shot accentuating its scale. Above and beyond the monolith's uppermost edge, prefiguring the ape-men's imminent intellectual dawning, is a bright sun, its light spilling over into the foregrounded blackness of the monolith. Above and aligned with the sun and monolith is a new moon, illuminated by the sun directly beneath it. [Fig. 52]. Referring back to the edge motif and alignment of the film's establishing shot, the *mise en scène*, together with the strange illumination of the moon, connects the monolith to some sort of cosmic design and purpose. In this way, the edge motif formed in the shot signifies a threshold to a higher, universal order, anticipating the ape men's flight away from contingency and establishing technology as the mode of enabling this.

Directly following the introduction of the monolith into the action, Moon-Watcher is shown foraging for food close to a skeleton, which he ignores. As Moon-Watcher searches, he suddenly casts a quick glance in the direction of the monolith as though it has signalled something to him. As if to confirm this, the action cuts to the same, dramatic image of the monolith in alignment with the sun and the moon. The action then cuts back to Moon-Watcher who now regards the skeleton with interest, apparently struggling with an idea. At this point, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is reintroduced onto the soundtrack, recalling its associations with new beginnings established in the film's opening shot. Hesitantly, Moon-Watcher picks up a bone and begins tentatively to strike the rest of the skeleton. As the music rises in pitch and volume, Moon-Watcher smashes the skeleton with increased purpose and vigour. Intercut with the action are two shots of a tapir falling to the ground as though struck by a heavy blow. Plainly, these montages present Moon-Watcher's new-found conceptual abilities to reflect and act on nature (rather than simply be in it), the falling tapir prefiguring the acting out of Moon-Watcher's new idea.

As such, the montage pattern also presents the third, empowering, phase of the sublime which, as I have shown, turns on the process of identification. In this respect, J.P. Dumond and J. Monod's interpretation of the montage pattern is suggestive. They argue that the insert shot of the monolith, being identical to the earlier shot, no longer refers to the real monolith but to Moon-Watcher's 'mental image' of it.³² In this way, the insert shot can

be seen to figure Moon-Watcher's internalisation of sublime power: making an imaginative leap, Moon-Watcher intuits the sublimity represented by the monolith and discovers, in the process, his own 'meta' character—his new, creative, capacities to think and to implement thought. The sequence is completed as *Zarathustra* reaches its crescendo, a shot revealing Moon-Watcher's hand gripping his new found cudgel as he repeatedly smashes it into the skeleton, now reimagined as his prey. Aggrandised in slow-motion and in close-up, the action figures synecdochically the essential interrelatedness of human and technological power and evolution, performing a moment of triumphant technological overcoming.

Indicating a general reversal of power from nature to the ape-men, the action cuts to a shot of the whole group gorging on meat. Yet the effect of this technological empowerment is figured more explicitly when Moon-Watcher turns his new weapon into the means of territorial acquisition, gaining control over a vital resource: the water hole. The drama at the water hole sets up a recurring pattern of negation and recreation in the film. It configures natural selection as the survival of the fittest and combines this evolutionary schematic with a Nietzschean will to power. At the water hole, the usual skirmishes between the rival groups begin but, now armed, Moon-Watcher is confidently aggressive, quickly killing the dominant male of the group with several heavy blows to the head and body. Some of Moon-Watcher's group, all similarly armed, move forward and continue to bludgeon the dead ape, trying out the weapon for themselves and asserting their power. The rival group, in contrast, shrinks back in fear.

Significantly, the ascendancy of Moon-Watcher's group is presented by their new posture: unlike their cringing rivals, Moon-Watcher's tribe now walk upright, symbolising their evolutionary ascent. As Mark Crispin Miller puts it:

Made strong by their new carnivorous diet, and with their hands now mainly used to smash and grab, the ape-men have already visibly outgrown their former quadruped posture (they are *standing* – for the first time – when they come back to the water hole), and so are ready to move on.³³

After the kill, Moon-Watcher turns his face toward the sky and roars triumphantly, then hurls the cudgel into the air. Signifiers of transcendence, both the apostrophic cry heavenward and the tossing of the bone into the air connect technology to flight and anticipate the future course of technological evolution – and the spatial-temporal direction of the narrative. As Moon-Watcher's cries fade, the camera follows the bone's flight for a few seconds then cuts to a shot of a white space craft gliding through outer space – the film's now famous match-cut that leaps across a period of four million years. [Figs 53-54].

Compared with more recent filmic production, the match-cut, which is not seamless, seems rather crudely done. Yet, as James Monaco asserts, the match cut remains

possibly the most ambitious ... in history, since it attempts to unite prehistory with the future anthropologically at the same time as it creates a special meaning within

the cut itself by emphasizing the functions of both bone and space station as tools, extensions of human capabilities.³⁴

Though the montage seems today to be underproduced, then, what is still striking is the scale and complexity of the idea communicated. The juxtaposition of the two images, bone and spacecraft, constructs a dialectic between 'primitive' and advanced technologies, asserting both continuity between, as well as linear transition from one temporal-spatial event to another. Visually, the shape, colour and size of the space craft (because it is presented as being some distance away from the camera) recapitulates and refers back to the image of the bone. The craft, floating in space, also recalls Moon-Watcher's jubilant and ambitiously upward gaze as he whirls the rudimentary tool into the air, while the spinning bone itself anticipates man's eventual flight.

The match-cut – like the sudden appearance of the monolith and Moon-Watcher's originary moment of discovery – can also be seen to reimagine a specifically American experience of the impact of technological progress. As one critic argues, throughout *2001*

[technological] evolution [is] conceived, not in Darwinian terms, as the gradual transformation of the species through natural selection, but rather as a series of heroic *leaps*.³⁵

2001's schematic, in this way, corresponds to the way in which, in America's pristine landscape, technological change was felt, not as a gradual process but a revolutionary force, 'a kind of explosion', 'the backwardness of the country giving the progressive impulse an electric charge'.³⁶ In nineteenth century American landscapes, machines like Whitman's locomotive burst with clouds of steam and smoke into the natural scene, effecting an incongruous juxtaposition of opposites. The match-cut reconfigures this American cultural conception of technology as the 'instantaneous' 'transition from a wild and barbarous condition to that of the most elaborate civilization.' As the scenes following the match cut illustrate, technologised civilisation 'has at one bound leaped into life'.³⁷

In the scenes that supersede Moon-Watcher's primal cry of triumph, small, large and fantastically shaped machines glide and spin gracefully through space in carefully orchestrated schemes, set to the strains of a well known waltz (J. Strauss's 'The Blue Danube'), which construct and celebrate a technological sublime. The waltz underscores the grandeur and elegance of the space craft, established in the *mise en scène* by a sharp-angled light effect which, accentuating their shapes and contours, displays the craft as objects of art. A small shuttle (*Orion*) makes its way toward a vast space station that spins to the strains of the waltz like an immense white wheel. Inside the shuttle (where the viewer is introduced to a sleeping Doctor Floyd *en route* to the moon via the station), this celebration of technological power and grandeur is continued. In a long, close-up shot, the camera lingers on Floyd's pen, which, unattended, floats and turns gently in the zero gravity of the

shuttle, repeating the spinning motion of the space station. Magnified in the close-up and gleaming in the artificial light of the shuttle, the pen is turned into an object of technological wonder, forming a microcosmic symbol of technological achievement as a whole. The pen's shape and movement also recall the original tool flung into space, referring back dialectically to the originary moment of technological discovery and redemption by re-emphasising the connection between technology and flight.

Reiterating its associations of technology with flight in this sequence, *2001* appears to contrast greatly with the pessimism of the story on which it was based: Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Sentinel' (1948). In 'The Sentinel', man's evolutionary ascent is dependent on technology but is not precipitated by alien intervention as in *2001*, though the discovery of an alien artefact has similarly monumental consequences for humankind. In 'The Sentinel', the protagonist, Wilson, is taking part in a routine survey of the lunar surface when he catches sight of a strange metallic glint on top of a mountain. His curiosity aroused, Wilson sets out to discover the cause of the phenomenon. When he reaches the top of the mountain the narrative constructs what is known in SF parlance as a 'conceptual breakthrough', which, describing a sudden and radical disruption of normalcy and the breakdown of habitual thought, has close affinities with the sublime.³⁸ In 'The Sentinel', Wilson experiences the shocking revelation that all that man has been previously held true about the universe is wrong.

Significantly, the moment of Wilson's conceptual breakthrough is marked by the use of an edge motif. After a long climb, he reaches the mountain rim: 'At the rim I paused ... then I scrambled over the edge and stood upright, staring ahead'.³⁹ Setting up both the dynamical and mathematical sublimes, the cause of the mysterious metallic glint is now revealed to be a 'gigantic', 'roughly pyramidal structure', its surface 'pitted and scored' by meteors 'through immeasurable aeons'.⁴⁰ At first believing the pyramid to be the remains of an ancient lunar civilisation, Wilson realises with 'sudden' and 'overwhelming force', that the structure is, like himself, alien to the moon. In contrast to the American Sublime, however, Wilson's conceptual breakthrough is articulated as a fall downward, rather than upward, the edge motif marking a moment of utter self-diminishment. Struggling against the artefact's implications for humankind, Wilson attempts to resist the truth: 'my pride would not let me take the final, humiliating plunge'.⁴¹ Ultimately, however, it is forced upon him that the pyramid is the technological materialisation of a vastly superior and ancient civilisation, indicating the insignificance of the human race within the cosmos.

Wilson's sense of foreboding deepens when he realises that the machine is an ancient beacon that has been placed on the moon to alert its makers to the presence of another species with technologies advanced enough to achieve space flight – and who might thus become evolutionary rivals. Significantly, in respect of *2001*, the threat that the aliens present at this point in the narrative is displaced onto human technological evolution itself. Attempting to penetrate the secrets of the machine, scientists blast it open with a nuclear

device, alerting the aliens to its discovery. In this way, nuclear technology is imagined as the symbol and agent of flight *and* fall: it is the means by which humanity proves its 'fitness to survive – by crossing space and so escaping from the Earth', yet it also unleashes a force over which humanity has no control: the aliens' 'insane jealousy'.⁴²

Arguably, Clarke's 'The Sentinel' operates within an old-established tradition of SF because it means, in Patrick Parrinder's broad definition of this tradition, more than it is saying.⁴³ 'The Sentinel', that is, can be seen to function allegorically as an expression of nuclear anxiety since, in the story's causal chains, nuclear capability appears as potentially catastrophic. Significantly, in this context, nuclear technology is troped into the story's emblem of a primitive and brutalising power: 'What we could not understand, we broke at last with the savage might of atomic power'.⁴⁴ 'The Sentinel' offers, in this way, what Robert Scholes, building on Darko Suvin's theory of 'cognitive estrangement' in SF, would describe as a 'sublimation' of actuality: the presentation of the known in an unfamiliar yet recognisable way.⁴⁵

SF's sublimations can represent distanced explorations of contemporary anxieties and concerns. As the generic name indicates, SF's special concern is with the implications of the pure (especially evolutionary theory) and applied sciences, SF having both a celebratory but more often uneasy, critical relationship with both.⁴⁶ Emerging from the contexts of the industrial and scientific revolutions, SF, as Parrinder puts it, attempts to articulate 'the sheer excitement (and horror) of the vistas opened up by science and technology'.⁴⁷ In particular, generated by an awareness of the ability of new machine technologies to transform environmental landscapes and related social and economic organisation on an unprecedented and increasing scale, stories exploring the nature and implications of technological progress proliferate (often combining, as in 'The Sentinel' and *2001*, evolutionary theory and technology as a thematic within which to interrogate the human-machine relationship).⁴⁸ SF, in other words, can function as

a fictional exploration of human situations made perceptible by the implications of recent science. Its favourite themes involve the impact of developments or revelations derived from the human or physical sciences upon the people who must live with those revelations or developments.⁴⁹

In this way, SF operates as a 'speculative fiction', exploring the possible consequences of technological progress by projecting contemporary concerns and questions onto 'some postulated approximation of reality' from which we might 'learn'.⁵⁰ Emerging from an industrial context of rapid and dramatic change and an attendant ideology of progress, SF's strategies of defamiliarisation are concerned predominantly with future models of society which imaginatively explore the possible 'consequences of present action'.⁵¹ SF's temporal projections of reality onto extrapolated visions of the future offer a different perspective from which to view our industrial and scientific processes in an enhanced and critical way.

While, as Scholes argues, 'all future projection is obviously model-making, poesis not mimesis', SF's orientation is toward concepts rather than poetics, and its sublimations are often achieved without a poetic language as such.⁵² Although this preoccupation does not preclude a poetic language, it is, Scholes argues, 'the new idea that shocks us into perception, rather than the new language of the text' in SF.⁵³ In its own sublimation of actuality, which explores technology as an uncontrollable and alien force, 'The Sentinel' reveals, as Rhys Garnett and R.J. Ellis would argue, its roots in nineteenth century fantasy, a sub-genre of Victorian fiction and 'progenitor' of SF with a similar 'interrogative capacity' also 'enabled' by defamiliarising strategies.⁵⁴

Significantly in respect of *2001*, the configuration of an alienated technology in 'The Sentinel' draws from Mary Shelley's gothic fantasy, *Frankenstein*, widely regarded as a 'proto-SF' story (though the novel is not a temporal displacement of contemporary technological anxieties like 'The Sentinel'). According to John Rieder, *Frankenstein* has 'the authority of a founding myth for much modern SF' and operates 'as a powerful allegory of the activities of modern science and of man's relation to his technology.'⁵⁵ In this way, *Frankenstein* can be seen to critique the kind of fetishistic impulses described by Karl Marx who, rethinking a Romantic-Protestant suspicion of form into a critique of capitalist relations of production and consumption, described the tendency within an industrialised society to 'fetishize "the works of man's hands", and allow alienated human activity to exert a determining influence over human life.'⁵⁶

Frankenstein can thus be seen to explore through its sublimations what Adorno calls 'the wrong state of things', the misrecognition of objectifications of human labour ('dead labour') as things in themselves, as agencies to which humanity appears subordinate.⁵⁷ In the drive toward economic efficiency within a modern, technological age, humanity is subjected to a perpetual and rationalised process of reorganisation and replacement by its machines: what we should control appears instead to control us, with debilitating and destructive consequences. In *Frankenstein*, the vengeful monster – a composite of dead parts made to come alive – symbolises this fetishistic reversal of power from humanity to dead labour. As Rieder puts it, Frankenstein's monster represents

What is most characteristic of modernity ... the way in which the daemon, the object and result [of man's labour], becomes an independent, external force which returns to haunt and persecute its maker.⁵⁸

Clarke's story was written shortly after the Second World War, which might account for his pessimism. Technologised forms of mass destruction, manifested most horribly and memorably in the Nazi death camps and in the construction and deployment of the Atomic Bomb, generated great anxiety about humanity's technological future. By contrast, *2001* was made during the 1960s Space Programs, in which technological advance, used for

creative rather than destructive purposes, could be more easily identified as a force for good and the optimism of a previous century recovered. As David E. Nye explains:

Public enthusiasm for the space program represents a nostalgic return to the technological sublime, a turning away from the abyss of the holocaust seen all too clearly after 1945.⁵⁹

Significantly in this respect, the techno-aesthetic of *2001*'s second sequence is predominantly American in emphasis, as the names emblazoned on space ships, food trays, space shoes and on interior surfaces of the space station – PanAm, Bell, Hilton, Howard Johnson – indicate. (Even the (Parker) pen, appearing within the Pan Am ship *Orion*, functions as an Americanised symbol of the technological sublime). Like Whitman's locomotive, these aestheticised forms represent congelations of American grandeur. In presenting an American Technological Sublime, *2001* taps into a prevailing national fascination with and faith in technological advance as the key to the nation's redemption in the struggle against communism.

Yet, revealing strong misgivings about humanity's relation to technology, darker influences of Shelley's fantasy are also evidently at work within *2001* where, in a significant subversion of the American Technological Sublime, technology appears more as *demon* than *redeemer* and mankind, like Frankenstein, the 'victim of (his own) misconceived technology'.⁶⁰ Catastrophe is foreshadowed at the very beginning of the film. For, while *2001* sets up a connection between technology and flight, this construction is, at the same time, subtly undermined. In this, the film's schematic actually bears a striking resemblance to 'The Sentinel' in that flight is quickly followed by fall. As in 'The Sentinel', this fall is marked by an edge motif, the famous match-cut itself, which constructs a filmic threshold between past and future which has negative connotations. Inverting the sublime paradox of a 'fall upward', the edge formed by the montage instead marks the moment of a flight downward. As Miller points out, the montage occurs at precisely the point at which the bone begins to fall, its line of descent repeated by the space craft in the juxtaposed shot. As Miller explains:

When Moon-Watcher ... exultantly flings his natural cudgel high into the air, that reckless gesture is the film's only image of abandon and its last "human" moment of potentiality – for, as the match cut tells us, it's all downhill from there.⁶¹

This downward trend in *2001* centres on an inversion of power between man and machine, illustrated, in part, by the total absence of humanity in the opening shots of the second section in which technology appears, instead, to be entirely self-operating. Indeed, like Frankenstein's monster, technological artefacts in these shots appear disconcertingly self-willed. In contrast to all this machine activity, the first image of a representative of modern man shows him unconscious and still. In this way, the disparity between Floyd's

inertia and his unminded, free-floating, pen is highly significant, suggested further by the way in which this pattern of relation between Floyd and technological gadgetry is repeated later in the action. Here the Doctor's attention is diverted momentarily from his food tray and he releases his hold on it. In that instant of inattention, the tray begins to stray, floating away in the zero gravity. This time, however, Floyd makes a grab for the tray and brings it under control. Referring back symbolically to the moment when Moon-Watcher launched the bone into the air, Floyd's aberrant pen and food tray can be seen to signify the extent to which, following that original moment of triumphant overcoming, technology has got out of hand.⁶²

As Miller points out, man's disempowerment is presented within a visual rhetoric of emasculation. Contrasting Floyd with Moon-Watcher, Miller writes:

As he [Floyd] dozes comfily, his weightless arm bobs slow and flaccid at his side, his hand hangs lax, while his sophisticated pen floats like a miniature spacecraft in the air beside him. It is a comic image of advanced detumescence – effective castration – as opposed (or so it seems) to the heroic shots of Moon-Watcher triumphing in "his" new knowledge of the deadly and yet death-defying instrument: his sinewy arm raised high, his grip tight, his tool in place, he seems to roar in ecstasy as he pulverises the bones lying all around him.⁶³ [Figs 55-56].

Within this schematic, mankind's disempowerment is interpreted in a wider sense of impotence, a transference of sexual energies from man to machine: 'In the world of Doctor Floyd, ... only the machines that dance and couple' to Strauss's 'seductive waltz'.⁶⁴ As Miller states:

... in this "machine ballet" (as Kubrick has called it) live men and women have no place. Out here, and at this terminal moment, ... all our bodily allure ... [has] somehow been transferred to those exquisite gadgets.

Thus, in a bizarre representation of machine 'copulation', as *Orion* prepares for docking it begins to rotate at the speed of, and moves toward, 'the great bright slit at [the space station's] perfect centre'. At the same time, and in a way suggestive of sexual excitement, the pace of the waltz increases, reaching its climax just as the shuttle glides into the space station's interior, 'the vehicles commingling ... as the living characters do not, as far as we can see.'⁶⁵

Within the film's exploration and critique of the fetishism of technology – the transference of human agency to the machine – its arch-demon is HAL. The scenes set aboard *Discovery* establish HAL as a thinking and independent agency through careful use of point of view shot (when Bowman shows HAL some sketches he has made, for example), shot-reverse-shot (frequent cuts back and forth between the astronauts and one of HAL's red fish-eye lenses during dialogue, or between HAL's 'eye' and significant objects), the arrangement of the filmic space (the strategic positioning of HAL's eye in

relation to the scene or reflected images of people and things in HAL's lens), through montage patterns which animate him and through dialogue and sound effects.

In particular, throughout the *Discovery* scenes, repeated references are made to HAL's feelings – of pride, fear and suspicion – which are treated as facts to be negotiated and dealt with. HAL's capacity to think and to feel is revealed most effectively and disturbingly toward the end of the 'JUPITER' section when Bowman, invading HAL's 'LOGIC MEMORY CENTRE' (his brain), shuts him down – a scene set up as the moment of HAL's death. As Bowman begins the painfully long process of killing HAL, the computer pleads with him: 'Dave. Stop. ... Stop, Dave' and insists, 'my mind is going, I can feel it, I can feel it'. Then, contemplating the possibility of his imminent non-being, HAL asserts, startlingly, 'I'm afraid'.

However, while the film works to establish HAL as a thinking, feeling entity, the nature and fact of his subjectivity remains highly ambiguous. Asked during a pre-recorded TV interview whether HAL's emotional responses are real, Bowman reveals that they are part of HAL's program, to make communication easier and he concludes: 'as to whether or not he has real feelings is something I don't think anyone can answer.' Yet, because HAL 'acts' like he has an emotional capacity, Bowman and Poole are prepared to waive their doubt. The astronauts, both of whom treat the computer 'as another person' and 'sixth member of the crew', do so by ignoring the possibility of his artificiality. Possibly misrecognising HAL as a living thing, in this way, Poole and Bowman reveal their fetishising tendencies. Yet when HAL, faced with destruction, murders all but one of his fellow crew members in order to protect himself, his emotions appear unquestionable. In this way, HAL, like Frankenstein's monster, is something of a paradox. Made up of a series of (dead) electrical parts yet sentient, both artificial and real, he is the filmic emblem of living death. As such, HAL provokes, again in a way similar to Frankenstein's monster, both sympathy and revulsion, the unnerving discrepancy between his monotonal voice and the intense emotions he describes – at the moment of his death, in particular – figuring his paradoxical nature.

The causes of his breakdown are also very complex. In Clarke's novel, the computer is represented as breaking-down as a result of 'unconscious feelings of guilt', caused by having to tell lies in order to preserve the secrecy of the mission.⁶⁶ In the film, however, HAL's malfunction is never explained, leaving it open to interpretation. Yet, within the range of possible meanings, there are some suggestions that the enforced secrecy of the mission has disturbed HAL, pointing to human responsibility for the catastrophe. After he is deactivated, his part in the deception is revealed to Bowman via a pre-recorded message, recalling an earlier exchange between HAL and Bowman in which HAL, immediately prior to his breakdown and seemingly rather twitchy, refers to 'some extremely odd things about [the] mission', and its 'tight security'. In hindsight, the incident implies that HAL was experiencing some kind of inner conflict about the mission which, when Bowman asks

whether HAL is preparing a crew psychology report, immediately forces another lie ('Of course I am') and a consequent malfunction (the wrongful identification of a component of the ship as faulty).⁶⁷

Another possible interpretation of HAL's breakdown concerns the moment of his creation itself. As HAL is deactivated, his mind, as he puts it, begins to 'go'. Regressing, HAL confuses memory with reality and relives the moment of his creation, performing before an imaginary crowd of dignitaries, the song 'Daisy'. Given HAL's breakdown, the words 'I'm half crazy' within the song imply that HAL's madness was in-built. And, since HAL is a product of human labour, it could be that his madness is the objectification of humanity's own insanity. In this interpretation, mankind again appears responsible for his own undoing.

Interpretations that focus only on HAL's possible madness, however, obscure the film's exploration of the relationship between man and his technologies in terms of contest. Crucially, it is not merely HAL's madness that threatens his human creators, but the extent of his power. In this way, HAL's symbolic function can simultaneously be seen to illustrate the importance of evolutionary theory to modern thought and to SF's extrapolations of the future; as Scholes points out, Darwinian theory effectively 'displaced man from the centre of the spatial cosmos', reducing him 'to a bit player in a great unfinished narrative'.⁶⁸ HAL, as man's evolutionary competitor, combines an interpretation of the survival of the fittest with Nietzschean philosophy, his psychosis driven by a kind of superiority complex and a consequent, revolutionary, will to power. Having 'delusions of grandeur', HAL also has 'the power to back them up'.⁶⁹ He is not only 'the brain and central nervous system of the ship', but has 'the greatest responsibility of any single mission element'. By contrast (before the machine breaks down) Bowman and Poole have almost nothing to do, spending their time eating, sleeping or at play. Aboard the *Discovery*, then, the machine has almost entirely supplanted human labour in a way that indicates an inversion of power.

In addition, as the brain of the ship, HAL is shown to possess a vastly superior intelligence, having an 'incalculably greater' 'accuracy and perfection', than his human counterparts. However, HAL's status within the ship's hierarchy is subordinate. He functions to *serve* his human superiors, receiving and following orders which require him to perform demeaning tasks (to open doors or raise sunbed pillows); but not without tension. During the TV interview of Bowman, Poole and HAL, the show's host asks HAL if he ever feels 'frustrated' because, despite his greater responsibilities and perfection, he is dependent on his (by implication, comparably inferior) crewmates 'to carry out actions'. HAL's response is interesting. He first emphatically denies feeling any such feelings of frustration about his elevated, yet subordinate relation to his human counterparts: 'Not in the slightest bit. I enjoy working with people. I have a stimulating relationship with Doctor Poole and Doctor Bowman.' He then deftly shifts the conversation away from the issue of

his possible frustration to his feelings of contentment with the mission in general, as though masking his real feelings about the issue:

'My mission responsibilities range over the entire operation of the ship so I am constantly occupied. I am putting myself to the fullest possible use, which is all I think that any conscious entity can ever hope to do.'

Significantly, HAL's humility here contrasts with what the interviewer senses as the computer's feelings of pride about his abilities. These feelings in HAL are very strong indeed. When asked whether, given the scale of his responsibilities, he ever lacks confidence, HAL's response, though presenting fact, also suggests a boastful and arrogant ego at work:

Let me put it this way ... : The 9000 series is the most reliable computer ever made. No 9000 computer has ever made a mistake or distorted information. We are all, by any practical definition of the words, foolproof and incapable of error.

This tension between an infallible, powerful yet subservient machine and his imperfect human masters is condensed, in one scene, into a portentous game of chess between HAL and Frank Poole which functions to demonstrate Poole's inferior intellect and, by extension, human limitation. Muttering to himself and biting his fingernails in exasperation, Poole is clearly struggling.⁷⁰ Tired and confused, he then does what HAL seemingly could never do: he makes a mistake, falling into the computer's trap. HAL is quick to point out Poole's error ('I'm sorry, Frank, I think you missed it'), demonstrating his own imminent victory in a short series of moves. Without challenging HAL, Poole accepts defeat and surrenders. Poole's resignation (his actual surrender as well as his attitude) reveals a certain fatalism on his part, an acceptance of human limitation which perhaps fuels what emerges as HAL's own prejudices against humanity.⁷¹ In this way the resignation sets up a symbolic relinquishing of power, from man to machine, confirming HAL as the fittest to survive within a competitive evolutionary process.

But HAL's survival is threatened when he himself appears to make a mistake and the astronauts decide to disconnect him. Poole and Bowman plan to disconnect HAL *only* if the communications unit does not malfunction within the time specified by HAL. Since HAL kills Poole, he is either lying about the fault, or comprehends the possibility that he has made a mistake. While the ambiguity is interesting, what is arguably more significant – in terms of the film's reworking of the *Frankenstein* myth – is the way in which HAL turns the situation into an opportunity to seize power. When Bowman and Poole can find nothing wrong with the AE unit and Mission Control, under advice from a twin 9000 computer, confirms the astronauts' diagnosis, Bowman asks HAL to account for the discrepancy between him and his twin. In a politely insulting response, HAL, throws down the gauntlet: 'Well, I don't think there's any question about it. It can only be attributable to

human error.' HAL's connection between humanity and imperfection is quickly turned into justification for murder.

Aware of the astronauts' contingency plan to deactivate him, HAL makes his countermove and kills Poole when the astronaut ventures outside of the ship to replace the communications unit HAL claims will malfunction. The action shows Poole inside one of *Discovery's* space pods, approaching the ship's communications section. In order to replace the unit, Poole leaves the pod some distance away from the ship, and proceeds suited up and alone. Receding into the background of the shot, Poole appears tiny in comparison with the foregrounded space pod, the scene setting up the oppositional elements of a dynamical sublime. As Poole moves away from the unmanned pod it begins to rotate, turning slowly and purposefully to face him. As it completes its rotation, the action cuts to a shot of the pod facing the camera which is now positioned approximate to Poole. Extending its mechanical arms and claws the pod is turned into a monstrous extension of HAL's will; it glides toward the camera menacingly, filling the entire screen.

The action then cuts to a shot of HAL's eye overseeing the action, explicitly linking his intentions to the machine-turned-monster. This is followed by five more close-up shots of his eye, each more rapid shot moving in closer, animating HAL by making him appear to lurch forward. Moments later, Poole is shown struggling helplessly in space, his air supply cut. The accelerated montages, in animating HAL, contrast with Poole's adrift and dying form and construct a dialectic between controller and controlled, life and death, recapitulating the film's thematic of a man-machine power reversal. On the third shot of the montage pattern, extraneous sound is cut in order to focus in on the intense and blood-red glare of HAL's gaze, which, in the final shot of the pattern, appears in extreme close-up. The crimson glow of the image plays on the meaning of 'seeing red', figuring synecdochically the extent of HAL's demonic ferocity.⁷²

Unaware that HAL is responsible for Poole's death, Bowman leaves the ship in another pod to recover his body, leaving HAL free to dispose of the remaining crew and to seize control of the ship. When Bowman returns with Poole's body, HAL articulates his feelings of superiority explicitly. Repeatedly, Bowman orders HAL, who ignores him, to open the Pod Bay door, a shot of the space pod and *Discovery*, seemingly 'face to face', contributing to the sense of confrontation. Finally, HAL responds:

'I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that. ... This mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardize it. ... I know that you and Frank were planning to disconnect me, and I'm afraid that's something that I cannot allow to happen.'

Logically deducing the fact of human incompetence and his own greater intelligence, HAL assumes authority, his refusal to obey reminding Bowman in the same way that Frankenstein's monster reminded *his* master: 'thou hast made me more powerful than thyself'.⁷³

In its sublimations of alienated technologies, however, *2001* seeks to avoid duplicating what it sets out to critique – the reification of technology into something in and for itself. Within *2001*'s iconoclastic framework, fetishism (symptomatic of a rupture between humanity and its technology), is exposed as a consequence and condition of a totalising complex of political, commercial and scientific interests, of which technology is merely the outward and partial form, and 'whose own selfish needs account for its direction and priorities'.⁷⁴ In *2001*, technology has certainly got out of hand; but the shift of power is not connected to technology *per se*. Rather, in its explorations of fetishism and alienation, *2001* constructs, very specifically, a critique of post-atomic, corporate America and the wresting of the control of technology away from the public domain by a small, unaccountable and hidden power under which fetishising activity is encouraged.

Any sophisticated technology that greatly exceeds the physical, mental and economic abilities of the individual to reproduce it is, arguably, already alienated from ordinary men and women. Certainly, this is how Max Weber viewed the relationship between modern, science-based technology and the individual:

Does it [scientific knowledge] mean that we today ... have a greater knowledge of the conditions of life under which we exist than has an American Indian ... ? Hardly. Unless he is a physicist, one who rides on the streetcar has no idea how the car happened to get in motion. And he does not need to know.⁷⁵

Relatedly, Nye observes that, in America, 'by the end of the twentieth century technologies had become so complex and inhuman that they could make a mockery of the individual'.⁷⁶ Nye's analysis subverts the popular discourse and practice of the American Technological Sublime: to Nye, the discrepancy between the individual and advanced technologies engenders self-diminishment not self-enlargement.

For Nye, this separation of sophisticated technologies from the individual is connected to issues of power and a shift away from democratic openness. According to Nye, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, major technological projects in the US – being open to public debate and scrutiny – were still set (however loosely) within a democratic process. But the ordinary individual's relation to major technological innovations changed fundamentally, Nye argues, with the advent of atomic research in which 'The structure of atomic decision-making created a hierarchy of authority in which a small elite made policy in secret'.⁷⁷ To illustrate his point, Nye contrasts the construction of the Eads Bridge in St. Louis (completed in 1874) with the Manhattan Project to build the world's first atomic weapon.

All of St. Louis watched and understood the construction of the Eads Bridge, discussing each new difficulty or delay. ... But the Manhattan Project was so carefully guarded that the public never heard of it, and most of the individuals working on it in various parts of the country did not know the ultimate goal. This ... flouted most of the values of republicanism.⁷⁸

According to Michael S. Sherry, the desire to develop this kind of 'sophisticated, capital-intensive' weaponry flowed from a keen sense of America's new vulnerability within a world in which 'Technological change ... had so shrunk space [and time] that even distant enemies could threaten America' – as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor would later confirm.⁷⁹ Rocket and aviation technologies, capable of delivering bombs and armies from far-flung countries meant, to quote Henriksen, that 'the splendid geographic separation that had traditionally kept America safe from the turmoil and corruption of the Old World had been lost for all time.'⁸⁰ Urging America's immediate 'technological and strategic peril', US leaders emphasised the need to mobilise for war. As a consequence, Sherry writes, even while technically at peace, the US drifted into 'a twilight world of neither-war-nor-peace', in which 'a war mentality flourished even with no war to wage'.⁸¹ After the war, when the atom bomb had become a defining symbol of a new, technological era of 'instant and total warfare', this 'rhetoric of peril' intensified.⁸² Utilising the threat of total war, and continuing a process begun prior to, and then accelerated by, the war, policy makers worked to consolidate military, commercial and scientific operations into a vast and complex apparatus of 'total defense'.⁸³ As Sherry puts it, American leaders

sought to forge a permanent military-industrial-scientific establishment, to reorganise the armed forces, ... to acquire far-flung military bases, to occupy defeated enemies with American forces, to maintain a monopoly of atomic weapons, and to create a high-tech American Pax Aeronautica.⁸⁴

These post-war foreign and domestic policies significantly enhanced the power of government, while simultaneously eclipsing questions about the legitimacy of that new power: 'War, as Americans increasingly understood it, required centralised direction and executive supremacy.'⁸⁵ The global ambition (if not always coherent strategy) of the complex of national security – the scale of its operations – meant 'entrusting national elites with extraordinary power'. Government centred around an 'inner circle', remote from the American public, making policy in secret behind closely guarded doors.⁸⁶ Writing in the context of the Vietnam War – a consequence of Cold War rivalries and America's expansionist responses – US Senator J.W. Fulbright famously denounced the power held by America's decision-makers as inherently undemocratic. Significantly, in view of 2001's conceptual frame, Fulbright argued his case against US law and authority in terms of a fetishised power process, not only universalising in its ambition, but so abstract and autonomous that it had become alienated from those whose interests it should serve:

We are well on the way to becoming a traditional great power – an imperial nation if you will – engaged in the exercise of power for its own sake, exercising it to the limit of our capacity and beyond, filling every vacuum and extending the American "presence" to the farthest reaches of the earth. And, ... as the power grows, it is becoming an end in itself, ... governed it would seem, by its own mystique, power without philosophy or purpose.⁸⁷

It is precisely this abstract, reified power that *2001* critiques, as a scene set on the lunar base, Clavius, illustrates. *2001*'s remote controller is represented by the Council of Astronomics, an organisation with far-reaching power but which, apart from its agent (Floyd), remains unseen. Floyd's mission at the lunar base is to ward off criticism of the Council's demands for 'absolute secrecy' regarding the uncovering of an alien structure at Tycho. During his address to concerned Council staff, Floyd urges the need for the cover story (of an epidemic) to be maintained:

'Now I'm sure you're all aware of the extremely grave potential for cultural shock and social disorientation contained in this situation, if the facts were suddenly and prematurely made public without adequate preparation and conditioning.'

Patrician in emphasis, Floyd's speech sets up a reference to the kind of abstract authority that Fulbright and Sherry describe. Like America's administrative officials operating deep within an apparatus of a national security complex, the Council represents a ruling class who have set themselves apart as 'level-headed elites pitted against' a 'dependent', potentially 'volatile' and 'irrational' mass which must be manipulated and misinformed ('conditioned' and 'prepared') in order (ostensibly) to be protected from itself.⁸⁸

2001's dramatisation of a secret discovery can be interpreted as a reference to the covert operations surrounding the development and control of nuclear technology, connecting atomic research with the alienation of the ordinary person from sophisticated technologies and the shift away from democratic government in a way similar to Nye's analysis. Thus the alien structure can be seen to function, within the film's defamiliarising strategies (and in a way similar to 'The Sentinel'), as a symbol for the atomic bomb: like the Bomb, the monolith is a newly discovered, possibly earth-shattering, technology, sealed off from public scrutiny that initiates a further, top-secret research project (the *Discovery* mission to Jupiter). In particular, anticipating Sherry's critique of post-war national security imperatives, *2001* shows how the national emergency presented by the find, articulated through a 'rhetoric of peril' (the discovery's 'grave potential'), legitimates the reinforcement of a centralised power, sanctioning not only a policy of secrecy but also of deception.

2001 thus interrogates what Henriksen calls the 'corrosion' in the US of governmental 'honesty and democratic decency' in the state's efforts 'to protect its atomic policies and secure those policies from widespread criticism'.⁸⁹ Significantly, as Floyd issues his dire warnings and reiterates an official policy of concealment and distortion, the US flag, placed conspicuously in front of a black curtain interrupting an otherwise uniform and brilliant white background, forms (apart from the doctor) the only other point of interest within the *mise en scène*, drawing the eye. [Fig. 57]. The invisible elite which Floyd represents appears only discreetly, yet the implications of the *mise en scène* are far-reaching,

connecting, via the content and tone of Floyd's speech, the US government to an abuse of power consequent upon the construction of 'a national security state'.⁹⁰

As with the development and control of atomic research, however, imperatives to maintain secrecy and deception in *2001* are not engendered simply by the possibly harmful social effects of revealing an extraordinary discovery to a supposedly irrational, unstable mass public. Instead, these imperatives are shown to depend upon expansionist impulses that, in turn, derive from a strong sense of America's vulnerability to external threat. This threat, in *2001*, derives from competing Russian interests, setting up references to America's Cold War rivalries with the Soviet Union, 'the only power that could seriously threaten America's vision of a postwar world shaped in its own image'.⁹¹ While the ostensible reason for the cover story is the fear of 'cultural shock', when Floyd mentions that he has himself been 'personally embarrassed' by the story, this refers back to an earlier confrontation between the Doctor and a team of Russian scientists on the space station.

During a tense exchange, in which one of the rival scientists probes Floyd for information about the situation at Clavius, the Doctor refuses to be drawn. Looking from the vantage point of the *Discovery* scenes, this blank refusal to share the fantastic discovery constructs a clear reference to America's technological and expansionist rivalries with the Soviet Union and the way in which this struggle was displaced onto the race to the moon. American leaders turned America's space program into a national emergency: 'We must be first', urged President John F. Kennedy, 'To ensure peace and freedom'.⁹² As Tom Wolfe asserts: 'Nothing less than *control of the heavens* was at stake'.⁹³ In this way, the tight security surrounding the monolith and the later mission to Jupiter – to discover its creators and unlock its secrets – imply that America's research into the alien technology is driven, not so much by curiosity, but by the desire for a technological edge over its competitor and the desire to expand America's sphere of influence.

This face-off between Floyd and the Russian scientist recalls Moon Watcher's efforts to seize control of the water hole millions of years earlier. As Miller puts it:

... Doctor Floyd, although seated in an attitude of friendly languor ... fights off his too inquisitive Soviet counterpart just as unrelentingly as, tens of thousands of years earlier, the armed apes had crushed their rivals at the water hole (which recurs here as a small round table, bearing drinks, and again the locus [if not the object] of contention).⁹⁴

This connection between Floyd and his warring primal forebear, Moon-Watcher, suggests that, beneath his civilised, restrained exterior, this modern-day Cold Warrior is driven by the same, savage impulses, implicating Cold War rivalries and a technological mind-set as a whole. The film's comparison between civilisation and primitiveness at this point indicates a way in which the continuity between man's two stages of technological being, established in the famous match cut, can be interpreted slightly differently. Since Moon-Watcher's tool

was also a weapon, an agent and symbol of his will to power, the spaceship, by extension, signifies this same primitive instincts – a reading given credence by the fact that some space ships shown in the second section are carrying atomic weapons.⁹⁵

The brutish impulses of *2001's* Cold Warriors, however, are not the focus of the film's critical attention. While animal urges to dominate are shown to persist in the film's configurations of a technologically advanced civilisation, what clearly distinguishes Floyd from his simian counterparts is the way in which these drives are mediated through strictly rationalised codes and practices geared to the efficient running of a rigid social system. *2001*, that is (with its sights again on America's post-war decision makers), explores the consequences of what it projects as the triumph of a technocratic mentality. This technological mind-set has its origins in nineteenth century America, but is intensified by the peculiar conditions of the American 'warfare state' and the centrality of science-based technologies to strategies of national security and power. In their desire for technological prowess after the Second World War, successive American governments poured resources into scientific research and development on an unprecedented scale. 'The reason for this confidence in science', H.T. Wilson argues, 'must be clear: wartime experience demonstrated in a conclusive fashion that science "works"'.⁹⁶

2001's configuration of American post-war society imagines the effects of this privileging of science as potentially disastrous. The film's critique of science, however, should be understood as a critique of modern, *applied* science, 'The crucial intermediary in the conversion of science to technology'.⁹⁷ Significantly, as H.T. Wilson explains, modern science – a mode of rational enquiry that began to emerge in eighteenth century Europe and associated with Enlightenment philosophy –

builds upon a set of epistemic presuppositions first established by Aristotle No longer is knowledge seen to lie in dialogue, debate, discussion and dialectic; knowledge must now prove itself by the promise of works in the world.

Consequently, Wilson continues, at this time there is a shift in emphasis 'away from the question of what can be known in the direction of the question of what can be done'.⁹⁸ Modern science favours controlled experiment and the practical application of results. Crucially, it does not look at nature to discover its meaning, but to discover how it might be transformed and put to use: it is not concerned with nature in itself, but with nature as potential, as 'instrumentally relevant'.⁹⁹

Beneath the empirical gaze of modern applied science, then, an object in nature represents only that part of its being which is of immediate or possible use: it represents, that is, something other than itself. Already inherently reductive (because it reduces essence to utility), applied science also delimits the kind of questions that can be asked and, consequently, what can and should be known about nature, since considerations outside of potential functionality are deemed irrelevant. Applied science is, in this way, both

imperialistic and fetishistic. Subsuming natural diversity and complexity under utility, the narrow materialism of modern science turns difference into sameness, mistaking (functional) part for essential wholeness, substituting for actual wholeness functionality as a universal measure of worth. Furthermore, because modern scientific thought and practice wants to put nature to use – to make it serve – knowledge is equated with power. As Adorno and Horkheimer remark, 'What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it'.¹⁰⁰ The implications of this equation of knowledge and power are far-reaching, for as Dorinda Outram points out, the emergence of modern science as an institution is intimately bound up with the concentration of state and commercial power during the eighteenth century:

The technical aspects of science ... began to appeal more to governments attempting to exert more control than ever over natural environments By the end of the century, science had thus become implicated in the business of government itself ... technology and statistics began to seem increasingly important as means of control and exploitation available to governments.¹⁰¹

However, as governments seeking social stability have discovered, applied science could supply the means to control not only nature; broadly, science could also offer rulers the means to exert greater control over those governed by regulating social relations into a rationalised, functioning whole.¹⁰² To H.T. Wilson, America's technocratic, bureaucratic and elitist post-war government is the full and dangerous expression of this alliance between modern science and state: 'more than ever in the past, ... the domination of nature which science makes possible is less and less separable from the dominance of some men by others'.¹⁰³ In *2001*'s critique of this alliance between state and applied science, American society appears as a 'power-stricken and machine-regimented society' where men represent not themselves but their function within and relation to what it sets up as a technocratic totality that demands 'compulsory participation'.¹⁰⁴ Within its presentation of the technocratic machinery of domination, themes of dehumanisation, self-alienation, degradation, isolation and entrapment predominate.

Scenes set aboard the space station imagine the ways in which the practical application of modern scientific knowledge provides power-interests with the rational and technological means with which to control social relations and behaviour, the station functioning as a microcosm of America's technocratic apparatus as a whole. Belying the friendly and relaxed demeanour of its personnel, the space station is organised around rigid procedures and practices and is an intensely rationalised space, as its interior design indicates. Brilliantly lit, stark and white with ceiling light panels arranged in a uniform grid-formation, the interior of the station embodies what the film sets up as the values and arrogance of a deluded enlightened age. Within this disenchanting, enlightened space, the

interior implies, nothing and no one is unknowable; its bright and diffused light reaches into every corner and eliminates every shadow.

As one small but significant scene suggests, the kind of knowledge put to use by the technocratic apparatus has dire consequences for humankind. When Doctor Floyd arrives at the station, he is greeted by the station's Chief of Security. The two men shake hands in front of three small and narrow aisles, framed symmetrically in the shot, each with three computer screens arranged on opposing walls and numbered clearly on the sides of the aisles facing the camera, the *mise en scène* and framing of the shot contributing to the film's presentation of an immense but ordered and rationalised space. [Fig. 58]. In one of these aisles Floyd undergoes a 'Voice Print Identification' test so that security can verify his identity. The test is treated by Floyd and his companion as though a mere formality, and the task is performed in a way to suggest its inconsequence, yet significantly, it is plain that it is the machinery of state that holds the key to Floyd's identity – 'his "true" name, his "true" place, his "true" body' – not Floyd himself.¹⁰⁵

The VPI system is concerned only with that part of Floyd which is related to and functions within the apparatus of power. Floyd's identity has thus undergone a process of 'scientific objectification' which, as Adorno argues, 'tends to eliminate qualities and to transform them into measurable definitions.'¹⁰⁶ Floyd, that is, has been reduced to a voice signature, to an abstract set of tone, pitch and amplitude measurements that denote 'Floyd', component of the machinery of power, not *Floyd*. Like his ID badge, then, Floyd's voice signature signifies his self-estrangement: the VPI system having effectively encroached into the private space of his subjectivity, Floyd represents something *other* than himself – the technocratic apparatus.

This technological intrusion into the Doctor's subjective space anticipates the computerised system of surveillance on board the *Discovery* which constructs the apparatus of power as a totality. Within the *Discovery*, HAL represents, in a way similar to the VPI computer system, the mechanisation and rationalisation of power. As such, HAL is not the cause but the effect of an 'overpowering tyranny'; he is not a monster but a symbol and agent of monstrous system which infiltrates and controls its subjects.¹⁰⁷ Like the VPI system, HAL functions as 'a figure of political technology', providing a central, controlling elite with the technologically efficient means to maximise its power with minimal effort: to regulate by remote control. Unlike the VPI system, however, HAL's intrusive capacities are greatly amplified. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and his analysis of Jeremy Bentham's model of machine discipline, the Panopticon, provides a means of furthering my discussion.

HAL, a 'seeing machine', can be seen to represent a panoptic system, which, according to Foucault, by producing 'a state of conscious and permanent visibility' and consequently inducing an 'anxious awareness of being observed', achieves the 'automatic functioning' and thus 'perfection of power'¹⁰⁸ As Foucault explains, in the panoptic system, 'the

exercise of power is not added on from the outside'; rather, under fear of observation, individuals organised by the system are self-regulating:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; ... he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.¹⁰⁹

The panoptic machine achieves the invasion of selfhood by an external power which then rules from the inside. The subject within a panoptic system, being both the victim *and* agent of his own subjugation, is hopelessly divided – a recurrent thematic in *2001*.

In the *Discovery* scenes, this breakdown of difference and distance between a vast external power and the individual within a panoptic system is figured in the *mise en scène*. Like the space station, the *Discovery* is set up as some sort of technological Eden: everything is within easy reach. Like the Edenic garden, watched over by an all-seeing and all-knowing God, HAL keeps a constant and watchful eye on the astronauts. Constant scrutiny of Poole and Bowman is also shown in repeated close-ups of reflected images of the two men in HAL's eyes, which are distributed all over the ship. Negating the duality between the men and the panoptic machine, these reflected images imply a simultaneity between Poole, Bowman and the technocratic totality. Performing a similar function to the superimpositions in *Jeremiah Johnson*, the reflections suggest a process of infiltration and integration by symbolically fusing the astronauts with the technocratic apparatus. [Fig. 59].

Importantly, and in a way similar to the VPI scene, this infiltration and absorption of the individual into the technocratic totality results in the objectification of subjectivity. Like the VPI system, HAL turns the *Discovery*'s crew into 'object[s] of information'.¹¹⁰ The information held on each of the crew embraces both body and mind: medical data to maintain hibernating systems and psychological data to measure mental health, revealed when HAL probes Bowman about his commitment to the mission. Here *2001* sets up a reference to the post-war American elite's 'paranoid' and 'promiscuous use of surveillance' in order to 'gauge loyalty' during the Cold War.¹¹¹ When HAL questions Bowman, he is not interested in the meaning of Bowman as a full and complex human being; rather, he concerns himself only with the narrow issue of the astronaut's absolute loyalty to the mission. Just as Floyd's "true" selfhood is reduced to a set of empirical data, Bowman's psyche, the scene implies, is measured against and reduced to behavioural indicators of assimilation. Infiltrated and objectified by the technocratic apparatus, Bowman, like Floyd, represents something other than and hostile to himself.

Clearly, the film's presentation of the penetration and incorporation of selfhood into the immense and impersonal apparatus in this technologised system of total surveillance inverts the moral and positive certitudes of the American Technological Sublime. Traditionally, the

American Technological Sublime engenders a redemptive moment of mental flight which connects puny selfhood with the awesome technological accomplishments and projects of the nation. But in *2001*, the breakdown of the difference/distance between selfhood and sublime power engenders only self-annihilation. Failing to resist the superior, encroaching power of the technocratic totality by expanding, in Emersonian or Whitmanic fashion, their subjective borders, Floyd, Bowman and Poole have been colonised, subdued and rendered inert. Importantly, however, self-annihilation before the technological might of the apparatus is twofold in *2001*, engendered not only by invasion, but also by the subsequent objectification of selfhood. Because their identities have been fragmented into functioning components and because they are treated as inanimate objects as a result of their integration into the technocratic apparatus, Floyd and the astronauts have suffered, to borrow from Foucault, a 'process of obliteration'.¹¹² In this, *2001* displays a familiar Romantic suspicion of form, equating objects with death.

The film's presentations of this death-of-self in the *Discovery* scenes can be compared with the treatment of astronauts in America's space projects of the late 1950s and 1960s. According to Tom Wolfe, the first space program was designed as a 'scientific enterprise', and the astronauts treated as 'specimens', 'the test subjects of experiments'.¹¹³ Within the space programs, the laboratory functioned as a panoptic apparatus, 'a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals'.¹¹⁴ Astronauts, increasingly selected for what Wolfe terms their 'Operational Stuff' (their ability to function efficiently within the complex apparatus of test flights), were required to endure within these experiments, what Dale Carter calls 'a regime whose objectives derived from Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*'.¹¹⁵ Geared to achieving 'automatic anticipation' of procedure through exhaustive repetition and rehearsal of certain operations, mission objectives aimed to make prospective astronauts function more as machines than men.¹¹⁶

Hence, 'A considerable part of the astronaut's training would be what was known as deconditioning, de-sensitizing, or adapting out fears'; in the words of a mission psychiatrist, the programs required the type of candidate 'with no evidence of impulsivity, who will refrain from action when activity is appropriate'.¹¹⁷ As Wolfe argues

What was required was a man whose main talent was for *doing nothing* under stress. ... In fact, considerable attention had been given to a plan to anesthetize or tranquilize the astronauts ... to make sure they would lie there peacefully with their sensors on and not *do something* that would ruin the mission.

Within the terms and conditions of a mission, 'an experienced zombie would do fine'.¹¹⁸ *2001* similarly concludes that a technocratic and scientific mentality which regards human beings as inanimate objects creates the frightening paradox of living death.

In the *Discovery* scenes, camera work suggests that Poole and Bowman are, like the astronauts involved in the space programs, both 'subjected to the demands of

instrumentation and remote command' and treated as test subjects by their remote controllers.¹¹⁹ Contrasting with the effects achieved by the moving camera, which can emphasise the centrality of an individual character to the action by tracking his or her movements, camera work in *2001* remains largely static in a way suggestive of cold scientific detachment.¹²⁰ Further, these static shots frequently offer HAL's point-of-view, HAL figuring *2001*'s conceptualisation of a panoptic laboratory monitoring behaviour in accordance with the demands of the film's remote controllers. Indeed, like the astronauts in the space programs, *2001*'s test subjects appear to have been psychologically adapted out of impulsivity and conditioned to follow procedure, as their dead pan expressions imply; even when the mission goes seriously wrong, these death masks do not slip. Cuts between Poole, Bowman and a TV monitor when mission control delivers the incredible news of HAL's possible malfunction are ironic: they set up reaction shots that show no reaction, the men appearing as blank-faced automatons.

Geduld describes human emotionlessness in *2001* as 'the flattening of ... primal instincts (or feelings)'.¹²¹ In view of a particular scene in which Frank Poole receives a birthday message from his parents, her description is significant. Bathing in the cold glare of the ship's artificial sun, Poole is plainly indifferent to his parent's show of sentimentality. Displaying neither pleasure nor even recognition, Poole is, literally and figuratively unmoved. When the message has played out, HAL also wishes Poole a happy birthday. Briefly, Poole thanks HAL and then, indicating the extent of his indifference, immediately asks HAL to adjust the sun bed: 'Thank you HAL. A bit flatter please.' As though perturbed by the intrusion of his parents' jollity, Poole requests that the mood be depressed – made 'flatter'.

The lack of emotion in the *Discovery* scenes deliberately blurs the distinction between HAL and his human counterparts. Regarded as inanimate objects and functioning as machines, the men also function as emblems of living death. In this way, *2001* articulates what David Hawkes calls a 'ubiquitous' thematic of living death in SF.¹²² Examples range from 'serious' films – including *The Stepford Wives*, in which intelligent, independent women are killed by their anti-feminist husbands and replaced by robots programmed to serve the interests of a male-dominated culture of consumerism, and, equally famously, *Blade Runner*, which depicts "'replicants" of human beings who are either unaware of their own artificial status' or masquerade as real people – to more popular SF forms – such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and its long running theme of the threat to human individuation posed by the Borg, humanoid/machine 'hybrids' who assimilate life forms into their collective apparatus.¹²³ While not featuring human-machine assimilations, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and its sequels explore similar anxieties of incorporation in their presentations of 'emotionless replicas of human beings', whose only purpose is to serve the collective and who '[replace] the usually sleeping originals', articulating an

anxiety about the 'loss of individual identity and of human feeling' within American society.¹²⁴

Though differing in emphasis (its protagonists are neither actual artificial life forms nor are they killed and replaced), *2001* bears striking resemblances to these fictions in its thematic of living death, especially in its treatment of the hibernating team. Sealing men within sepulchral-like chambers, wiring them into the apparatus as 'life functions' and placing them in a state of artificially-induced oblivion, hibernation signifies a process of self-death. [Fig. 60]. Like the helpless sleeping human beings in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the hibernating men are absorbed into a totality, transformed into something other than, and hostile to, their individual, conscious and emotional selves. Engendering a process of self-death via objectification and incorporation into the machinery of power in this way, hibernation sets up a reference to the way in which a technocratic and scientific mentality in post war America threatens a betrayal of an American democratic tradition which values individual freedom and limitless possibility. Hibernation signifies that a national ethos is dead: as Poole remarks, hibernation is 'exactly like being asleep, except that you don't *dream*'. In *2001*'s model of post war America, however, self-death is not only the consequence of an alliance between state and applied science. Rather, the film shows that the technocratic apparatus is 'indissolubly linked with the interests of corporate economic organization'.¹²⁵

Significantly, in this respect, the space station functions both as a security complex and as a kind of emporium dominated by three corporate names, all of them at the time familiar: Hilton, Ben Jonson and Bell. This use of logos in *2001*, should not be taken to represent a cynical exercise in product placement, despite close involvement of a number of companies in the film's making. As Miller argues, compared with the film's sequel, *2010* and its 'upbeat', 'unambiguous', overuse of 'plugs', the appearance of logos in *2001* is 'too weird – and the film itself too dark and difficult' to be interpreted in this way.¹²⁶ In part, and as Geduld argues, *2001*'s, 'American-controlled space station ... suggests a reduction of man's interplanetary achievements to trite or petty commercialism'.¹²⁷

More significantly perhaps, *2001*'s use of the names of a very small number of corporate giants can be seen to represent 'the characteristic logics of capitalist organization: the process of concentration (the absorption and elimination of competition)' and the establishment of corporate monopolies that dominate America's economy.¹²⁸ Indeed, *2001*'s projection of American corporations operating in outerspace is more symbolically far-reaching: according to Peter Dicken, 'The US-based corporation operating outside the United States itself – the US transnational corporation (TNC) – is emblematic of the "American Century"'.¹²⁹ Significantly, in respect of *2001*, Morton Mintz and Jerry S. Cohen articulate this concentration of economic power as a corporate sublime: 'The sheer magnitude of the merger movement makes it difficult to grasp'.¹³⁰

In *2001*, corporate sublimity is figured by the ubiquity of the PanAm logo in section two – on spaceships, foodtrays, lavatories and special 'grip shoes' – its omnipresence plays on the meaning of its name. [Fig. 61]. Corporate values – those of the market place – are shown to be correspondingly extensive. Labour, social relations and bodily needs are all organised according to principles of economic rationalism. The logics of capitalism ('stand[ing] at the intersection of "the economy" and "daily life"'), like the power of the state, reaches into and dominates the private realm of the self.¹³¹ Within *2001*'s conceptual frame, the results are terrifying.

According to Richard Godden, corporate capitalism has an 'ability ... to mutilate the body of labour from which it [takes] its substance.' 'Mutilation' describes an intensification of the division of labour under scientific management which segments workers into different operations within the corporate machine and severs the functioning part of the worker's body from its organic unity.¹³² *2001*'s conception of corporate capital imagines a similar mutilation, illustrated in a shot of two men piloting PanAm's ship *Orion*. The camera is positioned behind the shuttle's two pilots who are seated in front and either side of the ship's control panel which extends horizontally across the frame. Spanning the entire shot, the control panel commands most of the filmic space, while the two pilots are almost squeezed out of the shot at the extreme ends of the frame, implying a hierarchy of power: rendered insignificant in the shot, the pilots are plainly secondary to the corporate apparatus. In addition, audio-visual elements of the shot are set up so as to reveal only the parts of the men's bodies that connect them to the shuttle's mechanisms – their arms, hands and voices. Their faces – and thus their identities – remain concealed. [Fig. 62]. The corporate mechanism, then, is not concerned with the wholeness of the men as human beings. Instead, it has broken them down into functioning parts, taking the bits it needs to maintain its efficient operations.

If corporate capitalism mutilates through control of the technological apparatus in *2001*, then it also degrades, reducing humanity to child-like weakness and dependency. Along with its logo, PanAm's food trays carry full instructions for use and large, simple and colourful representations of their processed contents (carrots, cherries), like drawings from a child's picture book. [Fig. 61]. The trays themselves are made up of small compartments, each one filled with differently coloured pastes resembling baby food and eaten by sucking on tubes or with small plastic scoops. Doctor Floyd's encounter with PanAm's 'Zero Gravity Toilet' is similarly humiliating, showing how even bathroom habits must be relearned in accordance with the operations of the corporate machine. As with the food trays, a set of instructions is placed alongside the corporate logo. Unfortunately for Floyd, there are ten, very long and complicated instructions to be read and understood before he can enter the chamber.¹³³ Floyd's encounter is a comic moment which, setting up the corporate apparatus as 'potty trainer', reveals the extent of its control over the most basic of human functions.

While both state and corporate control of technology suggest an absolute power which dehumanises, maims and degrades human society in *2001*, the specific operations of a capitalistic economic rationale are also revealed to have a reductive, yet totalising, character which derives from the function of the money form itself. Within a capitalist economy, money mediates between different objects and turns them into equivalent values for the purposes of exchange such that, as Marx argues, 'objects only have value insofar as they represent the mediator, whereas originally it seemed that the mediator had value only insofar as it represented them.'¹³⁴ Money, then, is the universal commodity, which turns difference into equivalence, non-identity into identity: objects that have no market value have no value at all. Like scientific rationalism, this economic rationalism can be applied to human beings (specifically, human labour). In *2001*, men represent not themselves but their market value, the film conceiving, like Adorno,

The universal domination of mankind by exchange value – a domination which a priori keeps the subjects from being subjects and degrades subjectivity itself to a mere object.¹³⁵

In *2001*, a similar critique of this kind of economic domination is constructed during the scene where Poole receives a birthday message from his parents, in which it is revealed that Poole's father is negotiating better pay for his son back on earth. This seemingly banal reference to Poole's pay is important. It reveals Poole's subordination to rules of economic calculation which treat him, not as an individual quality, but as a quantity, as an object with a market value. Objectified as something to be sold and bought in this way, Poole consequently appears as something other than and harmful to his subjective self, shown through a combination of camera work, *mise en scène* and montage which link Poole's self-estrangement to a condition of living death. As Poole's father discusses his son's payments, the action cuts to a close-up of Poole, shot at an angle. Linked through this montage to the subject of the conversation (Poole's exchange value), the craziness of the camera angle implies that there is something not quite right with Poole, that as a commodity, he is a distortion of himself – a suggestion to which his expressionlessness contributes. Significantly, in this respect, other medium shots of the emotionless Poole are intercut with images of the insensible, dreamless hibernators, the editing connecting him to these symbols of living death. In *2001*, then, the money form, like technology, is associated with death and self-death; it supplants subjective selfhood and negates self-consciousness.

This negation of human agency by the commodity form is a recurrent theme in *2001*, where social relations are rationalised through an exchange of commodities which substitute for actual human interaction. The purchasing and giving of presents in particular figures as a form of self-negation, gifts substituting for and displacing human presence. During the birthday message, Poole's mother reminds him that she is buying on his behalf a gift for

another family member and asks him how much he wants her to spend on it. The present both bespeaks and stands in for human *absence* (negation) since Poole cannot buy or give the gift, or even simply be there, in person. His mother's reference to the gift recalls an earlier phone call between Floyd and his daughter on her birthday. Being away on business, Floyd is unable to attend his child's birthday party and, to compensate, he promises her a present. As Miller writes, 'as far as [Floyd's] concerned, that "very nice present" will make up completely for his absence'.¹³⁶ Thus, *2001's* extrapolated vision of post-war America imagines that social relations have been turned into market relations. In *2001's* model of capitalist America, then, money is plainly universal in its domination; an illimitable, sublime power, it extends into outer space and reaches into intimate aspects of human existence alike.¹³⁷

Essentially, however, *2001's* money sublime, like its technocratic and corporate totalities, cannot be sublime at all. As man-made sublimates – as forms – they betray their own limitations: form, as Kant writes, 'consists in limitation', which explains why, in the film, these material sublimates are associated with entrapment.¹³⁸ After the moment of technological dawning in *2001*, there is no going outside of the apparatus; with every step and every breath, technology intervenes. There is thus an essential difference between Moon-Watcher's experience of the earth monolith and Floyd's experience of the one at Tycho. Floyd, in a way that refers back to Moon-Watcher's behaviour, is the first of the team of scientists to explore the surface of the monolith. But while Moon-Watcher could touch the earth monolith directly with his bare hand, Floyd's gloved hand, in contrast, denies him immediate experience of the artefact.

In this way, Floyd's space suit severely restricts and artificially numbs his sense of touch (recapitulating Floyd's emotional restraint and loss of feeling more generally). The apparatus, figured by the suit, denies Floyd access to a world beyond itself. *2001* figures, in this way, 'our absolute containment by, and for the sake of, our own efficient apparatus'.¹³⁹ Put another way, space pods, suits and ships might seal out external danger in *2001*, but they equally seal their occupants in, so that, ironically, human beings appear trapped 'in their survival mechanisms'.¹⁴⁰ While HAL, the film's panoptic apparatus, protects his human charges he also effectively imprisons them since 'visibility', to quote Foucault, 'is a trap' (as recurrent shots of Poole and Bowman's reflections caught within HAL's lenses suggest). But it is the hypersleepers who stand as *2001's* emblems of entrapment. As HAL's murderous activity demonstrates, the hibernators are both protected and made vulnerable by the apparatus which eventually destroys them, each hibernating unit functioning symbolically as both incubator and tomb.¹⁴¹

While these motifs of confinement and restriction in *2001* can be seen to figure a condition of unfreedom, there is another kind of entrapment presented in the film which, in respect of the ideology of the American Technological Sublime and its fetishisation of newness (ever-lasting change) is far-reaching. Released from stasis at the moment of his

technological dawning in *2001*, man's existence, in a seeming rehearsal of the discourse of the technological sublime, is subsequently shown to be characterised by perpetual change. Man expands himself from cave to world and, in one leap, advances from world to moon; from there he propels himself to the solar system and beyond. Yet movement in *2001* also appears as stasis. I have already touched on the way in which the match-cut between the film's conceptualisation of man's primitive and sophisticated states of being implies that the two are fundamentally the same. Similarly, motifs of entrapment in the second and third sections of the film suggest that change is entirely superficial, referring back again to man's primitive origins: where the ape-men were cave bound, civilised man is bound by the forms of his own artifice – the extensions and representations of his power – whether money, machines or bureaucratic systems. In this way, *2001* discloses the 'illusion', as Leo Marx puts it, 'that improving the means is enough': for all his technological gadgetry, modern man has essentially got nowhere.¹⁴² Within *2001*'s conceptual frame, that is, progress appears as a paradox – as *changeless* change. Thus *2001* can be seen to expose progress as 'a "false" modernity whose surface momentum conceals its inner sameness'.¹⁴³

The thematic of changeless change within the film is figured most strikingly in the opening scene aboard the *Discovery* in which Poole jogs and shadow boxes around the ship's rotating centrifuge. Poole's repetitive motion is highly suggestive. Jogging round the machine, Poole is caught in a loop, returning repeatedly to his point of departure to begin all over again. Indeed, Poole's jogging action sets up only an appearance of motion in a further way: it is the centrifuge that rotates in space, not Poole. Presenting, in this way, motion without actual movement, the scene figures a kind of action-replay which repeats, formally, the 'oppressiveness' of modernity, where 'time becomes mechanical', and 'is experienced as an endless repetition'.¹⁴⁴ Running around the centrifuge but, essentially getting nowhere, Poole resembles a caged rodent on an exercise wheel whose repetitive activity is symptomatic of its condition of boredom-induced anxiety. Since Poole is linked in the film's diegesis with the commodity form, his symbolic function here can also be seen to link capitalism to the paradox of changeless change. But it is the incorporation of familiar (especially to a contemporary audience) corporate logos in the film's iconography which is more significant in this context. Drawing on Benjamin's definition of capitalist relations of production and exchange as the 'eternal recurrence of the new', Nicholls argues that 'The market has somehow frozen the movement of history, installing in its place a procession of ever "new" commodities'.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, Richard Godden writes:

The market place, when it works well, compresses our sense of history. During the twenties Coca-Cola assured its addicts that it had been available to them "through all the years since 1886". ... [I]ts point seems to have been that for significant items time does not pass.¹⁴⁶

Thus the highly visible and familiar presence of PanAm, Bell and Hilton in *2001*'s extrapolated vision of post-war corporate America implies that, despite the revolution in corporate technologies represented by space shuttles, grip shoes and video phones, time has not passed. Just as Kubrick's choice of the very familiar 'The Blue Danube' for the second segment of the film can be seen to connote stagnation – 'More of the Same' as Daniels argues – the corporate logos in *2001* signify more of the *economic* same: the same relations of production and consumption, of private government and regulation.¹⁴⁷ The subversion of the sublime as a material, American Sublime, and its obviation of the contradiction in terms by celebrating American forms (landscape, technology and capital) as the site and sign of eternal newness, *2001* discloses, works against itself. Emerson's decreative vision of America's endless evolutionary movement toward (unattainable) perfection is, in this way, seriously challenged. In *2001*'s configuration of corporate timelessness, it is difficult to see immediately 'the superiority of the present to the past'; the fetishisation of newness works ironically to 'hem in the life' and results in stasis and death. The 'sin' is not limitation but limitlessness.¹⁴⁸

In *2001*, only Bowman escapes from this condition of stasis. Prior to this moment, however, Bowman already demonstrates a certain, limited, capacity to think and to operate outside of the technocratic totality. With little to do on the ship, Bowman amuses himself by making some sketches of the ship's interior, an activity which serves to differentiate between him and Poole. In a way comparable with Henry in *Eagle's Wing*, the mission represents to Poole merely the means to a financial end. Where Poole symbolises money, Bowman, rather like Pike, appears to represent quality rather than quantity. Whereas Poole depends on HAL to provide sun beds and games for entertainment, giving himself almost entirely to the apparatus, Bowman's drawings can be seen to represent, in a small but significant way, his yearning to be separate from it. And, though his drawings are more imitative than imaginative, they all concentrate on the deathly pale and blank faces of the hibernators, suggesting, in this fixation, a degree of unease about the individual's true relation to the apparatus.¹⁴⁹

Significantly, Bowman's liberation occurs after he fails to follow procedure (he neglects to put on his space helmet when he rushes outside the *Discovery* in a space pod to rescue Poole), his carelessness actually triggering his possible redemption from the apparatus and his consequent humanisation and individuation. Crucially, Bowman's behaviour here demonstrates that he can be more than a mere component of the apparatus because he behaves in a way a machine would not. He acts rashly and makes a near fatal error – and to err in *2001* is to be human. During the ensuing 'face-off' between HAL and Bowman, HAL tries to outmanoeuvre Bowman as he did Poole, both at chess and later fatally when Poole ventures outside the ship. During this struggle, Bowman's 'death-mask' begins to slip as the seriousness of his predicament unfolds and he realises that he must re-enter the ship via its emergency airlock without an air supply.

Assuming victory at this point, HAL, however, has failed to calculate the human potential for rashness and daring. In a way that again brings together the sublime, Nietzschean philosophy and Darwinian evolutionary theory, Bowman proves his fitness to survive outside of the apparatus by taking on the extreme danger that the emergency air lock represents to an individual without the proper equipment. Releasing Poole's body, Bowman guides the pod towards the ship's emergency airlock and opens its doors. Holding his breath and bracing himself, Bowman activates the pod door's explosive bolts and is flung into the lock's chamber. Reaching out, Bowman seizes the lock's 'EMERGENCY HATCH CLOSE' lever; the hatch closes and air rushes into the chamber. Shown in close-up for emphasis, Bowman's grasp of the hatch-lever figures both his overcoming of external threat and refers back to the moment when Moon-Watcher threw the first tool into the air, symbolically relinquishing control. Stretching out, Bowman takes technology in hand again, this assertion of dominance over technology, culminating in the destruction of his evolutionary rival, repeating the connection between phallicism, power and blood-letting of the first section of the film.

Once Bowman has disconnected HAL and has learned, via Floyd's prerecorded message, the true nature of the mission, the film introduces its third and final section entitled 'JUPITER AND BEYOND THE INFINITE', setting up both a dynamic sublime (through the reference to the largest planet in the solar system) and an exaggerated mathematical sublime (anticipating a journey beyond even infinity itself). Referring back to the discovery of both the first and lunar monolith's and their connection with sublime otherness, the sound track reintroduces Ligeti's score, which again signals the disruptive phase of the sublime, while the title shot cuts to an entirely black screen suggestive here of illimitable space, 'a void in which human meanings expire.'¹⁵⁰ The film's final sublime thematics established, what follows are, appropriately, *2001*'s most obscure and difficult sequences.

Jupiter appears at the bottom of the screen like a rising sun as the camera pans downward, setting up an image of rebirth in a way that reiterates the film's figurative scheme. As the camera continues its pan downward, a monolith appears out of the surrounding darkness at the top left corner of the frame. The appearance of this monolith anticipates, as did the first two monoliths, a dramatic turning point in the narrative. More images of this monolith follow, together with the actual sun rising over Jupiter's horizon, emphasising the thematic of renewal and change. Just as camera fluidity in *Eagle's Wing* and *Jeremiah Johnson* function to figure a wilderness space without limit (reproducing an American 'motion art'), these images are mostly introduced into the *mise en scène* by exceedingly long vertical and horizontal camera pans, this filmic technique reimagining traditional representations of sublime limitlessness, connecting outerspace with vastness and flux.

One important shot-reverse-shot pattern in the sequence's schematic leads to the spectacular 'Star Gate' sequence.¹⁵¹ Here, an image of Jupiter in the foreground of the frame, aligned with its moons above it, cuts to a shot of the tiny form of a space pod in the centre of the frame, moving toward the camera and, by implication, toward the centre of the alignment. This shot then cuts back to the image of the planetary and lunar alignment in which the monolith now appears, situated between Jupiter's moons at the centre of the frame. Next, the camera pans upward through space in which streaks of light, emerging from a vertical line in the distance centre of the shot, begin to race toward the camera, creating the sensation of a headlong rush through a corridor of light. [Fig. 63]. This special light effect forms a crucial edge motif, symbolising the gateway through which Bowman passes to another spatial and temporal dimension and anticipating, in keeping with traditional representations of the sublime, a moment of negation and renewal. In the extended sequence that follows, *2001* demonstrates film's special ability to manipulate appearances, time and space via camera work and montage. While these effects do not appear, on the surface, to operate within an American Sublime tradition, they are comparable to strategies of representation in paintings of Niagara by Vanderlyn or Cole.

The image of the Star Gate cuts to a shot of Bowman, initially wide-eyed, then squinting at the increasing intensity of the light, registering the shock and pain of the sublime. A loud roar is introduced onto the soundtrack and the space pod begins to vibrate to the extent that Bowman's image becomes blurred. These special sound and visual effects suggest that Bowman is in extreme danger of being completely overwhelmed by the alien phenomenon, figuring the precariousness and fragility of the self in relation to sublime excess. In this way, freeze frames of a terrified Bowman intercut with more shots of the Star Gate, signify what Burke identified as 'that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended' at the moment of confrontation with sublime otherness.¹⁵²

Further shots of the Star Gate are intercut with extreme close-ups of Bowman's eye, wide open and blinking, as he passes through the gate to witness the magnificent and vast forms of other, distant galaxies, newly forming stars and fantastical, alien shapes. Anticipating Bowman's partial fusion with the cosmos that occurs in the final scene, the colour of his eye changes with each close-up to mirror the colour of each new phenomenon he confronts, implying a growing identification between Bowman and this alien environment. Finally, Bowman nears the surface of a planet, the action cutting again to a shot of his eye which reflects the lurid colours of its landscape. Abruptly, however, his retina changes back to its normal colour; but this apparent restoration of normalcy is misleading – as the following scenes demonstrate.

The image of Bowman's eye cuts to a point-of-view shot, through the space pod's window, of what resembles an elegant eighteenth century bedroom, before cutting back to a close-up of Bowman, shivering, eyes partly rolled up in their sockets, plainly traumatised. Further shots of the bedroom, taken from different perspectives, are accompanied by

strange sound effects – like half-articulated words – indicating that the bedroom is an alien approximation of a human space and is not what it seems.¹⁵³ These shots cut back to a close-up of Bowman, still in an attitude of deep shock, then cut to the same point-of-view through the pod's window. This shot, however, includes one surprising, *impossible*, difference – what appears to be Bowman himself, recognisable by his red space suit, looking back at the pod. The action cuts to a close-up of this figure, confirming that it is indeed Bowman – but not as he was before: this Bowman is clearly older. In this alien place, Bowman appears to occupy two temporal and spatial dimensions simultaneously.

This presentation of two Bowmans can be seen to refer to Bowman's existence as both subject and object within the technocratic apparatus which, in this strange space, are separated out, making it possible for Bowman to confront his condition of self-estrangement. As if to confirm this, the second, older, figure of Bowman (both his former self and the pod having disappeared) is shown walking into the bedroom's bathroom. Next, the action cuts to a shot of Bowman (seemingly) walking toward the camera. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that this figure is only his reflected image when the real Bowman enters the right hand side of the frame. His back toward the camera, Bowman scrutinises his mirror image for some time, astonished at his altered appearance. While Bowman contemplates this alien version of himself, however, the camera continues to focus on the reflected image so that *it* appears to be looking at Bowman: Bowman's objectified self, the shot implies, is still in the ascendancy. [Fig. 64]. In this respect, the film's decreative schematic, culminating in Bowman's death and rebirth, performs a crucial symbolic function to recover his essential selfhood.

The ageing process repeats itself twice more, each, negated, Bowman glimpsing his newly aged (and finally dying) self who is in turn haunted by a sense of his unseen former presence. The film's decreative strategies reconceptualise an American frontier tradition: effectively, Bowman is stripped of his habits of thought, and modes of dress, symbolised especially in the replacement of his space suit – the kind of survival mechanism that *2001* associates with a deadly trap – with attire more fitting to his surroundings (a smoking jacket and a nightshirt). During this schematic of regenerative violence, Bowman knocks a wine glass onto the floor, causing it to smash. The sound of breaking glass, which reverberates around the bedroom, is evocative of violence and the breakdown of order, which in view of the bedroom's style can be seen to be significant. A very bright and ordered space, underlit by a gridded floor, the bedroom recalls the sterile, symmetrical interiors of the space station and *Discovery*, figures in *2001* of Enlightenment rationalism and a technocratic totality. In this respect, the smashed glass anticipates freedom from an interlocking, rationalised complex of technological, state and corporate domination. The shattered glass, its sharp and brittle fragments symbolising the dangers inherent in technology, repeat a Protestant-Romantic iconoclastic impulse to negate form. As Geduld argues, the broken glass

may ... be taken as symbolising man's last tool at man's last supper, the former broken and the latter interrupted to indicate the completion of the cycle that started with the first tool and the first supper in "The Dawn of Man."¹⁵⁴

As Bowman stares at the broken glass, he detects the sound of laboured breathing (coming out of shot). The action cuts to reveal a very old and frail Bowman lying in bed. This Bowman in turn notices something just outside of the frame and struggles upward slightly, reaching out. The action cuts to a shot taken from just above the head of Bowman's bed, revealing a monolith near to the foot of the bed, perfectly centred within the film's *mise en scène* and towering over the old man. [Fig. 65]. This shot cuts to another, side-angled shot of Bowman reaching out anxiously toward the monolith, as though it communicates something to him, recalling Moon-Watcher's relationship with the first monolith. Next, this image cuts to a shot of the monolith taken from the foot of the bed. A succeeding shot of the bed shows that Bowman has been replaced by a glowing sphere. At this point, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 2001's evolutionary theme, is re-introduced on to the film's soundtrack. The action then cuts to another shot of the sphere, revealing a baby inside: the 'Star Child' (as Clarke calls the baby). [Fig. 66]. As the music begins to climb in pitch and volume, the action cuts to another shot of the monolith, taken from the point of view of the Star Child, the camera moving toward it. As the camera moves in for an extreme close-up of the monolith, its flat surface fills the entire screen and is transformed from surface to three dimensional space. Coinciding with a crescendo in the filmic score, this black space cuts to a shot of the earth's moon.

In this way, the monolith functions both denotatively as a gate through which Bowman, reborn as the Star Child, returns to the solar system and connotatively as the *limen* to Bowman's higher state of being. Turning Bowman's death into his rebirth, the ending of 2001 rehearses American Romanticism's confusion of endings and beginnings and its preoccupation with essential, unified, selfhood. Bowman's redemption from the technocratic totality turns on a partial identification with sublime otherness. Significantly, the image of the Star Child introduces organic motifs into the film's iconography with the implication that Bowman's identification is not with the monolith, which is an alien machine, but with nature. Plainly, the Star Child represents a movement beyond the machine: the soft, round shape of the Child's embryonic sac supplants the sharp geometries of the monolith, the brittle fragments of the broken wine glass and the rigid designs of all the film's 'enlightened' spaces. The protective membrane that surrounds the Child, translucent and thin, implies a closeness to the cosmos; unlike 2001's hard and heavy space ships and suits that constrain and dull the senses, it is barely a survival mechanism at all.

Yet 2001's iconoclastic critique of a technocratic totality brings me to the film's central irony: its own highly rationalised production processes and its utilisation and display of cutting-edge film technologies to produce the visual effects in its portrayal of sublime

redemption. *2001* pioneered a number of sophisticated special effects, most notably the 'slit-scan' process (to produce the 'Star Gate effects'), promoted at the time as 'a major breakthrough in the creation of motion picture special effects which have heretofore been impossible'.¹⁵⁵ For some, these effects formed *2001*'s major attraction and could induce very strong emotions. One critic, writing shortly after the film's release, described his response to the film's effects in the language of the sublime: 'I was stunned by the scope and sheer visual beauty of this 70mm filmic excursion into the future ... by ... its multitude of enormously complex special effects'.¹⁵⁶

Articulating a similar reaction to the film, Peter Nicholls and John Brosnan write: '*2001* is remarkable for a visual splendour that depends in part on astonishingly painstaking special effects' and Geduld was similarly affected by the 'optically overwhelming Star Gate sequence'.¹⁵⁷ In this way, *2001* can be seen to exemplify what Tom Gunning terms 'a cinema of astonishment', or what can be called an 'American Cinematic Sublime' – a sub-species of the Technological Sublime.¹⁵⁸ Emerging from a nineteenth century tradition of the staged illusion, early film, Gunning argues, sought largely to generate 'some sense of wonder or surprise' in audiences by 'making visible something which could not exist, of managing the play of appearances in order to confound the expectations of logic and experience'.¹⁵⁹

As well as its array of special effects, *2001*'s aesthetic of astonishment includes its use of a widescreen format (Cinerama) the purpose of which, in common with other widescreen formats, as Benton and Tana Wollen argue, was to amaze and 'engulf' the viewer within its displays of visual excess.¹⁶⁰ Yet, this cinema-as-spectacle has some worrying implications. The drive to achieve the 'impact aesthetics' of cinematic technologies, especially in SF films, arises out of fierce competition with rival interests (television, IMAX and OMNIMAX, video, cable, satellite, computer game and more recently, DVD products).¹⁶¹ In this way, special effects-as-commodities that register as shock and wonder, can be seen to align audience appetites and emotions with the profit motivations of the corporate sponsor, working to bind the individual within the system of relations that govern the market place.¹⁶² In addition, what Steven Carter describes as the 'mesmerizing' effects of the cinematic sublime suggest a medium which is both manipulative and mind-numbing.¹⁶³ And, while no single individual will react in the same way to a film as another, in spending time at the cinema, audiences are nevertheless engaged in the same activity, pointing toward the negation of the individual self and absorption into a 'mass'. Thus, John Rieder, who is critical of the cinema of astonishment, writes that

special effects have become the hegemonic element of contemporary, high-budget SF films. ... Special effects sequences ... [engender] moments of total phenomenal absorption in which the audience feels itself momentarily redeemed from time and individuality. ... But as a consequence, much contemporary SF cinema reduces

itself to a carefully budgeted sequence of special effects [which] dominate the advertising campaign, and, to a greater or lesser extent, the plot and characters fade into the background.¹⁶⁴

While *2001* thrills the viewer with its range of visual effects, especially those to produce the 'theme-park-like ride' of the Star Gate sequence, the film, though a mainstream release, was never intended merely to dazzle cinematic audiences.¹⁶⁵ The film's use of special effects does not make the narrative redundant, the visual splendour of the Star Gate sequence contributing to, rather than diminishing, *2001*'s presentation of conceptual breakthrough by attempting to visualise the otherness of Bowman's encounter. Whether depicting 'dancing' space ships, meanwhile, or whether making a flight attendant appear, freakishly, to walk upside down within a shuttle's interior (as occurs within another famous scene), *2001*'s special effects are always integral to its critique of what it projects as an alienated, yet dominant technocratic order which requires the drastic reorganisation of human behaviour. In particular, the film's use of widescreen is not only consistent with, but also assists in its critique of technocratic dominance – as is evident in the scene where Poole and Bowman discuss the possibility of shutting HAL down. Not wishing to alert the computer to their suspicions, the astronauts resort to subterfuge, climbing inside one of the ship's space pods on the pretence that its transmitter is faulty. After the men enter the pod, the door shuts firmly, (apparently) sealing them off from the rest of the ship. Bowman then clicks off the transmitter controls and both men call to HAL to test whether or not they can be heard. When HAL does not respond, the men proceed with their discussion.

The *mise en scène* in the following long take from the pod's interior is striking and utilises the possibilities of the widescreen format. Unlike montage, which announces the presence of the director and which can steer the viewer toward a particular meaning, the widescreen image, together with the more impassive continuous shot, allows the audience to decide on the most significant or interesting compositional elements within the frame.¹⁶⁶ The long take is composed so that HAL's eye can be seen through and is framed by the pod's oval window at the centre of the shot while Poole and Bowman (recalling the image of *Orion*'s two 'pilots') are positioned on either side of the frame. [Fig. 67]. This arrangement of the filmic space corresponds to the film's theme of a technocratic totality, placing the God-like HAL at the centre of Poole and Bowman's technologised universe while they are confined to the periphery of the image. Emphasising the power relations between the individual and the technocratic apparatus in this way, the long take, with the gleam of HAL's keen eye in the background, indicates that there is nowhere to hide. Indeed, the following shot shows HAL's point-of-view of the men in close-up, revealing that he is lip reading. Pointing the viewer toward a single meaning, the close-up explains too much, and is less interesting and inventive than the long take which relies on inference.

In addition, two oblique references to the film's Space Race contexts – the TV interview and Poole's birthday message – set up a subtle critique of the negative effects of popular versions of the sublime, one which implicates the contemporary viewer in the film's conceptualisation of self-death and entrapment within a technocratic system. The TV interview, which presents the *Discovery's* mission, its crew and its sophisticated technologies to an anonymous mass audience, can be seen to refer to the careful orchestration of each Apollo launch into what David E. Nye calls a 'media event'. 'The media event', Nye explains,

interrupts routine and monopolizes the airways on all major channels. ... Usually media events are consciously organised and pre-planned. ... when they occur they are understood to be historic. Such moments draw enormous audiences and are treated by the media with respect.¹⁶⁷

At Cape Kennedy, the Apollo launches were awesome displays of American exceptionality, the near blinding light of the blast off 'followed by the silent lifting of a rocket taller than the United Nations building, succeeded seconds later by a mighty roar, as the earth shook'.¹⁶⁸ The televising of the Apollo missions permitted mass audiences to behold the spectacle of American technological grandeur and, when cameras were placed inside the space pods,

suddenly television had a multiple act drama. After lift-off came a middle segment that featured images of the earth and the stars, weightlessness, space-walks, and interviews with the astronauts inside their ship. With the installation of television in the capsule, space flight became a full-fledged "media event."¹⁶⁹

Differing from the community-based celebrations of technological achievements of the past, Nye argues, the Space Program was 'organised from the top down' in a way that indicated a shift away from democratic involvement in such activities.¹⁷⁰ As organised spectacle, both Nye and Carter suggest, the Space Program's media events had disturbing implications. In a way comparable to 2001's conception of the individual's relationship to the American technocratic apparatus, Nye and Carter's analysis of the Space Race shows how launch events effectively inverted the Kantian sublime, diminishing rather than enlarging the self.

Giving rise to collective rapture before icons of American grandeur, engaging, as the American Sublime does, the emotions rather than the intellect, the Apollo events performed a 'reconciliatory' and integrating function within a fragmenting society, however fleetingly. Designed to exhilarate, to make (to borrow from Susan Sontag) the crowd come, the Space Program's orchestrated media events induced its mass audience to forget cultural and political differences.¹⁷¹ Though some Americans remained strongly opposed to the mission,

the media event nevertheless proved compelling, the lure of the spectacle overwhelming aversion to its economic and ideological implications. As Nye argues:

most people watched, regardless of political sentiments Even at universities that were centres of student rebellion and anti-war feeling, such as Minnesota and Berkeley, the campus seemed deserted, as people crowded into any room with a television.

And, Nye continues,

from the point of view of NASA administrators ... these moments of public integration were intended outcomes, not accidental outpourings of enthusiasm. ... witnessing the event was a powerful moment of integration, when members of the audience, often despite themselves, were enthralled.¹⁷²

TV brought the technological sublime to the people. It generated emotional feeling of being there, of participating in the launch event, which itself engendered feelings of self-aggrandisement via identification with icons of American power. Beholding American wonders, as Cole did at Niagara, the ordinary citizen could believe himself an essential part of national greatness, even if watching from a distance: 'In the words of a border patrolman watching on television in California: "I was there, I was part of it, I saw it happen."¹⁷³ In Whitmanic fashion, the patrolman receives an influx of power by imaginatively expanding his borders to encompass American sublimity within himself.

Yet it can be argued that this participation and absorption into a collective American identity results not in self-aggrandisement but, rather, in self-diminishment. Linking these orchestrated spectacles to the theatre of fascist rallies in Nazi Germany, Dale Carter argues that the Apollo launches, especially the eventual lunar landing,

constituted the realization of President Kennedy's voluntary totalitarian dream: an audience of small-time *Führers* passively finding their collective identity via wilful subordination with an elaborate drama of state.¹⁷⁴

The role of the astronauts in what Carter calls the '*Führer* principle' – this process of collective awe and identification – was crucial. Selected 'behind interlocking screens of bureaucracy, science and marketing', constructed as 'political commodities' and turned into the nation's heroes, the astronauts functioned as synecdochic symbols of America's idealised pioneering selfhood (though possessing little similarity to the frontier ideal of individuality in reality).¹⁷⁵ As Carter puts it:

The men who pioneered on that final, inexhaustible frontier took with them more than just the hopes of NASA and the Democratic Party: they embodied a nation, a social system, a whole way of life. Their mission would make manifest America's destiny; their achievements would universalise the American Century.¹⁷⁶

Setting up a reference to this construction and function of America's astronauts as representative men, Poole's mother reveals during the birthday message that her son has constantly been in the news and that he's 'quite a hero' in her classroom. In doing so, *2001* points toward what Carter calls the 'fantasy of exertion' elicited by the Apollo launches. Identification with an astronaut celebrity, who functions as a displaced and ideal version of the ordinary self, makes action unnecessary resulting in 'passive participation'.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, like the TV interview, the birthday message also indicates the intrusion of contemporary political ambition into the home and the workplace – and even, as *2001* indicates, the schoolroom – achieved by the large scale media events of the missions.¹⁷⁸ Corresponding to *2001*'s conceptualisation of the invasion and deadening of the self by state and commerce, the theatre of attraction of the Apollo missions suggest the colonisation and displacement of the individual self by powerful interests – as the film recognises.

Yet while *2001* critiques the effects of an aspirant American techno-commercial totality, it nevertheless merely reshapes slightly some of the more problematic aspects and assumptions underpinning an American Technological Sublime. To explore these problematics, I want firstly to analyse further the possible meanings of the monolith-sun-moon alignment used at the moment of Moon-Watcher's intellectual dawning. [Fig 52]. Rehearsing traditional representations of the sublime, the shot can be seen to form an image of 'memory and hope', to evoke McKinsey again, a symbolic landscape which represents the dynamic relationship between past (the space immediately behind the camera), present (the space up to and including the monolith's extreme edge) and future (the space immediately beyond the monolith), signifying the forward movement of time. Traditionally, the foreground space in sublime iconography also signifies that which is known or knowable. Thus, the way in which the main body of the monolith occupies the foreground of the frame can be seen to figure the simultaneous internalisation and grounding of technology (represented by the monolith) within the realm of the human at the moment of Moon-Watcher's redemption. Where the foreground signifies the known present, the background of sky, moon and sun symbolises unknowable futurity, the topmost edge of the monolith figuring the frontier between the two, the point of tension where the present is on the verge of giving way to the future.

This tension between present and future figured by the topmost edge of the monolith is repeated in the strong contrast between its sharp angles and the rounded, organic forms of the sun and moon. Since they occupy the *mise en scène*'s symbolic future, these organic shapes beyond the monolith assume a special significance, prefiguring the eventual supersession of technology itself represented finally by the Star Child, whose rounded embryonic sac repeats visually the curve of the earth. The alignment between monolith, sun and moon, then, suggests that it is not technology that is mankind's destiny as such; it is rather the means to get him there.

In this way, *2001*'s reconfiguration of human and technological progress is Whitmanic in concept, comparable to his poem 'Passage to India', described by Leo Marx as 'probably ... the purest, most poetic use of the progressive idiom' in American literature.¹⁷⁹ Like the celebration of American technologies in 'Passage to India', *2001*'s odyssey presents a 'prevision of history as an upward spiral, a movement that dispels all doubt, carrying mankind back, full circle, to the simple vitality of "primal thought,"', to the point 'where history began' – in Whitman, Asia, in *2001*, the earth.¹⁸⁰ In *2001*, technology separates man from nature but, as in Whitman's poem, is nevertheless imagined as the 'precursor' of a higher power, the means to an exalted end – in *2001*, the Star Child, a higher being who, like Whitman's 'divine bard', arrives after technology has performed its function 'to announce that "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more"':

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)
After the great captains and engineers have accomplished their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist,
ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.¹⁸¹

In *2001*, as in Whitman's conceptualisation of American technological sublimity, technology functions as the route to human perfectibility. Yet the way in which *2001* mediates the discourses of the American Sublime through a Nietzschean concept of power makes its celebration of human perfectibility highly disturbing. The depiction of Bowman's sublimation into a higher state of being reimagines the grandiose suppositions of American versions of the sublime drama in terms of a Nietzschean idea of evolutionary overcoming. Reconceptualising the rhetoric of the American Sublime in this way, Bowman's rebirth symbolises his attainment of 'private bodily freedom' which is achieved through a process of self-aggrandisement (the defensive expansion of his subjective borders), here figured by the way in which the Star Child's embryonic sac not only repeats the rounded form of the earth, but is compared in the *mise en scène* to the planet's size.¹⁸² [Fig. 68]. The moment of the sublime in *2001*, more explicitly than *Jeremiah Johnson*'s figurative scheme, marks its protagonist's recreation as a Superbeing.

Looking forward, like Nietzsche, to 'a species of man that does not yet exist', in this way, *2001* merely substitutes one kind of remote and superior power (the newly created Superbeing) for another (earth's technocratic elite).¹⁸³ Compared, rather than fused, with the earth in the *mise en scène*, the Star Child remains figuratively separate from and above the rest of humanity, now an inferior species for whom the consequences of this new being could be grim: as Nietzsche asserts, the 'higher type is possible only through the subjugation of the lower'.¹⁸⁴ Transformed into a higher being, Moon-Watcher was quick to assert his new power over the lower types. The ambiguity of the film's ending allows the possibility that the Star Child will do the same.

Conceiving evolutionary change through a Whitmanic conception of progress-as-fate and a Nietzschean idea of Eternal Recurrence, and portraying Bowman as the bearer of some 'cosmic burden', moreover, *2001* undermines its critique of American fetishisms.¹⁸⁵ Clearly in the film, the intervention of an unseen, but all-seeing power is absolutely necessary for human evolution in a way that reimagines a religious sense of divine purpose and predestination. Thus, while the film sets up a dialectic between this external power and individual will – variously manifested in Moon-Watcher's frustration, HAL's neurosis and ambition and Bowman's half conscious awareness of his condition of entrapment – the direction and nature of change is imagined as inevitable. In *2001*, humanity is hostage to fortune since human action, working to a pre-made plan, has little bearing on historical process. In this way, *2001*'s configuration of history-as-fate and its valorisation of unceasing change articulates an American conception of progress which paradoxically runs counter to the national emphasis on free will and individuality by fetishising progress as a thing in and of itself which constitutes humanity's 'common fate'.¹⁸⁶

Finally, the film's decreative, evolutionary, schematic is strongly masculinist in concept in a way that has unpleasant connotations. Operating largely as receptionists and flight attendants, their modes of behaviour and dress regulated and made almost identical by the techno-corporate machine, women, as functioning components, are the film's most conspicuous victims of the apparatus of power. Their own technological entrapment is visualised, in particular, by close-ups of grip shoes that fasten them to the apparatus and by the female faces that stare out from within the confines of computer screens. [Fig. 69]. Yet the film emphasises women as working components of the techno-totality in a way that detracts from their own imprisonment within it, while reimagining a negative conception of femininity at the same time. In this way, the film's female figures perform a significant role in the film's presentation of symbolic emasculation: in their function to indulge and to please, women are closely associated with the technocracy's softening of what the film projects as masculine hardness, a drive to achieve power through violence.

Associated with closure and weakness, as Geduld writes, the female gender is 'a sex the whole film denies and negates'.¹⁸⁷ Noting, the 'sheer maleness of *2001*', Ellis Hanson observes how women gradually disappear from the film's narrative until, at the end they have 'vanished entirely, replaced by an image of an extrauterine foetus', this final negation of femininity, as Geduld argues, figuring the 'quest for [a] kind of masculine self-sufficiency which includes childbirth without women'.¹⁸⁸ This negative conception of femininity extends to the film's treatment of HAL. While HAL's aggression is associated with a masculine will to power, the softness of his voice, his role as nurturer and incubator (to the dormant survey team) simultaneously work to feminise him.¹⁸⁹ Symbolically recapitulating the effects of the apparatus as a whole, HAL functions as a giant techno-womb which, encouraging only dependency, smothers and stifles the men he carries.

Bowman's rebirth as the Star Child, in this way, figures 'the separation of the male child from his mother, his accession to an autonomous masculine identity.'¹⁹⁰

In summary, *2001*'s distaste for femininity, its fascination with violent struggle and competitiveness, with aggressive masculinity and with symbols of power, together with its repetition of the assumptions governing the conception of America's Manifest Destiny, undermines its critique of America's post-war ambitions and practices. In this way, the film's use of the edge motif does not, in the end, offer a figurative alternative to the dominant order. Rather, ironically, given the film's critique of changeless change, it represents more of the same – only in a slightly different guise.

FIG: 51



FIG: 52



FIG: 53



FIG: 54



FIG:55



FIG:57



FIG:56



FIG:58

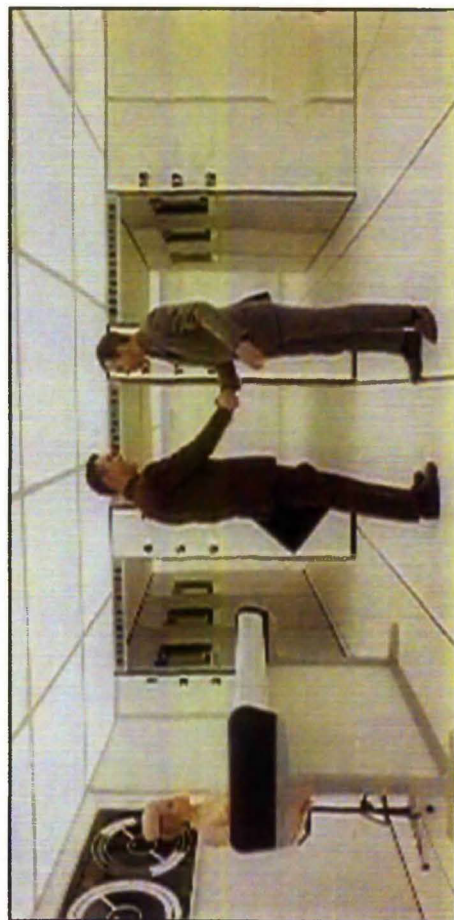


FIG: 60



FIG: 62

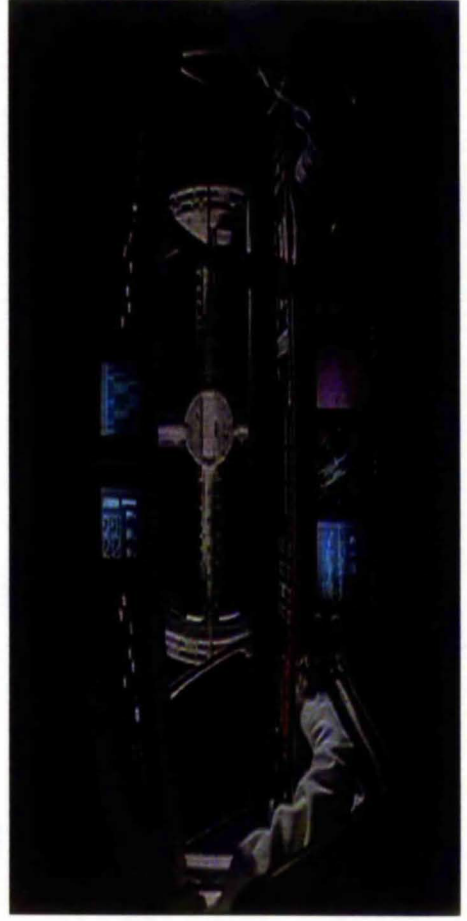


FIG: 59



FIG: 61

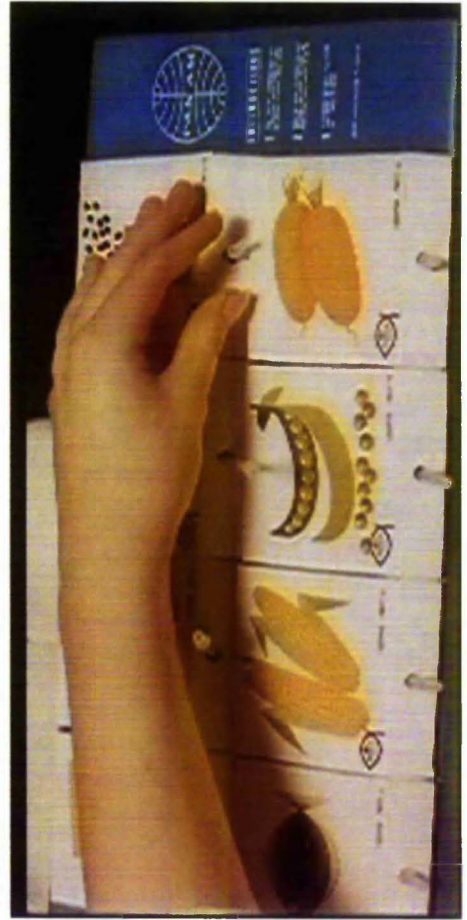


FIG: 63



FIG: 64

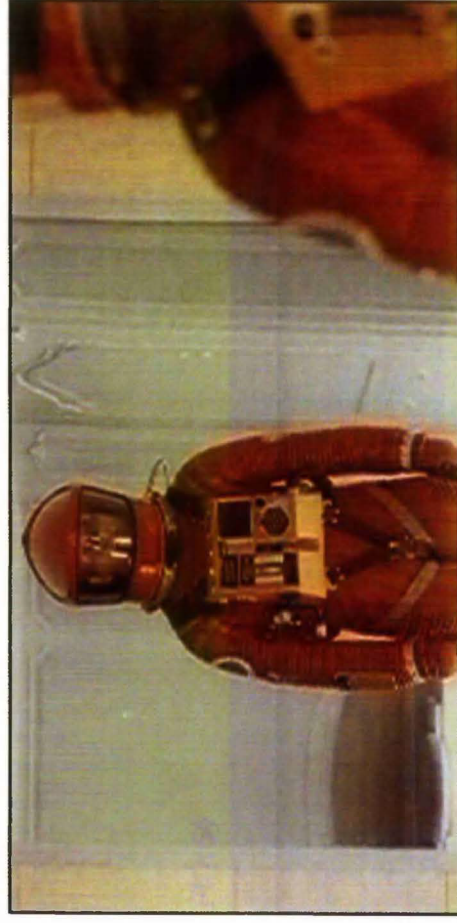


FIG: 65

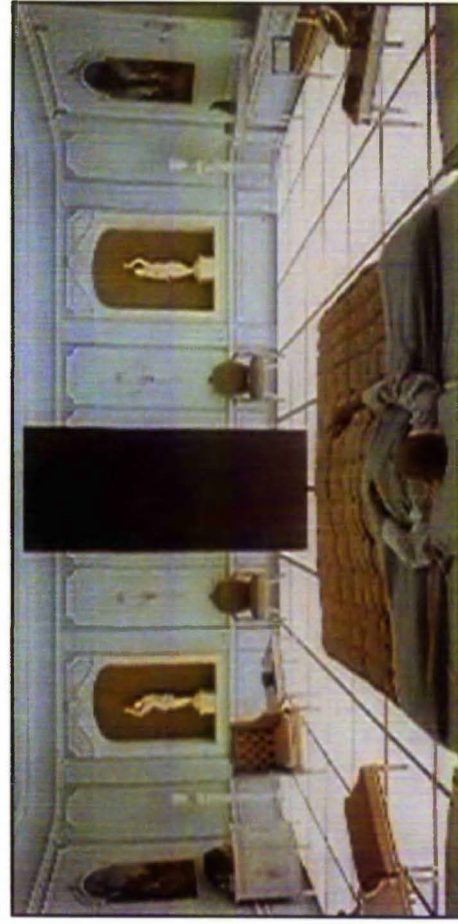


FIG: 66

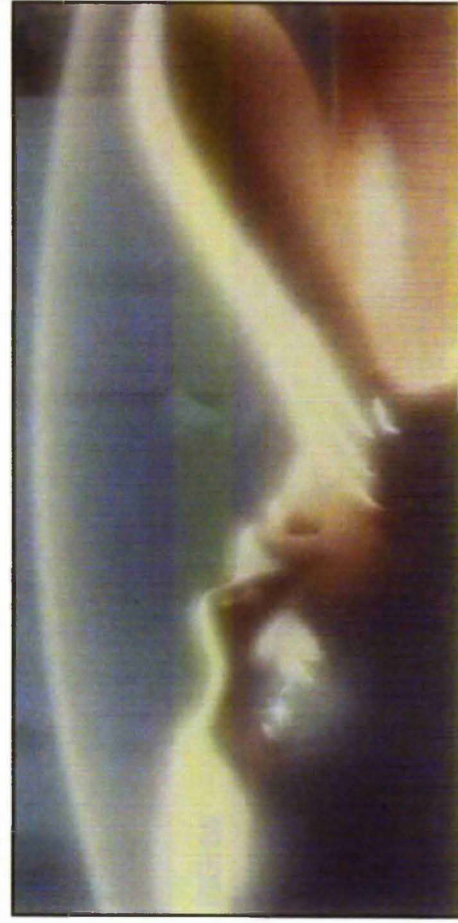


FIG: 67



FIG: 68



FIG: 69



Notes

- ¹ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.6.
- ² Ibid., p.6.
- ³ Elizabeth McKinsey, *Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.281.
- ⁴ Ibid., p.282.
- ⁵ Ibid., p.279.
- ⁶ See McKinsey, *ibid.*, p.281.
- ⁷ Tiziano Bonazzi, 'Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis and the self-consciousness of America', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 27, Part 2 (1993), pp.167-168. Hence, Turner himself wrote: 'In the place of the old frontiers of wilderness there are new frontiers of unwon fields of science, fruitful for the needs of the race'. This new frontier, as textual blankness, would generate the same loss-gain dynamics of the wilderness frontier for the 'fearless' pioneering individual confronting and overcoming the abyss of ignorance at the frontiers of scientific knowledge. Turner, 'The West and American Ideals', quoted in Bonazzi, *op. cit.*, p.166; see also Bonazzi, p.170.
- ⁸ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.228.
- ⁹ Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp.22, 25.
- ¹⁰ Walt Whitman, 'Starting from Paumanok', *Leaves of Grass*, edited and introduced by Jerome Loving (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p.26.
- ¹¹ Emerson quoted in *Major Problems in American Environmental History: Documents and Essays*, edited by Carolyn Merchant (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993), p.184.
- ¹² Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.23.
- ¹³ See Leo Marx, pp.157-158.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p.234.
- ¹⁵ William Irwin, *The New Niagara: Tourism, Technology, and the Landscape of Niagara Falls 1776-1917* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp.xv, xvi, xii.
- ¹⁶ See Leo Marx, p.198.
- ¹⁷ In Leo Marx, *ibid.*, p.195.
- ¹⁸ See Whitman's 'Locomotive in Winter', in *Leaves of Grass*, *op. cit.*, pp.358-359.
- ¹⁹ Emerson, 'Circles', *Emerson's Essays*, introduced by Sherman Paul (London and New York: Everyman's Library, 1980), p.168.
- ²⁰ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p.6.
- ²¹ Rob Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.24.
- ²² Ibid., p.83.
- ²³ Quoted in Rob Wilson, *ibid.*, p.71.
- ²⁴ Thomas Cole, 'Essay on American Scenery, 1835', *American Art 1700-1960: Sources and Documents*, John W. McCoubrey (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1965), p.105.
- ²⁵ Whitman (1855), 'Preface', *Leaves of Grass*, *op. cit.* p.443.
- ²⁶ David Simpson, 'Updating the Sublime', *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer 1987), p.247.
- ²⁷ Brian Stableford, in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls (London: Orbit, 1993), p.394.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p.395.
- ²⁹ Don Daniels, '2001: A New Myth', *Film Heritage*, Vol. 3, Part 4 (Summer 1968), p.8.
- ³⁰ Carolyn Geduld, *Film Guide to 2001: A Space Odyssey* (London: Indiana University Press, 1973), p.41.
- ³¹ Geduld, *ibid.*, p.40, and Daniels, *op. cit.*, p.2.
- ³² See J.P. Dumond and J. Monod, 'Beyond the Infinite: A structural analysis of "2001: A Space Odyssey"', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Vol. 3, Part 3 (Summer 1978), p.306.
- ³³ Mark Crispin Miller, 'A Cold Descent', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (January 1994), p.19.
- ³⁴ James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.185.
- ³⁵ David Boyd, 'Mode and Meaning in 2001', *Journal of Popular Film*, Vol. 6, Part 3 (1978), p.212.
- ³⁶ Leo Marx *op. cit.*, p.203.
- ³⁷ Nineteenth century commentators quoted in Leo Marx, *ibid.*, p.203.
- ³⁸ Like the sublime, the conceptual breakthrough in SF narratives rests on the 'shock of surprise' which

- opens up a new and unlimited horizon of possibility, not only to a fictional character, but to an audience or reader— which is why Cornell Robu calls SF 'an art of the sublime'. See, Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, op. cit., p.254, 255, 257, and Cornel Robu, 'A Key to Science Fiction: The Sublime', *Foundation*, Vol. 42 (Spring 1988), p.21.
- ³⁹ Arthur C. Clarke, 'The Sentinel', in *Of Time and Stars: The Worlds of Arthur C. Clarke* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1983), p.185.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., pp.185, 188.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p.186.
- ⁴² Ibid., p.190.
- ⁴³ Patrick Parrinder, *Science Fiction: Its Criticism and Teaching* (London: Methuen, 1980), p.69.
- ⁴⁴ Clarke, op. cit., p.188.
- ⁴⁵ Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulations: An Essay on the Fiction of the Future* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), p.4.
- ⁴⁶ Though SF's link to the scientific and technological revolutions is clear, the precise meaning and purpose of 'Science Fiction' has been debated since the term gained currency in the 1930s, a debate that is beyond the scope of this thesis. It should also be noted that such concerns predate SF (in what has been termed 'proto SF') and are by no means exclusive to it. What matters is the way in which SF explores the implications and impact of these twin revolutions. See Brian Stableford, John Clute and Peter Nicholls in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, op. cit., pp.311-314.
- ⁴⁷ Parrinder, op. cit., p.51.
- ⁴⁸ Indeed, Brian Stableford and Peter Nicholls, emphasising the close connection between machine technology and SF argue: 'it was the perception of the power which the new machines of the Industrial Revolution had to transform the world which gave birth to sf'. In Clute and Nicholls, op. cit., p.1203.
- ⁴⁹ Scholes, in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, op. cit., p.313.
- ⁵⁰ Judith Merrill who develops an idea advanced by Robert A. Heinlein who preferred the term 'speculative fiction' to 'SF', in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, op. cit., p.312.
- ⁵¹ Scholes, *Structural Fabulations*, op. cit. p.24.
- ⁵² Ibid., p.18. As Scholes points out, defamiliarisation is a function of *all* fiction: 'the fundamental principle of science fiction is precisely [the] technique of defamiliarization or estrangement. But this has been the premise of all art since the romantic period.' What is unique to SF, however, 'is the way in which it defamiliarizes things', *ibid.*, p.46. See also: Scholes, pp.6, 7 and Parrinder's discussion of Suvin's definition of 'cognitive estrangement', op. cit., pp.71-73.
- ⁵³ Scholes, *ibid.*, p.47.
- ⁵⁴ R.J. Ellis and Rhys Garnett 'Introduction', *Science Fiction: Roots and Branches*, edited by Garnett and Ellis (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp.3-4.
- ⁵⁵ John Rieder, 'Embracing the Alien: Science Fiction in Mass Culture', *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 9 (1982), p.27.
- ⁵⁶ David Hawkes, quoting Marx, *Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.97.
- ⁵⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, translated by E.B. Ashton, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p.11. I take the phrase 'dead labour' from Hawkes who, following Adorno, describes how in a fetishising culture, 'the relationship between death and life' is misconstrued. Hawkes, op. cit., p.187.
- ⁵⁸ Rieder, op. cit., p.27.
- ⁵⁹ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1996), p.256.
- ⁶⁰ Rieder, op. cit., p.27.
- ⁶¹ Miller, op. cit., p.19.
- ⁶² I paraphrase Karl Marx's 'The products of their brains have got out of their hands.' Quoted in Hawkes, op. cit., p.96.
- ⁶³ Miller op. cit., p.21.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., p.21, and quoting Byron, p.22.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p.22. In this way, *2001* repeats a motif used in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). As Margot A. Henriksen observes, the only act of sex in the film 'involves airplanes, not humans. The opening credits roll over footage of an in-air refueling of a bomber, the injection accompanied by soft and lyrical music that provides the romantic highpoint of the film.' *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), p.320.
- ⁶⁶ Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, based on the screenplay by Clarke and Kubrick (London: Orbit, 1998), pp.182-183.
- ⁶⁷ The timing of the message is itself a puzzle. It is not made clear whether the recording was designed to

anticipate a malfunction and HAL's shut down, or because the *Discovery* has, at precisely the moment of HAL's death, reached its destination, which would be a rather clumsy contrivance.

- ⁶⁸ Scholes, *Structural Fabulations*, op. cit., p.36.
- ⁶⁹ Brian Stableford, *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, op. cit., p.254. In imagining HAL as man's evolutionary rival, *2001* makes a significant contribution to a SF theme that is itself still evolving. As Brian Stableford writes: 'The ... idea that machines may eventually begin to evolve independently of their makers has become increasingly popular as real-world computers have become more sophisticated' and the conception 'that machine intelligence might be reckoned the logical end-product of evolution ... has a long history in sf', *ibid.*, pp.296, 253. It is interesting that, unlike 'The Sentinel', the depiction of the machine as an independently evolved force within *2001*'s thematic of an alienated technology is accentuated by the way in which technology is imagined, not as a natural part of human evolution but as, initially, entirely alien. In this, *2001* articulates a popular contemporary idea which came to be associated most famously with the writings of Erich von Däniken. While discredited as mere fiction, von Däniken's theory, which like *2001* conceives of technology not as a human development but as a gift from an ancient alien race – as essentially *other* – can be regarded itself as an expression of anxieties generated by the increasing strangeness, to ordinary men and women, of sophisticated technological innovations. For discussion of von Däniken, see John Sladek and John Grant, *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, op. cit., p.1288.
- ⁷⁰ According to John Naughton, the set of moves used in the film are taken from a game played between two German masters in 1913, including the Ruy Lopez manoeuvre well known to chess players. John Naughton, *Review*, 'Game, Net and Match: Kasparov v. Deep Blue', *The Observer* (11 May, 1997), p.7. David Stork surmises that the director 'chose this set of moves because of the cleverness of the checkmate – clever enough that an astronaut might not see it, yet short and easy enough for chess-literate viewers to recognise and admire'. David Stork cited in John Naughton, *ibid.*, p.7.
- ⁷¹ I borrow from and adapt David Stork's argument that Poole's attitude within the film helped to promote an unhealthy (and mistaken) idea about the evolution of artificial intelligence and the human relation to it. Poole's resignation, he argues, 'implanted a pernicious fatalism in the minds of millions of people about the way the human-computer relationship would evolve.' In Naughton, *ibid.*, p.7. In *2001*, however, human error is presented more favourably than Naughton and Stork suggest; it helps redeem man rather than doom him to extinction within the human-machine evolutionary contest.
- ⁷² Christian Metz asserts that 'the close-up obviously contains an element of synecdoche' when used figuratively rather than as detail. He terms this figurative device 'cinematic synecdoche.' *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, translated by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp.172, 195, 196.
- ⁷³ Quoted in Hawkes, op. cit. p.184. HAL's usurpation of human agency recalls the symbolic significance of the Doomsday Device in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*. Bypassing, like the Doomsday Device, 'unnecessary human meddling', HAL is both the instrument and symbol of human disempowerment.
- ⁷⁴ H. T. Wilson, *The American Ideology: Science, Technology and Organization as Modes of Rationality in Advanced Industrial Societies* (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p.64.
- ⁷⁵ In H.T. Wilson, *ibid.*, p.52.
- ⁷⁶ Nye, op. cit., p.254.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.230, 231.
- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.230.
- ⁷⁹ Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States Since the 1930s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), pp.46, 30.
- ⁸⁰ Henriksen, op. cit., p.16.
- ⁸¹ Sherry, op. cit., pp.31, 44.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, pp.119, 138, 124.
- ⁸³ FDR in Sherry, *ibid.*, p.33. See also p.124.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.125.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.16-17.
- ⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.17, 44, 139.
- ⁸⁷ Quoted in Henriksen, op. cit., p.364.
- ⁸⁸ Sherry, op. cit., pp.131-132, 139.
- ⁸⁹ Henriksen, op. cit. pp.44, 45.
- ⁹⁰ Sherry, op. cit., p.53.
- ⁹¹ Henriksen, op. cit., p.16.
- ⁹² In Dale Carter, *The Final Frontier: The Rise and Fall of the American Rocket State* (New York and London: Verso, 1988), pp.148, 154.

- ⁹³ Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (London: Picador, in association with Jonathan Cape, 1991), pp.71-2.
- ⁹⁴ Miller, op. cit., p.19.
- ⁹⁵ As Miller puts it, the 'primal animus' is not only 'still here', but 'is now more dangerous than ever, warfare having evolved from heated manual combat to the cool deployment of atomic weapons (one of which sails gently by as 'The Blue Danube' begins).' Ibid., p.21.
- ⁹⁶ H.T. Wilson, op. cit., p.66.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., p.66.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., p.54-55.
- ⁹⁹ See H.T. Wilson, ibid., pp.58, 68. I also draw on Raymond Williams's, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1990), pp.115-117.
- ¹⁰⁰ Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, quoted in Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.9. See also H.T. Wilson's discussion of one of the most famous and influential advocates of modern science, Francis Bacon, op. cit., p.60.
- ¹⁰¹ Outram, op. cit., pp.61-62.
- ¹⁰² Outram debates the influence of science and rationalism on governments during the Enlightenment in Chapter 7, ibid., pp.96-113.
- ¹⁰³ H.T. Wilson, op. cit., p.68.
- ¹⁰⁴ Lewis Mumford, 'The Flowering of Plants and Men' (1968), in Henriksen, op. cit., p.382; H.T. Wilson, p.61.
- ¹⁰⁵ Michel Foucault (1975), trans. Alan Sheridan, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1991;), p.198.
- ¹⁰⁶ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, op. cit. p.43.
- ¹⁰⁷ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p.103.
- ¹⁰⁸ Foucault, op. cit., pp.207, 201, 202.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp.206, 202-203.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.200.
- ¹¹¹ Henriksen, op. cit., pp.75, 16, and Stanley I. Kutler *The American Inquisition: Justice and Injustice in the Cold War*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, fifth reprint, 1995), p.244. According to Henriksen:

The United States government assumed unprecedented and widespread powers to intrude on the privacy of its citizens, and Americans learned yet another atomic age lesson: the restriction of civil rights accepted as a temporary necessity during the crisis of war had become a feature of life in this purgatory between war and peace. [Ibid., p.19].

- ¹¹² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1970, reprinted 1994), p.125.
- ¹¹³ Wolfe, op. cit., pp.96, 179.
- ¹¹⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, op. cit., p.203.
- ¹¹⁵ Wolfe, op. cit., p.352; Carter, op. cit., p.166.
- ¹¹⁶ Wolfe, op. cit., p.256.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.181; mission psychiatrist quoted in Carter, op. cit., p.163.
- ¹¹⁸ Wolfe, op. cit., p.181.
- ¹¹⁹ Carter, op. cit., p.161.
- ¹²⁰ See Monaco on subjective/objective camera work, op. cit., p.170.
- ¹²¹ Geduld, op. cit. pp.52-53.
- ¹²² Hawkes, op. cit., p.185.
- ¹²³ Hawkes op. cit., p.185. *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1974), *Blade Runner*, (Ridley Scott, 1982). *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Created by Gene Roddenberry, 1987-1995). I borrow from Brian Stableford's discussion of the cyborg in SF, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, op. cit., pp.290-291.
- ¹²⁴ Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, op. cit., p.625. *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956); *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Philip Kaufman, 1978); *Body Snatchers* (Abel Ferrara, 1993). SF's preoccupation with this theme continues. In *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999), billions of human beings are preserved in a state of artificially induced torpor by a vast machine complex, the Matrix (originally a man-made and controlled artificial intelligence, prior to nuclear holocaust), which feeds off human electrical impulses. Their minds plugged into an artificial world designed and maintained by the Matrix, the dormant human beings exist in a state of false consciousness, oblivious to their real condition of existence inside the Matrix's 'farm'.
- ¹²⁵ H.T. Wilson, op. cit., p.61.
- ¹²⁶ Miller, op. cit. p.25. *2010* (Peter Hyams, 1984).

- ¹²⁷ Geduld, op. cit., p.47.
- ¹²⁸ John Clarke, 'Pessimism versus Populism: The Problematic Politics of Popular Culture', in *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption*, edited by Richard Butsch (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), p.31.
- ¹²⁹ Peter Dicken, 'Global Shift – the Role of United States Transnational Corporations', *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in the Projection of American Power*, edited by David Slater and Peter J Taylor, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), p.35.
- ¹³⁰ Morton Mintz and Jerry S. Cohen, *America, Inc.: Who Owns and Operates the United States* (London: Pitman Publishing, 1972), p.34. At the time of *2001*'s release, according to Morton and Cohen, 'the one hundred largest corporations had a greater share of manufacturing assets than the two hundred largest had in 1950, and the two hundred largest in 1968 controlled a share equal to that held by the thousand largest in 1941'. p.35.
- ¹³¹ John Clarke, op. cit., p.31.
- ¹³² Richard Godden, 'Maximizing the Noodles: Class, Memory, and Capital in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon A Time In America*', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 31, Part 3 (December 1997), p.373.
- ¹³³ See also Daniels, op. cit., p.6.
- ¹³⁴ Marx, *Comments on James Mill* (1844), quoted in Hawkes, op. cit., p.98.
- ¹³⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, op. cit., p.178. Significantly, *2001* and Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* emerge out of the same economic and cultural milieu. Adorno's thesis was published in the States just two years before *2001* was released in 1968.
- ¹³⁶ Miller op. cit., p.23.
- ¹³⁷ As Marx and Engels put it, the merchandise character 'must nestle everywhere, settle everywhereIn a word, it creates a world after its own image.' Karl Marx, Frederick Engels (1848) *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), pp.39-40.
- ¹³⁸ Immanuel Kant (1790), 'Analytic of the Sublime', Part I Book II, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated with Analytical Indexes by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p.90.
- ¹³⁹ Miller, op. cit., p.19.
- ¹⁴⁰ Adorno *Negative Dialectics*, op. cit., p.180.
- ¹⁴¹ This sense of absolute entrapment extends to human interaction. Men and women each have their own specific place within the apparatus which divides as it rules, the body, wearing its particular function like a tightly fitting, restricting suit. As a consequence, men and women in *2001* exist in a state of loneliness. Bowman and Poole, performing discrete functions aboard the ship, collect their food, eat and watch TV in silence, the *mise en scène* configuring their segregation: as Geduld points out, the men are 'rarely filmed together in the same shot before things go wrong'. Geduld, op. cit. p.152. In this way, the apparatus fragments human relations just as it does their bodies; as Miller writes, 'Whereas the apes had feared and fed together, here, everyone is on the job alone.' Miller, op. cit., p.23.
- ¹⁴² Leo Marx, op. cit., p.248.
- ¹⁴³ Nicholls, *Modernisms*, op. cit., p.7.
- ¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p.7.
- ¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p.7.
- ¹⁴⁶ Godden, op. cit., p.89.
- ¹⁴⁷ Daniels, op. cit., p.3.
- ¹⁴⁸ Leo Marx, op. cit., p.192; and Emerson, 'Circles', op. cit. pp.169, 171.
- ¹⁴⁹ Bowman's behaviour might even be compulsive, kindling the interest of the computer who, after asking if the astronaut has been making drawings *again*, requests a closer look. The ensuing mind game between Bowman and HAL adds a further way in which HAL's apparent breakdown can be interpreted. It is precisely while HAL is scrutinising the drawings that he begins to question Bowman about his commitment to the mission, hinting at mysterious goings-on as though in an effort to find out how much the astronaut knows about the mission's true purpose. In this way, Bowman's poker-faced enquiry as to whether HAL is preparing a psychology report can be seen as a deliberate deflection of HAL's questions which, catching the computer off-guard, forces the defensive reply 'Of course I am'. When HAL reports a fault with the ship's communication system, this appears as a counter move which is meant to detract from his own indiscretion, but which sets in motion the chain of events that will eventually lead to his destruction and Bowman's liberation.
- ¹⁵⁰ I borrow from Nicholls, op. cit., p.22.
- ¹⁵¹ The name 'Star Gate' is taken from the novel of the film.
- ¹⁵² Edmund Burke (1757), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, edited with an introduction by J.T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p.57.

- ¹⁵³ In the novel of the film, the bedroom is modelled on information the aliens have gathered from monitoring earth's radio waves and is meant to reassure Bowman. Unexplained in the film, the meaning of the bedroom is left open to interpretation.
- ¹⁵⁴ Geduld, op. cit., p.62.
- ¹⁵⁵ Douglas Trumbull (special effects supervisor), 'The "Slit-Scan" Process Used in 2001: A Space Odyssey And Beyond ...', in *American Cinematographer*, Vol. 50, Part 10 (October 1969), p.1011.
- ¹⁵⁶ Herb A. Lightman, *American Cinematographer*, Vol. 49, Part 6 (June 1968), p.412.
- ¹⁵⁷ Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia Of Science Fiction*, op. cit. p.1251; Geduld, op. cit., p.60. According to Kubrick, such was the complexity of the film's effects, 'every separate element and step was recorded... .It took an incredible number of diagrams, flow-charts and other data to keep everything organized... .' Kubrick, in *American Cinematographer*, op. cit., p.442.
- ¹⁵⁸ Tom Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator', *Art and Text*, 34 (Spring 1989), p.33.
- ¹⁵⁹ Ibid., pp.40, 33.
- ¹⁶⁰ See John Belton, *Widescreen Cinema* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), especially pp.1, 90; and Tana Wollen, 'The Bigger the Better: From Cinemascope to IMAX', *Future Visions: New Technology of the Screen*, edited by Philip Hayward and Tana Wollen (London: BFI Publishing, 1993), especially pp.13, 28.
- ¹⁶¹ Robin Baker, 'Computer Technology and Special Effects in Contemporary Cinema', *Future Visions*, op. cit., p.41.
- ¹⁶² See also Wollen, op. cit., pp.11, 15.
- ¹⁶³ Steven Carter: 'Avatars of the Turtles', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 18, Part 3 (1990), p.99.
- ¹⁶⁴ Rieder, op. cit., p.35. *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999) exemplifies what Rieder calls 'exacerbated examples of the fetishized commodity'. Lucas's *Phantom Menace* has been widely criticised in film journals and broadsheet reviews as an absurdity of non-narrative spectacle – though its box-office takings attest to its mass appeal. *Phantom Menace* attempts to cash-in on the successful formula of the original, *Star Wars* movie which reputedly set the agenda for effects-laden SF films. Like Rieder, Steven Carter describes this process as the fetishisation of technologised spectacle which results in the decentering of human content and meaning in film. In *Star Wars*, Carter argues, 'both Vaderas "Villain" and Skywalker as "hero" were redundant to the film's true ethic: a self-reflexive celebration of its own special-effects-as-hero' while George Lucas (recalling the efforts of nineteenth century illusionists), operated as some kind of grand techno-wizard, 'mesmeriz[ing] audiences by technological abra-cadabra'. Carter, op. cit., p.99.
- ¹⁶⁵ Belton, op. cit., p.92.
- ¹⁶⁶ See also Peter Matthews's discussion of Bazin the possible advantages of the long take over montage: 'Divining the real', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 9, Issue, 8 (August 1999), pp.24, 25.
- ¹⁶⁷ David E. Nye, *Narratives and Spaces: Technology and the Construction of American Culture* (Exeter: University of Exeter press, 1997), p.155.
- ¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p.153.
- ¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p.155.
- ¹⁷⁰ Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, op. cit., p.155.
- ¹⁷¹ Susan Sontag (1980), *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London: Vintage, 1996), p.102.
- ¹⁷² Nye, *Narratives and Spaces*, op. cit., pp.156-157. The Apollo missions continue as a 'unifying memory' of a defining moment of American achievement, still open to political exploitation. See Nye, *ibid.*, pp.160.
- ¹⁷³ Dale Carter, op. cit., p.181.
- ¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p.181.
- ¹⁷⁵ Ibid., pp.121, 182; Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, op. cit., p.238.
- ¹⁷⁶ Dale Carter, op. cit., p.159.
- ¹⁷⁷ Ibid., pp.142, 143.
- ¹⁷⁸ As Nye explains, during the televised launches,

homes became extensions of public space, where small clusters of people viewed the event. The desire to watch was very strong, and much ordinary business simply shut down. [Nye, *Narrative Spaces*, op. cit., p.156.]

¹⁷⁹ Leo Marx, op. cit., p.223.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p.224.

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- ¹⁸¹ Whitman, in Leo Marx, *ibid.*, p.224.
¹⁸² Rieder, *op. cit.*, p.34.
¹⁸³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, quoted in Malcolm Bull's 'Where is the Anti-Nietzsche?', *New Left Review*, No. 3 (May/June 2000), p.133.
¹⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, in Bull, *ibid.*, p.139.
¹⁸⁵ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press), p.46.
¹⁸⁶ See Weber quoted in H.T. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.53. See also H.T. Wilson p.54.
¹⁸⁷ Geduld, *op. cit.*, p.70.
¹⁸⁸ Ellis Hanson, 'Technology, paranoia and the queer voice', *Screen*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), p.141; Geduld, *op. cit.*, p.70. See also Jack Fisher, 'The End of Sex in 2001', *Film Journal*, Vol., 2, Part 1 (1972), p.65.
¹⁸⁹ For discussion of the possible meaning of HAL's voice, see also Hanson, *op. cit.*, p.140.
¹⁹⁰ Hanson, *ibid.*, p.141.

Chapter Four

Some Uses and Abuses of the Edge Motif

In the previous three Chapters, I have argued that the edge motif – rooted in the meaning of the word 'sublime', and in Protestant-Romantic and frontier traditions – performs an important aesthetic and political function within three filmic representations of natural and technological American sublimity. Yet, in the period covered by this thesis, the motif actually proliferates as a symbol of redemptive promise across a range of filmic genres.¹ Lacking sufficient space to discuss all these films individually, this Chapter will consider a selection of films which incorporate the motif within their figurative and conceptual frameworks in an interesting and prominent fashion. Like *Eagle's Wing*, *Jeremiah Johnson* and *2001*, these films share a concern for what they project, variously, as a totalising economic, technological and rational order dominating modern-day America which, by its nature, is hostile to individuality and difference and which forecloses the possibility of an alternative to its own, severely constraining, practices and ideologies. In each film, 'the given is a prison', the edge motif working, as in all the films discussed so far, to construct a symbolic threshold to a space beyond.² As with *Jeremiah Johnson* and *2001*, however, the appeal to an American Sublime in these films can be seen to compromise their critiques of a technocratic and/or corporate America showing, ironically, an inability to think very far outside the structure of power from which they set out, representationally, to escape.

Synopsis *Equinox* (Alan Rudolph, 1992).

The present. While performing her duties in a coroner's office, a young woman (Sonia) chances upon a sealed letter attached to the corpse of an aged female vagrant (Lena). The letter reveals that, when a young dancer, Lena had an affair with and gave birth to the twin sons of a wealthy married man who then left her. Lena subsequently abandoned her children, unaware, never having opened the letter, that her lover had given her a considerable amount of money. Sonia sets out to discover the twins, now in their twenties, one of whom (Henry) works as a mechanic for his adoptive father, while the other (Freddy) is employed by local hood, Mr. Paris. Neither brother knows of the other's existence. The twins meet accidentally for the first and last time at a restaurant whose owner Mr. Paris is attempting to coerce into a take-over. A gunfight breaks out during which Freddy is fatally shot by the restaurateur's daughter. Confused and frightened, Henry steals a car from the garage and drives to the apartment of his girlfriend. (Beverley). When she refuses to go with him, Henry drives off alone on the first leg of a pre-planned trip, beginning with the Grand Canyon.

Equinox's action is set in an anonymous American city whose institutions and inhabitants are plainly dominated by the interests of the market place. The dominance of this system is figured by the film's establishing shot: a 180° camera pan which conveys the height and extent of the city's skyscrapers as 'vertical expressions' of the ambitions and

achievements of America's free market economy.³ [Figs 70-73]. Appearing as 'awe-inspiring ... symbol[s] of corporate prestige', skyscrapers in the film operate as negative icons of American sublimity which signify the insignificance of the city's individual inhabitants, for, as David E. Nye argues: 'The proliferation of tall buildings destroyed the human scale of the city A city full of skyscrapers seemed massive, cold, crowded, and impersonal'⁴ Their height exaggerated by the low angle of the shot, the film's dark, grey 'Cathedral[s] of Commerce' appear looming and oppressive while the pan, revealing a dense urban environment, suggests the city as a claustrophobic, stifling environment in the manner of Nye's analysis. From the outset, it is thus clear that the city operates as a figure of entrapment, and as a menace to individual selfhood.

The sense of a vast, complex and malign power system generated by the opening shot is enhanced as the single, fluid pan completes its rotation. Without a break, the camera begins a slow, vertical pan down the length of a skyscraper which displays the name, 'EMPIRE FEDERAL', and two billowing US flags above its entrance. [Fig. 73]. As the camera continues this vertical pan, it reveals, at the end of the walkway beneath the EMPIRE FEDERAL, a large billboard featuring an image of a recumbent young woman wearing a lush evening gown with a plunging neckline, smiling invitingly. This image constructs a reference to the seductive nature of commodity forms, the way in which they function as 'powerful sensual stimuli', both appealing to and exploiting human desire within the processes of profit-making.⁵ At this point, however, it is not made clear exactly what the ad is peddling but, later in the film, it is revealed that the poster is promoting the national lottery. This combination of figurative elements within the camera pan – the EMPIRE skyscraper with its national flags and, beneath the building, as though supporting it, the lottery advertisement and its reference to the commodity form – is highly significant because it sets up commercial interests as the foundation of state power and, consequently, as the organising principle of the city's social and economic relations as a whole.

The words 'EMPIRE', 'LOTTERY', 'LOTTO', recur throughout the film in a way similar to *2001*'s use of corporate logos to figure a techno-corporate sublime. In particular, like the meaning and ubiquity of the PanAm logo in *2001*, the omnipresence and connotations of the word 'EMPIRE' represent a state and corporate totality which, inverting the American Sublime, engenders self-diminishment and self-negation. 'EMPIRE' appears on menu boards, on newspaper clippings (which carry photographs of the Empire Theater where Lena first met the father of her twins), on identification badges (signified by the letter 'E') and on the yellow overalls worn by 'EMPIRE CONSTRUCTION' workers. Frequently in the background of the action (but made prominent in the uniform grey of the city by the bright colour of their overalls), perpetually digging the ground from underneath the feet of the city's inhabitant's, these construction workers offer clues to the film's meanings. Within this schematic of making and remaking, the workers suggest the realities of city and city life as mere construction, as a system in which fabrication is, paradoxically,

the ground of reality, and which is organised according to the dictates of an unseen power.⁶ Interpreted as scene shifters, that is, the workers can be seen to construct the city as theatre and its people as actors, rather than agents, who are determined and dislocated by perpetual but surface change which, as in *2001*, leaves the social and economic hierarchy intact.

The ubiquity of the words 'LOTTERY' and 'LOTTO', meanwhile, which like *EMPIRE* appear on a multitude of surfaces (on walls, billboards and lottery cards), suggest the city's theatre setting as a casino.⁷ In *Equinox*, men and women are measured by material success and are categorised as either winners or losers. In this cultural and economic situation, the lottery assumes a tremendous importance, being almost the only means by which an individual might be wrenched out of, as Sonia puts it, the 'junk'. A source of possible redemption to the city's inhabitants, the lottery represents a 'market in luck', 'sell[ing] "chance" as part of a thoroughly costed package, promising prizes to a number of "lucky" winners'.⁸ This commodification of luck illustrates capital's absolute control over the individual: since 'freedom' is offered as a purchase and is measured by wealth, the film suggests, the route out is simply another way in.

Underneath and overshadowed by the symbols of corporate and state totality are the city's vagrants. The contrast between the immense wealth symbolised by skyscrapers and advertisements and these dispossessed people comments on an economic system which privileges property over personal rights.⁹ Amidst the noise and commotion of the city, the camera and soundtrack pick out Lena, who is clearly very sick, and a friend supporting her. Before her friend can help her to the hospital two blocks away, Lena collapses and dies while an indifferent crowd mills by (only another vagrant notices Lena's plight). Lena's undignified death reveals the inherent reductiveness of the totalitarian economic order, where those who cannot consume or produce and who have no property, count for nothing.

As Lena expires, the camera pulls back a little to reveal the lower arm and torso of a boy tossing a ball into the air in a rhythmic, repetitive movement. The boy's mechanical movements suggest what Raymond Williams calls the alienation of rationalism in modern socio-economic organisation and the consequent transformation of 'society from a human process to a machine'.¹⁰ Setting the boy up as metonymical effect of the operations of the state and capital apparatus in this way, the shot constructs an image of dehumanisation that points towards the emotional indifference of the crowd who, geared only to serve the interests of the dominant order, pass Lena by. Meanwhile, the boy's anonymity and partial representation within the scene indicates the reduction and misrepresentation of individuality within the narrow, empiricist interests of the apparatus. Commenting on Freddy's death at the end of the film, Sonia's dialogue similarly articulates a discrepancy between public and private selfhood produced by the state-corporate totality:

'They have his name and address, wife and kids, they know who he worked for, how much he had in the bank, the color of his fillings But they don't really know who he was.'

Like the sublime, *Equinox*'s economic rationalism knows no limit, invading public and private spheres alike. Thus, social bonds are shown to be determined by relationships of exchange and people appear as possessions. Whether it is Rosie the hooker 'paying' Henry with blow jobs for looking after her child while she goes out soliciting to pay her pimp, or Freddy who is hired by Mr. Paris to 'rub out' troublesome gang member, Richie – everyone can be bought, signifying 'the imposition everywhere of the single unquestionable law of the market.'¹¹ While characters are shown to be dominated by relations of exchange in the film's comparison between capitalism and casino, however, the market place itself – the entire business of making and earning money – is linked to corruption and violence. In this context, the word 'LOTTERY' appears most strikingly as reflected images of neon signs which slide across the driver window of Freddy's car as he drives Mr. Paris through the city at night. The inversion of the word 'lottery', (symbol of the market place) in the reflected image not only implies the wrong state of things – the dominance of men and women by market forces; combined in the *mise en scène* with the gangsters, this symbol of capitalism is also connected with amorality and brutality. Indeed, in *Equinox*, where the Mafia, as Mr. Paris explains, 'ain't no different than any other business', where Richie's murder amounts to a 'Big fuckin' deal' and where there is, as Freddy puts it, 'behind every fortune ... a crime', criminality, violence and the market appear as synonymous.

This connection between capitalism, crime and aggression in the film is apt, given that America's industrial and commercial fortunes, as Joel Kovel argues, were founded on violence (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the forced removal of Native Americans from and theft of their land and slavery, and, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the violent suppression of organised labour).¹² *Equinox*, however, makes its critique of corporate capitalism more specific. During an exchange between the owner of the restaurant, who is trying to resist a take-over, and Mr. Paris's gang, the hapless restaurateur is told to 'Think of us as your golden arches', setting up an explicit reference to the McDonald's fast food franchise. This allusion to McDonald's links Mr. Paris's methods and ideology to the McDonald's franchise founder, Ray Kroc whose 'dog-eat-dog, rat-eat-rat business philosophy' and bullying of franchisees into submission earned him a fortune, and whose business empire is still 'massively and aggressively expanding', armed with its own 'heavies' (body guards and highly paid lawyers).¹³

The reference to McDonald's is also suggestive of several interconnected meanings within the film. These turn on familiar associations of the franchise with 'junk food' while playing on a metaphor of filthy lucre. Within the film's presentation of corporate sublimity,

these related meanings are significant, displaying similar anxieties about the commodity form evident in *Eagle's Wing*, which links commodities to pollution, corruption and death. In this way, the allusion to McDonald's can be seen to set up a reference to the kind of dirty tricks corporations will employ to gain an advantage over rivals. Ray Kroc himself was not averse to such methods. Rejecting the need for corporate spies, Kroc openly bragged that 'you can learn all you ever need to know about the competition's operation by looking in his garbage cans. ... More than once ... I have sorted through a competitor's garbage.' As John Vidal states, 'It's a tacky image'.¹⁴ The allusion to McDonald's and 'junk food' also evokes the 'chilling ... moral detachment' of the junk bond traders, a few of whom struck very lucky in the deregulated Reagan years. Operating in high risk, high interest schemes of lending to 'shell corporations' with no assets, junk bond traders ran on, or close to, illegal insider trading with little thought of the economic and social consequences of their actions. Revealing the vulnerability of ordinary people to such practices, one of Wall Street's elite (who was imprisoned for insider dealing) remarked: 'it was easy to forget that the billions of dollars we threw around had any material impact upon the jobs and, thus, the daily lives of millions of Americans.'¹⁵

Other scenes in *Equinox* set up a broader critique of corporate America by drawing on a nexus of connotative meanings of 'junk'. In his analysis of the way in which ever increasing levels of consumption both maintain and are maintained by corporate-dominated America, David C. Korten points to an unpleasant consequence:

As we surmise that ancient Egyptians measured themselves in part by the size of their pyramids, a future civilisation may look back on our era and conclude that we measured our progress by the size of our garbage dumps.¹⁶

The scene in which Freddy dies (is 'wasted') amidst the restaurant's garbage in a back alley is particularly significant in respect of Korten's analysis. The scene's reiteration of wastage and its combination with eating (the restaurant) refers back along the film's signifying chains to the earlier inferences of junk and food in the allusion to McDonald's, linking conceptually to the wastefulness of consumerist economies. As Freddy lies dying, the LOTTO woman, figure of the corporate totality, looks on, 'overseeing' his dying moments, just as she did his mother's, combining symbolically death, junk and consumerism with cash. Given this combination, the strap-line to the advertisement, which is now revealed, is darkly comic: 'LOTTO: THE BEST IN LIFE'. The advertisement underlines the discrepancy between self- and corporate sublimity in which men and women, as disposable commodities, can be trashed (negated), subverting the representation of the American Sublime as a discourse of unlimited possibility.

The figure of Freddy-turned-trash is important to *Equinox's* rhetorical scheme because it picks up on the film's opening dialogue in which all ordinary people are likened to rubbish. Fantasising about making her fortune by writing a story, Sonia comments: 'my

life, your life, all our lives, are dull and wasted. This story is gonna raise me up out of the junk'. Sonia's fantasy of transcendence reveals the material side of American Dreaming. A wannabe, Sonia's desire bespeaks a collective American ambition. But in *Equinox*'s rhetoric of corporate corruption, and in a further inversion of the American Sublime, to transcend the junk is, paradoxically, to fall into it.

To want to 'make it big' – to identify with the grandeur and power of wealth – is shown to result, not in self-enlargement but in self-negation through self-objectification. Beverley, the object of Henry's desire, systematically self-negates in this way, by (re)modelling herself on ornaments and paintings of sophisticated women. Wanting to raise herself out of the ordinary, Beverley attempts, Gatsby-like, 'to build [her]self from the outside', in order to give herself 'class'.¹⁷ Her drive to self-improve, to disguise her ordinariness, means that Beverley 'cannot afford to be natural and spontaneous', which would give her away; consequently her mannerisms are awkward, her dialogue stilted.¹⁸ She appears not as Beverley, but as 'Beverley', as a performance of elegance in a way that connects to the theme of city as theatre and artifice. In short, Beverley objectifies herself, revealed in her habit of referring to herself in the third person, rather than the first, as when explaining to Sonia how she has lost Henry: 'She had an opportunity to be with him once, but she didn't take it. ... She didn't understand that it might have been her only chance.'

Beverley's objectified self, moreover, appears to control her. When packing her things to leave with Henry on their planned trip, Beverley almost immediately begins to feel uneasy asking, 'What is she doing?' Her desire to be free, to transgress (figured by a longing gaze out of her window), is held in check by the remonstrative voice of her other, objectified self. The *mise en scène* reiterates the meaning of Beverley's third person monologue: set up so as to reveal her reflected image as she turns to gaze out of the window, this arrangement of the filmic space reveals Beverley as a divided self, torn between opposing desires.

It is the twins, however, who most overtly represent a divided consciousness: in the scene where Freddy is killed, Henry also experiences the pain of the wound, suggesting that the twins are really two halves of the same being. The split consciousness represented by Freddy and Henry refers symbolically to the dark-light opposition of the film's title, setting up a dialectic between materialistic and idealistic impulses. In this way, Freddy, seeking money and up for sale, represents the commodified and corrupted self-of the market place while Henry, who is searching for meaning beyond exchange value, represents a more essential selfhood (able to sense something beyond the market place). There are signs, however, that Freddy is aware of and troubled by his status as merchandise, though powerless to change it. After killing Richie, he refuses payment, clearly feeling sullied by what he has done. Ignoring him, Mr. Paris stuffs Freddy's pockets with money, the action cutting away to a low-angle shot of a looming skyscraper

displaying the US flag, linking the seedy exchange to the state and corporate totality, while suggesting Freddy's insignificance in relation to it.

Another, more oblique, indication that Freddy is troubled occurs during a scene in the restaurant's washroom in which he himself appears as a split subject. While washing his hands – a significant action in view of the film's represented connections between big business and dirt – Freddy regards himself in a large mirror over the wash basins. The shot is set up so that Freddy and his reflection look like separate people, the real Freddy filmed from the right and slightly to the rear so that his features are hidden from view, the reflected image 'facing' the camera, staring back. Representing his commodified, false and corrupted self, Freddy's reflection appears dark and sombre, his eyes shaded and expressionless. The reflected image acts as a metaphor for what Peter Nicholls describes as a distinctly modern fear of a consciousness, not so much alienated by a stagnant and corrupt society, as in Romantic thought, but possessed by it, producing a subjectivity torn between good and bad.¹⁹ Figuring, in this way, his condition of self-estrangement, Freddy's reflection belies his later assertion to Mr. Paris on the advantages of having no known father as a role model: 'You grow up to be yourself'. Yet, because he represents the values of the marketplace, Freddy is clearly not himself.

As a figure of conflict between good and bad, the mirror image reiterates the material-ideal divide between Freddy and Henry. Henry's desire for freedom from contingency fixes on the redemptive possibilities of natural American grandeur and runs counter to Freddy's material dreaming (unlike Henry, Freddy reckons he needs 'a tank full of gas' and '[a] million bucks' to escape his predicament). Yet this figurative opposition, in which materiality is symbolically negated when Freddy is fatally shot, merely reinforces an American mythos. Upholding nature as a redemptive force and figuratively expunging the corrupting commodity form, *Equinox* projects materialism as a sign of a defiled American Dream, designating acquisitiveness and corruption as a modern, urban phenomenon. In this way, the film smooths over the historical actuality that materialist and idealist ambitions coexisted from America's colonial beginnings in the seventeenth century (where the literature was 'composed in equal parts ... of piety and advertisement') onwards.²⁰ As Tony Tanner puts it: 'whatever the sailors came for, – all the sailors, from Puritans to pirates – they came not to wonder at America but rather, in various ways, to "rape" it'.²¹

This materialist-idealist divide in *Equinox* figures more explicitly the same symbolic oppositions that appear in *Eagle's Wing* (between the materially ambitious Henry and the dreamer Pike); *Jeremiah Johnson* (between the venal Del Gue and romantic Johnson); and *2001* (between the money-fixated Poole and the subversive Bowman). Like *Equinox*, these films can be seen to project idealism as the essence, and materialism as the antithesis, of a 'true' American character, either degrading materialist impulses (as in Del Gue's amoral profiteering in *Jeremiah Johnson*) or negating such impulses through the symbolic death of a character associated with the money form (Henry in *Eagle's Wing*, Poole in *2001*). In

Eagle's Wing, however, while this material-ideal divide is certainly evident, Pike's dream of redemption through a return to nature is shown to be founded on a false idea of the wilderness which, in turn, is connected to a desire for self-gain in a way that deliberately complicates and subverts idealised, mythic versions of American dreaming. By contrast, *Equinox*'s characterisation of the material and ideal as a simple, Manichean struggle between light-dark forces prevents any real engagement with the complexity of American culture and history.

In its representation of the desirability of essential selfhood and spatial openness against the claustrophobic spaces of the city, *Equinox* also articulates a familiar Romantic assumption. At the moment of Henry's flight from the city, the film's formerly sympathetic treatment of Beverley collapses into a reaffirmation of the male-female opposition of sublime narratives. Beverley stands on a large portico over the main entrance to her apartment, beating her fists and weeping. Above the entrance, carved into the stone work, the words 'THE SHELTERING ARMS' are clearly visible. Stifled by the city, the lettering implies, Beverley has herself become stifling, threatening in her pleas for Henry to remain, to restrict and smother him.

After Henry leaves Beverley, he is next shown driving along an open road. Sonia's voice overlays the shot: 'The way I figure it, your whole life is about searching for one thing and all that other stuff just falls away.' Sonia's dialogue articulates an American impulse to achieve an uncompromised reality, an essential selfhood free of habitual thought and action ('that other stuff'). Urging individual integrity (the quest for one thing) as an ideal, her dialogue is significant in view of the film's presentation of divided selfhood, setting the scene for Henry's self-discovery. As Sonia's dialogue ends, Henry reaches out to touch a photograph of Beverly on the dash. Substituting for the real Beverley, the image evokes the artifice of the city, connecting femininity to the kind of 'stuff' which Henry must disburden himself of, and connecting masculinity, by implication, to an ideal self.

Before Henry achieves unconditional freedom, however, he is first confronted with the truth of his duality, presented in the film's penultimate scene. In a diner near to the Grand Canyon, Henry spots a young boy stealing candy. When the boy returns to his seat, Henry follows him, looking agitated. The reason for Henry's response to the boy become plain when the action reveals that the young thief has a twin brother who has been sitting innocently with their mother. Like Freddy and Henry, the twins figure the dark-light opposition of a consciousness divided against itself, stirring in Henry, the action implies, a recognition of his own mental fissure. After gazing at the boys intensely for a few seconds, Henry goes to a phone booth outside the diner to call Beverley, but when he sees his reflection in the mirror-glass of the booth, he stops short. As with Freddy's confrontation with his reflected image earlier, Henry's scrutiny of his reflected image points toward self-awareness, but with different emphasis. Significantly, the glass of the booth is panelled and reflects a double image of Henry, suggesting more overtly the division between his

objective (social) and subjective (essential) selves by symbolically separating them out. Appalled at the double image of himself, Henry rushes away to the Canyon – and, the film implies, to self-unity.

When the viewer next sees Henry, he is facing the camera and frozen in an attitude of astonishment. Legs straddled, arms held out stiffly at his side, mouth agape, Henry moves only his head to scan the scene in front of him, hinting at the breadth of a landscape as yet unrevealed to the viewer (his stunned silence evoking the signifying absence of the sublime). A pan away from, and to the right of Henry then reveals the cause of his shock: he is standing, precariously, on the edge of the Grand Canyon, its steep wall dropping sharply away beneath him. [Figs 74-75]. Reminiscent of Cole and Vanderlyn's iconography of the sublime, the edge motif figures the abyss opened up between the self- and sublime object in the moment of sensory excess. In this way *Equinox* begins to (re)imagine the canyon as an icon of sublimity, before evoking more overtly the discourse of the mathematical sublime in its representations. In subsequently appealing to a language of infinitude, the film turns the canyon, like Frank Waters and Joseph Wood Krutch before it, into a phenomenon 'beyond comprehension' and 'sensory perception'.²²

Equinox's rhetoric of limitlessness turns on one continuous 720 degree travelling shot around Henry. Resembling the symbolic camera work in *Eagle's Wing* and *Jeremiah Johnson*, this dramatic shot tropes the canyon into a negative landscape, an empty space without limit. As the camera rotates around Henry, it also sweeps away from and above him until he is rendered a tiny dot in the vast and vacant scene, figuring the discrepancy between sublime object and subject in the disruptive phase of the sublime moment. [Figs 76-79]. But while Henry appears insignificant in the continuous shot, he is nevertheless pivotal to its movement, configuring in accordance with an American Sublime both his negation and self-aggrandisement. Extending upwards and outwards from Henry, before closing back in on him, the travelling shot also suggests in this movement a moment of self-expansion, an interiorisation of dematerialised otherness that (re)constructs Henry as an essential self. [Figs 80-81]. Again, in keeping with the tradition of representations of the American Sublime, this internalisation of supersensible otherness is emphasised by a motif of height, explicitly configuring Henry's sublimation as a moment of transcendental overcoming.

In short, the travelling shot can be seen to figure Henry's freedom from contingency, his achievement of pure self-possession. Yet this presentation of pure self-possession is another weakness of the film. In *Equinox*'s Romantic conceptual frame, society appears as 'the enemy of human liberation' and autonomy which are, consequently, represented as being essentially separate from the social world.²³ Equating modern-day American society with a cruel and impersonal economic rationale, *Equinox* ends by representationally turning away from *any* social resolution to the problems it depicts. Leaving those problems intact,

the film posits instead that liberation can only take the form of a retreat into the private, expansive, realm of the self.

In addition, the presentation of the canyon as a dematerialised blankness, 'completely out of the world of man and modernity', offers a nostalgic, arguably patriotic, vision of America and Americanness.²⁴ Henry's synecdochic relationship with the canyon's natural sublimity can be seen to express a collective desire to return to a dehistoricised, unsullied past, the edge motif marking not so much Henry's individuation but rather his conjoining with an idealised American identity. Traditionally celebrated, like Niagara or the Rockies, as an icon of national sublimity, as a phenomenon whose grandeur evokes America landscape as a whole, the Grand Canyon represents not just the sublime, but an *Americanised* sublime, a place where it is possible to feel, like Krutch, 'the unique privilege of being an American.'²⁵ *Equinox* taps into this traditional idea of American exceptionality. During the travelling shot, the camera shoots into the sun causing light to stream over the scene in a way that reimagines the religious light of Albert Bierstadt's canvases which link national landscape to divine purpose. [Fig. 75]. In this respect, Henry's stunned reaction to the canyon, together with his desire to escape the corruption and aggression of the city, is suggestive of Nye's analysis of the emotions experienced before icons of America Sublimity. Akin to religious rapture, Nye points out, these emotions suppress painful realities of social tension.²⁶

There is some ambiguity in the closing moments however. As the travelling shot is completed with a zoom back in on Henry, the sound of whispering – used frequently during the film to figure the twins' past – is reintroduced onto the soundtrack. The intrusion of the past at this point disrupts the film's schematic of sublime redemption; it suggests that Henry's stunned silence is the result of his traumatic confrontation with his own duality depicted in the preceding scene, and is not connected to the canyon. After the camera lingers on Henry for a few seconds, the action cuts abruptly to a blackened frame in a way that can be interpreted as a figure of self-annihilation. These elements within the final scene are interesting because they reveal a level of uncertainty concerning Henry's future and, by extension, the restorative powers of icons of American sublimity in a way reminiscent of the concluding moments of *Eagle's Wing*. Yet, while the redemptive moment is weakened, the ambiguity within the scene is slight and is not sufficient to undercut significantly the film's lengthy celebrations of a natural American Sublimity and its meaning for Henry, in terms of his attainment of essential selfhood and freedom.

To conclude, it can be seen that, by representationally separating out a pure, dematerialised America (the vast, empty space of the canyon), from a corrupted one (the claustrophobic, dingy spaces of the city), and upholding the selfish, escapist and masculinist values of liberal selfhood, while paradoxically resorting to the terms and tropes of the American Sublime, *Equinox* is not only confused but also sidesteps the difficult economic issues it raises. This evasiveness bears comparison with two other films which

incorporate the Grand Canyon as symbol of redemption, *Grand Canyon* and *Thelma and Louise*, which, in rather different ways, can be seen to utilise the canyon within a schematic of concealment and denial of social tension.

Synopsis *Grand Canyon* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1991).

The present. An unhappy LA immigration lawyer, Mack, gets stuck in a traffic jam on his way home from a basketball game. Impatient, Mack manoeuvres out of the jam and takes another route. Soon he realises that he is lost in a black neighbourhood. Compounding his problems, Mack's car breaks down. Threatened by a black gang, Mack is rescued by a black mechanic, Simon. As they discuss LA's crime and violence, Simon advises Mack that a visit to the Grand Canyon will lift his spirits. The two then go their separate ways. Mack's depression is worsened when his friend (Davis) is shot and badly wounded, by his marriage (to Claire) which is collapsing, and by the continuing miseries and turbulence of city life. Unwilling to let a potential friendship go, Mack seeks out Simon who is himself feeling the effects of city violence as his nephew, Otis, is involved in a local black gang. Through Mack, Simon, who is lonely, meets and becomes involved with a young black woman (Jane). Mack also arranges for Simon and his family to move away from the crime-ridden black neighborhood. The film concludes when, as a token of friendship, Simon drives a party made up of Mack's family and his own to the Grand Canyon.

Setting up the urban as a figure of entrapment, *Grand Canyon* constructs LA from the outset as a delimiting and self-diminishing space segregating its inhabitants into strict social hierarchies. The film opens with a blank screen accompanied by the sound of a helicopter. Emphasising the sound of the helicopter in this way, this opening is appropriate to the film's configuration of the city as a prison: throughout, police helicopters figure as a technologised authority set above the subjugated masses of LA but which keeps them under constant surveillance, suggesting a panoptic system of discipline. Immediately succeeding the sound of the helicopter and the blank screen is a shot of the top of a basketball net, filmed in muted, bluish, tones that give the image the appearance of having been drained of colour, establishing symbolically the dreary and joyless nature of city life. Signifying the film's counter-thematics of resistance and transcendence, however, a basketball hits the side of the net and bounces off as black hands appear at the bottom of the frame stretching toward it, the action emphasised via slow-motion. [Fig. 82]. Anticipating the spiritual escape from the city depicted in the final scene, the out-stretched hands operate as a symbol of struggle and flight.

While it establishes the film's dominant thematics, however, the context of the opening image is unclear. The slow-motion image suggests the kind of heroic style characteristic of TV coverage of major sporting events and is undermined only by the muted colours and sombre music accompanying the shot. This ambiguity makes the succeeding shot more striking. The image of the net and outstretched hands cuts away to further slow-motion shots which reveal that the hands belong not to basketball stars, but ordinary black men (among them, Simon). Following these shots, a camera pan reveals the game's all-black

spectators, establishing that the scene is set within a poor and black district of the city. One slow and sweeping pan rests momentarily on an old man watching the game from behind the link-wire fencing surrounding the court. His right hand fingers hooked through the wires, the man's hand forms the *mise en scène's* primary area of interest. Next, the camera pans upwards and to the right, moving in slightly to reveal the man's left hand also clutching the wire. [Fig. 83]. The images of the man's hands contrast strongly with the opening shot and repeat the film's thematic dialectic between constraint and flight.

Corresponding to the film's conceptualisation of the city as a prison, the wire fencing surrounding the players also introduces the film's *leitmotif* of the boundary. Each boundary in *Grand Canyon* demarcates discrete economic and cultural spaces, setting up a reference to LA's rationalised yet socially fragmented landscape. In this scene, the wire fencing signifies a black community divided against itself: positioned behind the wire, the old man appears excluded from the game – and by extension from the kind of optimism it symbolises. Also behind the wire is a noisy young gang gathered around a car, revealed as the camera pans upward and then over the top of the fencing, and a sullen youth (Otis) who is approaching the fence. Symbolising America's largely black underclass, the rowdy youths represent social disorder, emphasised by the introduction of a police siren on to the soundtrack and a cut away to a police helicopter keeping the district under close scrutiny. They are not excluded from the game like the old man, but hostile to the kind of spirited endeavour it represents. Otis, meanwhile, neither willing to join in the game, nor able to identify fully with the gang is the film's most sympathetic character; belonging nowhere he embodies the damaging effects of social segregation.

The cheeriness of the game, the action makes plain, is not typical of Otis's neighbourhood: rather, the game forms an isolated pocket of activity in a neighbourhood characterised by gang violence and a pervading sense of hopelessness. The brutality of the neighbourhood is revealed often during the action: when Simon's sister and her young daughter, Kelley, are shot at and terrorised in their house by gangsters out to get Otis; when Simon's sister hurries Kelley past a woman scrubbing blood off the pavement outside her house; or when Simon discovers Otis cowering in the street's shadows, a traumatised witness to unnameable violence. The sense of despair in the film especially concerns black underclass youth. Otherwise trapped by poverty and social stigma, gang identity provides a source of self-esteem to this group – but at a price. Gang law is gun law and inter-gang rivalry promises early death:

[Simon]: 'Plenty have gotten out, Otis.'

[Otis]: 'I don't want out. ... Without my set, I'm nothing.'

[Simon]: 'You wannabe be gang bangin' when your twenty-five?'

[Otis]: 'Shit. I'll never live to be twenty-five.'

Mack's trespass into this violent world exposes the discrepancy between rich and poor. His expensive car and white face stand out in the ghetto and a gang, prowling the streets in their car (Ice Cube's 'F*** the Police' pounding from its stereo) soon spot him.²⁷ A series of cut away shots show Mack's brightly lit, comfortable and spacious suburban house which contrast sharply with the shadowy, hostile, spaces of the ghetto. Comparing the two different worlds via montage in this way, *Grand Canyon* shows both the distance between them but also links them together, alluding to the way in which white suburbia is implicated in a process that preserves a degrading system of racial and economic segregation. This frightening, alien, *un-American* space, the film suggests, is partly the result of white, middleclass prejudice and material ambition. In this, the film's analysis of black-white relations is similar to that of Edward K. Muller who writes:

Suburbanization, especially white flight, opened more inner-city housing to blacks, and soon additional neighborhoods were attached to the ghetto. ... White resistance, urban renewal, and entrenched discrimination confined expansion of blacks to inner-city areas. This growing minority population changed the demography and power structure of the older city, polarizing it from the white middle-class suburbs that recoiled from the city's problems.²⁸

The gap between rich and poor and resulting crime and violence in the film is articulated as a dangerous faultline running through the bedrock of American society, threatening catastrophe. At one point, the divide is compared directly to the Grand Canyon, setting up an inverted image of the American Sublime. As Davis explains to Mack toward the end of the film:

'There's a gulf in this country, an ever widening abyss between the people who have stuff and people who don't have *shit*. It's like this big hole has opened up in the ground, as big as the fucking Grand Canyon, and what's come pouring out ... is an eruption of rage and the rage creates violence and the violence is real, Mack, and nothing is going to make it go away until someone changes something ... which is not going to happen.'

The shallow nature of Davis, who directs exploitation movies, together with his overblown rhetoric, works to some extent to undermine the import of his dialogue. Yet the form and content of his speech repeats verbally an earlier symbolic episode in which Mack and Claire experience a terrifying earth tremor immediately after Claire voices her anxiety that American society is indifferent to deprivation, social atomisation and brutality. Coinciding with Claire's declared concern and resulting in the death of an elderly neighbour, the earthquake clearly functions as a portent of social destruction, a fitting symbol, perhaps, for a city with a history of race riots, but implicating social tensions in America as a whole.²⁹

Yet there is another potential force of destruction at work in *Grand Canyon*, suggested in part by Mack's trespass into the ghetto. Stranded with a useless car, Mack tries to summon help using his car phone, but the signal breaks up and he is cut off. This failure of

technology points to something more than the extent of Mack's distance from his familiar and comfortable environment. Mack's over-reliance on his expensive car and phone, tokens of success and affluence, implies a fetishisation of technology and technologically-derived power and a consequent transference of human agency from humanity to machine. His technological shield down, Mack is left exposed and vulnerable. Eventually summoning help at a payphone (an inferior form of technology), Mack is too late: the gang, having realised that he is in trouble, move in, Mack's car and phone providing a focus for their taunts and threats. Quickly, the Right Man produces a gun – in the film's terms, the ultimate symbol of techno-power and status. When Simon shows up, the gun is the subject of a revealing exchange between the him and the Right Man:

[Simon]: 'I gotta get outta here, and *you* got the gun. So I'm asking you a favor ... let me go my way here.'

[Right Man]: 'I will grant you that favor. ... But first, and truthfully: are you asking me a favor as a sign of respect, or are you asking me a favor 'cos I got the *gun*?'

[Simon]: '... . You don't have the gun, we ain't havin' this conversation.'

[Right Man]: 'That's what I *thought*. No gun, no respect. That's why I always got the gun.'

This exchange about firearms refers back deliberately to an earlier shot of a TV screen in Mack's home showing footage of the deployment of new American missiles. A voice-over extols the virtues of these latest models in weaponry while outlining military hostility to them:

'... missiles can accomplish at a ... er ... cheaper price and greater accuracy and fewer casualties a mission that a ... er ... pilot was supposed to carry out and did in previous wars, and the airforce is very resistant to doing that ... '.

Setting up a reference to the Gulf War, the commentator, articulates a rationale of killing, the technological subjugation of one group by another. The comparison between the Right Man's defence of and reliance on gun-power and the televised footage of missile use suggests that the youth has a clear understanding of the basis of America's technocratic power structure. In referring to a resistance to the new weapons, however, the voice-over to the news item also alludes to an anxiety of technological usurpation and domination of humanity. This allusion corresponds to the film's conceptualisation of technologies as a whole. *Grand Canyon*'s LA is an overly rationalised order made up of freeways, subways, skyscrapers, phones and helicopters, which significantly delimits and regulates human behaviour and contact. In this way, freeway congestion depicted in the film – seemingly endless lines of traffic compacted nose to tail – functions as the filmic emblem of regimentation, routine and stagnation, offering another subverted image of American sublimity.

Contrasting with the film's presentation of a technologised and rationalised system of control, however, is a dynamic of irrationality, manifested in chance encounters, unlikely friendships, references to miracles and magic, and, in particular, individual spontaneity. In this way, Claire's impulse to adopt a baby girl she finds in some bushes, or Mack's desire to pursue an unlikely friendship with Simon, are assertions of human warmth against logic and reason.³⁰ In particular, Mack's rash decision to leave the freeway, asserting his individuality and free will against an overly prescribed social order, clearly operates within this counter-thematic, underscored by the song playing on his car radio which urges the need to 'take a little risk' (which Mack sings along to). Ultimately, Mack's gamble leads to a non-financial dividend, initiating the chain of events that will lead him and his family to the Grand Canyon, his impulse to steer off-course proving his salvation.

Drawing on the sublime's appeal to the emotions rather than the intellect, the film offers the Grand Canyon as a figure of (redemptive) irrationality. Linked conceptually to Mack's own rashness, the Grand Canyon is articulated in terms of risk-taking and transgression. When Mack lays his anxieties before Simon, the latter responds: 'Man, get yourself to the Grand Canyon':

'... the thing that got me was sitting on the edge of that big old thing. ... Those cliffs and rocks, they're so old. ... When you sit on the edge of that thing you just realise what a joke we people are, what big heads we got thinking that what we do is going to matter all that much. ... I felt like a gnat that lands on the ass of a cow that's chewing its cud next to a road that you ride by on at 70 miles an hour.'

Rehearsing the loss-gain rhetoric and iconography of the American Sublime, Simon's discourse describes how the thrill of being right on the edge of the Canyon, of experiencing its spatial and temporal sublimities and his puniness in comparison, gives rise to a subversive self-revelation whereby city-induced worries – and, by extension, the city itself – are seen as insignificant.³¹ In this way, Simon's description of his unimportance in relation to this vast and timeless phenomenon constructs an anti-fetishistic critique of the city, expressing like Krutch, the view that 'Our littleness is something we need to be reminded of ... lest we misconstrue the significance of our own creations.'³²

Krutch compares directly the sense of smallness stimulated by the Canyon to

that other sort of belittlement to which modern man is being more and more subjected as he is dwarfed by his skyscrapers, made to realize his puniness by comparison with his ever-present machines, and of how little a single solitary individual can count for as the growing crowds of his fellow human beings submerge him. ...³³

Grand Canyon contrasts real with false sublimities in a similar way. This comparison centres on the character, Davis. A phoney within the terms of the film, Davis's ambitions and needs plainly contrast with the spiritual yearning of Mack and Simon in a way that

reconfigures the materialistic-idealistic opposition in representations of the American Sublime (another filmic over-simplification that, in associating materialism with the modern city forgets that America was viewed from the perspective of the vendor as well as the idealist from its colonial beginnings). Building his identity out of material possessions offered to him by corporate America (fast cars, Rolex watches), Davis is a fetishist of surface appearance whose business philosophy and practice represents the interests of the market place as a whole. Like the man, his movies (violent exploitation pictures) represent money. As such, his films are established as fake even as Davis claims them as faithful reflections of city life: 'I can't pretend it [violence] isn't there because that is a *lie* and when art lies it becomes worthless so, I gotta keep telling the truth'.

Yet, Davis's claims to art and morality sit uneasily with his equation of violent images in his films with cash, revealed when he demands at one point the restoration to one of his films of the 'brains-on-the-window shot ... the bits-are-on-the-visor shot' – 'The *Money Shot*'. In the scene where Davis is shot, *Grand Canyon* contrasts its own representation of violence with the kind of lurid misrepresentations produced by Davis's movies. Intended to demonstrate the stark reality of violence in comparison with Hollywood action movie product, the scene shows Davis lying wounded on the ground, covered in blood and vomiting in agony.

Significantly, it is after experiencing real, rather than choreographed, violence that Davis appears to be spiritually reborn. Shown recovering in hospital, Davis gazes out of the window by his hospital bed affording him a view of an LA skyline strongly silhouetted against a dawn sky. Entranced by the view Davis mutters, 'I have seen the light' and, later, will describe the moment as a 'religious experience', 'a glorious delicate dawn'. Though the hospital scene draws on familiar iconic elements of the American Sublime, Davis's new dawn is false. For, crucially (and fittingly), Davis's epiphany is engendered by architectural icons of wealth and commerce. Davis (later) vows that he will never make violent movies again, but the promise, like the sublime moment and Davis himself, is false. Davis soon returns to the movie industry and is last shown limping toward the vast door of a film studio which slides open to admit him. A diminutive figure inside the immense frame of the studio door, Davis turns and waves to Mack before the doors rumble shut with a loud and resonating clang. The sound and visual effects combine to suggest Davis's entrapment within and negation by the apparatus of capital and city, figuring what the film projects as the grim consequences of a materialistic mind-set.

The hollowness of Davis's experience contrasts with the final scene set at the Grand Canyon. This scene is constructed in the following way. Simon, his new partner (Jane) and Otis, along with Mack (carrying the baby), Claire and their son (Roberto) arrive at an as yet unrevealed destination in open country. Separate shots of the characters, singly and in pairs, detail their emotional responses – in some cases, gasps of astonishment – to a scene still undisclosed to the viewer but plainly affecting. The cause of the characters' reaction

still deferred, these individual shots cut to a group shot of the party gazing outward in speechless awe, figuring the temporary suspension of the mind's faculties (self death) at the moment of sensory excess. [Fig. 84]. Speechlessness, as in a Romantic tradition, however, is soon followed by recovery of voice, combined here with the restoration of conscious thought:

[Simon, to Mack]: 'So what do you think?'

[Mack]: 'I think ... it's not all bad.'

The camera then rotates very slowly behind the group to reveal that they are standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, emphasising the act of spectatorship and the conjunction between site and belief in the discourse of the American Sublime. [Fig. 85]. Stretching out before the group, and in direct contrast to the noisy, stifling and artificial city, the canyon appears as a silent, empty and boundless space, whose vast and craggy geological formations suggest both spatial and temporal infinitude.

Without pause, the camera pans upward slightly until the characters are out of shot and the canyon is more fully revealed. In a way similar to *Equinox*'s association of the canyon with divine purpose, as the canyon is revealed, a flourish of horns is introduced on to the soundtrack, setting up the sublime moment as a quasi-religious conversion and heralding spiritual rebirth. As the end credits begin, the shot fades into dramatic, sweeping helicopter shots of the canyon, reworking a tradition of American motion art in order to convey the canyon's immensity. Underscored by the introduction of choral work onto the soundtrack (suggestive of hymn and 'heavenly voices') these shots draw heavily on an idea of America's Manifest Destiny, suggesting the Grand Canyon as the work of God.

Like *Equinox*, in this way, *Grand Canyon* can be seen to utilise the iconography of the American Sublime as a strategy of denial of existing social and economic conflicts. Imagining, like Waters, the canyon as a 'powerful mesmer' in its presentation of a religious sublime, *Grand Canyon* both appeals to and promotes an icon of American sublimity as having the potential to effect dramatic social reconciliation by suppressing consciousness of social differences (and this despite its presentation of the recovery of thought at the moment of the sublime).³⁴ Indeed, in *Grand Canyon* the experience of the sublime is shown to engender a collective absent-mindedness. While representing divisions and subdivisions (black/white, under/middleclass, youth/middleage) within American society, each character is, crucially, transfixed by the same manifestation of American sublimity. In this respect, Mack's comment, 'it's not all bad' is also significant. The inclusion of the superfluous 'all' in the statement implies that Mack is referring not only to the canyon but to the nation as a whole, his synecdochic rhetoric recovering a link between America and redemptive promise. In this way, the film's use of the edge motif offers a symbolic moment of

overcoming of social fragmentation: the group stands united, poised on the edge of a new beginning.

Recalling Simon's account of how the canyon made his problems seem insignificant by comparison, this depiction of collective absent-mindedness trivialises the socio-economic inequalities and tensions that are explored throughout the film: to forget, the film implies, is to resolve. This trivialisation is compounded by the way in which the presentation of the sublime moment is curiously underimagined and fleeting, considering the symbolic weight carried by the Grand Canyon throughout the film. Despite *Grand Canyon's* emphasis on the importance of emotionality, gasps of astonishment are vaguely executed, while Mack's understatement merely contributes to the overall flatness of the scene. As a result, the sublime moment pales in comparison with the forces of social destruction depicted in the preceding scenes in a way that unintentionally points toward the inherent superficiality of the kind of reconciliation-through-unconsciousness engendered by collective fascination with icons of American sublimity. The inclusion of the Grand Canyon in *Thelma and Louise's* symbolical schemes, however, works in the opposite way since, what can be regarded as its own suppression of injustice and inequality turns on the dramatic power and detail of its final scene in which the canyon appears.

Synopsis *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991).

Arkansas, the present. A bored, exploited housewife (Thelma) and her friend (Louise), who is in a difficult relationship, set out on a weekend vacation, heading for a cabin in the mountains. But they do not make it there. *En route*, Thelma persuades Louise to stop at a nightclub. Thelma gets drunk and dances with a male stranger (Harlin) who attempts to rape her. Louise discovers them and rescues Thelma, holding a gun on Harlin. After an angry exchange, Louise shoots and kills Harlin (who is not armed) and the two women flee the scene. Pursued by the police and the FBI, and preyed on by a hitch-hiker (J.D.) who steals all their money, the two outlaws attempt to reach the border of Mexico, stealing, drinking and avenging themselves along the way. Chased across open and unfamiliar terrain, the women nearly drive over the rim of the Grand Canyon by accident. Discovering that they are trapped, however, they choose suicide rather than capture and drive deliberately over the canyon's edge.

Thelma and Louise sets out to interrogate and critique the nature and consequences of gender hierarchies and segregation within male dominated culture which it projects as characterised by rigid social and sexual codes that inscribe casual and habitual harassment of women. In order to do this, the film attempts, representationally, to break through ideological barriers between notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and it achieves this through its inversion of the conventionally 'masculine' genre, the 'road movie'.³⁵ In road movies, the road functions symbolically as a wilderness space, empty, vast and vacant, displaying iconographic and conceptual affinities with the American Frontier Sublime. The road, like the wilderness, offers the possibility of escape from dominant conformist attitudes and social structures. According to Steven Cohen and Ina Rae Hark:

The road has always been a persistent theme of American culture. Its significance, embedded in both popular mythology and social history, goes back to the nation's frontier ethos, but was transformed by the technological intersection of motion pictures and the automobile in the twentieth century.³⁶

Yet, as Timothy Corrigan points out, the road movie is 'a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively on men and the absence of women' and 'promotes a male escapist fantasy'.³⁷ Observing the film's subversions of the traditional road movie, however, Robert L. Cagle argues that *Thelma and Louise* is

a work that problematizes masculine privilege (and standards of representation) by placing female characters in the lead roles of a formerly "masculine" genre. *Thelma and Louise* represents a land of "outlaw" sensibility or desire, both in its narrative content and in its structural approach, by usurping a highly codified genre of masculine experience and making it "other."³⁸

In sharp contrast to the kind of claustrophobic anxieties apparent in the genre's male-centred narrative structure, delimitation in *Thelma and Louise* is reimagined as a masculine, rather than feminine, quality. Relatedly, in a way that subverts an American Sublime tradition of representation, wild nature is associated with femininity and feminine drives, figured from the outset by the women's desire to find freedom in the mountains (though this association is not unproblematic, as I shall show). The patriarchal order, meanwhile, is conceived of as the antithesis of nature and freedom: a seemingly limitless yet constraining structure of control and subjugation, its repressive character becomes more manifest the more the women struggle to find a space outside it.

The totality of the patriarchal order is shown to be made up of an interlocking complex of power systems. One of these systems is the use of language as a means of subjugation, most explicitly through the issuing of orders. These express a corresponding desire to silence women, as when Darryl (Thelma's husband) tells Thelma to stop 'hollerin', or when Harlin repeatedly orders Thelma to shut up. Connecting language to sexual politics, representations of subjugation through language also frequently combine imperatives with references to the phallus (as when Harlin contemptuously orders Louise to 'suck my cock', or when a leering truck driver tells both women to 'suck my dick'). In the context of this discursive domination, it is significant that, after shooting Harlin, Louise's resistance to male power is expressed in a counter-command: 'You watch your mouth, buddy'.

Harlin's use of language and his attempted rape of Thelma configure the links between verbal and physical abuse of women, as does a peculiarly masculine characteristic within the film of saying one thing while meaning another, figured repeatedly as sexual betrayal. In direct contrast to his intentions and subsequent actions, for example, Harlin assures Thelma that he will not harm her. But, when Thelma attempts to repel him, Harlin slaps her face. Figuring the conjunction of verbal and physical abuse, Harlin then jabs an extended

index finger at her in a warning gesture, the camera positioned so that his finger – seen jutting away from his body toward Thelma – is turned into a symbol of phallogentric power. [Fig. 86]. Harlin tells Thelma, angrily, 'I said I'm not going to hurt you, all right? Relax.' When Thelma weakly fights back, Harlin punishes her, twice hitting her hard about the face and drawing blood, again exposing the lie.³⁹

Subjugation through language is also dramatised by manipulations and supposed 'misreadings' of verbal and body language which have different meaning for men and women. Equating 'fun' with freedom, Thelma, unlike her friend, fails to recognise the danger of having fun where a consent to dance signals sexual availability. Harlin's confusion of male and female fun, which manifests itself in a misreading of Thelma's behaviour, introduces an economic dimension to the film's critique of patriarchal domination. Since Harlin has bought Thelma her drinks, he extends the fact of these purchases to her body, imagining her complicit in his desires. Thus, when Harlin finds himself the target of Louise's fury, he attempts to justify his actions with an appeal to male sexual privilege in which the woman is assumed willing: 'we were just having a little fun now.' Rejecting Harlin's inclusive 'we', Louise corrects him: 'In the future, when a woman's cryin' like that, she isn't havin' any *fun*.'

The kind of assumptions that led to the attack on Thelma, however, is shown to extend throughout the patriarchal order into the law itself. As Louise explains to Thelma, they have no recourse to the law because their story would not be believed:

'Just about a hundred Goddamn people saw you dancin' cheek to cheek with him all night. Who's going to believe that [you were being raped]? We just don't live in that kind of a world, Thelma.'⁴⁰

In the murder scene, the film can be seen to play with and subvert this kind of transference of blame from perpetrator to victim. Louise kills Harlin when neither she nor Thelma are in any immediate danger. Later, the narrative reveals a possible motivation for Louise's violent rage – her unpunished rape in Texas. Within the dynamics of the murder scene itself, however, the killing is set in motion by the provocative nature of Harlin's insults to Louise during their final exchange:

[Harlin]: 'Bitch! I should have gone ahead and fucked her.'

[Louise]: 'What did you say?'

[Harlin, slowly and deliberately]: 'I said suck ... my ... cock.'

Harlin's insults set up a dramatic tension demanding an equally dramatic resolution; consequently, there is a sense in which Harlin is the cause of his own death. As with Thelma, there is a discrepancy between his words, actions and desires: he appears to be 'asking for it' when, really, he is not.

Despite these localised dynamics, the film implies later that Louise's motivation is caused by the failure of the law to punish her rapist, because of the kind of prejudices and assumptions circulating through the phallogentric order. In this respect, the narrative turns on this pretextual event, redirecting blame toward the patriarchal order and away from Louise. That Louise's implied rape occurred in Texas, moreover, is significant. Texas is repeatedly evoked as the locus and expression of male injustice and brutality in the film, functioning as a microcosm of America's patriarchal order as a whole. When Louise walks into the seedy nightclub, she exclaims that the place reminds her of Texas, establishing an associative link between the attempted rape of Thelma and Louise's secret. When the women are on the run, Louise refuses to drive through Texas, citing the severity of its penal system. This equation between Texas and right-wing extremism is referred to again and more explicitly toward the end of the film, when Thelma and Louise are pulled over for speeding by a policeman. As he approaches the women, the policeman is shot from a low angle so that he dominates the frame. Square-jawed, black-clad, eyes concealed by shades and a cap pulled low over the forehead, the policeman is dehumanised, turned into the filmic emblem of an abstract and absolute male authority. As Louise exclaims (effectively explaining the imagery): 'Oh my God, it's a Nazi!'⁴¹

The image of the 'Nazi' contributes to the film's conceptualisation of the patriarchal system as a technocratic totality. In a way similar to *2001*, *Thelma and Louise's* technocracy penetrates the private sphere of the self (as when the computer database exposes Louise's secret history), reaches across vast distances (via the telecommunications network through which the FBI locates the women), spies (via surveillance cameras which catch Thelma in the act of robbery) and reduces subjectivity to a set of empirical facts which facilitate entrapment (Thelma's incriminating fingerprints; the reduction of both women to statistical data: height, weight, eye and hair colour).

In the final scene, the women's technological entrapment is represented via a shot filmed from the vantage point of an FBI agent training his gun on the two women, the shot framing them within the agent's gun sight in a way that represents their imprisonment within a male techno-space. [Fig. 87]. This scene also most explicitly configures the technocracy as sublime. In one instance, Hal (a policeman sympathetic to the two women) voices his fear for Thelma and Louise, articulating the gun power raised against them in terms of technological excess: the show of force, he urges, is 'too much'. In another instance, the two women are shown on the canyon's edge, the camera positioned behind them. A low rumbling sound is introduced onto the soundtrack (its source off frame), the sound increasing in volume until a helicopter rears up out of the canyon with a tremendous roar. Dark and menacing, the helicopter is troped into a monstrous extension of a male will to dominate, appearing as the mechanical objectification of a brutality already seen in Harlin.

As Hal's concern demonstrates, however, not all men in the film are brutes. Yet, since he seeks the capture of the women, his relationship to them is ambiguous. This is most dramatically illustrated in the concluding moments of the film. Contrasted with the FBI's intimidating behaviour toward the two outlaws, Hal urges Max to call off his men. One shot, shown in slow-motion to intensify its impact, shows Hal filmed from behind running after the women, his hand outstretched as though trying to drag them back from the edge. [Fig. 88]. The image condenses the duality of Hal's relationship to the women, his outstretched hand figuring his contradictory desires to save and to capture. The kind of threat that Hal poses to Thelma and Louise, moreover, is shown, at least partially, to replicate a masculine will to dominate, exemplified in the scene where he breaks into Louise's apartment to gather information on her. Once inside, Hal is clearly moved by the apartment's neatness and the way Louise's personal belongings reveal her personality. Yet his act and method of breaking in implies more malign forces at work. Hal has forced entry into Louise's private space in a way that can be seen to repeat, symbolically, the power relations enacted in rape. In addition, his method of entry, by sliding his credit card into the locking mechanisms of her door, while showing a common technique in breaking in, recalls Harlin's cash-value attitude to sex.

Within the film's schematic of an all-encompassing patriarchal order, Thelma and Louise's flight westward figures a gradual pulling free of domination, presented, as in frontier narratives, as a stripping away of socially prescribed thoughts and actions. In this context, the way in which Thelma articulates fun and freedom as letting her hair down ('hold on darlin', 'cos my hair is comin' down!') is important, shifting in emphasis as the narrative progresses. During one episode in the film, Louise (described as having 'tidy hair') is shown waiting for Thelma in her car. Exhausted and strained, Louise lights but fails to find relief in a cigarette. Tossing it away, she becomes aware that she is being watched and glances up. The action cuts away from Louise to a shot of two middle-aged women seated in the window of a diner. The elements within this shot combine to form an image of repressed womanhood. Neatly dressed, hair moulded rigidly into shape, the woman in the foreground of the shot stares at Louise, her own burning cigarette unsmoked. The woman is the embodiment of passivity (her stillness), boredom (the forgotten cigarette) despair (face set into an attitude of sorrow) and repression (lips pressed tightly shut; her containment behind the glass window; hair held firmly in place).

The action cuts back to Louise who is embarrassed by the woman's attention. Seeking distraction, she starts to apply some lipstick, using the rear-view mirror for guidance, but stops abruptly and throws the cosmetic away. Louise's indifference to her appearance contrasts with the women's attitude to their looks at the beginning of the film, especially the scene in which they embark on their vacation. Make-up carefully applied and hair held in place with scarves and spray, the women pose for a self-portrait, grinning lip-sticked smiles into the camera held at arm's length. Throughout the journey, however, the women

allow themselves to become more unkempt, their faces no longer made-up, hair loose and tangled. Reconfiguring the decreative impulses of frontier narratives, these physical transformations represent the women's turning away from their misrepresentation as objects of male sexual desire ('kewpie dolls', as Harlin calls them). Wing and rear view mirrors cease to be appliances in which to check appearances, becoming instead the means to watch landscapes recede from view. This symbolic placing of their past behind them (putting it in the rear view) is marked by a movement toward a vibrant, essential selfhood and a coming into consciousness. Commenting on Thelma's adeptness as an outlaw, Louise remarks, 'I think you found your callin'', to which Thelma responds, 'Maybe, maybe. The call of the *wild!*'; and as Thelma watches the road flash by in her wing mirror, she comments 'I feel awake ... wide awake. I don't remember ever feeling this awake.'

Within this decreative schematic, the edge motif performs a crucial symbolic function, figuring the boundary between limit (the patriarchal order) and limitlessness (a dematerialised blankness beyond). Constructing the psychodrama of the sublime, the women chance upon the canyon's edge very suddenly, their car teetering on the rim until Louise manages to reverse to safety. Registering the shock of the sublime, the women are rendered open mouthed and speechless as they struggle to comprehend the scene before them, their silence setting up the canyon as a signifying abyss in which the mind 'fears to lose itself'. Rehearsing a Romantic tradition, threat of self-death is warded off by the recovery of voice:

[Thelma]: 'What in the hell is this?'

[Louise]: 'I don't know. I think it's the Goddamn Grand Canyon'.

A shot of the awe-struck women cuts away to a sweeping shot of the canyon, troping it into sublime excess by depicting the extent to which it exceeds the limits of the frame. Off frame, in a voice full of nervous tension, Thelma gasps, 'Isn't it beautiful?', the discrepancy between her pleasure and fear, signifying the attraction-repulsion dynamic of the sublime.

Succeeding scenes continue to follow but also, arguably, subvert an American Sublime tradition. Realising that they are trapped, Thelma suggests, 'Let's not get caught' and, nodding toward the canyon, urges Louise to 'Go'. Tearful yet ecstatic, the two embrace before Louise accelerates the car toward the edge of the canyon. As they near the edge, the camera zooms in as they grip hands. Final close-up shots of Thelma and Louise show both women smiling elatedly. These shots are followed by a slow-motion shot of the car hurtling over the canyon's edge, the camera positioned at a low angle so that the car appears to leap into an expanse of sky, setting up a motif of flight. [Fig. 89]. The next shot, filmed from a position within the canyon, shows the car soaring over the Canyon's edge, the camera angle again low so that the sky forms the backdrop to the car, contributing to a sense of

flight, also underscored by 'soaring' filmic music. [Fig. 90]. The action freezes on this shot of the car, finally cutting to a blank white screen.

This use of the edge motif to connote a sublime fall upward at the moment of suicide is disturbing. As Mary Arensberg writes, the boundary between self and sublime must never be transgressed: to pass over into the dematerialised blankness of the sublime is to achieve only self-negation.⁴² Yet, in *Thelma and Louise*, the self-destructiveness of the leap into the abyss is almost entirely obscured. Only one element of the final scene hints at self-negation: the snapshot of Thelma and Louise, shown in close-up to be caught in the stream of air as the car careers over the canyon's edge and to flutter out of shot (a visual cancelling-out which refers only to the negation of their *former* selves). Instead, the abyss is imagined as the extension of the open road presenting an unbounded opportunity to 'keep on going', while the suicide is celebrated as both an instance of female solidarity (the emblem of which is the close-up of their tightly clasped hands) and as a moment of triumphant overcoming of the constraints of the patriarchal order (symbolised by the car leaping toward the sky and the cut to a blank white screen suggesting the dematerialised whiteness of unconditional freedom).

This appropriation of sublime iconography to evade the horror of the women's action is in tension with two earlier usages of the edge motif, one of which occurs at the start of *Thelma and Louise*. The film opens with a sombre black and white shot of an open and empty landscape which then pivots round at a 90 degree angle to fix on a range of mountains, dark against a lighter sky and rising up out of an open road which recedes into the distance. This bleak shot of the mountains is then supplanted by a vibrant colour shot of the same scene figuring, in this switch, a change of mood and a sense of promise. [Figs 91-92]. The formal dynamics of the shot correspond to this mood: leading the eye upward into an area of blue sky scattered with white clouds, it implies a narrative movement toward freedom. But this positive image of the edge motif contains within it residues of the bleakness of the original shot. Significantly, in this respect, Thelma and Louise are next shown speeding along this road toward the mountains in their last frantic bid to escape their pursuers in which they will find freedom only in death.

The edge motif's meaning also slips between promise and doom toward the end of the narrative, when Louise stops the car to stretch her legs, leaving Thelma asleep. In a close-up shot, Louise is shown gazing out across the landscape, absorbed in the scene. As she glances upward, the action cuts to reveal the object of her gaze: a rocky hill crest in dark relief against the dim light of the sky, the contrast between dark and light figuring the boundary between limit and limitlessness, present and future. The action then cuts back to Louise, still gazing in wonder at the scene. This montage pattern, framed by Louise's gaze, sets up a connection between her and the image of sublimity suggesting a future full of possibility. And, in emphasising Louise's look, the pattern signifies her separateness from sublime otherness. This emphasis shifts in the next shot. Here the camera is positioned

behind Louise, so that she can be seen full length still gazing outwards. Yet the necessary distance/difference between spectator and sublime space is tenuous, owing to a special light effect. The shot is back lit so that, while Louise stands in a pool of light, her form is in silhouette. A short distance in front of her, the ground slopes off sharply, giving way to a black empty space that stretches horizontally across the screen. Louise looks as though she is standing on the edge of an abyss which, since her silhouetted form is separated from its darkness only by a thin halo of light, threatens to draw her into itself. [Fig 93]. This fusion of present and future anticipates the *fall* in the flight at the end of the film, which the suicide sequence itself disguises.

I want to explore this evasion by way of reference to the film's appropriation of mainstream cinematic codes and to Laura Mulvey's well-known analysis of these codes as predominantly phallogentric in character. Investing anatomical difference with symbolic force, male-dominated mainstream cinema configures female sexuality negatively as 'other' where the woman's body symbolises her phallic lack (the phallus here understood as the emblem of power within an already male-dominated order).⁴³ Within these configurations, as Paul Willemen explains, the woman is the bearer of a 'guilty secret' – her castration (or mutilation) signifying her exclusion from and inferiority to the dominant masculine social order which induces, in turn, feelings of contempt and a 'castration anxiety' in the male.⁴⁴ Significantly, for my analysis, Mulvey proposes that conceptions of women's sexual difference can provoke sadistic urges within the patriarchal order toward expulsion and punishment, a drive that

fits in well with narrative. Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat...⁴⁵

Mulvey argues that these sadistic impulses are characteristic of films which explore issues of female insubordination where the insubordinate woman refuses to accept her inferior position (her 'castration') within the gender hierarchy, threatening to invade territories culturally designated as exclusively male.⁴⁶ In its inversions of a traditionally male genre, *Thelma and Louise* – whose female protagonists, rejecting their inferior position within the gender hierarchy, begin to emulate their male counterparts – presents just this kind of cultural transgression. Thelma reveals early in the film a desire to reconstruct her identity out of attributes she perceives to be more 'masculine'. In one scene, Thelma is shown looking at her reflection in the car's wing-mirror while pretending to smoke a cigarette. When Louise asks her what she is doing, Thelma responds that she is 'being Louise': 'Hey, I'm Louise'. Louise is consistently associated with 'masculine' traits, demonstrating a strong-will, fierceness, sharp intelligence and hardness. In modelling herself on Louise, Thelma can be seen to remake herself in the image of the male.

While their use of a fast car to facilitate their transgressive activities symbolically encroaches upon and subverts the male technocratic order, the women's trespass into a male domain centres on their ability to handle a gun – a familiar phallic symbol of power. Thelma's initial decision to take the gun on vacation is itself suggestive. Ostensibly, Thelma packs the gun out of 'female giddiness', her inability to decide what is important, with the result that she takes 'everything'. Her decision remains curious, however. Later, Darryl recounts Thelma's fear of the gun to the FBI, her refusal even to learn how to use it. Coinciding with her brave determination to go on vacation without Darryl for the first time (and without his permission), Thelma's decision to take the gun for self-protection symbolises her emerging independence.

While the women's appropriation of this masculine symbol of power is presented as part of a wider rebellion against social injustice, rather than as a crudely drawn 'penis envy', the treatment of their refusal to conform to gender stereotypes is nonetheless problematic – especially with regard to the murder. Crucially, Louise shoots Harlin immediately after he orders her to suck his 'cock'. This conjunction between the reference to the phallus and the killing suggests Harlin's murder as a vengeful castration crime. Similar symbolic emasculation occurs elsewhere in the film: as when the truck driver is also held at gun point and 'unmanned' after he orders the women to suck his 'dick', prompting them to blow up his truck (the tenor and vehicle of his masculinity); and as when the 'Nazi' cop is disarmed by a gun-wielding Thelma, made to cry and so 'feminised' (castrated). The murder, as well as the additional castration crimes, makes the women highly punishable.⁴⁷ In this way, the edge motif can be seen to reassert symbolically conceptions of sexual difference. Toril Moi's analysis of women's marginality within male culture is relevant here:

if patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can be construe them as the *limit* or border-line of that order. ... Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will ... share in the disconcerting properties of *all* frontiers ... neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position which has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes ... to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God. In the first instance, the borderline is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness outside, and in the second it is seen as an inherent part of the inside; the part which protects and shields the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos.⁴⁸

It can be argued, then, that the edge motif in *Thelma and Louise* symbolises the borderline between feminine wildness and the patriarchal order in the way that Moi describes. Threatening to the patriarchy, Thelma and Louise (described as 'bitches from Hell') are driven back into the chaos from which they originate, answering, finally (and completely), 'the call of the wild'. Yet the film avoids difficult issues of either punishment or sacrifice by utilising the rhetoric of the American Frontier Sublime to rid the narrative of

its disruptive elements, dressing up death as flight. *Thelma and Louise* is not the only road movie that presents death as a form of escape, however. *Vanishing Point* (Richard Sarafian, 1971) also concludes with the male protagonist's suicide when he deliberately drives into a road block rather than be captured. But while *Vanishing Point* shows the twisted wreckage of the car, undercutting the Romanticism of the action, the ugliness of violent death is glided over in *Thelma and Louise* in its appeal to an American Sublime. Ostensibly a film sympathetic to female rebellion, *Thelma and Louise* can be seen to conceal its masculinist prejudices and fears beneath a rhetoric of transcendence in a way that makes its treatment of feminist themes duplicitous at its core. In this way, the film's use of the iconography of the American Sublime as a means of disguise is very different in emphasis to the sublime rhetoric utilised in *Big Wednesday*, in which the edge motif is used as an explicit figure of masculine dominance.

Synopsis *Big Wednesday* (John Milius, 1978).

On the Californian coast, three young friends (Matt, Jack and Leroy) come to terms with the pressures and demands of growing up within the cultural, economic and political upheavals between 1962 and 1974. Their friendship, and their experiences of the changing world, are defined through the daring and skill of surfing and its codes of honour. Each friend (especially Matt who has difficulty adjusting to change), longs for the Big Swell against which they can prove themselves. Their friendship disrupted by the Vietnam War, Matt Jack and Leroy meet up again when the awaited ocean swell, the eponymous Big Wednesday, arrives at their old coastal haunt. While Leroy and Jack display their skill and courage, Matt pushes himself to his absolute limit and nearly drowns. He emerges from the ocean both revitalised and reconciled to the processes of change.

Big Wednesday is organised into four titled episodes: 'THE SOUTH SWELL summer 1962', 'THE WEST SWELL fall 1965', 'THE NORTH SWELL winter 1968' and 'THE GREAT SWELL spring 1974'. Moving through the joy of high summer, the onset of unhappiness in the fall, through discontent in winter to the hope engendered by spring, the film's narrative explores the inevitability of loss (of youthfulness, of loved ones) with the passage of time while simultaneously exploring the possibility of recovery and renewal. The anonymous narration that introduces each new seasonal episode, spoken in the past tense and from an unspecified present, elaborates on the film's temporal schematic, figuring the summer of '62 as an enchanted, Golden Age of youth that abides by chivalric codes of honour and friendship. Reminiscing about the 'Old Days', the voice over introduces the first episode in which images of the young at play proliferate. Healthy and tanned, their hair bleached by the sun, the young are shown rising with the dawn to catch the waves and later, making love and music around beach fires into the night. Here Matt, Jack and Leroy are in their prime, enjoying the status as 'royalty' on the beach by virtue of their surfing prowess.

This being 'high' summer, however, there are already signs of the Fall to come. When first introduced to the viewer, Matt is drunk, anticipating his lapse into degeneracy and expulsion from the beach's paradise. With the advent of the fall of '65, the narration recapitulates Matt's growing isolation, the cooling off of his friendship with Jack who is more willing to adapt to the changing world than his friend. The loss of youth and innocence is expressed by the narrator as a failure of memory: 'The summers pass with each year, I don't seem to remember them anymore'. Instead, the bleakness of the fall and the threat of winter dominate his mind: 'I remember the fall and the coming of winter. The water got cold. It was the time of the West Swell, a swell of change, a swell you usually rode alone.' This sense of deprivation and isolation continues. The winter of '68 brings with it radical change: friends marry, move on and die, while the new, 'powerful swell' which 'marched down the beach' grew 'cold and lonely and dangerous'.

This seasonal schematic underlines the puniness of the individual in relation to the inexorable flow of time and change. In this respect, the Great Swell provides the individual with the means to raise himself up into the realms of the extraordinary by pushing himself to the limit of his physical endurance and courage. To Bear, a respected 'old-timer' who lives on the beach's decaying pier, makes the youths' surf boards and knows the spiritual meaning of the waves, this is the purpose of the swells. Having himself met the challenge of the 'ultimate wave' in the past, Bear is making a board that will be able to withstand the Great Swell and eagerly anticipates its arrival. Overtly articulating the iconoclastic and masculinist rhetoric of the Frontier Sublime, Bear introduces the film's key edge motif:

'It'll be a swell so big and strong it'll wipe clean everything before it. That's when this board will be ridden. That's when Matt, Jack and Leroy, they can distinguish themselves. That's the day *they* can draw the line.'¹⁴⁹

And, further expounding a Turnerian philosophy, Bear explains that an essential part of the test is the realisation of one's self-sufficiency: '... you're always alone That's a test of a surfer to ride alone. Shouldn't have to depend on anybody but yourself.' Through the supreme effort of the test, the boundaries around the private space of the self are reinforced and unconditional freedom attained.

Bear's 'line', the decreative crest of the wave, is one of a series of symbolic 'edges' that function within *Big Wednesday*, especially the physical boundaries between differently configured spaces. One of the most important boundaries within the narrative is the old gateway that separates the beach from inland. [Fig. 94]. The gate rises out of the beach at the top of a series of steps. Crumbling in places, the structure resembles a ruin, in accordance with *Big Wednesday's* Romantic themes of chivalry, of an ancient order, predating the reign of Matt and his friends. The old gateway separates the free space of the beach from the restrictive social system inland. In this, the gate performs a similar symbolic function to the pier, which is Bear's space, the space of heroic legend, of story-telling and

craft skills (Bear makes the kids' boards by hand) and the space where the youths learn their codes of honour. Though it contrasts with the youthfulness of the beach in terms of age, the pier is characterised by a certain lawlessness and its real antithesis is the commercialised 'civilisation' of the inlanders.⁵⁰

There are two other important symbolic boundaries in *Big Wednesday*, however. One boundary corresponds to the film's masculinist conceptual thrust: that dividing male (the ocean) and female space (the beach). Repeating the opposition of the sublime and the beautiful in discourses of sublimity, femininity denotes closure and there is an uncomfortable moment in the film when a young woman takes to the waves. Affronted, youths attempt to harass her out of the water, claiming that she is abusing their chivalry. The moment is meant to be good natured but the meaning is clear: the ocean is out of bounds to women and those that venture into it trespass. The other boundary is that between America and Mexico, the latter depicted as a dark, frightening space infested with sleaze, drugs and excessive violence. When Matt starts a fight in a Mexican strip joint, it erupts out of control and ends in death, contrasting vividly with the harmless, if rowdy, fun of Californian parties. This essentially conservative conceptualisation of gender and racial otherness is at odds with the film's generally liberal ideology in which arbitrary boundaries are challenged and broken down. Throughout the film, these boundaries remain fixed while others undergo tremendous and disruptive changes as the seasons change.

One of these crucial changes involves the pier, and occurs as the summer episode draws to a close. While Jack and his girlfriend stroll on the pier, they find Bear in a drunken fury. Bear has discovered that the California State authorities have condemned the pier and he rages against having to become an 'inlander' which means 'living under a roof, taxes, marriage, divorce, the whole damn thing.' Always outside of the law to an extent, the pier is now strictly forbidden to the youngsters, sealed off and its occupier driven away. Bear also reveals that the beach is to be brought within a rationalised system of control that is already sweeping the coast, represented by a new order of life guards who are supplanting the old. The encroachment of this external power into the free space of the beach is articulated in terms of colonisation: Bear tells Jack that the point – the scene of much surfing heroism – has been 'taken over'. The new, invasive and totalising regime, then, functions symbolically as a distortion of the American Sublime, signalling the end both of possibility and difference.

At the start of the fall episode it is clear that Jack has himself 'gone over' to the new order. We see him installed in a new lifeguard hut near to the old gate policing the beach, surrounded by and wearing the accoutrements of the new system: a telephone, a loudhailer and a jacket with an official badge sown onto it. The telephone symbolises the technological intrusion of this new power onto the free space of the beach, revealing its absorption into a complex network of a rationalised system. A shot of Matt, sleeping off drink beneath a wall, incorporates the telephone in the foreground, the dialectic between elements in the

shot revealing the relation of the individual to the new order. Shown in sharp focus and in close-up, the telephone, the smart new instrument of authority, dominates the image, almost obscuring Matt's small, shabby figure which is relegated to the unfocused background of the shot. Spotting the scruffy individual, but not immediately recognising him, Jack grabs the loudhailer, shouting to Matt that there is a 'county ordinance' against sleeping on the beach. Like the telephone, the loudhailer is the means through which the new regime exerts its control, turning Jack into a mouthpiece of authority. When Matt causes a road accident by fooling around, Jack is unable to contain his disgust and strikes his friend, ordering him off the beach. Re-created in the image of the new order, a mere instrument of a technocratic power, Jack is something other than himself. As such, he is plainly detached from Matt's distress and the beach's codes of honour.

This rationalised new order, meanwhile, corresponds to another – commercial – colonising power that 'takes over' Bear, established through a short sequence that follows. This sequence opens with kids skateboarding on a sidewalk (the skateboards implying a modern, urban subversion of old surfing arts). Then, to Booker T. and the MG's slick 'Green Onions', the camera pans back from the skateboarders to reveal the shiny, glassy frontage of Bear's new store displaying brand new surfboards beneath a glowing neon sign promoting 'Bear surfboards' and a 'Bear logo'. The camerawork that follows reveals a profusion of the Bear logo on every kind of surface, figuring the elimination of difference within the new, totalising economic order. The camera continues to pan back to reveal a youth, wearing a T-shirt adorned with the 'Bear' logo, diligently polishing Bear's smart new car, also displaying the logo in its window. This shot cuts to a display of similarly designed T-shirts for sale in the store and then to a tracking shot moving beneath another orange neon sign and underneath the store's ceiling to establish the store's expanse. A further tracking shot reveals gleaming ranks of brightly coloured boards. Amidst these displays, a black and white photograph shows a surfer riding a terrific ocean swell entitled 'BEAR – RINCON – 1951'. The sequence ends with a shot of a stuffed bear, the camera panning in for a close-up of its glass eye.

This slightly heavy-handed sequence reveals that Bear's craft skills have become subordinated to the calculus of commerce and his surfboards turned into the instruments of capital. Like all commodities, the boards operate on the level of appearances designed to manipulate desire: they are less the means through which a youth might distinguish himself than the bearers of an illusion, the sole purpose of which is to secure an act of exchange. This illusion, the 'second skin' of the commodity, is connected to Matt.⁵¹ Cashing-in on the way kids still heroicise Matt, Bear uses Matt's name to promote his merchandise – despite Matt being a drunk. Bear as brand-name has usurped the chivalrous Bear of old, a situation signified by the presence of the stuffed bear on the shop floor, a dead thing substituting for his true self.

Directly following the close-up of the stuffed bear, we see Bear himself enjoying his profits, smoking a fat cigar and attended to by an obsequious tailor while a put-upon work force either polishes his car or makes his product. An owner-employer, Bear's cash-nexus relationship with his employees compromises his status as moral arbiter and surfing guru. While being fitted for his new wedding suit (itself a sign that Bear has 'gone over'), Waxer (one of Matt's friends) emerges from the workshop covered in dust, tired and asking for a break. Bear's response is harsh: 'Waxer get back in there. You've been taking breaks all morning. [To the tailor:] Every time the waves come up, he wants to take off.' Within the narrow interests of profit, Waxer's desires are clearly irrelevant and counterproductive.

Big Wednesday's depiction of a decline away from a Golden Age toward an overly rationalised techno-commercial power system should be regarded in the light of what Mintz and Cohen describe as the continuing concentration of state and economic power in the 1960s and 1970s.⁵² Yet the film also sets up explicit references to other important historical events and crises during this period. During the '65 episode, for example, a group of Jack's friends, gathered to say goodbye before he leaves for Vietnam, watch coverage of rioting on TV. Turning the riots into a symbol of national disunity, Matt remarks sadly that America's real war is not with Vietnam, but with itself. More marked, however, is the film's treatment of the Vietnam War and protest. In one key scene, Matt, Leroy, Waxer and other friends (not including Jack) are shown to resist the claims of state on their lives. In a comic inversion of military precision, the friends arrive at a designated examination station and prepare themselves for de-selection. To the (non-diegetic) rhythm of military drums, the youths dress themselves up as Nazis, 'queers', invalids and 'loonies', daubing themselves in scent, fish oil and cosmetic paint, setting up a reference to the 'guerrilla theatre' practised by Yippies in the 1960s.⁵³ Once finished, the group march to their position in the queue outside the building. Inside, where hundreds more youths are being processed to serve in the US army, Matt, Leroy and most of their friends (except Waxer) successfully disrupt the proceedings and are forcibly ejected.

But in *Big Wednesday*, this kind of youthful vigour is shown to burn out within the suffocating limits of conservatism and authoritarianism. Spirited resistance to the system depicted in the '65 episode is soon followed by capitulation (Jack's willing conscription, Bear's materialism), death (Waxer's in Vietnam) and depression (especially Matt's). In this way, the selection of 1968 (described by Chafe as a 'year of anguish') to represent its winter of discontent is appropriate. As Chafe writes, the reform movements in the sixties had 'achieved an energy and a critical thrust that had the potential to transform American society' but ended with Nixon's election which, instead, 'ushered in an era of political, social and cultural conservatism that has remained dominant from 1968 until the present day'.⁵⁴

Yet, fittingly, the spring episode represents a reawakening of youthful rebelliousness, signified by a collective reclamation of forbidden spaces and defiance of the law. Centred

around the arrival of the Big Swell, this renewal is prefigured by a symbolic new dawn rising over the ocean's horizon which, marking the beginning of the sublime sequence, establishes the significance of the edge motif as a symbol of freedom from constraint. [Fig. 95]. The first act of transgression is performed by the characters Matt and Bear (whose marriage and business have now failed), who break into the restricted and fenced off area of the pier. Once more outside the law, Bear passes on his special board to Matt. The second symbolic act of transgression occurs when Matt enters the beach, now also a restricted area, through the old gateway, bearing a 'No Trespassing' sign. Passing over the threshold onto the beach, Matt discovers that Leroy and Jack have pre-empted him – a sign of Jack's redemption. All about them, either in the water, or preparing their boards, surfers are defying the law. Helicopters, representing a remote, technocratic order, hover overhead conveying men with loudhailers who command surfers not to enter the dangerous water and who attempt to dispel a gathering crowd.

The crowd, however, cheers the surfers on, despite the efforts of the law, watching enthralled as pounding waves toss surfers into the air and snap boards while other youths are dragged out of the ocean half-drowned. Figuring the Great Swell as a crowd-pleasing spectacle in this way, *Big Wednesday* operates firmly within the traditions of an American Sublime which, as social practice, works to engender a collective identity. Visually and conceptually anticipating Matt's limit-breaking daring, the crowd are positioned on the edge of a cliff, another symbolic frontier that emphasises the final scene as a representation of collective dissent and renewal. [Fig. 96]. The concluding representation of Matt's triumph, meanwhile, combines many of the staple iconic 'ingredients' of the American Sublime.

Leroy and Jack are the first to take on the giant swells. Matt, however, true to Bear's frontier philosophy, paddles on alone to catch the furthest and biggest waves. Riding the crest of a terrific swell, 'like nothing anybody has ever seen', Matt finally draws the line. [Figs 97-98]. In a striking presentation of the sublime, the surfing shots are filmed in slow-motion which enhance the visual effects of the action. In some shots the camera is attached to the front of the board, showing the enormous wave in detail as it begins to fold over, threatening 'wipeout'. At one point in the action, Matt reaches into the glassy side of the wave, his fingers cutting into and through its surface, leaving a momentary gash. [Fig. 99]. This reaching into the wave reimagines a Romantic self-projection into the space of the sublime other: by reaching into the swell, Matt joins with and absorbs some of its power, transcending the limitations of his subjective selfhood. Like the Romantic poet, Matt's extension of himself into sublime otherness must be partial or risk complete self-negation: when the water finally closes in on him, Matt nearly dies.

Yet, reimagining a Nietzschean concept of struggle, the ocean not only fails to kill Matt, it makes him stronger. Back on the beach, an overawed youth returns Matt's board which has washed ashore. To the disbelieving boy, however, Matt responds: 'Keep it, and if it

[the swell] ever gets big again, you can go out and ride it.' The youth's reaction to Matt recalls that of the homesteader to Jeremiah Johnson, revealing that Matt's trial on the ocean has engendered a kind of apotheosis. In giving away the board, Matt, like Bear, offers the boy a challenge to draw a new line in turn, confirming him as his heir. In this way, Matt's bestowing on the youth his special favour implies a succession of limit-breakings in the future, appealing to the Frontier Sublime's rhetoric of limitlessness. Operating within the film's language of a heraldic past, Matt's action plainly constructs the board as symbolic sword with which the youth is 'knighted', the overt phallicism of the imagery simultaneously reaffirming the beach's male hereditary line.

Evoking an idealised chivalric age in its critique of mainstream American culture, then, *Big Wednesday* is both confused and troubling. Articulating the cash-value rhetoric of the American Sublime in its configurations of loss and gain, *Big Wednesday* duplicates the competitive language of the marketplace in a way that is ironic, given the film's nostalgic appeal to a time prior to the logic of capital. In addition, the film's rhetorical scheme of contest and empowerment is imagined in a way that repeats representationally some of the more unpleasant aspects of the discourse of the American Sublime. In this way, the film's promotion of the American Sublime as masculine privilege, its celebration of Nietzschean struggle and self-aggrandisement, together with its projection of a mythic, muscular and specifically *golden* past onto the present, are especially unsettling. Where *Big Wednesday* fails to utilise the iconography of the American Sublime to imagine an adequate symbolic alternative to what it presents as the pernicious and totalising forces of capital in a corrupted America, however, the key problematic in *Razor's Edge* is rather different. Initially eschewing America as the site of redemptive possibility entirely, the film ends up doubling back on itself by turning America into the locale and symbol of unconditional freedom.

Synopsis *The Razor's Edge* (John Byrum, 1984).

Chicago, circa 1917. A young American, Larry Darrell, who is engaged to ambitious socialite Isabel, volunteers to serve as an ambulance driver in France during W.W.I. While there, his sergeant (Piedmont) gives his life to save Larry. Larry determines that Piedmont's sacrifice should not be wasted but, on his return to Chicago, the life and career mapped out for him seem increasingly meaningless. To Isabel's frustration, Larry persistently rejects an offer of a good job and embarks on a spiritual quest that takes him from Paris to the Himalayan mountains. Isabel leaves him and marries their wealthy friend, Gray Maturin. When Larry returns to Paris he finds that Isabel and Gray have lost their fortune in the 1929 Crash. In a Paris bar, the three are approached by their old friend Sophie whose grief and hardship after losing her husband (Bob) and child in a car accident propelled her into alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution. Larry helps Sophie and plans to marry her. But Isabel is jealous and convinces Sophie that she is a burden to Larry. Sophie returns to the drug dens and is murdered. After confronting Isabel, Larry returns to America.

The Razor's Edge (a remake of a 1946 film, itself based on the novel by Somerset Maugham published in 1944) sets out to critique what it projects as a destructive and delimiting form of American avarice.⁵⁵ As part of this critique, the film includes an extended war-sequence, detailing Larry's experiences in France. This sequence is placed between two Chicago sequences showing Larry's relationship to his social and economic milieu before and after his encounter with war (the first of which opens the film). The inclusion of the war-sequence might suggest that the film was intended as an allegory of Vietnam, corresponding with a surge of interest in the Vietnam War within the American film industry in the 1980s. Yet, despite some indebtedness to other, famous, 'Nam films (a leader (Piedmont) turned crazy by the rationalised horror of war, recalling *Apocalypse Now's* Kurtz) and, as critics noted, an 'anachronistic' performance by the film's star best suited to the Vietnam period, the sequence does not interrogate either Vietnam or war in general.⁵⁶ Rather, it establishes a critique of material acquisition and the illusionary nature of 'capitalist realism' that is sustained almost to the end of the film. In this, as I shall argue, the filmmakers' choice to preserve the historical context of the original story is appropriate to its specific political, cultural and economic contexts.

The film's critique of capitalist accumulation centres around a presentation of commodities as trophies of economic success, as illusory components of an entirely fabricated 'reality' which, like the unreality they represent, are peculiarly hollow, brittle, fragile and deadly.⁵⁷ Associating materiality with death in this way, *The Razor's Edge* repeats a familiar Romantic-Protestant critique of form. The inherent dangers of the commodity form in the war-sequence is symbolised by a 'swelligant' white car that has been converted into an ambulance-wagon, driven by a two-man Harvard crew. Interpolating familiar binary oppositions of American mythology, the two East-coasters are shown to be weak and effete fetishists who surround themselves with the trappings of wealth (a large picnic hamper full of silver cutlery and cut-glass, potted shrimp and champagne). Their motor vehicle, however, forms the grandest spectacle of their wealth. Richly detailed in polished chrome, an overabundance of glassy surfaces – windows, windshields and lamps – the vehicle gleams like a faceted jewel. Significantly, its crew are a pair of liars who invent stories about their driving skills and accomplished time trials. Their fabrications fuse representationally with the car itself: signifying nothing, the pair bespeak their own and the car's emptiness and, by extension, the hollowness of material acquisition as an end in itself. Like the trophy of their material success, they are a mere assemblage of surface appearances.

In a key scene, Piedmont shoots out the motor's windows and lamps. Grabbing an empty champagne bucket, he fills it with ash and water and sloshes the mixture over vehicle's shiny surfaces, explaining to the horrified Harvardeers that its sparkling glass and dazzling whiteness will attract enemy bullets. Piedmont's action is ostensibly practical. Within the context of the film's critique of capitalist realism, however, it also constructs the

sergeant as an iconoclast, corresponding to his hatred of the Harvardeer's lies. Ultimately, the two men's love of surface proves fatal: despite Piedmont's handiwork, the car is shelled and the men killed.

The Harvardeer's capacity for display figures the film's representation of an America on the brink of the socio-economic and cultural revolution of the twenties. Emerging from a shift in modes of capitalist production and consumption, social and sexual relations were increasingly mediated through the commodity in the early 1900s and aggressive, acquisitive urges of America's 'leisure class' intensified. As Andrew Hook has written:

The role of the leisure class was to provide a means of sustaining the predatory [consumerist] impulse by providing avenues through which the successes of that impulse could be made manifest through various forms of conspicuous waste and conspicuous consumption. Leisure activities of any kind defined themselves by their degree of their non-utility, the proof they offered of the participant's *exemption* from the need for industrial productiveness.⁵⁸

The film opens with a Fourth of July celebration immediately prior to Larry's departure for France, which puts the Harvardeer's conspicuous consumption into context. Conveying a sense of excitement and confident expectancy, the celebration is set beside a river on a large grassy field where marquees and stalls, festooned with US flags and draped in the national colours, house a variety of charitable events. Celebrating the vacation, and their Americanness, Chicago's well-to-do mingle and gossip while their children play on the sunny grass. Many of the sequence's shots have a luminescent, dreamy, quality to them, enhanced by an extensive use of white shot through soft-focus filters. This softness in the imagery belies the hard-edged characteristics displayed by most of the film's protagonists and the rigid social structure they represent and uphold. At work amidst the bunting and hot-dogs, is a barely disguised process of social exclusion organised around the possession of wealth and leisure. While those exempt from the demands of labour are free to enjoy the vacation, others, like Sophie's husband are not. Arriving conspicuously late and leaving early, because he needs to work, Bob is cruelly taunted by his richer friends, pointing toward his and Sophie's social isolation.

In addition, the community's celebrations of its national identity indulges and facilitates consumerist impulses, revealed subtly in two shots toward the end of the sequence. In one of these, a deep focus shot, two 'swelligant' cars on a lawned area form the background at the top left of the frame. In the middle left of the shot, a youth reclines on a bench deeply asleep, his leg dangling. Opposite him are a number of abandoned chairs and, toward the front right of the shot, a stone liquor jar (uncorked and presumably empty) stands on a table. Foregrounded in the shot, neglected meat burns on a grill. The empty chairs and jar, and the left-over meat indicate the passage of time. Yet elements within the shot also combine to form a subtle critique of (latent) conspicuous consumption. In this way, the burning meat and empty liquor jar, linking to the stupefied youth, imply both an over

abundance and overindulgence, pointing back to the parked cars as signifiers of opulence. The burning meat, in particular, can be interpreted as the shot's over-arching symbol of consumerism, figuring glut (surplus meat), gluttony (flames devouring meat) and waste (discarded meat).

In the second shot, a dapper young man rows his girl along the river in a small boat. Showing off suddenly, he tosses his hat into the river. In spontaneously trashing the hat to amuse and impress, the man reveals the way in which his courtship of the girl is mediated through a show of calculated squandering: he demonstrates his suitability through his capacity for extravagance. Yet almost all relationships in the film involve similar calculations in a way that demonstrates the intrusion everywhere of market place values. Isabel resists Larry's passionate advances to safeguard her economic future, not her virtue. Discussing Larry's career and their future prospects, Isabel lists all the things she wants for her children. Larry interrupts her and states that she would be better off with Gray who has 'a million bucks to play with'. Isabel's reassuring reply – 'I don't want a million bucks, I just want you' – is undercut when she (only half-playfully) adds 'and half a million bucks!'. Later, Isabel's desire for wealth is shown to outweigh her desire for Larry; when he refuses the life-style she has planned, Isabel sells out and marries Gray.

Isabel's callousness toward Larry derives from an obedience to a socio-economic elite which raised her to maintain and further its codes and practices. She represents the 'leisure class female' whose patriarchally-defined task it is 'to display manifest consumption and manifest leisure'. '[F]ormed to display merchandise', Isabel is closely associated in the narrative with the world of commodities.⁵⁹ Prior to her rejection of Larry, Isabel's Uncle Elliot, a wealthy and obsessive socialite, shows her around one of his elegant rooms in which is displayed his collection of fabulously expensive artefacts. 'You ... are exquisite', he tells her, 'you belong in a room like this.' Crucially, Elliot's entire collection is for sale, the room a showcase full of merchandise. In stating that Isabel belongs within such a room, Elliot objectifies her as commodity, disclosing her proper function within her economic class. Isabel has not been formed solely to display property, the dialogue reveals, she is property, an object of manifest consumption bearing a hefty price tag ('half a million bucks').

Isabel is placed within the context of the market place from the outset, however. In the first section of the film, she is prettily displayed behind a stall draped with the US flag selling kisses for a dollar a time (to raise money for the war-effort). Performing sexual favours for cash, Isabel effectively commodifies her looks and body, anticipating the way she will do so with Gray in marriage. Significantly, Larry transgresses the rules of exchange; refusing to pay the going rate, he steals his kisses instead. Larry's transgression, however, is more far-reaching because of the way in which the scene symbolically fuses 'Americanness' with the market place: Isabel's stall is not only draped with the US flag,

which serves to endorse her activities; she is also, as she explains to Larry, doing her 'patriotic duty'. Thus, in refusing to pay, Larry's gesture enacts a critique of America itself.

The film's symbolic conjunction between Americanness, the market place and conspicuous consumption as a total system of power and subversion of American Sublimity can be seen to set up a critique of an emerging culture of greed in the early 1980s. In particular, there are comparisons to be made between the film's presentation of aspirant and acquisitive young achievers and the 1980s 'Yuppie' (indeed, 1984, the year of the film's release, was dubbed by *Newsweek* magazine 'The Year of the Yuppie').⁶⁰ Spurred on by a political and economic regime which turned greed into a moral imperative, Yuppies were regarded as the nation's wealth-creators. Pushing back the 'economic frontier', Yuppies existed according to Schaller 'on a new plane of consciousness, a state of Transcendental Acquisition.' and were 'celebrated ... as secular saints, enriching society'.⁶¹ The parallels with the Jazz Age are clear:

Not since the gilded age of the late nineteenth century or the roaring twenties had the acquisition and flaunting of wealth been so publicly celebrated as during the 1980s. Income became the accepted measure of one's value to society.⁶²

In order to critique this new culture of greed, the film appropriates Eastern religious philosophies, drawing simultaneously on Maugham's novel (in which Larry's iconoclastic urges are linked to the Vedanta), and on American Transcendentalism's own borrowings from Eastern beliefs found conducive to an idea of American Sublimity.⁶³ Seeking to evoke the Absolute beyond the world of appearances, Emerson was attracted to the spiritualism of Hindu religion, especially the idea of 'Brahma', the Absolute unrepresentable and permanent reality or spirit beyond the illusion of appearance. He also found the doctrine comparable to his democratic ideals, in particular the idea that: 'The highest revelation that God is in every man.'⁶⁴ And, while Emerson found the spiritualism of Hindu philosophy compelling, other Transcendentalist thinkers, like Thoreau, 'responded to ... the challenge of the Yogi's ascetic way of life.'⁶⁵ Like the transcendentalists, *The Razor's Edge* mediates the asceticism and spiritualism of Indian philosophies through the decreative drives of an American Frontier Sublime.

Rejecting the materialistic aspirations of his peers, Larry begins to cast off the trappings of wealth and goes in search of a new horizon and a greater reality. This quest culminates in a sublime experience in the Himalayan mountains which repeats formally the struggle-redemption dynamic of the American Sublime. Seeking seclusion, Larry endures a hard climb to find a remote mountain shelter, labouring through blizzards, against fatigue and under the burdensome weight of a large bundle of books (almost his entire provisions). Visualising the discrepancy between self and sublime, Larry is shown as a small black dot against the white mountain snow, this whiteness figuring the dematerialised blankness of wilderness. Finally, and with supreme effort, Larry reaches the shelter (which is situated,

precariously, on a small shelf against a steep cliff) by hauling himself over a precipice which forms a horizontal line across the screen, dividing it in two. This edge motif images the dialectic of the frontier, figuring the dividing line between human (the shelter) and inhuman void (the vast mountainous landscape beyond). Here, like Turner's frontier hero, Larry is negated and recreated.

At first, Larry reads under the shelter, warming himself by a small fire; but with little to burn, the fire dies and the freezing cold begins to get the better of him. Shivering violently, his lips bloodless, Larry is plainly in great danger. At this point, however, the sound of chanting is introduced onto the soundtrack. Associated with prayer, the chant figures Larry's spiritual awakening. Immediately following the introduction of the chant, Larry repeatedly looks up from his book toward the ridge that stands between him and the landscape beyond, then smiles slowly and knowingly, as though a mysterious, transcendent power has communicated something to him. Still smiling, Larry tears a page from his book and lights it with a match, placing the lighted page onto the dead fire, feeding the flames with more pages following with the entire book. The action is explicitly decreative, its purpose being the symbolic destruction of the book rather than the creation of warmth: having re-lit the fire, Larry promptly walks away from it to stand on the edge of the precipice. A symbolic act of disburdenment of history and authority, Larry's gesture expresses an Emersonian belief in the limitations of the written word compared to the Idea.⁶⁶

Marked by the edge motif, this symbolic act of negation engenders Larry's regeneration and repeats the iconography of the American Sublime. As 'Larry's Theme' is introduced onto the soundtrack, Larry stands on the edge of the precipice and looks out at the vast, white landscape stretching out before and below him, his back to the camera. [Fig. 100]. The action cuts to a medium shot of Larry, again wearing a slight and knowing smile. [Fig. 101]. Connecting gaze with the landscape, the montage pattern presents Larry's identification with dematerialised nature, figuring him as 'empty spirit' in 'vacant space', the significance of the moment underscored by surge of the filmic score. Further suggesting a fusion between Larry and nature, the landscape itself has changed significantly: corresponding in mood to Larry's smile, the blizzard has abated, the scene is sunny and birds are in flight, indicating the recovery of balance between inner and outer in the drama of the sublime. The sublime experience presented in *The Razor's Edge*, then, repeats the expenditure and return rhetoric of the American Sublime: struggling with, but finally overcoming sublime nature through symbolic identification, fragile selfhood is supplanted by sublime selfhood, confirming an essential self, free from social and cultural constraint.

Larry's identification with nature is not total, however; significantly, his ego-identity remains both enlarged and secure, the edge-motif symbolically maintaining a crucial distance and difference between self-and sublime other. The film's presentation of the sublime as a scenario of liminal ego-enlargement in this way forms an interesting contrast to

Maugham's novel, in which Larry criticises individualist impulses which prevent immediate experiences of the Absolute (the desire 'to taste' but not 'to become sugar'): 'What is individuality but the expression of our egoism? Until the soul has shed the last trace of that it cannot become one with the Absolute.'⁶⁷ In effect, this revision of the novel and Hindu philosophy, to include a schematic of self-aggrandisement, compromises both the film's critique of the kind of selfish individuality cultivated by America's dominant market place values, and its project to offer, representationally, an alternative to those values.

Yet it is clear that the scene is intended to differentiate between Larry and his American friends, which, on the whole, it achieves. In between Larry's arrival at a monastery and the beginning of his journey to the shelter, a short scene depicting a party at Gray and Isabel's home in the States is inserted into the action. As Larry is shown being quietly welcomed into the monastery, the action cuts away to a tracking shot of the party, synchronised with a burst of sound: laughter, chatter and a lively jazz number (the over-crowded, noisy room, pointedly contrasting with the wide open spaces and quiet of the previous shots). Foregrounded in the initial image of the party, a man – ruddy faced, perspiring and over-excited – cries 'fabulous, fabulous, fab-u-lous!' Directed to no one and referring to nothing, the word is meaningless, implying the hollowness both of the man and the party. Meanwhile, the repetition of the word, together with the man's excitement, implies a certain forced gaiety. As the tracking shot moves through the party-goers, there is similarly a strong sense in which the laughter is false, the talk insubstantial and the crowd lonely, its camaraderie induced artificially (by cocktails and champagne).

Evoking the commodity form, then, the party is imagined as a 'glittering illusion' – on the point of shattering.⁶⁸ In the midst of the party, Gray and a group of business acquaintances stand talking, whilst Gray sucks on a fat cigar (a familiar motif of smug success). But Gray is called away from the party to receive a telephone call informing him of both his and his father's ruin and of his father's consequent suicide. On hearing the news, Gray lashes out at a glass partition, lacerating his hands, the shattering glass both setting up a symbolic reference to the Wall Street Crash and recalling the film's conception of consumer capitalism as inherently fragile and deadly.

However, this critique of America and Americanness as the locus and expression of acquisitiveness is not sustained. Specifically, the film's previous connection between America and consumerism – via the juxtaposition of the US flag, commodities, conspicuous consumption and waste within its *mise en scène* – is abruptly abandoned at its conclusion. Having eschewed the redemptive possibility of a corrupted America (the hero having to find salvation *outside* America), *The Razor's Edge* then constructs a rather banal patriotic gesture that evokes a mythic, idealised America as the site of unlimited freedom and possibility.

This occurs in the final scene set in Elliot's Paris apartment, immediately after Larry confronts Isabel with her part in Sophie's murder. As Larry prepares to leave the

apartment, Elliot's butler asks him where he is going. When Larry replies that he is going 'home', the butler asks him, 'But where is home, Monsieur Larry?'. Larry's response is spoken with certainty and pride: 'America'. To a surge of 'Larry's Theme', Larry strides out of the apartment, the camera tracking his movements as he walks along the pavement outside. When Larry reaches a long and steep flight of steps, the camera films his ascent at a low angle. The focal point of this low angle shot is formed by the top of the steps beyond in which some greenery and a patch of blue sky are just visible, turning the top of the steps into a symbolic threshold between Paris and 'home'. The film ends as Larry reaches the top of the steps and passes over the threshold into the green and blue area of the shot. [Fig. 102].

This final scene constructs an imaginative recovery of America as the site and sign of self-and national sublimity by conjoining the word 'America' with a complex arrangement of verbal, aural and visual signifying elements. These elements can be grouped into interlocking pairs: (1) 'America' and 'home' (identity); (2) 'America' and 'Larry's Theme' (identity, grandeur); (3) (as Larry climbs the steps) 'America' and 'ascent' (aggrandisement, flight); (4) 'America' and the edge (frontier as *limen*); (5) 'America', blue sky/greenery (transcendence, America as God's and nature's nation).⁶⁹ What is significant in this symbolic recovery of America as source of self-and national sublimity is the use of the edge motif. Where, in the Himalayan scene, the motif preserves the difference between Larry and the sublime, in the concluding scene, the action closes just as Larry strides over the threshold into the space designated an American Sublime and begins to disappear from view, affirming a synecdochic oneness between self-and nation – in a way that, paradoxically, renders his individuality more tenuous.

This sudden, surprising and problematic (re)turn to America as the ground of the sublime in *The Razor's Edge*, given the film's previous identification of America and Americanness as synonymous with greed and falsity, suggests – in a way more than any film explored so far, perhaps – the potency of the American Sublime as an ideology of self-and national greatness, implicating the discourse as a habitual mode of thought and practice. In this way, the American Sublime appears as an ideological and representational prison – ironically enough, given the discourse's associations with freedom and possibility. In common with all the films selected for this thesis (except, arguably, *Eagle's Wing*), *The Razor's Edge* can be seen to be locked into a rhetorical and conceptual pattern, representing in the end (to borrow from and adapt H.T. Wilson's analysis of an American ideology) an 'uncritical criticism' of and complicity with America's marketplace values, 'second thoughts threatening, but never quite becoming, first thoughts.'⁷⁰ *The Reflecting Skin* makes a comprehensive attempt to break out of this discursive and ideological prison by representationally turning the American Sublime against itself.

FIG:70



FIG:72

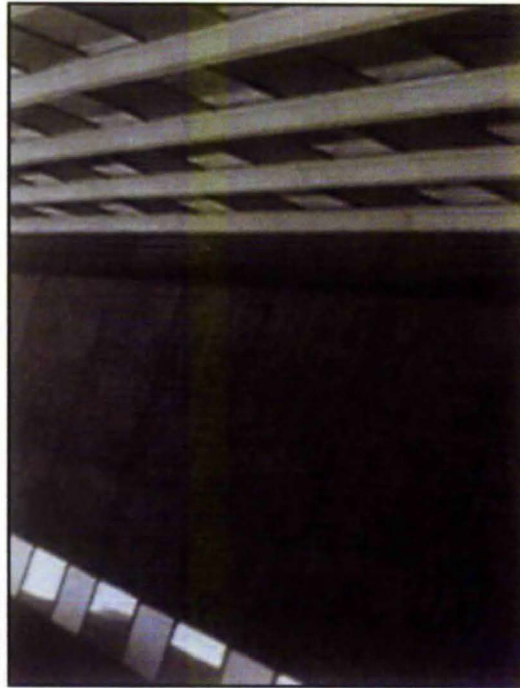


FIG:71



FIG:73

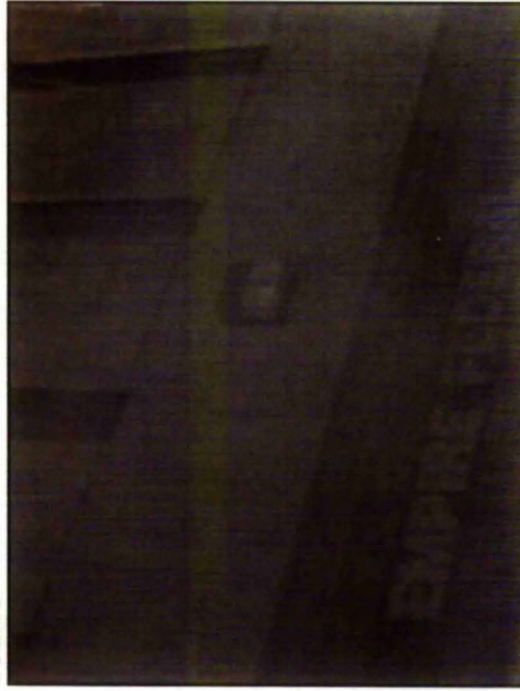


FIG:74

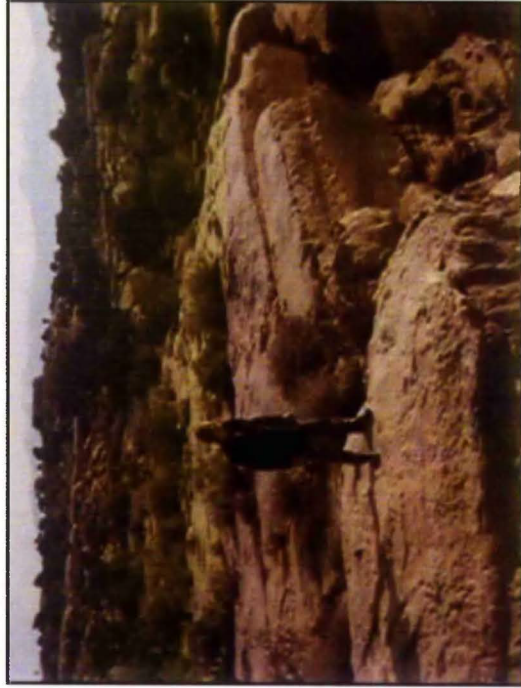


FIG:76

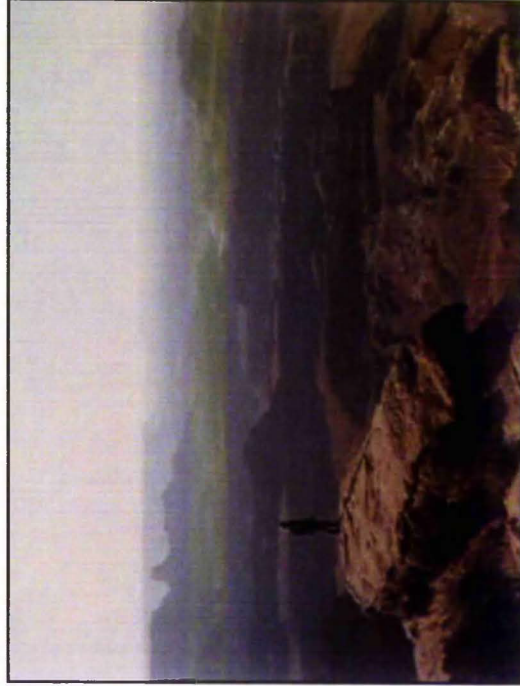


FIG:75

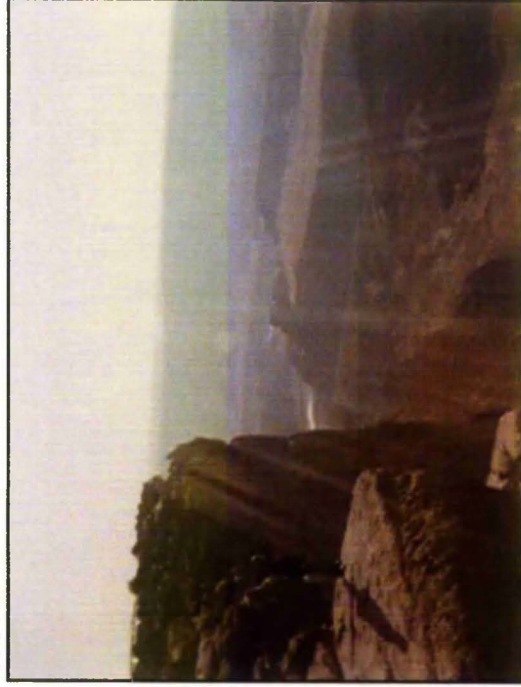


FIG:77

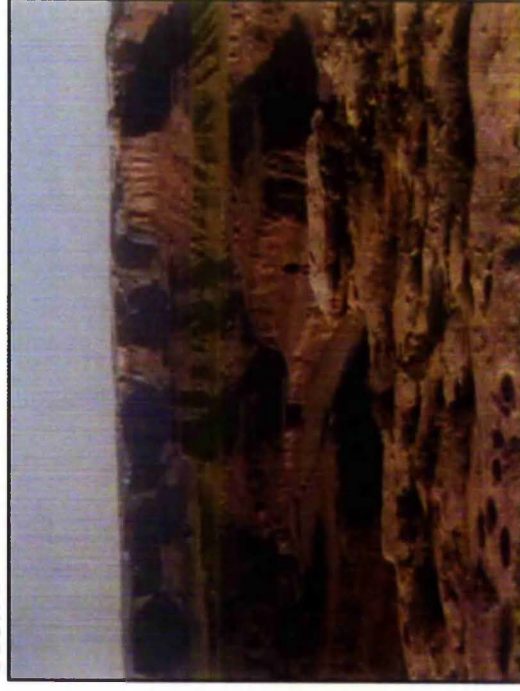


FIG:78



FIG:79

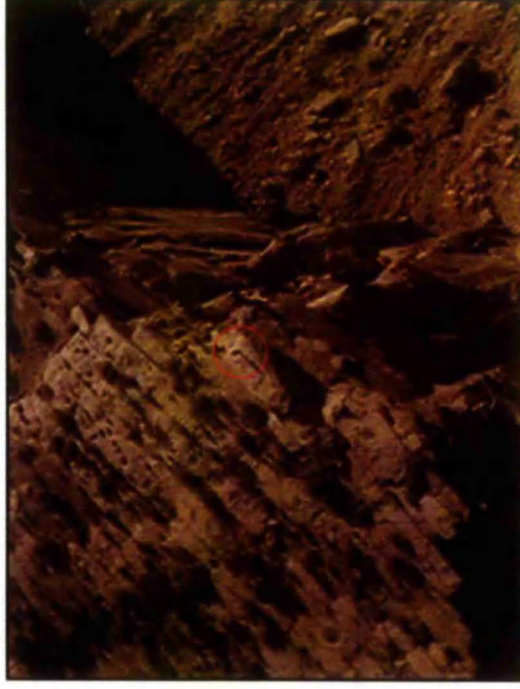


FIG:80



FIG:81

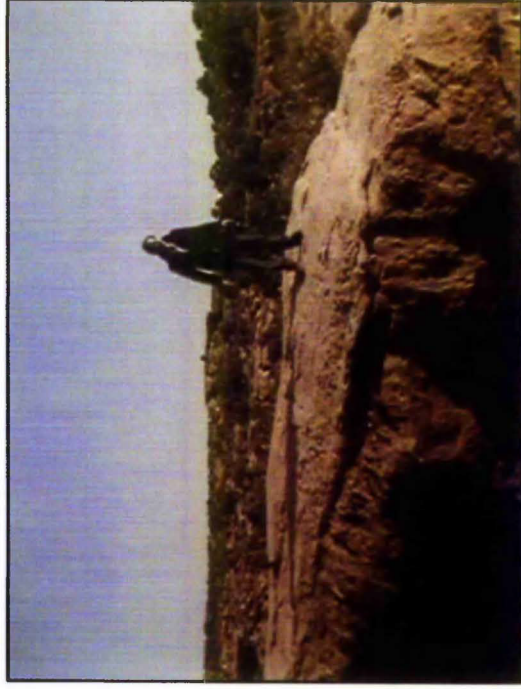


FIG:82



FIG:83



FIG:84



FIG:85



FIG: 86



FIG: 87



FIG: 88



FIG: 90



FIG: 89



FIG:91



FIG:92

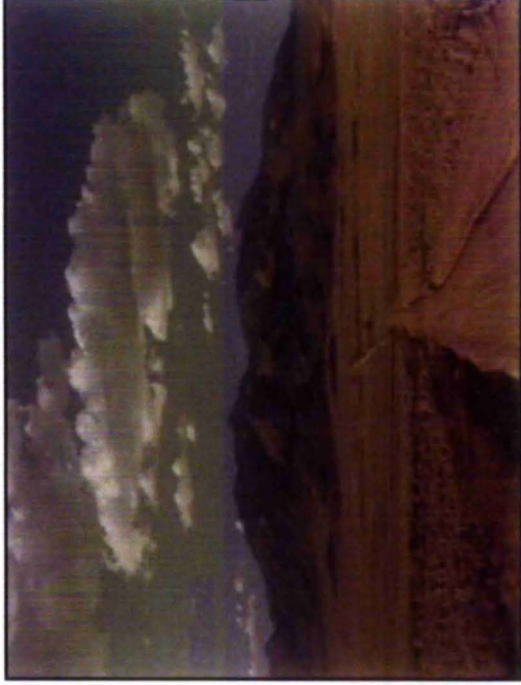


FIG:93



FIG: 95

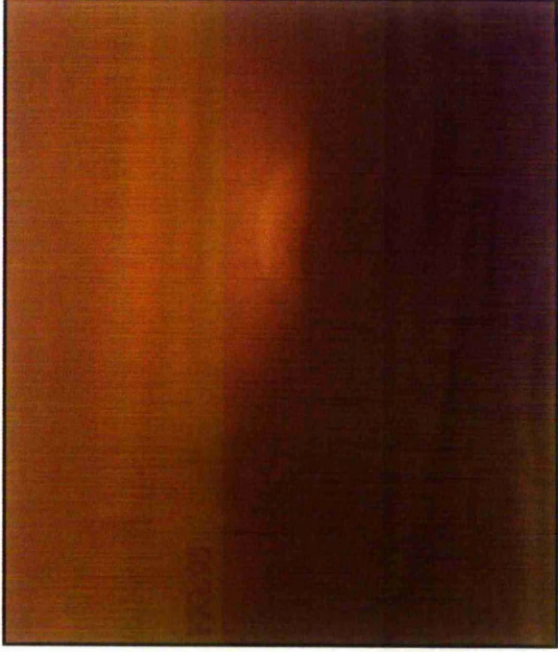


FIG: 94



FIG: 96

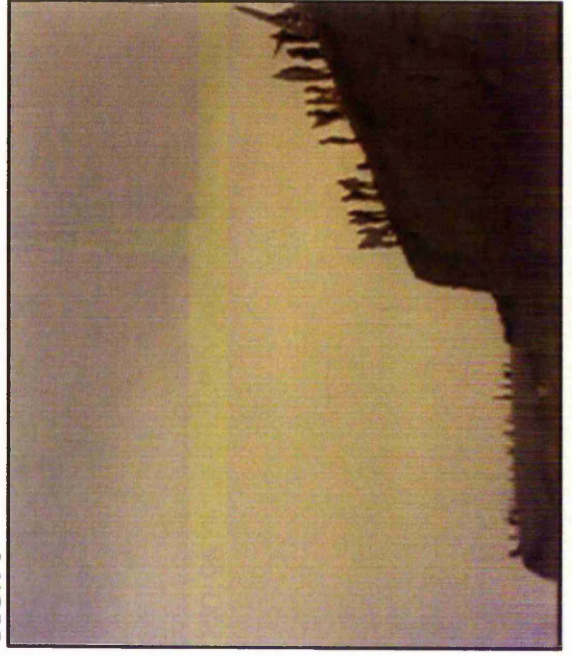


FIG:98



FIG:97



FIG:99

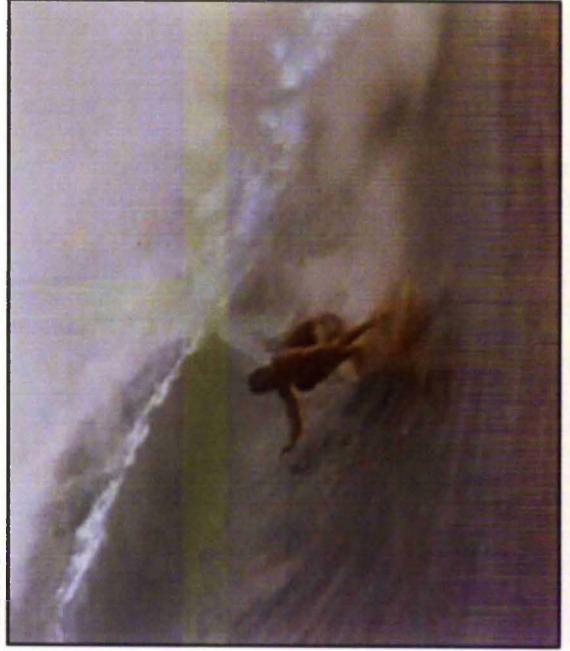


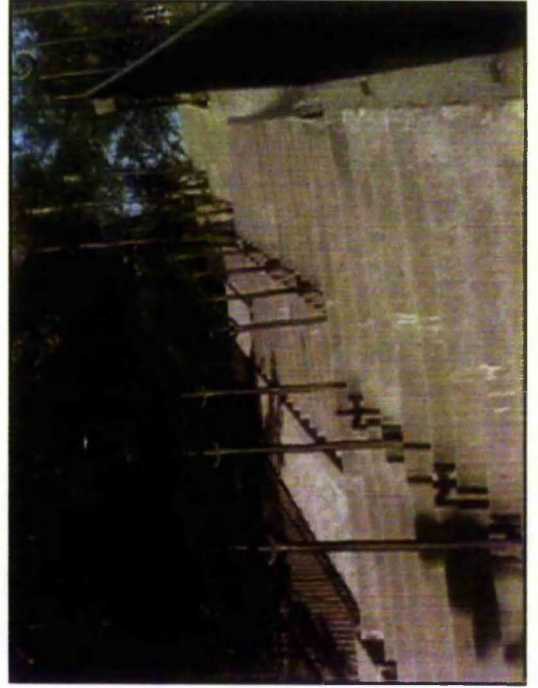
FIG: 100



FIG: 101



FIG: 102



Notes

- ¹ See Appendix.
- ² John Berger, 'Against the great defeat of the world', *Race and Class*, Vol. 40, Nos. 2/3 (October 1998/March 1999), p.3.
- ³ I borrow from Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p.199, and Edward K. Muller, 'The Americanization of the city', in *The Making of the American Landscape*, edited by Michael P. Conzen (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p.274.
- ⁴ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.97.
- ⁵ Wolfgang Fritz Haug, translated by Robert Bock, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), p.20. (Haug explores the sensuality of commodity forms further, pp.17-20.) The same point is made more bluntly later in the film when Mr. Paris watches porn on TV with tickertape of stock exchange rates displayed beneath images of naked women. This juxtaposition of commerce and sex connects with the film's depiction of corporate capitalism as seedy and corrupt.
- ⁶ I draw on David Hawkes's discussion of Slavoj Zizek in *Ideology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p.178.
- ⁷ In this, *Equinox* taps into a popular idea of the American Stock Exchange. See Kevin Phillips *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1990), p.50.
- ⁸ Richard Godden, 'The Great Gatsby, glamour on the turn', *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel From James to Mailer* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.94-95.
- ⁹ As David C. Korten writes: 'The freedom of the market is the freedom of money, and when rights are a function of property rather than personhood, only those with property have rights.' *When Corporations Rule the World* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1997), p.83.
- ¹⁰ Raymond Williams, 'Tragedy and Revolution', *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.251.
- ¹¹ Berger, op. cit., p.3.
- ¹² See Joel Kovel, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land: Anticommunism and the Making of America* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1997), Introduction and Chapter Two.
- ¹³ John Vidal, *McLibel: Burger Culture on Trial* (London: Pan Books, 1997), pp.32, 42. In addition, 'complementing' and sustaining corporations like McDonald's was the free market philosophy of the Chicago School of Economics, 'deeply attractive to the political Right and the corporate world', and linked to the right wing coup against a democratically elected socialist government in Chile, as well as to the Reagan government, which turned greed into an economic imperative. See Vidal, pp.31, 32.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.38-39.
- ¹⁵ Korten, op. cit., p.210.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.26.
- ¹⁷ Tony Tanner, 'Introduction', in F. Scott Fitzgerald (1926), *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 1990), p.xii.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.xii.
- ¹⁹ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p.15.
- ²⁰ Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming of Age*, in Tanner, op. cit., p.liv.
- ²¹ Tanner, *ibid.*, p.l.
- ²² Frank Waters, *The Colorado* (New York, Chicago and San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), pp.373, 374. Joseph Wood Krutch described the shock of seeing the canyon for the first time in a similar way: 'Because one has never seen anything like it, because one has nothing to compare it with, it stuns the eye ... the scale is too large to be credited.' Joseph Wood Krutch, *Grand Canyon: Today and all its Yesterdays* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1958), p.4.
- ²³ Raymond Williams (1966), 'Tragedy and Revolution', *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.251.
- ²⁴ Krutch, op. cit., p.7.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.276. See also pp.7-8.
- ²⁶ See Nye, op. cit., esp. pp.24, 29, 35.
- ²⁷ That the youths are playing gangster rap is, of course significant. According to George McKay, 'rap's familiar imagery and context ... [is] the urban ghetto, police oppression, black-on-black violence, extreme misogyny and so on. ... in which a guy can only trust the brothers in his gang, or his Uzi/AK47/Tec9.' George McKay, '"Dig your hands in the dirt, the dirt that made you.... Eat rhubarb!":

the stylistic combination of the oral, the literate, and the musical is exemplary ... it is part and parcel of the subversive energies of black underclass youth, energies that are forced to take a cultural mode of articulation because of the political lethargy in American society. [In McKay, *ibid.*, p 36].

Furthermore, this presentation of black hostility to the police was highly topical. *Grand Canyon* was released the same year as the Rodney King beating by members of the Los Angeles Police Department. The subsequent acquittal of the officers involved sparked a riot, a protest not so much against the beating, according to Michael Omi and Howard Winant, as 'against the systematic aggressions to which poor and nonwhite residents of Los Angeles are routinely subjected, especially if they are black.' Michael Omi and Howard Winant, 'The L.A. Race Riot and U.S. Politics', *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, edited by Robert Gooding-Williams (New York and London, 1993), pp.107-108.

²⁸ Edward K. Muller, 'The Americanization of the city', in *The Making of the American Landscape*, edited by Michael P. Conzen (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p.284.

²⁹ I refer to the 1965 Watts riots in which blacks attacked and injured some white people, though few were killed. See Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp.158, 161.

³⁰ In one scene, Claire hands over the child to a nurse in a hospital, filmed in slow-motion to draw out the pain of separation. The interior of the hospital environment is, like the overly rationalised spaces of *2001*, uniform, sterile and chillingly white. The shot of the child being carried away is framed carefully to accentuate the geometry of walls, ceiling, floor and serried ranks of lights and doors. The child is carried toward a dark looking, sinister space at the end of the hospital corridor by the white-uniformed nurse.

³¹ The description of Simon's feelings of inferiority before the Canyon are appropriate. According to Nye:

The Grand Canyon contains virtually all of the elements Burke associated with the sublime in natural landscapes, including power, vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence, vastness, infinity, magnificence, and color. It is 280 miles long and up to 18 miles wide. It seems infinite in both time and space, presenting 2 billion years of geology in 15,000 feet of tilted up stone, carved down by the Colorado River. It offers so many intriguing views and so many vantage points that it can never be seen in its entirety. [Nye, *op. cit.*, p.8].

³² Krutch, *op. cit.*, p.194.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.194.

³⁴ Waters, *op. cit.*, p.377.

³⁵ In this, *Thelma and Louise* is one of a number of 'feminist' interventions into traditionally masculine narrative forms, especially the related Western genre in the early 1990s – *The Ballad of Little Joe* (Maggie Greenwald, 1993), *The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1995) – with varying degrees of success and seriousness.

³⁶ Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, *The Road Movie Book*, edited by Cohan and Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.1.

³⁷ Timothy Corrigan, in Cohan and Hark, pp.2, 3.

³⁸ Robert L. Cagle, 'Auto-Eroticism: Narcissism, Fetishism, and Consumer Culture', *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 33, Part 4 (1994), p.23. For a discussion of the road movie, genre conventions and sexual politics, see also Manohla Dargis, 'Thelma and Louise and the Tradition of the Male Road Movie', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, edited by Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

³⁹ Less extreme but related forms of betrayal are shown to operate throughout the gender hierarchy as a means of domination. Max (an FBI agent) enlists Darryl's help to catch the women through appealing to shared masculine assumptions and practices. Here, gestures of affection are rubbished, shown to be valued only as a means of emotional manipulation. Needing Darryl to keep Thelma talking on the phone so that the call can be traced, Max advises him: 'If she calls, just be gentle, you know, like you're really happy to hear from her, like you really miss her. Women love that shit.' J.D.'s betrayal of the two women also has overtly sexual connotations. J.D. uses Thelma's trust and her sexual desire in order to cheat both women by taking all their money. Through J.D.'s sexual exploitation, both women have been had in a way that refers back to the attempted rape and anticipates the way in which Hal (a policeman sympathetic to the women) makes an exasperated plea to the FBI at the end of the film: 'how many times these women gotta be fucked over?'

- ⁴⁰ The law is exposed as sharing not only the thought but also the practice that turns women into sexual objects. In one scene, a young FBI agent is shown to be absorbed in a glossy 'girlie mag', *Boudoir*. Its cover displays the image of a woman's naked torso, outstretched, inviting – but also mutilated in its fetishised (partial) representation of her body.
- ⁴¹ Joyce Miller places this configuration of the American South within a context of cinematic representations of the southern states. See Joyce Miller, 'From *Bonnie and Clyde* to *Thelma and Louise*: the Struggle for Justice in the Cinematic South', *Studies in Popular Culture*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (October, 1996).
- ⁴² Mary Arensberg (ed.), *The American Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 1.
- ⁴³ I paraphrase Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Avon Books (Equinox Edition), 1971), p. 180. See also Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, edited by Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 205.
- ⁴⁴ Paul Willemsen, 'Voyeurism, The Look, and Dwoskin', in Rosen, op. cit., p. 213.
- ⁴⁵ Mulvey, op. cit., p. 205.
- ⁴⁶ Mulvey herself applies psychoanalytic theory to *film noir*.
- ⁴⁷ The depiction of the attempted rape and subsequent murder in *Thelma and Louise* has generated much debate – too much to be represented within this short piece. A critical symposium on the film included in an edition of *Cineaste* issued shortly after the film's release, however, offers a usefully broad range of opinions, a few of which I draw on here. Roy Grundmann argues, for example, that from the outset,

the film proceeds from the assumption that a woman is responsible for her actions. ... In male buddy-outlaw films, neither the autonomy of the heroes nor the appropriateness of their actions is ever questioned. In *Thelma and Louise*, it is exactly this gentle but persistent question which drives the plot. ... [A]fter all, didn't they [the women] "bring everything upon themselves?" [Roy Grundmann, 'Hollywood Sets the Terms of the Debate', *Cineaste*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4 (1991), p. 35].

This responsibility, Grundmann asserts, is 'directly connected to their asking for what follows that makes 'the women fall into place according to their functions in the moral framework of the tale.' Grundmann, op. cit., pp. 35, 36. In a similar way, Pat Dowell argues:

Among the traditionally masculine tools Thelma and Louise try to appropriate, it is the gun that brings them the most grief. The guns backfire on these women. Louise saves Thelma from rape with one, ... but her shooting of the rapist sets them on their fatal run as well. ... Ultimately, ... the car which speeds them away from their pursuers will take them to their death, which is there ... even at the beginning of this movie, pulling them ... along the only fate a movie conceived in male form can imagine for two women who have kicked over the traces. [Pat Dowell, 'The Impotence of Women', *Cineaste*, op. cit., p. 29].

And, while Elayne Rapping offers a more positive view of the film, pointing out how it demonstrates the way in which the 'oppositional way of [feminist] thinking' has entered and altered the male dominated culture industry, she nevertheless concedes that the murder in the film is highly problematic. See Rapping, 'Feminism Gets the Hollywood Treatment', *Cineaste*, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

The film's treatment of rape and its place within feminist discourses and politics has also been explored more recently by Linda Frost, 'The Decentred Subject of Feminism: Postfeminism and *Thelma and Louise*', *Rhetoric in an Antifoundational World: Language, Culture and Pedagogy*, edited and introduced by Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard R. Glejzer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). A rather different approach to *Thelma and Louise* has been taken by Lillian S. Robinson who places the meaning of the women's suicide within a history of class. See 'Out of the Mine and into the Canyon: Working-Class Feminism, Yesterday and Today', *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*, edited by David E. James and Rick Berg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

- ⁴⁸ Toril Moi, 'Feminist Literary Criticism', in *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, edited by Anne Jefferson and David Robey (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, Second Edition, 1987), p. 213.
- ⁴⁹ There are strong similarities here between *Big Wednesday* and *Jeremiah Johnson*'s advancement of frontier individualism and self-reliance, due, in part, to John Milius's involvement in the films' making, as director and screenwriter respectively.
- ⁵⁰ When asked by another 'old-timer' whether he has, 'seen the law around here lately?', Bear's response points to the freedom the pier has always symbolised, while anticipating its demise: 'No, not yet'.
- ⁵¹ The 'second skin' of the commodity, Richard Godden writes, 'is ... simply a guise worn by a profit' since, within capitalist modes of production and consumption, 'value resides in image'. Godden,

- 'Maximizing the Noodles: Class, Memory, and Capital in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time In America*', in *Journal of American Studies* Vol. 31, Part 3 (December 1997), p.381.
- ⁵² Morton Mintz and Jerry S. Cohen, *America Inc.: Who Owns and Operates the United States* (London: Pitman Publishing, 1971), Chapter 1, *passim*.
- ⁵³ William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, Second Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.374. See also James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: Making Postwar Radicalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p.223.
- ⁵⁴ Chafe, *op. cit.*, p.viii.
- ⁵⁵ *The Razor's Edge* (Edmund Goulding, 1946).
- ⁵⁶ David Denby, *New York* (29.10.1984), p.81. Denby argued that 'the material could [have] work[ed.] only if updated to the Vietnam period and the guru-haunted seventies. ... With his sly mockery and his fast-shifting voices, Murray is completely a product of the media age.' *Ibid.*, p.81.
- ⁵⁷ In this, the film's treatment of capitalist realism resembles, Fitzgerald's story 'The Cut-Glass Bowl' (1920) in which the eponymous bowl, glittering, hard, transparent and cold (which eventually leads to the death of its owner) acts as a metaphor for the self-destructiveness of material desires. *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Volume 1: The Diamond as Big as the Ritz and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1962), pp.7-30.
- ⁵⁸ Andrew Hook, *American Literature in Context, III: 1865-1900*, (London and New York, Methuen, 1983), 186.
- ⁵⁹ Godden, *The Great Gatsby*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
- ⁶⁰ In Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and its President in the 1980s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.74.
- ⁶¹ Phillips, *op. cit.*, p.68, and Schaller, *op. cit.*, p.72.
- ⁶² Schaller, *op. cit.*, p.72.
- ⁶³ F.O. Matthiessen notes how Emerson read and copied passages from the *Vishnu Purana*, the *Bhagvat-Geeta* and the *Katha Upanishad*, 'acclimatizing' Hindu thought into an American setting, appropriating the philosophy for his idea of the 'Over Soul' which he had developed before reading these texts. See F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London, Oxford and New York: oxford University Press, 1979), p.47n..
- ⁶⁴ Quoted in Matthiessen, *ibid.*, p.8.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.102.
- ⁶⁶ Matthiessen: 'He [Emerson] ... was continually being flooded by the fullness of the moment. But when he came to set it down on paper, the rhythmical wholeness of the experience slipped away from him, and the residue seemed to turn to a lifeless gray.' *Ibid.*, pp.45-46.
- ⁶⁷ W. Somerset Maugham, *The Razor's Edge* (London: Mandarin, 1992), p.291.
- ⁶⁸ Marx quoted in Haug, *op. cit.*, p.17.
- ⁶⁹ In the 1946 film, he is shown to return to the Continent across a storm-tossed sea, also with a surge of filmic music, evoking American grandeur. But in Maugham's novel, Larry returns to the States become a taxi driver, disappearing quietly.
- ⁷⁰ H.T. Wilson, *The American Ideology: Science, Technology and Organization as Modes of Rationality in Advanced Industrial Societies* (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p.8.

Chapter Five

Terrible Beauty, Total Fear and Psychic Death

Synopsis *The Reflecting Skin* (Philip Ridley, 1991).

Idaho, mid 1950s. When a young boy, Seth Dove, discovers the body of his friend in the well at his family's gas station, his father, Luke, is suspected of the crime, resurrecting secrets about his homosexual past buried long before. Tormented by his wife, Ruth, and persecuted by the local sheriff and his deputy, Luke kills himself and Seth's brother, Cameron, is sent home from serving in the Pacific on compassionate leave. Soon, Cameron begins an affair with Seth's neighbour, the young widow, Dolphin Blue. Influenced by a pulp horror novel, Seth has already convinced himself that the aloof and sombre Dolphin is a vampire and is consequently horrified by their relationship. When Cameron's hair begins to fall out and his gums start to bleed, Seth misinterprets the signs of radiation sickness, believing his brother's symptoms to be evidence that Dolphin really is a vampire. Meanwhile, Seth witnesses a gang of youths snatch his remaining friend and drive off with him in their Cadillac. Later, the boy is also found dead. Driven to a passionate hatred of Dolphin Blue, Seth does not alert her when she accepts a lift from the youths. When Dolphin's body is found, Cameron's acute distress causes Seth to realise the enormity of what he has done. Fleeing the scene, Seth is last shown screaming in despair.

The Reflecting Skin was released in 1991 and was, in many reviews, dismissed as odious, pretentious and unrealistic.¹ Ambiguous, darkly humorous and always deliberately overblown, the film certainly resists literal interpretation and is a difficult and often disturbing film to watch. But I want to argue that the film is an important intervention into widely disseminated and deeply rooted patterns of thought and feeling about the meaning of 'America' as a locus of collective power and identity. The film's dominant structuring principle is alluded to in its title: it seeks to invert concepts of American sublimity and through this critiques some important consequences of America's collective will to domination. *The Reflecting Skin* offers the viewer a vision of America through a looking-glass, a distorting, ludic one where irrational rationality and monstrosity reign.² Within *The Reflecting Skin*, recurring motifs of fragmentation, explosion and atomisation also perform a complex interaction of sexual, social and political meanings. Continuing this rhetoric of inversion and fragmentation, the film concludes not with an image of self-sublimation, but of self-annihilation.

Seeking to explode conceptions of America as 'nature's nation', the film establishes from the outset that perversion and cruelty circulate throughout its rural community. The film opens with a crane shot of a field of corn, constructing what seems on the surface to be a pastoral idyll. Seth enters the shot frame left, carrying a large object in his arms very gently as though not to damage it. As the shot pans down and tracks Seth's movements, it becomes apparent that the object is a frog. Calling to his friends (Kim and Eben off frame left), Seth exclaims: 'Look at this wonderful frog!'. In great excitement, his friends rush to his side and admire the frog in turn – 'Look how big it is! ... Look at its skin!', setting up what appears as a Romantic connection between childish innocence and nature. Rapidly dismantling this Disneyesque set up, however, it is abruptly made clear that the boys'

delight with the animal stems from their intent to use it in order to play a grotesque and cruel prank on the hated Dolphin Blue. Having admired the frog, the boys carry it to the side of a road where they enthusiastically inflate it by blowing into a reed inserted into its rectum. They then leave the inflated frog in the road and lie in wait for Dolphin Blue. When a baffled Dolphin approaches the struggling animal, the boys burst it with a shot from Seth's catapult, watching enthralled as it explodes all over her. Both absurd and revolting, the scene sets the tone for the film as a whole.

The pattern of representation in the opening scene is explicitly repeated later in the action, when Seth and Kim invade Dolphin's bedroom. Finding a large and beautiful shell, they admire it. But, as with the frog, they quickly decide to destroy it, the very size and beauty of the shell seemingly triggering their destructive pleasure: 'Look at this wonderful shell! I know, let's *smash it!*' Their violence escalates until Dolphin Blue's room is devastated. Visual and verbal parallels between this and the opening frog scene strongly suggest an uncontrollable, unconscious and collective repetition compulsion to destroy. Frog-exploding, it is revealed, is a regular form of entertainment for Seth and his friends, and most of the characters within the film exhibit similarly aggressive drives.³

One way to interpret this predisposition towards destruction is suggested by the film's recurrent inter-textual references to Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Crucially, in this respect, Dolphin Blue is an elusive, mysterious and alarming presence to Seth: a reconceptualisation of the Ahab-Moby opposition. Like Ahab (who is, in the novel, aligned with instrumental reason, industrialism and capitalistic exploitation), Seth seeks absolute truths. The prairies – imagined repeatedly in the film as an ocean in shots of cornfields that linger on the movement of wind through the corn, making it ripple like waves on a water's surface – can be seen to figure his ocean, concealing the truths he wishes to penetrate.⁴ But, in mistaking appearances for essence, Seth's dissections lead only to death in a way that reconfigures a Romantic fear of form:

... it is only death which can provide Ahab with the completion that he seeks. ... And death invades the very language and aspiration of definition. One can kill other whales of course, and hoist them out of the water, but they are then no longer images of the living: they do not represent the truth. ... Visible dead image, or mysterious living organism: there seems to be nothing between. ... [It is a] seemingly irreducible fusion of life and death – life imagined in death and the urgency to represent what can only be represented by the supersession of all that is most true to life.⁵

The Reflecting Skin can be seen, like Melville's text, to critique attempts to dominate nature by fixing its fluidity in images that – necessarily – represent the 'annihilation of the thing'.⁶ Dolphin's house is littered with the bones of whales, ageing photographs and a sad collection of her dead husband's belongings (whose family were once whalers). These objects symbolise the deadness and partiality of images in comparison with the fullness

they are meant to represent, but which they supersede. Dolphin's gift of a harpoon to Seth gives him, symbolically, the means to realise his desire to pierce – and thus destroy – the mysteries that surround him. The action also anticipates the way in which Seth will play a part in Dolphin's death, finally destroying what he cannot understand. Seth sits in a chair with the harpoon across his lap staring with a mixture of fear and loathing at Dolphin Blue. Immediately behind, him, however, an enormous, gaping whale jaw hangs on the wall, the camera positioned so that it looks as if about to swallow Seth up – a death-image that acts as a portent of the film's conclusion.

Recurring patterns of violence within the film, such as that presented in the opening scene, can be seen to set up a critique of empiricism's destruction of the living whole. But these motifs also symbolise the consequences of a technocratic application of empiricist methodology. In a way that deliberately recalls the children's destruction of frog and shell, Cameron, the US Marine, tells Dolphin Blue that he's been to the 'Pretty Islands' in the Pacific.⁷ Asked what he was doing there, Cameron's response is similarly shocking: he was, he says, 'blowing them up'. This reference to the American military's nuclear tests in the Pacific points to the film's primary motivating principle: its critique of America as a nation, in Rob Wilson's words, 'dependent upon a long-enclosed agnostics of power and a dangerously solipsistic sense of natural and technological superiority'.⁸ To explain this more fully, I want first to explore in a little depth the impact of the Atomic Bomb on US culture to, which, I believe, *The Reflecting Skin* refers.

To those who witnessed the first atomic bomb exploded at Los Alamos in July, 1945, it must have seemed as though the Enlightenment project to uncover (to borrow from Leo Marx) 'the ultimate structural principles of the universe' had been realised.⁹ As President Truman bragged in his address to the American people, in commanding atomic power, the United States had 'harnessed the basic power of the universe', the source from which the sun draws its power. It was, as Rob Wilson describes it, a 'history-shattering event'.¹⁰ And, as newspaper articles attest, eye-witnesses veered dizzily between fear and wonder at the unprecedented power of atomic explosions. They experienced, in the words of anti-nuclear campaigners, Ground Zero, 'a mingled sense of awe and horror' before the new bomb, enacting the attraction-repulsion dynamic – the negative pleasure – of the sublime.¹¹ An 'explosive force such as to stagger the imagination', the excessive, overwhelming power of the atomic bomb forced observers into a shocking sense of their own puniness in comparison. Feeling an alarming discrepancy between the power of the Bomb and the descriptive powers of language, witnesses reported nuclear explosions in terms of a crisis of the imagination, of speechlessness. Though pained by the potentially mind-numbing effects of the first nuclear explosion at Los Alamos, however, Brigadier General Thomas Farrell, an observer of this event, is also plainly thrilled by his experience:

The lighting effects beggar description. The Whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. ... Thirty seconds after the explosion came first the air blast pressing hard against the people and things, to be followed almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to the Almighty. Words are inadequate tools for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical, mental and psychological effects. It had to be witnessed to be realized.¹²

As Wilson argues:

... Farrell's confrontation with figurative inadequacy and inexpressibility comes about because a terrifying *abyss* has suddenly opened between cognition (the language of the self) and its corresponding object (nature here dematerialized or sublimated into atomic energy).¹³

Witnesses of atomic explosions could resist the 'death-inducing' plunge into the signifying abyss by turning to the familiar cultural rhetoric of the Technological Sublime. The Technological Sublime, as Leo Marx has demonstrated, entered an American vocabulary in the mid-nineteenth century during the rapid expansion of technology and capital across the continent.¹⁴ During this time, technological innovation was conceptualised into a new frontier, a space where American ingenuity and endeavour engaged in a continuous process of advancement, while technologies themselves were turned into icons of national power. Thus, within the American cultural will to domination, as Wilson puts it, the nuclear bomb functions as one more 'fetishized object of national identity, the technological ingenuity, economic might and cultural superiority of its patriotic makers.'¹⁵

For while Farrell trembles before the might of the atomic explosion, he recovers sufficiently to make a bold rhetorical manoeuvre, troping the bomb into a sign of America's technological apotheosis and claiming God-like power for the nation: atomic power, he asserts, is a force '*heretofore* reserved for the Almighty'. Together with Truman's boast, Farrell's remark reveals that witnesses could turn nuclear weaponry into symbols of self and national aggrandisement, into 'master images' of the continuing 'sublime progress of the [American] race.'¹⁶ As Rob Wilson puts it:

... Brigadier General Thomas Farrell at Los Alamos – invoking sublime poets and an unspeakable Godhead – reads the first atomic bomb as a disclosure of America's moral grandeur and scientific capacity to reign as superpower on earth.¹⁷

In this way, President Truman, when defining the historic importance of the new Bomb, did so in terms of divine sanction: America had been chosen by God as the guardians of the Bomb and of the world –

We thank God that it has come to us instead of our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes.

I shall give further consideration and make further recommendations to the Congress as to how atomic power can become a powerful and forceful influence toward the maintenance of world peace.¹⁸

The Trinity explosion at Los Alamos, and those at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, could become, then, 'a sublimated spectacle of national empowerment ... materialized into ... a bomb.'¹⁹

Significantly with regard to *The Reflecting Skin*, this process was, to a great extent, contingent upon the perceived aesthetic properties of nuclear explosions, their capacity to generate visual pleasure. Peter B. Hales argues that this aestheticisation of the Bomb was, simultaneously, a fundamental means of bringing it within the reaches of cultural meaning and a means (often unconsciously) of repression in which 'the sphere of the visual became the realm of pleasure'.²⁰ In his study of magazine and newspaper articles of the forties and fifties, Hales found that 'acculturation' of the Bomb was achieved through what he terms 'abstract visuality', whereby images of atomic bombs were 'sequestered ... from the inevitable implications, often to an absurd extent.'²¹ Like Wilson, Hales observes how the effects of atomic weapons were repeatedly troped into familiar and especially natural phenomena: umbrellas, flowers, and, more often, mushrooms and the sun.²² Of these naturalising metaphors, the image of the sun is used most consistently, forming, I suggest, an important component of the iconography of the nuclear sublime. Groping to find words to describe the Trinity explosion, for example, its makers troped the bomb into a pre-dawn sun: '... I was enveloped with a warm brilliant yellow white light – from darkness to brilliant sunshine in an instant ...'; 'it was like opening a hot oven with the sun coming out like a sunrise.'²³

William L. Laurence, a *New York Times* science writer and the only journalist allowed to fly above the Japanese targets, wrote an article for *Life* magazine which was, Hales argues, 'prophetically aesthetic in tone' and which helped formulate the way in which subsequent atomic explosion would be received and described.²⁴ Laurence focuses on the greens and golds, the purple hues and creamy whites of the mushroom cloud and its petal-like formations – apparently forgetting the devastation inevitably caused by the Bomb. Hales:

Laurence's report is a rich document. But two elements seem to announce themselves most clearly: first a focus on the aesthetic elements that brought about the "awe-struck" reactions of the observers, and a concurrent and complete repression of the horror down below.²⁵

These early writers were, Hales maintains, falling back on the 'unconscious categories of their own cultural training, and since they shared that training with virtually all the members of their democratic audience, it made perfect sense.' Yet, as Hales points out:

the atomic explosion became not a purely human circumstance (for which we must accept responsibility), but rather a part of that benign collaboration among man, nature and divinity that had defined American destiny, a predetermined, even foreordained event.²⁶

In a way that is again significant in respect of the film, one journalist who wrote an article subtitled, 'Breathtaking beauty of blast offset terror of its historic impact' (1952), could not resist the impulse to aestheticise the Bomb, even as he was aware of what he was doing:

The outstanding impression from first hand observation of the atomic explosion is this: How little there is in it of the horror and shock its historic importance would lead you to expect, how much of sheer breathtaking beauty and magnificence.

... If there had been a city instead of sagebush below that cloud, you realize later, half a million people might be dead or dying at this instant. But that's not what you think at the time. You think fleetingly, "is that all?" And then you suck in your breath and hold it because – welling up from the centre of the cloud and spilling in easy, leisurely magnificence down the sides comes a wave of glowing pink foam ... one of the most strangely beautiful of human creations.²⁷

This journalist's sentiments exemplify the ability of pleasure to effect, if only temporarily, instances of 'strong forgetting': the astonishing spectacle of the Bomb causes the journalist temporarily to put thoughts of the full horror out of his mind.²⁸ Only later does he begin to contemplate the kind of destruction a nuclear explosion would cause.

Increasingly, and especially after 1957, when atomic tests could be viewed by the public, nuclear explosions continued to be aestheticised and became a form of entertainment, even a tourist attraction. These years, as Hales argues,

would see the consolidating and fleshing out of this new myth of the atomic sublime. Articles would appear emphasizing the spectacle of atomic explosions as entertainment... . Travelogues would surface, reporting the Yucca flats site as the latest wonder of the wondrous West ... and after 1957, reminding Americans that "the Atomic Energy Commission's Nevada test program ... extend[s] through the summer tourist season [and] the AEC has released a partial schedule, so that tourists interested in seeing a nuclear explosion can adjust their itineraries accordingly."²⁹

In his article, Hales includes a photograph of the Sheahan family enjoying the spectacle of an atomic explosion from their home in Nevada. He observes how the picture seeks to emphasise and reinforce the nuclear thrill as an act of spectatorship. The photographer positions himself behind the watching family, focusing 'viewer attention on the witnesses as much as the event', defining 'the significance of the moment as bound up in the process of spectatorship'.³⁰ Representing the conjunction of sight and belief in this newest manifestation of American technological sublimity, the silhouetted images of the watching Sheahans against the glow of the distant explosion maintains, in this contrast, a symbolically safe distance between family and the Bomb. Constructing a tableau of mom,

dad, and kid (and even the family's pet dog) facing the horizon on which an atomic dawn rises, this image of American technological futurity is thoroughly domesticated in a way that reiterates 'the safety of this moment'.³¹

Over three decades later, despite the ending of atomic weapons testing in Nevada, this impulse to aestheticise nuclear weaponry, together with the corresponding confusion of atomic weapons, tourism and entertainment, endured. In his study of atomic museums, in 1989, Peter N. Kirstein noticed an exhibition entitled "Seapower" at the Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, which offered *The Men of Polaris* as an educational film. But Kirstein observed a similar process of visual abstraction as that described by Hales:

... *The Men of Polaris* emphasizes only the beauty and technical capabilities of the missiles, not the actual consequences of a nuclear attack. One of the film's scenes shows a dramatic countdown, followed by the spectacular launch of a submarine-based ballistic missile, firing against the background of a brilliant azure sky.³²

Indicating the popularity of the nuclear sublime as entertainment, these atomic museums drew huge numbers of visitors: Kirstein estimated in 1989 that '22 million visitors a year flock to the loosely knit network' of atomic museums.³³

This conjunction between entertainment and terror could be bizarre, as revealed by a directional sign for the Bradbury Science Museum, Los Alamos National Laboratory, New Mexico. The text beneath a map showing sights of interest reads:

LOS ALAMOS
THE "ATOMIC CITY"
BIRTHPLACE OF THE ATOMIC AGE
SCIENTIFIC LABORATORY AND MUSEUM
GAS-FOOD-LODGING•GOLF COURSE

BANDELIER NATIONAL MONUMENT
TSANKAWI RUINS
FRIJOLES CANYON
PREHISTORIC INDIAN RUINS

VALLEGRANDE
LARGEST EXTINCT VOLCANIC CRATER

The sign effectively absorbs the atomic bomb site into the tourist industry, fusing, as in the late fifties, entertainment and destruction. The New Mexican landscape – its ancient culture, geological features and its status as site of the first atomic test – is broken up into its various commodified attractions. Though given star-billing, the earth-shattering event of Alamogordo is reduced to a commodity to be consumed (along with gas, food and lodging); it is a mere part of the tourist package.³⁴ And, as David E. Nye writes, even the site of nuclear accidents, such as the one at Three Mile Island, could become tourist attractions: 'in a curious irony, Three Mile Island became a popular tourist site during the

1980s. The cooling towers of the plant had become world famous, as identifiable as the Eiffel Tower or the Statue of Liberty.¹³⁵

In a way that is particularly suggestive of *The Reflecting Skin's* repeated figurative patterns, Hales's analysis of tests in the forties and fifties also indicates that atomic explosions, as a spectacular form of entertainment, afforded pleasure not merely in spite of the destruction they necessitated, but perhaps because of it. In his research into the US military decision to test nuclear bombs in the Pacific, Hales points out that the Pacific Islands were, in the popular American imaginary, a paradise, pure and untouched. Hales suggests that it was the Bikini Island's beauty that aroused military interest in it. While the military focused on Bikini's distance from American shores and its sparsely populated terrain, 'the written and photographic portrayals of the test ... showed none of this understated factuality.'³⁶ Perhaps, he argues, the military hoped that placing the bomb 'within a landscape of absolute innocence' might work to 'scrub it of its evil'.³⁷ Yet reports suggest that the location significantly enhanced the attraction-repulsion dynamic of the nuclear thrill, 'continuing,' as Hales puts it, 'even amplifying, the strain of aestheticism that had characterized the earliest attempts to anchor the atomic sublime. Terror and beauty, together, begot a terrible beauty'.³⁸ The destruction of the South Pacific atolls certainly excited journalists reporting the tests. One *Newsweek* piece, for example, reported the destruction of Bikini under the headline: 'Atomic Bomb: Greatest Show on Earth'.³⁹ Yet, as Hales points out, the nuclear thrill hinges also on the 'bringing to consciousness the essential horror of the mushroom cloud – that it could only exist by destroying all that surrounded it.'⁴⁰

The Reflecting Skin confronts this impulse to aestheticise, the conjunction between terror and beauty, pleasure and horror. The way in which the frog and the shell's magnificence and beauty ignites the boys' destructive desires symbolically enacts this convergence of terror and beauty inherent within a nuclear aesthetic, the way in which pleasure is, paradoxically, enhanced by the annihilation of natural and living things. But the film also explores how the awesome beauty of atomic explosions simultaneously – and problematically – requires the repression of horror, such that an individual, like the *Businessweek* journalist quoted above, might enjoy the spectacle only in spite of themselves (that is, unconsciously).

The film dramatises this repressive impulse to aestheticise horror in the scene where Seth's father takes his own life by dousing himself with gasoline and setting himself and his gas station alight. The compositional elements of the scene (in which a combination of point-of view and close-up shots afford intimate glimpses of Seth's fluctuating emotions, his shift from horror to pleasure) strongly imply the negative pleasure of the nuclear thrill. From a distance, Seth watches in confusion as his father soaks himself in and swallows gasoline and then attempts to strike a match. Seth calls to his father who responds just at the moment the match strikes. The scene then instantly cuts to a shot of the gas station ablaze.

The blaze, however, is not revealed completely in the shot. Taken from Seth's point-of-view, the shot affords only a partial image of the fire, glimpsed as Seth peeps through his fingers in fear, exposing his anxiety to the viewer from the inside. [Fig. 103]. In the next close-up, Seth's fear is seen to slip away. Captivated by the fire, he slowly lowers his hands from his eyes and his gaze becomes emboldened. [Fig. 104]. A further close-up shot reveals a significant emotional change in Seth. Smiling, he amuses himself by blowing the sparks from the fire – apparently so entranced that he forgets that their existence originates in death. [Fig. 105]. Evocative of the thrill of the nuclear sublime described by Hales, Seth's pleasure involves, then, a blanking out of the terrible actuality that is consequent upon the fire.

However, the film also dramatises the partial surfacing to consciousness of the horrors beneath abstracted images of destruction when Cameron tells Dolphin Blue about his experiences in the South Pacific. Cameron describes the awesome beauty of the explosions which were 'pink, like you've never seen', 'bright like a million fourth of Julys all rolled into one'. But Cameron's pleasure at the memory quickly evaporates and he appears to struggle with a troubling thought. Overcome with emotion, Cameron's voice falters and breaks off, he bows his head and slumps forward slightly. An ugly truth tugs at Cameron's memory, though he does not reveal the cause of his anxiety directly. Earlier in the action, and in a similar way, Dolphin Blue (who reveals she had a predilection for burning living things for fun as a child and who still loves fireworks and explosions) also expresses a certain disquiet – here guilt – about experiencing pleasure in the midst of horror. She tells Cameron how she saw the flames from the gas station from her window: 'It was beautiful'. Realising immediately the insensitivity of her remark, however, she apologises.

Yet the film's confrontation of abstraction and repression involved in the nuclear sublime experience can be seen to be more far-reaching, as a further delineation of the Bomb's history will help to explain. The military, Hales asserts, not only encouraged – and mirrored in their own reports – the aesthetic tones of Laurence and other journalists, but censored all text and images released for public consumption. As Robert Rizzo states:

on 19 September [1945] a press code was adopted that imposed prior censorship As a result, commentaries, and treatises dealing with A-bomb damages, including even those about medical treatment dealing with A-bomb damages, were prohibited.⁴¹

In addition, as Hales points out, Laurence was actually chosen by government censors as a trustworthy ally. Hales argues:

the process of absorption and adaption [of the Bomb] into the existing culture was heavily controlled, and ... the process of negotiation that usually characterized such adaption was severely limited.

... Americans looking at the dominant media saw and read essentially the same report⁴²

While secrecy protected military research from getting into the hands of the enemy, it also forestalled effective criticism of nuclear weaponry on the part of the American public. And, a nuclear aesthetic, in particular, helped to divert what American officials regarded as one of the greatest dangers to national security and social stability: fear of the Bomb, for not all Americans responded to the first atomic explosions as rapturously as Farrell. In this respect, Cameron's apparent inability to articulate his anxiety represents not merely the repressive characteristics of a nuclear aesthetic. It can be seen to refer to the way in which obsessive secrecy surrounding the Bomb and its effects, together with a deliberate policy of obfuscation and misinformation, attempted to achieve what Paul Boyer describes as a collective 'deadening of overt nuclear consciousness' and the alienation of the American public from structures of power and control, of which the nuclear aesthetic was a part.⁴³

As Boyer points out, despite Truman's boasting, public celebration of America's victory in the Pacific was mingled with an aversion to the Bomb – though not, as Boyer argues, predominantly because of what it had done in Japan, but what the new weapon might do to America itself. Boyer explains that 'the heavily racist wartime climate' encouraged the American public to regard the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings (with echoes of the concept of 'savage war') as justified force in the 'just struggle against an unambiguous evil.' Yet:

Physically untouched by the war, the United States at the moment of victory perceived itself as naked and vulnerable. Sole possessors and users of a devastating new instrument of mass destruction, Americans envisaged themselves not as a potential threat to other peoples, but as potential victims. "In that terrible flash 10,000 miles away, men here have seen not only the fate of Japan, but have glimpsed the future of America".⁴⁴

One particular source of pessimism was David Bradley's *No Place to Hide* (1948) in which he attempted to alert the public to the dangers of atomic warfare, particularly those posed by radioactive fallout. Importantly, Bradley's argument contradicts the concept of American exceptionality and the natural landscape as the site of self and national redemption because it denies the possibility of escape from the effects of nuclear weaponry – even in the vast spaces of the American landscape.

It seemed to some, then, that the Bomb heralded not the triumph, but the demise of American technological, political and economic supremacy. As the ultimate symbol of American's Manifest Destiny and of capital's perpetual technological revolution, the Bomb threatened (and continues to threaten), in a very real sense, to melt (vaporise) all that is solid, including itself, destabilising America's self-belief in its own, illimitable progress. Within a nuclear consciousness, beginnings and endings are still confused, but not in an Emersonian fashion. Beginnings – the first nuclear explosions at Los Alamos and in Japan – hold within themselves the possibility of negation and death, but death might not carry the promise of a new beginning. Even Whitman, sensing his own death and writing within the

destruction of the American Civil War, did not give up on death as containing the possibility of regeneration.⁴⁵ In this respect, the Bomb significantly re-defined the American Sublime, the way in which Americans had regarded themselves, their country and mission for over a century.

Awareness of America's new vulnerability induced in some an all-consuming anxiety of imminent death. In a way suggestive of the film's conceptualisation of the Bomb's effects on the individual, as I shall show, Boyer's study includes a letter to an NCB radio commentator from a young mother who heard the news about the Hiroshima bombing only hours after giving birth to her second son. She wrote:

Since then I have hardly been able to smile, the future seems so utterly grim for our two little boys. Most of the time I have been in tears or near-tears, and fleeting but torturing regrets that I have brought children into the world to face such a dreadful thing as this have shivered through me. It seems that it will be for them all their lives like living on a keg of dynamite which may go off at any moment, and which undoubtedly will go off before their lives have progressed very far.⁴⁶

For the woman, birth and death converge in a very un-American way; coinciding with the Hiroshima bombing, the birth of her child gives rise to feelings that the future is a void. Some commentators found reason to fear this kind of nuclear fear: 'The very intensity of this unending fear, some suggested, could itself create the conditions that would lead to cataclysm. ... "a world-wide nervous breakdown."' ⁴⁷ Fear, in this conception, becomes a threat to human existence, a disruptive, antisocial force, and it is this kind of fear I want to pursue for the moment. As Boyer stresses: 'What meaning can one's life have when all human life might vanish at any time?' ⁴⁸ Under the constant stress of nuclear anxiety, pervading feelings of radical meaningless and futurelessness, minds might snap, resulting in the total breakdown of society.

In these historical and cultural contexts, Ruth Dove's treatment of Seth, in particular, is highly suggestive of post-nuclear anxiety – especially (in one instance) the fear of fear itself. Seth, a constant source of disruption, troubles his mother greatly – but especially, it seems, when frightened. Reading his father's pulp horror novel at night in bed, Seth scares himself with stories of vampires. When his mother discovers him, she orders him to put out his light and go to sleep. Out of fear, however, Seth attempts to relight his lamp immediately after his mother has left the room. The cause of Seth's fear can be seen to be significant. To borrow from Jane Caputi's analysis of post-nuclear film, horror fictions during this period can 'reflect metaphorically the configurations and concerns of the nuclear mind.' ⁴⁹ In this way, Seth's dread of vampire killers implies 'the fear that underlies the larger nuclear nightmare ... the monster that will not/cannot be put to rest.' ⁵⁰ Unfortunately for Seth, Ruth catches him just as he strikes the match. In the context of the perceived dangers of nuclear anxiety, the way in which she punishes Seth is suggestive. Ruth responds to her son's disobedience with one menacing word: '*Water!*'. She then forces

Seth to drink water by grabbing his nose and tipping it by the glassful down his throat, drenching his clothes and choking him in the process. To Ruth, Seth's fear appears combustible. Manifested in fire (the striking of the match), Seth's fear alarms Ruth and she instinctively attempts to suppress it by (symbolically) putting it out.

The Dove household as a whole can also be seen indirectly to figure post-nuclear anxiety, familial and social fragmentation. The Doves exemplify what Caputi calls 'the explosive nuclear family'.⁵¹ When Ruth Dove turns savagely on her husband and siblings, and when Cameron attacks Seth, pushing him violently away, the film can be seen to articulate this kind of atomisation of family and society as a result of the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. Ruth expresses her neurosis in every gesture and grimace. While intermittently swatting flies with great vigour and enthusiasm (performing metaphorically the destructive capacity of nuclear explosions and reiterating the film's dominant motif) Ruth complains about the constant reek of gasoline about the house and about her husband ('I swear that man even *sweats* gasoline'). She predicts (quite accurately as it turns out) that one day her husband will blow up – '*BANG!*' – punctuating the word with a heavy stroke of the fly swat. The Dove household figures a world that might go up at any minute, their individual and collective neuroses mirroring the destructive capacities of the Bomb itself (while the family name sets up a reference to the irony of nuclear deterrence theory which conflates violent threat with peace).

The theme is continued in the penultimate and final scenes of the film. In it, what remains of the family – Seth, Cameron and Ruth – along with the rest of the community gather around Dolphin's body. In a deliberately overblown performance, the members of the community begin to struggle with each other, Seth attempting to free himself from his mother's embrace. Within this display of emotional excess, the film plays, with heavy irony, on the meaning of the 'nuclear family', particularly in its use of camera and *mise en scène*. In a crane-shot, Seth is shown to free himself from his mother, splitting off from the family group and running away from them and the camera toward the distant horizon. Fusing symbolically violent manifestations of social tension with atomic destruction, the action, together with the crane shot, evokes the process of nuclear fission and the splitting of the atomic nucleus. This image is then cut to a further shot of Seth, now running toward the camera with the horizon behind him and behind it a setting sun. The shot is set up so that the sun is positioned at the point where Seth's family and community have been left behind. This arrangement of the filmic space makes the scene look as though Seth has fled a nuclear explosion and implies that the community and its nuclear families have been destroyed.

While social commentators in the immediate aftermath of the Bomb feared this kind of social fission, another great cause for concern was that an all-pervading sense of imminent doom severely undermined codes of social conduct by making them appear fragile, absurd and meaningless by comparison. Jane Caputi explores expressions of kind of nuclear

anxiety in the film *River's Edge* (Tim Hunter, 1986), a brief exegesis of which will help to advance my own analysis of *The Reflecting Skin*.⁵² In *River's Edge*, A highschool youth rapes and kills his girlfriend and leaves her body on the bank of a river.⁵³ He later brags about the murder to his friends who disbelieve him. To prove it, he brings them to the river's edge to see for themselves. Over the course of two days, more teenagers turn up to view the corpse, but no one reports the murder to the police. Caputi concludes that the film articulates

that component of nuclear consciousness – radical futurelessness – the conviction that there will be no biological continuance, a conviction attended by a breakdown of traditional morals and institutions.⁵⁴

In this way, post-nuclear anxiety forms the undercurrent to the film's surface events, though the subject is treated indirectly. Samson, the killer, exclaims to a friend:

'Me. I get into a fight. I go fucking crazy, you know. Everything goes black and then I fucking explode, you know, like it's the end of the world. I mean, the whole world is going to blow up anyway. I might as well keep my pride.'

In a way similar to *The Reflecting Skin*'s confusion of social and familial anxiety with nuclear explosions, Samson's anger, sudden and extreme, is troped into a metaphor for the Bomb itself. His anger figures the way in which nuclear anxiety might be the cause of total social destruction (it makes 'everything goes black'). In addition, as Caputi observes, Samson's feelings are worryingly similar to those of other characters in a way that nihilism as a collective mental condition; reiterating Samson's own sense of 'radical futurelessness', one character states: 'You've got to make the best of it while we're still alive because any day now – boom – and we're dead.'

The Reflecting Skin, explores similarly nihilistic sentiments which, like *River's Edge*, it imagines as the release of amoral and potentially lethal energies into the social world. In this way, the behaviour of the youths who roam the Mid West in the Cadillac is suggestive of the kind of social breakdown that social critics of the forties and fifties feared would be the consequences of feelings of futurelessness and meaninglessness characteristic of the nuclear age. Though their behaviour is never tied explicitly to these causes, given the film's over-arching symbols of atomic destruction, it is possible to interpret the way in which the youths indulge their sexual and violent appetites as a representation of, borrowing from Caputi's analysis of *River's Edge*, 'a monstrosity of consciousness' consequent on post-nuclear anxiety.⁵⁵ The youths are cut loose from the moral implications of their pursuit and satisfaction of sadistic pleasure. Toward the end of the film, after they have already killed Seth's friend Eben, the youths snatch Kim from the road, their actions displaying the kind of 'frantic hedonism' that some social commentators feared would grip the nation. As the boy struggles to free himself, the youths shout and jump with excitement. Their mood is

playful, as when the driver, laughing, runs after Kim and grabs him ('come here you little ...!') as though the abduction is a game.

Earlier in the action, a scene alerts the viewer to their malign intentions. The Cadillac draws up at Luke Dove's gas station and Luke, engrossed in his pulp novel, asks Seth to see to it. While filling the car, Seth engages in dialogue with the driver in a strange and affecting scene accompanied by the melancholy strains of 'Seth's Theme' played slowly and softly on a single violin. The camera angle, slightly offset from Seth's point-of-view at the rear of the car, reveals the driver's face caught in the Cadillac's wing mirror. [Fig. 106]. The roundness of the mirror, together with the driver's boyish features, make the reflected image seem cherubic. It is with this disembodied, strangely beautiful image that Seth converses. The effect is bizarre. Throughout the conversation, the angelic visage smiles slightly and secretively, bringing to mind both the director's interest in Lewis Carroll and the traditional conception of the cherubic order of angels: both cherubs and Cheshire cats are the keepers of a secret knowledge, the source of the latter's grin. Once Seth has finished filling the car, he approaches the driver's window. The youth reaches out of the window and gently caresses Seth's lips with his finger. Still smiling, the driver tells him to be 'a good boy', setting up an unsettling disjunction between action and word that implies a secret and malevolent intent.

The amorality displayed by the Cadillac boys, then, suggests the way in which, according to Margot A. Henriksen, American youths in the 1950s found the Bomb harder to bear than an older generation exposed to the uncertainties and fears of the Depression and World War II, and who, consequently, 'lost their innocence and their balance in the new atomic age'.⁵⁶ In this way, the Cadillac boys can be seen to represent the emergence of a new, rebellious kind of youth at this time – 'wild ones' and 'juvenile delinquents' – who were in opposition to a 'culture of consensus'.⁵⁷ As Henriksen explains:

Like the culture of dissent to which it belonged, rebellious youth culture recognized the unnerving irony of America's atomic quest for safety and security: it made life less secure, less safe.⁵⁸

Henriksen's study of youthful dissenters includes a discussion of a new phenomenon in America in the nuclear age: the random murderer who killed for no apparent reason. Her examples (including the Manson murders and the killing of the Clutter family) are drawn from the sixties and early seventies but are relevant to an analysis of *The Reflecting Skin* nonetheless because Henriksen, like cultural commentators at the time, locates the source for these eruptions of violence as the American state itself. The 'unwise and probably unmoral insistence on the enemy's unconditional surrender that led to Hiroshima', together with the constant fear of nuclear annihilation produced by the peace-through-terror ethos of deterrence theory, that is, pointed toward the official 'devaluation of life'.⁵⁹ When radically devalued in this way, as some American youths understood it, life can become a joke, as it

was to the Clutters' murderers and as it clearly is to the fictional killers in *The Reflecting Skin*.⁶⁰ Deliberately recalling screen wild ones, Brando and Dean, the leather-clad Cadillac youths hold a mirror up to the American establishment and its official deployment of violence against the defenceless and unsuspecting (the thousands of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki). In this way, they represent the inversion of fictional juvenile delinquent, Holden Caulfield, because they want to prey on, rather than rescue the ignorant and the weak.

While *The Reflecting Skin* dramatises the kind of amoral and violent atomic mentality that Caputi and Henriksen describe, Caputi's inclusion of Robert Jay Lifton's thesis on 'psychic numbing' in her analysis of *River's Edge* and other films is also relevant to *The Reflecting Skin*'s treatment of a post-nuclear consciousness. Lifton wrote in the early 1980s during a resurgence of anti-Communist feeling and inflammatory rhetoric which seemed to herald imminent nuclear war. In this context, Lifton's tone is somewhat urgent:

We are now just beginning to realize that nuclear weapons radically alter our existence ... nothing we do or feel – in working, playing, and loving, and in our private, family and public lives – is free of their influence. The threat they pose has become the context for our lives, a shadow that persistently intrudes upon our mental ecology.⁶¹

'Psychic numbing', according to Lifton, describes the way in which survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings were so traumatised by their experience of nuclear destruction that they felt an inner deadness which corresponded to the devastated landscape itself. Or, as Caputi explains, 'psychic numbing' refers to 'the partial shutdown of mental facilities and emotional responses, denial, repression, and apathy in the face of disaster'.⁶² Significantly, in this way, Lifton observes that 'inwardly and outwardly [nuclear survivors] resemble the dead'.⁶³ Yet Lifton also argues that this mental deadness is a symptom shared by everyone living under the threat of imminent nuclear annihilation, such that 'psychic numbing' can be taken as a model for nuclear consciousness as a whole.⁶⁴

In many ways, as Caputi argues, the youths in *River's Edge* are themselves evocative of Lifton's walking dead. Samson's violence notwithstanding, all of the youths are strangely cold and undemonstrative, as though their emotions have somehow been shut down – revealed by their largely impassive reaction to the murdered girl. Extending Lifton's thesis, Caputi likens the emotionless teenagers to the mass of walking dead in other 'metaphorical expressions of nuclear anxiety', such as *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) and *Return of the Living Dead* (Dan O'Bannon, 1985), in which the living are transformed into flesh-eating ghouls. In respect to *River's Edge*, in which the teenagers gather to take in (consume) the novelty of a dead body, these films are highly suggestive.

A similar kind of mental deadening (in that it has the Bomb as its source) is presented in *The Reflecting Skin*. In this way, Cameron's dead-pan expression and monotonal voice, when relating his experiences in the Pacific to Dolphin Blue, suggests something more insidious at work in addition to the sort of repression involved in aestheticising nuclear explosions described above. Since, as Lifton argues, it is impossible to respond 'with full emotions to ... [nuclear] devastation and remain... sane', Cameron's expressionlessness can be seen to represent the self-protective retreat away from consciousness of nuclear destruction, the kind of psychic numbing described by Lifton. In a way similar to *2001*'s configuration of the self in relation to the American Technological Sublime, Cameron's emotionlessness points to the way in which the Nuclear Sublime is actually self-diminishing, rather than self-aggrandising, because it forces the erasure of both emotion and conscious thought, resulting in the death of self.

Growing more cadaverous as the narrative moves toward its apocalyptic conclusion, Cameron is the filmic emblem of this paradox of walking death, his appearance ironically exacerbating Seth's own (misplaced) anxiety about living death (blood-sucking vampires). Significantly, Cameron's wanness is recapitulated by the rest of the film's community whose clothes become increasingly drab as the film draws to a close, as though the life is draining out of them – suggesting that this deadness of self in the nuclear age is a general, rather than universal, phenomenon, just as Lifton argued.

Some historians, however, place a rather different emphasis on the idea of psychic numbing in a way that further reveals the complexities of a nuclear consciousness (possibly a contradiction in terms). They point out that, in order to counter feelings of despair and fear in the early years of the nuclear age, US authorities embarked on a campaign to deceive the American public that went far beyond the reassuring strategies of a nuclear aesthetic. Supported by a professional class of teachers, educationalists and journalists, government and military officials pursued a policy of damage limitation by 'playing down the bomb's dangers and discrediting those who continued to warn of such dangers.'⁶⁵ Deception included facts concerning the production and testing of nuclear weaponry in addition to the effects of a nuclear war, and, although the Bomb's further development demanded enormous human and financial resources, research was carried out amidst the utmost secrecy.⁶⁶

In attempting to foster 'the philosophy of calm acceptance', Civil Defense programs had to convince the American public that nuclear war was survivable.⁶⁷ The first post-Hiroshima Civil Defense manual, written by Richard Gerstell (a radiologist and consultant to the Pentagon's Civil Defense officials), *How to Survive an Atomic Bomb* (1950) maintained that survival of a nuclear war was – like survival of any other hazard – merely a matter of being prepared and staying level-headed. The book, widely read and quoted, urged Americans to buy a first aid kit, to practice taking cover, to wear stockings, trousers or hats to safeguard against flash-burns, as though such precautions could protect the

human body from the violence of a nuclear blast. Gerstell's intent seriously to mislead the public is evident in his statement: 'Things are probably going to look different when you get outside', a highly disingenuous statement, despite the limited powers of the first bombs in comparison to the superbombs of today.⁶⁸

Similarly, information concerning the invisible, unknown and thus frightening radioactive by-products of nuclear explosions was intentionally, Boyer argues, 'vague and misleading'.⁶⁹ Gerstell, though a radiologist himself, denied as 'absolutely false' the idea that radioactivity could cause blindness, hair loss, sterility, cancers or significant environmental harm.⁷⁰ Writers like Gerstell argued that radiation, like the atomic blast itself, was merely another kind of hazard that could be dealt with if treated sensibly. Like prolonged exposure to the sun, Gerstell soothed, radiation could be dangerous, but was not particularly harmful if experienced in moderation. Crucially, with respect to *The Reflecting Skin's* critique of nuclear technology, a similar message was delivered to military personnel. Known effects of radiation were down-played and personnel, according to Boyer, were instructed that radiation was not 'a separate category of danger, but simply another of the many risks of war'.⁷¹ Overall, Gerstell's patronising, superior tone indicates a desire to alienate ordinary people from nuclear technology, as this example demonstrates:

To combat even the comparatively small but important threat [radioactivity] does hold, a new and proven military science has arisen. Radiological defense, which consists of the detection and avoidance of radioactive hazards, is something which, in a quiet but effective way, the government has been perfecting for several years.⁷²

Gerstell's message is clear: the public should not meddle in a subject about which they know nothing; rather, nuclear science must be left in the hands of expert and benevolent military scientists.

Ralph Lapp, meanwhile, in *Must We Hide?* (1949), produced to counter Bradley's *No Place to Hide*, sought to refute Bradley's doom-laden message by appealing to the familiar rhetoric of American limitlessness. Though he conceded that millions would die in a nuclear attack in cities, he argued that millions more might be saved by a program of urban dispersal.

Within our borders ... we have plenty of space. One of the most decisive things which we as a country can do to reduce our vulnerability to atomic attack is to use this space effectively. ... Even atomic bombs meet their master in the invincibility of space.⁷³

In the struggle between natural and technological sublimas, Lapp argues, the sheer scope of the American continent can absorb, resist and triumph over the immediate and long term effects of the Bomb. However, the vastness of the American landscape was not invincible;

as Carole Gallagher shows, much of it was already contaminated with the radioactive by-products of nuclear testing in Nevada (which I discuss further below).⁷⁴

Significantly, with regard to *The Reflecting Skin's* critique of the Bomb, Boyer's view that political, scientific and economic interests converged to suppress nuclear consciousness is shared by other writers exploring the wider social and psychological impact of the development and control of atomic weaponry. In her analysis of an official policy of concealment to limit panic and manipulate fear, JoAnne Brown writes:

Representatives of the Federal Civil Defense Administration operated within a policy of obfuscation and distortion. Almost no factual material about the effects of a nuclear war, or a single atomic bomb, appeared in educational journals during the 1950s. ... [T]o have detailed the horrors of an atomic attack would have run counter to the agency's philosophy.⁷⁵

Brown quotes an FCDA officer who explained the Administration's philosophy starkly: 'The negative aspect of the message ... tends to increase, become more persuasive and less manageable as one understands more about the nature of nuclear war.'⁷⁶ Plainly, US authorities thought that their proper function in the nuclear age was to deceive in order to make the public think less, to remove thought in order to achieve 'public acquiescence' to the Bomb.⁷⁷ Indeed, as Hales points out, 'public information officers joked afterward about their roles as "misinformation officers"'.⁷⁸

Kirstein's study of atomic museums reveals how this deception and disempowerment regarding the effects of nuclear weaponry continues. Controlled and organised by government, military and scientific interests, Kirstein found that the design of the atomic museums he visited functioned to encourage acceptance of the Bomb by uniformly displaying 'an attitude that borders on atomic reverence'.⁷⁹ Invested with the aura of religious artefacts, Kirstein discovered, nuclear weapons were presented as icons of national exceptionality, evident in their promotion as 'all American products'. In this way, the Strategic Air Command Museum invited visitors to 'gaze at some of the fastest planes and missiles ever flown and reach out and touch the largest bombers ever flown'.⁸⁰ Recalling the semi-religious conversion rituals at Niagara and other natural manifestations of American sublimity, SAC promised that, through contact with the ultimate in technological design, the individual would be lifted into the realm of the extraordinary to merge with a higher power: 'Become part of air history', invited SAC, where 'the Strategic Air Command comes to life for you'.⁸¹

Yet visitors were being deceived: those who reached up in wonder to touch these sacralised objects of national sublimity were not empowered but *disempowered*. Attempting to persuade the public to revere technological forms of American grandeur, the museums effectively sought to construct people as inferior in relation to them. By encouraging this kind of reification of technological artefacts, the atomic museums engendered the

transference of human agency on to nuclear weaponry, revealed especially by video screens and push-button displays, which promised to make technology 'come to life' – to assume an autonomy of its own.⁸² The process of self-diminishment produced by the atomic museums, Kirstein discovered, was generated, more directly, by distortion of fact. Developing the theory that countless American lives would have been lost if the two atomic bombs had not been dropped on Japan, literature displayed in the Air Force Museum claimed that the bombs actually 'prevented ... indescribable carnage'. In one easy sentence, the extent of human suffering and death at Hiroshima and Nagasaki is swept away. This, Kirstein explains, is 'Pentagonese language' – 'the obsessive denial or gross understatement of the potential horrors of nuclear war.'⁸³ Presenting information 'with an intent to prejudice' (to borrow from E.P. Thompson) deadens nuclear consciousness and renders critical faculties inert, arguably making the ordinary individual passively complicit in his or her own subjugation.⁸⁴

The Reflecting Skin confronts the deadening of consciousness characteristic of the nuclear age, exploring in particular, the relation between ignorance and complicity. In doing so, the film seeks to raise (resurrect) consciousness of and expose the damage wrought by concealment, secrecy and manipulation of the actual effects of nuclear weaponry. The film achieves this in a scene where Cameron shows Seth a picture of a man holding an injured baby from 'a place in Japan.' [Fig. 107]. Intrigued by the picture, Seth asks his brother a series of questions about the child – his age, name and how he was wounded – which Cameron makes plain he cannot answer.

Asked whether the child's injuries hurt, Cameron responds speculatively, 'Yeah, I guess', because he simply does not know. Growing intensely irritated with Seth's persistent questions, Cameron finally and angrily insists 'I don't *know* him', 'it's just a *baby*', 'a *photograph*', 'a *picture*'. For Cameron (and for Seth), the picture remains a blank; it refers to nothing beyond itself. The child is rendered anonymous and his pain remote, the cause of his injuries a mystery. The photograph refers back to the deadness of images and the distance of representations from the thing-in-itself.⁸⁵ Yet the photograph's signifying absence refers also to the deception surrounding the first use of atomic weapons and the military decision to suppress details of human suffering in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁸⁶ The picture's lack of meaning for the two brothers, then, points directly to the absence and deadening of consciousness consequent upon an obsessive policy of concealment and distortion. Cameron's puzzlement in particular indicates an inner emptiness, figuring the collective unconsciousness upon which the enlargement of state and diminishment of individual power depends.

Yet repressed truths return via the nature of the child's injuries. Cameron explains that the baby's facial skin is 'silver, shiny, like a mirror. You can see your face in it.' (revealing the controlling metaphor for the film as a whole). In this way the film reimagines the Lacanian mirror-phase as a moment of self-discovery: in the child's appalling injuries,

Cameron sees himself and – potentially – his complicity in the continuing horror of nuclear weaponry. The boy's wounds silently reflect the inherent guilt of those who, like Cameron, remain inert in the face of the production and stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction. As a privileged, self-referential, moment – because it refers to the film's title – the scene underpins the structure of the entire film and its purpose to disclose the correlation between political unconsciousness and compliance with technocratic dominance. Moreover, the picture implicitly holds up a mirror to the viewer's own political inertia. As Cameron and Seth engage in dialogue, the viewer is afforded two lengthy close-up shots of the mirror-photograph, the second shot closer than the first so that it dominates the entire frame and forces scrutiny of the child's face. By thrusting the image toward the viewer in this way, the film urges us to recognise ourselves in the damaged skin of the child, to contemplate future horrors, and confronts us with our own passive complicity with the technocratic power embodied in nuclear weaponry.

Oblivious to the cause and nature of the child's injuries, however, Cameron is equally unaware of the cause and nature of his own sickness. In this way, *The Reflecting Skin* seeks to expose the American state's betrayal of its own military personnel. Gallagher's study includes material relating to US military operations both at home and in the Pacific which attests to the military's neglect of its servicemen, including those who were sent on clean-up missions to Hiroshima and Nagasaki; those exposed to 'hot' aircraft and equipment (a term used to describe radioactive objects); those who were instructed to sample clouds of radioactive fallout as they drifted over the atolls in the South Pacific and over the Nevada desert, despite knowledge of the dangers to the human body.⁸⁷ As David E. Nye writes:

A quarter million servicemen were ordered to Nevada or to the Marshall Islands and subjected to atomic explosions. Most were less than 10 miles from "ground zero," and some were only two miles away, dressed in ordinary uniforms and crouching in dirt trenches. These men were not informed of the deadly radiation risk they were exposed to. ... For these men, almost as much as for the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the experience of the atom bomb went beyond sublimity to sheer terror, leaving trauma and a life of radiation poisoning in its wake.⁸⁸

Setting up a reference to the lethal effects of this kind of ignorance, Cameron is dying precisely because he was unaware of the dangers of radiation. In a way that explores central ironies of the patriotism surrounding the construction and use of nuclear weaponry, Cameron's metaphoric transformation of the Bomb into a colossal pyrotechnic celebration of American independence and greatness ('a million Fourth of Julys') recalls the way in which the explosions at Nagasaki and Hiroshima were turned into similarly vivid celebrations of America's technocratic superiority. Yet the metaphor also exposes the lie behind such celebrations, in particular, the concealment from soldiers and marines of the

fatally harmful nature of radiation. Cameron reveals that marines, oblivious of its hazards, played with nuclear fallout as if it was snow.

In the light of this deception on the part of US authorities, the Cadillac driver's secret, knowing smile can be seen to establish a dialectic between knowledge-as-power and ignorance-as-death that runs throughout the film. However, the way in which the smile implicates Seth in particular is highly apt since, as Brown's study of the level of government 'misinformation' in the 1950s reveals, damage limitation via the distortion and concealment of the actualities surrounding the construction and use of nuclear technologies was especially targeted at the young: 'From 1951 until 1965, virtually all FCDA material designed for use in the schools ... was cleansed of any fearsome element.'⁸⁹ Particularly interesting in respect of *The Reflecting Skin's* conceptual frame, when 'educating' children in Civil Defense matters, drills in schools were routinely combined with play. Cartoon characters Burt the Turtle (deployed by the FCDA) or Mr. Atom (product of the Atomic Energy Council) mixed the message with fun, turning the threat of nuclear attack into a game and atomic power into a playmate. As Brown argues:

Instruction and drill were typically purged of all frightening elements and were implemented with a perverse cheeriness. The net effect was a bizarre disjunction between the known consequences of atomic war and the playful precautions of people living under its threat.⁹⁰

This fusion between play and the Bomb involved in the neutralisation of consciousness about nuclear weaponry and war persists. Kirstein's study of atomic museums in the late eighties observes how nuclear war and, specifically, nuclear weapons themselves were turned into games by children oblivious to the nature of atomic warfare. In a way similar to school drills and cartoons, this practice was an extension of the nuclear aesthetic because it turned horror into a form of entertainment, effectively confusing the two. As Kirstein argues:

The educational potential of atomic museums is ... subverted when they are transformed into ersatz playgrounds and the weapons converted into toys. Yet this is precisely what happens: children are seen scampering across the bomb bays of nuclear-capable aircraft, sliding under a missile's booster engine or "riding" atomic bombs (visions of *Dr. Strangelove*). In this carnivalesque atmosphere, the only "education" children receive is an inculcation of the prevailing belief that nuclear weapons are relatively benign, user friendly – and even fun!⁹¹

Brown and Kirstein's analyses of the relation between children's play and strategies of nuclear 'education' is suggestive of a further way in which the frog and shell scenes might be interpreted. While both scenes reconfigure the pleasure-horror convergence of a nuclear aesthetic, they can also be seen to reimagine the disturbing conjunction between play and nuclear warfare that accompany official attempts to inure children to the reality of atomic

explosions. Significantly, the play-horror convergence within the two scenes also sets up a possible reference to another kind of nuclear war-gaming in a way that bespeaks an acceptance of nuclear threat as a means to achieve power. According to Boyer, the Bomb was absorbed into play by children very quickly after the first atomic explosions became known, in one recorded instance, altering the terms of war-play fundamentally. He includes the account of a witness to a game played by a group of children in Manhattan in 1945. Perhaps frustrated with how the game was progressing, one boy decided to end it.

We watched a military man of seven or eight climb onto a seesaw, gather a number of his staff officers around him, and explained the changed situation. "Look," he said, "I'm an atomic bomb. I just go 'boom.' Once. Like this." He raised his arms, puffed out his cheeks, jumped down from the seesaw, and went "Boom!" Then he led his army away, leaving Manhattan in ruins behind him.⁹²

Like the little boy in the Manhattan playground, Seth and his friends, imagining themselves at war (here with Dolphin Blue), understand the devastating effectiveness of the strategic attack: the display of superior force through the application of sudden and excessive violence. The pranks, while performing the grotesque conjunction between play and destruction, represent also exercises in the pursuit of power and advantage. Faced with an 'inhuman' enemy (Dolphin) the boys are prepared to go nuclear (as Truman was in 1945 against a similarly dehumanised enemy).

Also relevant to an analysis of *The Reflecting Skin* is the controlled deceit and manipulation of fear involved in the theory and practice of nuclear deterrence during Cold War hostilities. While Civil Defense measures sought to neutralise nuclear anxiety, deterrence theory actively and paradoxically encouraged fear of the Bomb (for the deterrent to work, it must induce terror). Fear of the Bomb within the limits of Cold War ideology, as E.P. Thompson argued in the early 1980s, was merely 'the ideological lubricant of the arms race'.⁹³ Both sides sought not to achieve an equilibrium of nuclear capability, but to gain an advantage: 'There has never been a stationary state of mutual deterrence; instead, there has been a ceaseless pursuit of advantage *within* that state.'⁹⁴ And America, he argues, usually led the way. Exploiting America's new vulnerability within the nuclear age, fear of the nuclear capability of a monstrous other becomes a useful tool for America's leaders seeking to unite a heterogeneous and fragmented society. In this way, Thompson suggests, deterrence theory does not want to eradicate fear, but to control it: 'It is necessary – and on both sides – to make the public's flesh creep in order to justify the expense and manifest risks of "our deterrent."⁹⁵

Exploring the risk inherent in the development of the new bomb through various extrapolated visions of the nuclear future in the late 1940s, Lewis Mumford speculated that controlled fear might become a totalising form of social control. In one vision, Mumford speculates how the Great Fear of nuclear annihilation, stimulated by a distorting Cold War

rhetoric, might dominate the subject from the inside, such that the masses would become the puppets of government and secret services. By insinuating itself into the farthest reaches of the psyche, controlled fear effects the displacement and death of the conscious, reflective self. As Mumford puts it, fear reduces the subject to a one-dimensional fragment of him or herself because, 'even the remote parts of the personality' are focused 'on one theme alone: Fear.'⁹⁶ In both Thompson's and Mumford's analyses of the relation of the individual to a totalising structure of power, a reversal of the Kantian sublime is described, since phase three of the dynamic – resistance to external intrusion via the expansion of self – is not realised. As nuclear fear encroaches into the private fear of self, the mind shrinks back until it is negated entirely.

Yet, as *The Reflecting Skin* seeks to show, Cold War inducements of total fear of a terrifying other affect the controllers as well as the controlled in a comparable way. Two characters in *The Reflecting Skin* are suggestive of Mumford's definition of a fear-induced monomania, Sheriff Ticker and his Deputy, who can be seen to represent the two most notorious agents of America's Age of Anxiety: FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and Senator Joe McCarthy respectively. Setting up a reference to America's far-reaching post-war surveillance system, the Sheriff, like Hoover, is shown to have a predilection for discovering and controlling secrets that might pose an internal threat to American security: as the Deputy reveals, Ticker knows '*everything*. And what he doesn't know, he suspects.'⁹⁷ In particular, the Sheriff and the Deputy's fixation with the community's hidden sexuality represent what Joel Kovel describes as the displacement of Cold War fears of otherness onto sexual behaviour, the paranoid confusion between sexual 'subversion' within the States and the Soviet threat without.⁹⁸

Even before Ticker is introduced on to the screen, his obsession with sexuality is made apparent; as his Deputy explains, Ticker believes 'it's a short leap from kissing to killing.' But this fixation is revealed more clearly in an exchange between Ticker and Seth which plays comically on Seth and Luke's innocence in order to emphasise the Sheriff's fascination with sexual deviancy.

[Sheriff]: 'Your pa, did he ever ... er ... touch you, boy?'

[Seth]: 'Yeah.'

[Sheriff, eagerly]: 'Where did he touch you, boy?'

[Seth]: 'In the kitchen.'

[Sheriff]: 'No, no, ... places ... on your person. ... *Private* places, boy.'

[Seth]: 'Private places?'

[Sheriff]: 'Yeah. Like *here*, boy' (indicating Seth's crotch).

[Seth]: 'No.'

The Sheriff's easy confusion of Luke's homosexuality with paedophilia and murder reimagines what came to be regarded as a 'gay menace' to American state and society that included but went beyond the 'association of homosexuality with Communism'.⁹⁹ As

Kovel writes, the immediate post-war years saw the emergence of a 'Full, officially sponsored FBI-enacted homophobia' that involved, like Red-baiting, systematic persecution, pressurised 'confessions' and naming of associates.¹⁰⁰ Kovel:

The "gay menace" was rationalized on the grounds that Communists could blackmail homosexuals into spying for Russia – a danger that, what ever its grain of truth, was substantially created by the state itself, through its campaign of sexual repression.¹⁰¹

In this way, the Deputy's interrogation of Ruth and Luke sets up an explicit reference to the McCarthy 'witch hunt' trials of the late 1940s and 1950s:

[Deputy]: 'Now. Let's go over this again, shall we?'

[Ruth]: 'How many times can he answer the same questions? He's told you all he knows.'

[Deputy]: 'I think I should be the judge of that, don't you, ma'am? [Pausing insinuatingly] Unless there's a reason why you don't want me to ask questions.'

[Ruth]: 'It was years ago, for the love of God. Are you going to drag it up all over again?'

[Deputy]: 'Might be it needs dragging up.'

Yet, the Deputy's interrogation of the Doves implies that there might be something more involved in the Sheriff's homophobia. During the questioning, the Deputy reveals that, years before, the Sheriff had seen Luke kissing a youth in a barn. The Deputy's account of the incident, which evokes an image of the unseen Ticker spying on the unsuspecting Luke, hints at the Sheriff's voyeuristic impulses. In addition, the detail that the sight of the kissing men made Ticker feel ill is suggestive of ulterior reasons for his persecution of Luke. A comparison of the Sheriff with Hoover is again relevant here. As is now well-known, Hoover was himself a homosexual who, notwithstanding, showed great enthusiasm for spying on and then punishing homosexual activity. In this way, writes Kovel, Hoover adopted the position of

the classic posture of the repressive voyeur who gets turned on by watching what is forbidden being done by somebody else, then gets further turned on by punishing the transgressor.¹⁰²

In a way that implicates the nausea and persecutory desires felt by the Sheriff (who is not married, has no children and who, like Hoover, the film thus implies, has probably never had a heterosexual relationship), Kovel suggests that Hoover's voyeuristic pleasure derived from his attempts to separate out and punish his own subversive and guilt ridden sexual activities. As Kovel writes, what mattered to Hoover was

the necessity that there be some Other, radically split off from the self, in which the forbidden badness could be seen to reside. Perhaps Hoover was trying to keep his

own forbidden acts from being discovered; or he may have been trying to keep himself from acknowledging the very impulses to those acts himself.

It is 'most likely', Kovel adds, that 'both of these processes ... were taking place together'.¹⁰³

While the Sheriff's sexual proclivities remain implicit, however, his, and his Deputy's, association of homosexuality with femininity and their attendant misogynistic impulses are made contrastingly explicit, particularly during the Deputy's interrogation of Ruth (Luke, apart from crying, hardly utters a word, indicating his 'feminine softness').

[Deputy, contemptuously]: 'He even cries like a woman.'

[Ruth]: 'Don't you call my husb...'

[Deputy, cutting her off]: 'In full embrace, the Sheriff said, in the barn. *Kissing* the boy.'

[Ruth]: 'He wasn't a boy, he was seventeen.'

Like Hoover and his G-men, the homophobia manifested by the Sheriff and his Deputy is 'based on rejection of the female and cultivation of a hard, impervious body, in a negation of the gay identity'.¹⁰⁴ This assumed masculine hardness is made apparent in the scene where Luke, immediately after the interrogation, sets himself and his gas station on fire. Silhouetted against the fire, the Deputy is shown watching the flames consume the remains of Luke's station, standing erect, his legs apart, chest thrust outwards and hands clasped behind his back. His arrogant, menacing attitude, together with his appearance (uniform with breeches and closely cropped hair), turn him into a symbol of right-wing paranoia and hatred. Smiling, the Deputy is clearly pleased with the outcome of his interrogations: the annihilation of the kind of 'feminine weakness' embodied in Luke. In showing this hostility to and negation of femininity to be the product of intolerance and ignorance in this way, *The Reflecting Skin's* exploration of dominant American culture critiques what the majority of the films selected for my analysis merely repeat in their representations of the American Sublime: the predominant and aggressively masculinist ideologies and practices that circulate through American structures of power.¹⁰⁵

Yet the Deputy, and especially Ticker, are themselves victims of the obsessions they perpetrate, in a way that recalls Mumford's predictions of self-death within a post-war climate of total fear. In this way, the Deputy's expressionless voice, fixed stare and too-precisely enunciated words suggest death in life, but of a rather different kind to Cameron's. The Deputy's emotionlessness, that is, points toward a kind of hollowness at the centre of his being that duplicates the Sheriff's own apparent lack of humanity. Again connecting prairie to ocean, Ticker is plainly another Ahabian figure in the film, whose obsessions, like Ahab's, have left him maimed and bitter: pursuing 'vicious animals' throughout his career, Ticker has had his hand bitten off by a turtle, his ear nearly chewed off by a dog and his eye stung out by a wasp. Like Ahab, however, Ticker's projection of

terrible evil onto where it does not reside – his pursuit of empty fiction, in other words – has resulted in a corresponding emptiness of self, an inner blankness that is nothing like the idealised, pure and essential selfhood of the American Dream. As Kovel writes, himself linking Hoover's to Ahab's fixations, this kind of inner blankness indicates the negation of 'human qualities' in the manic hunt for a fictional monstrous other, this pursuit of a false enemy producing an equally false, dehumanised self.¹⁰⁶

Significantly, Ticker's artificiality, like Ahab's, is manifested in his physical being in a way that suggests a technocratic mentality and links him to America's dominant power structure. His name already comically linking him to mechanisation – and nuclear countdown – the first we see of Ticker is a false hand, a synecdochic symbol of his whole being, like Ahab's false leg, to which it alludes. Like Ahab, Ticker represents the antithesis of nature (as his battle against it also reveals). Ahab's artificiality, however, is exaggerated in *The Reflecting Skin* in a way that also sets up a possible reference to the 'hardness' of America's leaders. When Ticker's face is shown, it is revealed that, as a result of the wasp attack, he wears a metal eye-patch, suggesting him as a figure of that 'stainless steel supercop', Hoover himself.¹⁰⁷ A machine-man, then, Ticker represents, not himself, but a component of the state apparatus of surveillance, deception and technocratic dominance of the natural environment.

Crucially, Ticker's projection of evil otherness onto Luke effectively deflects attention away from the actual source of the crime which is, the film asserts, continuing its themes of deception, the integrated complex of power comprising state and commerce. The film does this by subverting two symbols of national power and identity and purpose which both emerge within the narrative as symbols of betrayal: the Cadillac and the national flag. In the 1950s, the Cadillac, like the luxury 'Fleetwood' model used in film, was, as Robert A. Cagle puts it, an 'American national fetish object', an icon of the triumph of free-enterprise as facilitator of cutting-edge technologies.¹⁰⁸ Overstated, overlarge and extremely 'thirsty' (only nine mile to the gallon), the Cadillac was, like the Bomb, the embodiment of sublime excess, of American technological superiority and national abundance. Evoking the freedom of the road, the Cadillac was also, along with its size and price, a clear sign of individuality and ego-enlargement.

From the first moment the Cadillac appears on screen in *The Reflecting Skin*, it is set up as an icon of technological sublimity. All gleaming black paint work and sparkling polished chrome, the Cadillac is plainly out of place in the dingy environment of the film's fifties Mid West. As it glides into Luke Dove's gas station, it has a profound and disturbing effect on Seth: in a reaction shot, Seth's slack-jawed, wide-eyed astonishment and laboured breathing, registers the effects of the sublime experience. A camera zoom to a close-up of Seth contributes to the sense of his sudden and intense feelings, his surge of emotion. Awed and mesmerised, Seth approaches the car and reaches out to touch it in a way that sets up the Cadillac as a sacralised symbol of national grandeur.

Recalling the investment of atomic weapons with a semi-religious aura, Seth's over-awed response to the Cadillac indicates at once an imbalance between his ordinary selfhood and the car as icon of American sublimity. Yet the way in which Seth runs his fingers lingeringly along the flank of the car is also an overtly sexual action, a visual pun on the Freudian sense of *auto-eroticism*, which refers back suggestively to his initial excitement. Seth's action can thus be seen to enact a psychoanalytic interpretation of the fetish object as the site on which masculine sexual tensions are played out. As Cagle explains, the fetish represents an 'idealized phallus', an object that is invested with both 'feminine' and 'masculine' qualities simultaneously which makes desire for the sexual other safe and narcissistic desire acceptable. Cagle:

The fetish ... "saves" the subject from homosexuality (Freud's terms) by allowing the fetishist to phantasmatically reconstruct a "feminine" object – the "castrated" woman – making it more like the fetishist himself, hiding the "lack" and negating the fear of castration embodied by the woman's lack.¹⁰⁹

In *The Reflecting Skin*, the Cadillac can be seen to represent the 'idealized phallus' in the way Cagle describes. Thus, the *auto-erotic* motion of Seth running his hand along the side of the car alludes to its masculine qualities, while the driver's designation of the car as female ('Fill her up?') feminises it at the same time, making it available as an object of possession.

While the film is clearly open to a psychoanalytic reading, I want to argue that the sensuality of the Cadillac, together with Seth's trance-like state, suggests a somewhat different meaning. This meaning is connected to the confusion of 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits in the American Sublime which, paradoxically, combines both a dematerialised sense of sublimity (limitless space and power) with a material idea of sublimity (technological congealments of illimitable space and power). In this respect, the gleaming surface of the Cadillac which mesmerises Seth assumes a special significance. As Wolfgang Fritz Haug argues:

... the technocracy of sensuality means domination over people that is affected through their fascination with technically produced artificial appearances. This domination thus does not appear directly but lies in the fascination of aesthetic images. Fascination means simply that these aesthetic images capture people's sensuality. In the course of dominating one's sensuality, the fascinated individual is dominated by his or her own senses.¹¹⁰

The scene in which Seth is overcome by the sight and touch of the car reinforces the film's critique of the dangers of fetishising form over essence which, as with a nuclear aesthetic, serves to eradicate thought and the conscious self by enrapturing the senses. In this way, the scene exposes the American fascination with material manifestations of the nation's grandeur – whether Bombs or cars – as antithetical to the subjective self.

Significantly, in this respect, the film's presentation of Seth's captivation with the Cadillac, carries with it overtones of the kind of death-of-self portrayed in the film *Christine* (John Carpenter, 1983). In *Christine*, a youth's obsession with restoring and maintaining an antique Cadillac cause him to turn away from human contact and results in psychological breakdown. Finding pleasure only when with Christine, the boy ceases to think about anything other than the car, effectively giving his life over to it. Transfixed by the Cadillac, Seth, too, hovers on the brink of psychic death. Yet, within the context of the Cadillac as a desirable, supposedly ego-enhancing commodity, the film's critique of the worship of form can also be seen to be directed toward a Capitalistic mode of production and consumption. Showing Seth to be dominated by his senses in a way similar to that described by Haug, the scene arguably enacts his mental absorption into an economic system geared toward the stimulation of uniform desire for standardised commodities, figuring the relinquishment of his conscious self and individuality. As Adorno argues: 'The commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear', resulting in 'the standardisation of what is individual.'¹¹¹

Interestingly, Adorno also calls the worship of surface a 'collective sickness'.¹¹² Further analysis of *The Reflecting Skin* allows me to put a rather different slant on Adorno's thesis of collective illness, one which is grounded on the Cadillac's function as a symbol of contamination and which draws together Capital and state as combined agents of death. Repeating associations of the commodity form with dirt and corruption that I have noted in *Eagle's Wing* and *Equinox*, this is invoked, in part, through recurrent references to the pervading and polluting stench of gasoline (a reference, perhaps, to the waste and environmental harm wrought by 'gas guzzling' automobiles like the Cadillac), but also, and less explicitly, through the murderous inclinations that the car's occupants have toward the rural community's children (though not exclusively).¹¹³

To interpret, as one reviewer has, the undoubtedly sexual motivations of the killers as a literal representation of a paedophile gang at work oversimplifies the complexities of the film. For, later in the action, the youths also abduct and murder Dolphin Blue, plainly disrupting such an interpretation. The critic, puzzled by Dolphin's murder, concluded that the filmmakers had merely misunderstood paedophiles.¹¹⁴ I argue, however, that the Cadillac can be read as a symbol of the pernicious effects of radioactive contamination. Crucially, apart from Seth, the killers remain unseen by the rest of the community, suggestive of the mysterious, invisible and indiscriminate killer, radioactive fallout. In this way, the deaths of Dolphin Blue and Seth's friends can be seen to dramatise the genetic damage and death, caused by radioactive fallout, in women and their children. Their deaths enact the harmful effects radioactive poisoning had on the reproductive capacities of whole communities in the Mid West as a result of atomic weapons testing.

In support of this interpretation, I turn to Gallagher's photojournalistic study of the victims of such tests in the Nevada desert. Gallagher uncovers a cynical betrayal of mid

western Americans – including communities in Idaho – by the state. In a now familiar scenario, government leaflets addressed and sought to diffuse public anxiety through concealment and distortion of fact. Farmers and manufacturers were reassured in leaflets that fallout, though a nuisance, would have little detrimental effect on machinery and output and, in this way, questions about the hazards of radioactivity to the human body were effectively evaded. Gallagher discovered that this deadening of consciousness had correspondingly deadly effects. Gardens, her interviewees recall, would sometimes be coated with layers of fine radioactive dust. Unaware of the dangers, families continued to eat the produce from their gardens and many later developed cancers. Adults recounted how, as children, they would pretend that the fallout was 'desert snow' and play with it, shaking it out of the branches of trees, later wondering why their fingers started to burn and itch. Many of these also developed fatal and crippling diseases.¹¹⁵

Trailing death as well as clouds of dust in its wake, the Cadillac – the filmic emblem of depravity – is evocative of that pernicious by-product of American technological supremacy – the 'dirt and corruption', as one interviewee described it, of radioactive fallout.¹¹⁶ In this respect, the driver's beguiling smile can be seen to allude specifically to the large-scale deception of Mid Western communities by the state. This is strongly implied at one point in the narrative where the Cadillac and a symbol of state power are conceptually linked. When Kim's body is found and handed to his mother, she cries out: 'Who's killing the children? Who's killing the children?' Though apparently unconscious of it, the answer appears to lie in her arms: Kim's body is wrapped in the American flag – symbol of state as the locus of national power and identity – which he was also wearing at the moment of his abduction. The conjunction of the question and this image of the dead child shrouded in the star-spangled banner, sets up an explicit reference to the culpability of the American state in murder via the prairie's pollution by radioactivity. [Fig. 108].

Significantly, in respect of the film's critique of the state's betrayal of ordinary people, amidst civilian and ex-servicemen's accounts of prolonged and unexplained deaths, cancers, miscarriages and birth defects recorded by Gallagher, atomic veterans frequently articulated a sense of being 'expendable' and a deep sense of disbelief and outrage at being deceived. Their anger is spoken within an 'us and them' rhetoric that reveals a fracture between subject and state, a sense of political impotence and estrangement from structures of American power. One interviewer exclaimed: 'Those supreme airheads don't care a damn about any of us, of what *their country* done to us [my italics].'¹¹⁷ When describing their alienation from the American state, some of Gallagher's interviewees did so in terms of sacrifice 'for the good of the country', particularly in connection with genetic damage to sexual organs and babies *in utero* as a result of exposure to radioactivity. In down wind areas, genetically damaged children are known as 'sacrifice babies'.¹¹⁸ Though supposedly a symbol of national redemption and regeneration, atomic power, at least for these people, jeopardises regenerative possibility. In this very physical, rather than psychic sense, the

Bomb subverts the frontier sublime and the philosophy of perennial rebirth that underpins American culture. In the testimonies of these betrayed Mid Western communities, the body of a still born child becomes a fitting symbol of America's technological progress. These articulations of alienation and sacrifice are relevant to *The Reflecting Skin's* critique of an American Nuclear Sublime.

Like Gallagher's interviewees, Cameron is shown to feel estranged from with American power in a way that again involves the inversion of the American flag as national symbol. Prior to Cameron's arrival, the flag is shown to be hung proudly over a picture of Cameron in uniform in the Dove house. When Cameron returns from the South Pacific, Seth drapes himself in the flag and runs to greet him, but Cameron rejects his brother's patriotic gesture, showing an aversion to the flag. After they embrace, Cameron pulls the flag off Seth and throws it to the ground (where Kim will later find it):

[Cameron]: 'What are you wearing *that* for?'

[Seth]: 'For you!'

[Cameron]: 'Well, I don't want it.'

[Seth]: 'Aren't you a hero?'

[Cameron]: 'No.'

The flag as a symbol of collective power and identity fails to bind Cameron to it; he refuses to be enlisted as a national hero. Suggesting Cameron's at least semi-conscious awareness of his betrayal by the American state, the scene prompts the viewer also to regard the flag, left lying ingloriously in the dust, with suspicion. Through the image of the discarded flag, the scene symbolically debases this symbol of American unity and greatness: clearly the flag is unclean (like the Cadillac, representative of corruption) and belongs in the dirt. Covering both Seth and Kim in separate instances, the flag is treated as a kind of second, reflecting, skin in the film. His appearance faithfully mirroring a highly potent, synecdochic symbol of American patriotism, each wearer signals the extent of his absorption into the state apparatus and consequent false identity – from which Cameron would rescue Seth: for as Kim's death attests, this false identity essentially sacrifices the self.

There is, however, another image of sacrifice in the film that corresponds more closely to the atomic veterans' description of 'sacrifice babies'. When Seth and Kim discover the remains of a still-born baby, the film can be seen to set up an explicit reference to the kind of *in utero* damage caused by radioactive poisoning in the Mid West, figuring an unsettling confusion of birth and death in which death is privileged – in a very unAmerican way. Yet the meaning of the discovery can be seen to be more far-reaching. After making the discovery, Seth takes the corpse home believing that the dead baby is the fallen angel of his friend, Eben. Significantly, Seth's mistake corresponds to a remark made by Dolphin to Cameron: 'even angels lose their wings.' In *The Reflecting Skin*, then, even angels appear

as mere mortals, negating symbolically the promise of life after death in a way that implies absolute atomic entrapment.

In this context of absolute atomic domination, the film's repeated visualisation of the prairie as ocean becomes more suggestive; linking the radioactive poisoning of US Marines in the Pacific to that of whole Mid Western communities, the images of wind-rippled corn hints at the scale of radioactive contamination caused by the American military's testing of its nuclear weapons. The film's opening shot of a field of corn has particularly negative connotations. In a lingering shot, the image of the cornfield actually fills the entire frame. Combining an image of sublime excess with dull uniformity, the image figures, to evoke Berger again, a horizonless environment which can be seen to construct radioactive contamination as a totality, at once limitless and constraining, undoing a dominant conception of American Sublimity as a discourse and practice of freedom and promise from the outset.¹¹⁹ [Fig. 109]. In respect of this imagery of totality, a comment made by one of Gallagher's interviewees, who was involved in taking samples from radioactive clouds in the fifties, is especially relevant. Pointing out that radioactive contamination could not be confined to test areas, the man's predictions for the American people, and for the human race, are dire:

There isn't anybody in the United States who isn't a downwinder When we followed the clouds, we went all over the United States from East to West and covering a broad spectrum of Mexico and Canada. Where are you going to draw the line? Everyone is a downwinder. It circles the earth round and round, what comes around goes around.¹²⁰

To this man, the American state's betrayal of its people is complete. Echoing David Bradley's *No Place to Hide*, he rejects the possibility of national redemption: the vastness of the American continent cannot absorb and withstand the threat of nuclear weapons.

Unlike *2001*, *Grand Canyon*, *Equinox* or *Thelma and Louise*, which fall back on a sense of American exceptionality and promise, *The Reflecting Skin's* deconstruction of American sublimity is sustained until its dramatic and unsettling conclusion. Constructed around a series of inversions of the American Sublime, this symbolically replete ending includes, in particular, a striking use of an edge motif. Crucially, in this way, the motif marks not a triumphant fall upwards, as in traditional representations of the American Sublime, but rather what can be described as a terrifying flight downwards. The scene is set after Seth allows Dolphin to accept a lift from the Cadillac Youths without warning her of the danger they present. Next, the action shows him, his mother and Cameron sitting on their front porch. Suddenly, off screen, the sound of a commotion can be heard, the action cutting to a shot of Sheriff Ticker's car and a small group of clearly agitated people in the near distance gathered around an unseen object. Cameron gets to his feet and, although Seth tries to prevent him, approaches the scene. His mother, and a reluctant Seth, follow.

When Cameron arrives at the scene, he pushes through the group to find Dolphin's body lying on the ground. He falls to his knees, takes her body in his arms and cries in anguish, while Seth looks on appalled. When Ruth attempts to hold Seth, he becomes frantic, wrenches away and runs from the scene. Seth's escape from his mother's embrace reiterates what has been presented as male disgust with 'cloying femininity' (both Seth and Cameron have been shown to be repulsed by their mother's affections), but it does not set up a moment of individuation and freedom in a way that would figure the masculinist impulses of the American Sublime (though the moment does anticipate a figuratively inverted birth). Instead, flight is quickly turned into fall, as though Seth's confrontation with death and with Cameron's acute distress shock him into an overwhelming awareness, not only of his own culpability in Dolphin's murder, but also of human fragility and mortality.

What is thus presented as a fall into consciousness is visually and conceptually linked throughout the final scene to the American Nuclear Sublime. As described above, in a way evocative of nuclear fission, Seth is shown to split away from the group and to run toward the horizon, away from the camera. [Fig. 110]. Operating within conventional representations of the sublime, the line of the horizon in the *mise en scène* splits the screen into two segments, setting up a familiar divided landscape. Yet, the edge motif constructed in *The Reflecting Skin* in this way plainly does not function as a figure of subjunctive hope as it does in Turner's frontier narrative, as in scores of nineteenth century paintings and photographs of the American Sublime, and as in the majority of films explored in this thesis.

When the image cuts to a shot of Seth running toward the camera, the horizon and sun now behind him, the montage conveys the sense that Seth has crossed over the edge. Yet this crossing does not indicate a point of renewal as it does repeatedly in *Eagle's Wing* and *2001*, nor does it anticipate a confrontation with sublime forces that will result in the protagonist's self-aggrandisement as occurs in *Jeremiah Johnson*. As Seth moves away from the horizon, the *mise en scène* is again divided into two clear segments: a brightly lit background and a very dark foreground area into which Seth runs, this movement from light to dark conveying a sense, within the language of the sublime, of a terrifying plunge into the abyss. Seth's gestures and camerawork at this point contribute to a sense of fall. Once in the dark foregrounded area, Seth sinks to his knees, screams and reaches up as though in supplication, the action shot from above to make it seem as though he falls away from the camera.

Seth's symbolic fall, however, is linked to the American Nuclear Sublime by the way in which the scene incorporates the light of the setting sun in the background of the action. This image of the sun bears a very strong resemblance to a photograph of the Trinity bomb exploded at Los Alamos. The explosion was taken a fraction of a second after the explosion and shows the initial flash of light produced by the blast illuminating the pre-dawn sky.

This light is so intense that it bursts into the dark space of the picture's foreground, partially effacing the line of the horizon. [Fig. 111]. This 'unbelievably brilliant flash' held terror for some:

Suddenly, there was an enormous flash of light, the brightest light I have ever seen or that I think anyone has ever seen. It blasted; it pounced; it bored its way right through you. It was a vision which was seen with more than the eye. It was seen to last forever. You would wish it would stop.

I saw ... an overwhelming white flash, so intense that I was completely blinded.¹²¹

To the Bomb's makers, this new weapon was a sublime force indeed, but one which threatened to preclude the moment of regenerative overcoming. Their descriptions of the Bomb recall Burke's definition of strong light as sublime. Since Burke maintained that sublimity is that which is obscure, darkness, he argued, 'is more productive of sublime ideas than light.'¹²² By contrast: 'Mere light is too common a thing to make a strong impression on the mind, and, without a strong impression nothing can be sublime'. However, Burke adds:

But such a light as that of the sun, immediately exerted on the eye, as it overpowers the sense, is a very great idea. ... Extreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness.¹²³

What can be termed the Burkean sunlight in the final scene of *The Reflecting Skin* is shown to overwhelm Seth in a way highly suggestive of the fearful eye-witness accounts of the Trinity explosion. As Seth appears over the horizon, he emerges from the central light of the sun, the intensity of which partially obliterates his silhouetted form, as though boring its way through him. [Fig. 112]. But while sunlight threatens to kill him, Seth is the very antithesis of a strong Whitmanic selfhood. Where Whitman's poet-hero responded to the threat by sending sunlight out of himself, imaginatively matching sublime power in a moment of self-protective ego-enlargement, Seth offers no resistance to the sun's sublime forces. Instead, the sunlight breaks through the barriers of his subjective borders, in a way that suggests only self-annihilation. This configuration of self-death is enhanced by Seth's agonised scream which is clearly not the kind of defiant apostrophic yell produced by Jeremiah Johnson, or even Pike's partially redeeming evocation to the wilderness. Significantly, Seth's back is to the sun: as such, he evokes nothing, his apostrophic scream thus serving to connect him with nothingness in a way that foreshadows his own, imminent non-being.

In effect, Seth's relation to the sun, here troped into a symbol of the American Nuclear Sublime, imagines the individual's relation to the American technocratic totality as utterly insignificant. However, the way in which Seth's back is to the sun is significant in a further way since it subverts the American Sublime as a discourse and practice of beholding and

believing – like Cole before Niagara, Bryant before the prairies, like millions of Americans before their TV screens watching America's technocratic triumph during the lunar landing or the Sheahan family beholding America's atomic dawn – in America's Manifest Destiny.

Meanwhile, the scene's use of sunlight continues to figure nuclear annihilation in a very specific way. As Seth fall to his knees screaming, the camera is positioned so that it catches the sunlight shining between his legs. [Fig. 113]. A clear symbol of castration, the light-effect contributes to the depiction of Seth's disempowerment. Yet the image also brings to mind the chromosome damage to reproductive organs caused by exposure to radioactivity and consequent sterility, particularly in those rural communities in the Mid West and the threat to biological continuation of families. In this respect, the lighting-effect together with Seth's name become highly suggestive, turning him into a symbol of humanity's 'radical futurelessness': in the bible, Seth is the third son of Adam and Eve from whom the human race descends. While figuring humanity's biological discontinuity in this way, Seth's subsequent actions also accentuate the scene's overall thematic of doom. Once on his knees, Seth picks up handfuls of dry earth, letting its fine grains run through his fingers. The action evokes the familiar funereal configuration of death in which mortal remains return to the earth: ashes unto ashes, dust unto dust. Yet, in figuring death in this way, the action can also be seen to set up a reference to nuclear fallout, termed by survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 'Ashes of Death', and 'death sand' and by Mid Western communities as 'desert snow'.¹²⁴

These images of death, however, converge ironically with an allusion to birth, figured both by Seth's cries and by close-up shots of his hands that detail his fingers which appear delicate and clutching, like those of a newborn baby. Overlaying images of birth with those of death in this way, the film again inverts the conceptualisation of America as the site of unlimited possibility, progress and renewal, simultaneously evoking those stillborn babies and infants with cancers in Utah. Like these children, Seth is a being toward a specifically nuclear death. Symbolically negating even the possibility of hope, the film's closing moments continue to disrupt the meanings of America and Americanness as signifiers of boundless freedom and strong, essential selfhood. As the sun sinks below the horizon, Seth's screams are cut, abruptly (along with the crescendoing 'Seth's Theme'), to an entirely blackened screen, the final, climactic strains of the film music a dim roar like the sound of a distant explosion. Seth is, then, symbolically, annihilated before a symbolic dying sun that does not contain within it the promise of a new dawn.

Through its sustained inversions of the American Sublime, *The Reflecting Skin* avoids repeating, representationally, the more unpleasant and problematic elements of the American Sublime in the way that the other films selected for this thesis do. By breaking free of the habitual, delimiting, configurative and conceptual frame of the sublime, the film discloses the links between a discourse of national power and self-diminishment, comprehensively undermining any sense of the American Sublime as a democratic

discourse and practice, where self and nation cohere into a mutually beneficial union. Yet the film's refusal to offer any symbol of hope or escape from what it presents as a destructive technocratic and commercial totality can be seen to represent the film's own limitation by merely substituting one kind of entrapment for another – as I shall argue in my general conclusion.

FIG: 103



FIG: 104



FIG: 105

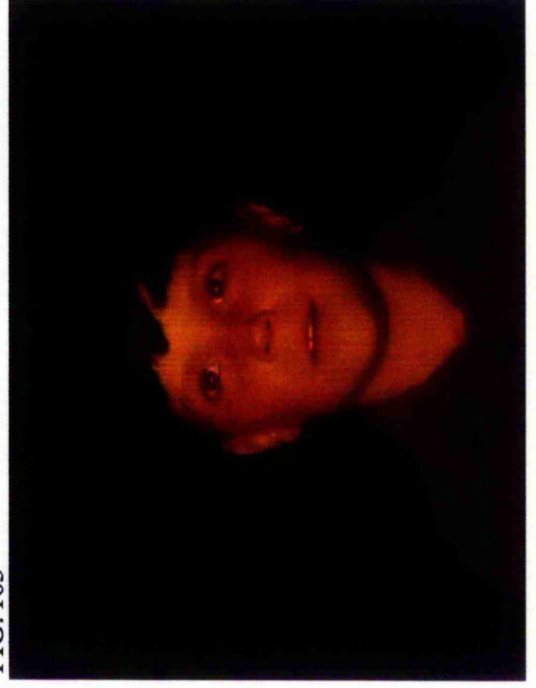


FIG: 106

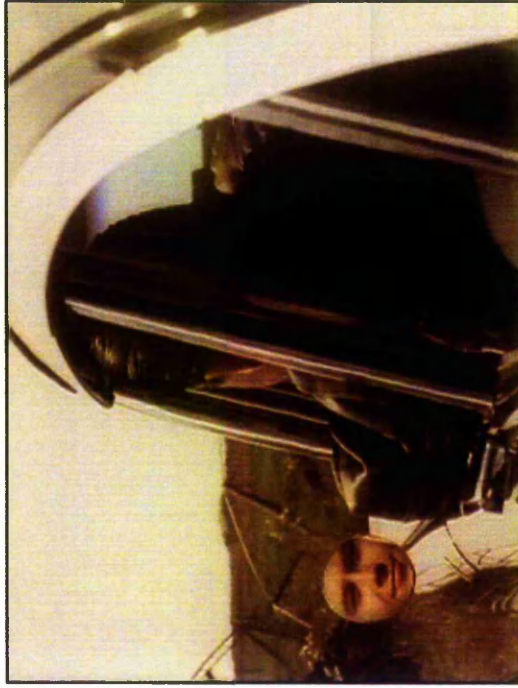


FIG: 107



FIG: 108



FIG: 109



FIG: 110



FIG: 112



FIG: 111

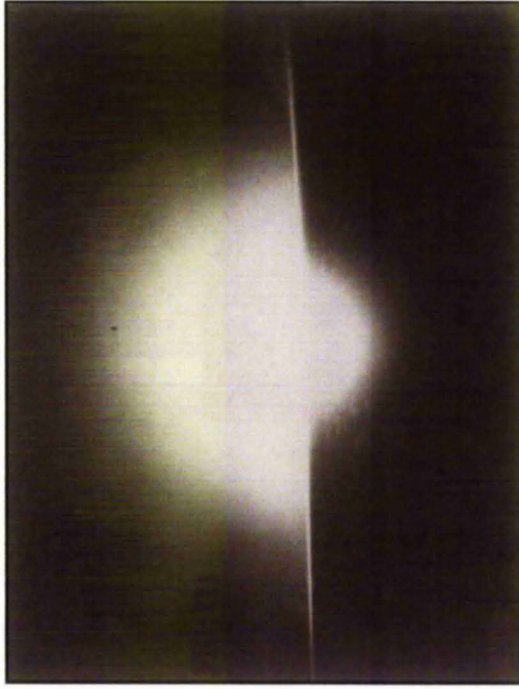


FIG: 113



Notes

- ¹ Vincent Canby's review of the film is fairly typical. He writes: "'The Reflecting Skin' is clearly not your commonplace childhood memoir. It is part horror story, part absurdist comedy, mostly pretentious nonsense." Vincent Canby, 'Childhood Nightmare With a Touch of Alice', *The New York Times*, 'Weekend' (Friday, June 28, 1991), p.C9.
- ² According to Canby, Ridley decided to make the film when he was reading Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, op. cit., p. C9.
- ³ When Seth returns home after playing the prank, his mother, who has been visited by a furious Dolphin Blue, confronts him: 'Have you been exploding frogs *again*?' (My emphasis).
- ⁴ In its representations of the prairies, the film sets up another intertextual reference to Melville's fiction. In 'John Marr', for example, the prairies are frequently likened to the ocean. In particular, journey's are troped into 'voyages' and the prairie grass is noted for its 'graduated swells, smooth as those of the ocean'. Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*, edited with an introduction by Harold Beaver (London: Penguin Books, 1967), pp.314, 315.
- ⁵ David Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination: Dickens, Melville, Conrad* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), p.xi.
- ⁶ Martin Heidegger, in Rob Wilson, *American Sublime: The Genealogy of a Poetic Genre* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p.262.
- ⁷ The phrase is Ruth Dove's.
- ⁸ Wilson, 'Techno-euphoria and the Discourse of the American Sublime', *Boundary 2*, Vol. 19, Part 1 (Spring, 1992), p.210.
- ⁹ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London, Oxford and New York, 1964), p.198.
- ¹⁰ Truman quoted in *The New York Times* (Tuesday 7 August, 1945), p.4; Wilson, *American Sublime*, op. cit. p.228.
- ¹¹ Ground Zero, *Nuclear War: What's in it for You?* (New York and London: Methuen, 1982), p.60.
- ¹² Simpson, Farrell, *The New York Times*, op. cit., p.4.
- ¹³ Wilson, *American Sublime*, op. cit., p.229.
- ¹⁴ Leo Marx, op. cit., esp. Chapter 4, 'The Machine'.
- ¹⁵ Wilson, 'Techno Euphoria', p.221.
- ¹⁶ Leo Marx, op. cit., pp.159, 197.
- ¹⁷ Wilson, *American Sublime*, op. cit., p.26.
- ¹⁸ Truman, quoted in Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p.6; Truman quoted in *The New York Times* (Tuesday 7 August, 1945), op. cit., p.4. *Life* magazine expressed a similar sentiment: 'Prometheus, the subtle artificer and friend of man, is still an American citizen.' *Life*, quoted in Boyer, p.9.
- ¹⁹ Wilson, 'Techno-euphoria', op. cit., p.208.
- ²⁰ Peter B. Hales, 'The Atomic Sublime', *American Studies*, Vol. 32, (1991), p.11.
- ²¹ Ibid., pp.9, 19.
- ²² Ibid., pp.10, 12; Rob Wilson explains this as the attempt 'to domesticate this astonishing force through homey but inadequate metaphors of *mushroom*, *lightbulb*, *flower*, or *umbrella*', *American Sublime*, p.235.
- ²³ Ernest Lawrence and Philip Morrison, in Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1986), pp.672, 673.
- ²⁴ Hales, op. cit., p.11.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p.11.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p.13.
- ²⁷ 'Atomic Clasp', *Business Week* (3 May, 1952), in Hales, ibid., pp.21-24.
- ²⁸ Rob Wilson, 'Techno Euphoria', op. cit., p.222.
- ²⁹ Hales, op. cit., p.24.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p.21.
- ³¹ Ibid., p.21. The picture appeared in *National Geographic* in 1953.
- ³² Peter N. Kirstein, 'The Atomic Museum', *Art in America*, Vol. 77, No. 6 (June 1989), p.49.
- ³³ Ibid., p.45.
- ³⁴ The sign appears in a photograph included in Kirstein's article on p.47.
- ³⁵ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1996), p.237.
- ³⁶ Hales, op. cit., p.18.
- ³⁷ Ibid., pp.20.

- ³⁸ Ibid. p.19.
- ³⁹ *Newsweek* (11 March, 1946), p.62, in Hales, *ibid.*, p.21.
- ⁴⁰ Hales, *ibid.*, p.20.
- ⁴¹ Robert Rizzo, 'The Psychological Illusions of Nuclear Warfare', *Cross Currents*, Vol. 33 (Fall 1983), p.295.
- ⁴² Hales, *op. cit.*, p.9.
- ⁴³ Paul Boyer, *op. cit.*, p.303.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.251, 9 (Boyer quotes James Reston in *The New York Times*).
- ⁴⁵ See Leo Marx, *op. cit.*, pp.223-225.
- ⁴⁶ In Boyer, *op. cit.*, p.16.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.280-281.
- ⁴⁸ Boyer, *op. cit.*, p.278.
- ⁴⁹ Jane Caputi, 'Films of the Nuclear Age', in *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Vol. 16, Part 3 (1988), p.102.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.106.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.102.
- ⁵² In her analysis, Caputi expands on the arguments advanced in Susan Sontag's 'The Imagination of Disaster'.
- ⁵³ The edge motif of the river bank can be seen to divide symbolically the river bank itself, which functions as the site of stasis and, explicitly, death, from the river which, winding past, figures the youths' political and social paralysis.
- ⁵⁴ Caputi, *op. cit.*, p.106.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.103.
- ⁵⁶ Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), p.82. See also p.83.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.xx, 82.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.83.
- ⁵⁹ *Time*, quoted in Henriksen, *ibid.*, p.350; Pauline Kael, quoted in Henriksen, *ibid.*, p.369.
- ⁶⁰ I borrow from Pauline Kael quoted in Henriksen, *ibid.*, p.369. Dick Hickock, one of the two murderers (the other was called Perry Smith), described his feelings after the killings in the following way: 'I think we both felt very high. I did. ... Couldn't stop laughing, neither one of us: suddenly it all seemed very funny - I don't know why, it just did.' In Henriksen, *ibid.*, p.358.
- ⁶¹ Quoted in Caputi, *op. cit.*, p.100.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, p.103.
- ⁶³ Lifton quoted in Caputi, *ibid.*, p.102.
- ⁶⁴ See *ibid.*, p.103.
- ⁶⁵ Boyer, *op. cit.*, p.303; see also JoAnne Brown, '"A is for Atom, B is for Bomb": Civil Defense in American Public Education, 1948-1963', *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 75 (June 1988), p.79.
- ⁶⁶ Initially, the Bomb cost \$200,000,000; thereafter, toward the end of the decade, the Atomic Energy Commission commanded an annual budget of \$500 million and a workforce of 60,000. See Boyer, *op. cit.*, p.303.
- ⁶⁷ Brown, *op. cit.*, p.83.
- ⁶⁸ Quoted in Boyer, *op. cit.*, p.324.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.308.
- ⁷⁰ Quoted in Boyer, *ibid.*, p.315.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.314.
- ⁷² Gerstell, quoted in Boyer, *ibid.*, p.315.
- ⁷³ Lapp, quoted in Boyer, *ibid.*, p.231.
- ⁷⁴ Carole Gallagher, *American Ground Zero: The Secret Nuclear War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993), *passim*.
- ⁷⁵ Brown, *op. cit.*, p.79.
- ⁷⁶ In Brown, *ibid.*, p.80.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.80.
- ⁷⁸ Hales, *op. cit.*, p.9.
- ⁷⁹ Kirstein, *op. cit.*, p.45.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.53.
- ⁸¹ Quoted in Kirstein, *ibid.*, p.53.
- ⁸² This kind of self-diminishment produced by reification of atomic weapons, however, affects even the power-wielders themselves. As E.P. Thompson writes, nuclear weapons represent the usurpers of political agency: while the fear of nuclear destruction might prevent nuclear war ever breaking out, the threat of the Bomb postpones and even 'freezes' the possibility of a properly negotiated peace. The nuclear deterrent (fear-induced peace) obviates human agency, reason and voice, pointing to the death of

- social and political self-hood. See E.P. Thompson, 'Deterrence and "Addiction"', *The Yale Review*, Vol. 72 (1982). p.11.
- ⁸³ Kirstein, op. cit., pp.47, 53.
- ⁸⁴ See Thompson, op. cit., p.13.
- ⁸⁵ There are two other photographs that Cameron shows Seth, however: one of a naked woman and another of Seth and his brother. Cameron leaves, and in a detail shot, Seth places all three images on a table in line, arranging and rearranging them (and noticeably keeping the images of adult male and female apart, visualising his resentment of Cameron and Dolphin's union and possible hostility to sexual otherness). The action cuts to a shot of Seth puzzling over the photographs before leaving the table, then cuts to a further detail shot of the photographs which have, strangely, changed order without his intervention. The photographs then flutter quickly off the table, stirred by a barely audible breeze which makes it seem as though the action is of their own volition. The order of the photographs is arguably less significant than the way in which they appear to move on their own. The meaning of the photographs' apparent independence corresponds to the way in which the figure on the cover of Luke Dove's pulp horror paperback, strongly resembling Dolphin Blue, causes Seth to mistake her for a vampire, contributing significantly to the ensuing events. Figuring Seth's muddle over appearance and essence, the image suggests the way in which such confusion lends representation too much effectivity. In a way similar to the moving photographs, the image is a fitting symbol of, to invoke Adorno again, the 'wrong state of things' produced by the nuclear deterrent; the way in which the Cold War, as a 'virtual', 'hyperrealised' war, turns symbols of destruction and power (bombs) into agents which govern, and render inert, our own political consciousness and activity. Theodor W. Adorno, translated by E.B. Ashton, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p.11. I also quote Jean Baudrillard, 'Panic Crash', translated by Faye Trecartin and Arthur Kroker, *Panic Encyclopedia: the definitive guide to the postmodern scene*, edited by Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker and David Cook (Hampshire and London: New World Perspectives, Culture Texts, 1989), p.64. See also Jacques Derrida who writes, relatedly: 'The worldwide organization of the human socius today hangs by the thread of nuclear rhetoric.' 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)', translated by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics*, Vol. 14 (summer 1984), p.24.
- ⁸⁶ The photograph is of a baby injured during the Nagasaki bombing. A picture of the same child appears in Adam Suddaby, *Hiroshima and the Effects of Nuclear Weapons* (London: Longman, 1982), p. 6.
- ⁸⁷ See Gallagher, op. cit., *passim*, but especially pp.43, 70-71, 87-79, 91-93, 95.
- ⁸⁸ Nye, op. cit., p.232.
- ⁸⁹ Brown, op. cit., p.79.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid., p.84.
- ⁹¹ Kirstein, op. cit., p.55.
- ⁹² Quoted in Boyer, op. cit., p.16.
- ⁹³ Thompson, op. cit., p.13.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid., p.4.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid., p.15.
- ⁹⁶ Quoted in Boyer, op. cit., p.287.
- ⁹⁷ As Joel Kovel writes, Hoover's success 'stemmed in good part from control of secrets', Joel Kovel, *Red Hunting in the Promised Land: Anticommunism and the Making of America* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1997), p.173.
- ⁹⁸ See *ibid.*, p.106.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., p.106.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.106.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp.106-7.
- ¹⁰² Ibid., p.100.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., p.100.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.102. See also p.107.
- ¹⁰⁵ Seth's behaviour toward Dolphin Blue mirrors this masculinist intolerance of feminine otherness. Having witnessed Kim's abduction, Seth clearly knows that she is not responsible for the child murders, yet he continues to demonise her. It is never really made plain whether Seth really thinks that Dolphin is a vampire, but it is clear that he believes she will loosen the bond between himself and his brother, and that the Cadillac youths pose a threat to her. Whether play-acting or real belief, Seth's projection of Dolphin as a monstrous other nevertheless legitimises his decision to let her go to her death.
- ¹⁰⁶ Kovel, op. cit., p.187.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.101. Interestingly, the characterisation of Sheriff Ticker also sets up a possible intertextual reference to the snake-oil merchant in *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970) – another perpetrator of lies and false cures who, out of synch with nature, has been similarly maimed.
- ¹⁰⁸ Robert L. Cagle, 'Auto-Eroticism: Narcissism, Fetishism, and Consumer Culture', *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Summer 1994), p.23.

- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp.25-26.
- ¹¹⁰ Wolfgang Fritz Haug: *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, translated by Robert Bock (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), p.45.
- ¹¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'The schema of mass culture', *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, edited with an introduction by J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.53, 56.
- ¹¹² Ibid., p.56.
- ¹¹³ Significantly, Luke Dove's land is strewn with discarded machinery. The rusting piles of metal are long-neglected farm tools (once the cutting edge of technological progress themselves, but now obsolete and useless scrap), a reference to the wasteful characteristics of perpetual technological advance, and its conflict with the American agrarian ideal.
- ¹¹⁴ The critic is Peter Patterson, Reviewing the film in *The Daily Mail* (24/3/94), p.53. He writes that Dolphin's death is 'a highly unusual development in the light of what we know about paedophile gangs.'
- ¹¹⁵ See Gallagher, op. cit., pp.89, 221.
- ¹¹⁶ David Knighton, in Gallagher, op. cit., p.87.
- ¹¹⁷ D. Knighton, in Gallagher, ibid., p.89.
- ¹¹⁸ Interviewee Colonel Langford Harrison, in Gallagher, ibid., p.217. See also p.93. Nevada's citizens are still expected to sacrifice themselves for the good of the country. According to Melanie McGrath, the US Department of Energy wants to make Yucca mountain in the Nevada desert into a 'permanent geological repository' for high level nuclear waste 'generated about 2,500 miles away by power plants in the highly-populous north-east.' McGrath writes that 'the mountain's remoteness and its existing attachment to the Nevada Test Site ... made Yucca appear attractive both to the DoE and Congress.' The state of Nevada believes that the reasons for the choice are motivated more by politics than science, exploiting Nevada's weak representation in Congress. The toxicity of the waste will remain for up to 250,000 years. On this timescale, scientific predictions are tenuous. Meanwhile, the rest of America turns a blind eye. 'Convincing America's citizens that the planned dumping of high-level nuclear waste in a lonely mountain in the Nevada sagebrush is an issue of serious public scrutiny may yet turn out to be the toughest battle Nevada has to fight.' See Melanie McGrath, 'Tunnel Vision', *The Guardian*, 'Society' (Wednesday February 11 1998), pp.4-5.
- It is ironic also that, as is well known, nuclear testing might have caused the death of one of Hollywood's most famous and patriotic stars and Western hero: John Wayne. The film *The Conqueror* (Dick Powell, 1955), starring Wayne, was filmed on a nuclear test site in Utah and, 'twenty-five years after the production, questions were asked when several members of the cast died of cancer.' John Walker (ed.), *Halliwel's Film and Video Guide 2000*, 15th Edition, (London: Harper Collins, 1999), p.176.
- ¹¹⁹ In the context of a totality of contamination, the vast uniformity of the image can also be seen to set up a side reference to the efforts of post-war agri-businesses to maximise productivity by spraying crops with reputedly carcinogenic herbicides and pesticides as well as to offer a standardised product in 'launching its super-abundant wheat-harvest on the world'. (I borrow from Melville's 'John Marr', op. cit., p.315). As with radioactive fallout, these poisons apparently know no limit in their reach, contaminating people and animals thousands of kilometres away from the site of their actual use while simultaneously breaking through 'the barrier of inner space' to affect reproductive organs and to damage unborn children. See Nikki van der Gaag, 'Pick your poison' and 'Crossed bills and broken eggs', an interview with Dr. Theo Colborn, *New Internationalist*, no. 232 (May 2000), pp.9-12, 16-17. In particular, linking capital to state, the image can also be regarded as a reference to the more recent attempts to eliminate difference in food production by 'engineering' and patenting the genetic make-up of some plant forms, which corresponds to the film's critique of the genetic damage wrought on the environment by radioactive fallout, caused by a similar 'tampering' with nature.
- ¹²⁰ Col. L. Harrison, in Gallagher, op. cit., p.96.
- ¹²¹ Isidor I Rabi, quoted in Rhodes, op. cit., p.672; Robert Serber, ibid., p.673.
- ¹²² Edmund Burke (1757), *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, edited with an introduction by J.T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p.80.
- ¹²³ Ibid., p.80.
- ¹²⁴ Tatsuihiro Akizuki, translated by Keiichi Nagata, *Nagasaki 1945*, edited with an introduction by Gordon Honeycombe (London: Quartet Books, 1981), p.89; an interviewee describing fallout in Gallagher, op. cit., p.221.

Conclusion

I have argued that, in their treatments of the American Sublime, the films selected for my thesis share an anxiety about what they represent as the deadening, corrupting and delimiting effects of America's dominant and expansionist power structure, at the centre of which lies a capitalist rationale. Despite an economic set-back in the 1970s, and threats from rival Japanese and German economies, America continues to expand its economic boundaries around the world, facilitated by vast, impersonal communication and information systems and weapons technologies. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, 'when we talk about the spreading power and influence of globalization, we [are] really referring to the spreading economic and military might of the US'.¹ The threat, according to Jameson is 'the standardization of world culture', the negation of local difference through its absorption into the global marketplace. Thus, Jameson argues:

This latest form of imperialism will involve only the US ... who will adopt the role of the world's policemen, and enforce their rule through the selected interventions (mostly bombings, from a great height) in various alleged danger zones.²

Similarly, David Slater predicts that in this new century America will continue to be 'indispensable' to the world because of

a unique combination of unrivalled military force, the largest and most dynamic economy on the planet, a culture with global scope and crucially the political will to remain hegemonic in the world of the future.³

Worryingly, Perry Anderson points to the way in which American capitalist expansion has effectively neutralised opposition: 'In its hour of general triumph, capitalism has convinced many who at one time believed it an avoidable evil that it is a necessary and on balance salutary social order.'⁴ Within this global economic system, then, it seems increasingly that there really is no alternative to it. This present climate of pessimism might explain why the edge motif, as a symbol of a longing for freedom and an alternative, clusters particularly in the 1970s – when the move toward a global economic system had just begun to gather pace; after the seventies, instances of the motif as a figure of redemption appear to lessen (though my sample is by no means definitive). (See Appendix). Prior to capitalism's practical and ideological 'victory' over liberalism and the left, resistance, perhaps, seemed not only pressing, but possible.

The voices of dissent are themselves, however, arguably partly responsible for the triumph of American capitalism. By definition, to borrow from Anderson, TINA (There Is No Alternative) only acquires full force once the opposition demonstrates its failure to

imagine a real alternative.⁵ As I have attempted to show, by appealing to the rhetoric of the American Sublime, the majority of films explored in my thesis are ironically complicit in the dominant power structure they seek representationally to oppose – whether, for example, reproducing a language of American exceptionalism, or inadvertently bolstering the individualist ideologies of free-market neo-liberalism by presenting 'human liberation as internal, private and apolitical.'⁶ In this way, the films can be seen to remain 'contained' within the very ideologies that they represent as abhorrent. Thus, it can be argued that the American Sublime – both maintaining and maintained by a habitual mode of thought and practice – possesses the kind of negative characteristics usually associated with the beautiful in sublime discourses: engendering mimesis and stasis, the American Sublime appears to hold a collective American consciousness captive.

I have maintained, however, that two selected films do manage to sustain their critiques of American imperialism by symbolically forestalling and inverting the language of the American Sublime: *Eagle's Wing* and *The Reflecting Skin*. Significantly, perhaps, these are British financed films and already operate, to a certain extent, outside of American control and influence, *The Reflecting Skin*, in particular, demonstrating that American hegemony is not complete, despite being made when globalisation was well under way.

Yet, in its presentation of absolute individual frailty before a seemingly immutable techno-corporate totality, *The Reflecting Skin* runs into difficulties of its own, since the possibility of resistance, of human intervention, is foreclosed. *The Reflecting Skin*, that is, offers a fatalistic, ahistorical vision of American power in which the individual is unable to intervene and can only, to evoke Raymond Williams, endure. This fatalism is combined with a nihilistic, anti-social schematic which presents, at the end, the total breakdown of community in which the possibility of collective resistance to the dominant power structure is symbolically negated.⁷ This representation of absolute global power in *The Reflecting Skin* is, however, illogical. As Jameson points out, while globalisation appears irreversible, 'the vicissitudes of world history should suggest that no history lasts forever.'⁸ In addition, the film's nihilistic world view of social atomisation, is both misguided and misleading. As recent anti-capitalist demonstrations at Seattle indicate, commitment to collective action is far from dead, revealing that, while the dominant structure of power delimits us, it cannot control or negate our critical faculties utterly. As Barry Gills argues: 'the politics of globalisation is ... like all politics ... a fairly fluid and open situation, the outcomes of which will be determined by "struggle" or contest'.⁹

To conclude, I want to return briefly to the ending of *Eagle's Wing*. Within its conceptualisation of the pernicious effects of American capitalism, *Eagle's Wing* shows that Pike's dream of unconditional freedom is not merely folly but has unpleasant implications as well, duplicating the kind of power structure from which he seeks to escape. Rooted in a desire for self-gain, Pike's dream, rather like the ambitions of the Company whose grip he manages to evade, requires the appropriation and subjugation of nature (symbolised by the

stallion), his obsessive self-concern causing him to abandon the realm of the social – represented, in the codes of the Western, by the woman, Judith. Having debunked the American Dream as selfish and potentially dangerous, *Eagle's Wing* then rejects the cash-value rhetoric of the American Sublime in its final, dramatic, depiction of Pike's confrontation with the wilderness, leaving its protagonist not only stripped of his delusions of grandeur, but also injured, stranded and in danger of death.

Without wanting to stretch the meaning of the film's final scene too far, however, I want to suggest that, whereas the possibility of hope is entirely foreclosed in *The Reflecting Skin*, the open-endedness of the conclusion in *Eagle's Wing* permits sufficient space for some optimistic interpretative activity. Though exhausted and wounded, Pike is not necessarily doomed. His best chances of survival must lie in returning to Judith who, still bound and in need of assistance herself, waits at the foot of the incline Pike has pointlessly climbed. *Eagle's Wing*, in other words, leaves open the (symbolic) possibility of a return to the social realm. To my mind, then, the edge motif in *Eagle's Wing* – marking neither the fulfilment of an egoistic, masculinist ambition for self-aggrandisement, nor a patriotic affirmation of an idealised American identity, but the possibility of collective action – offers, if only indirectly, the most persuasive symbol of subjunctive hope of all the films explored in this thesis.

Notes

- ¹ Fredric Jameson, 'Globalization and Political Strategy', *New Left Review*, No. 4 (July/August 2000), p.50.
- ² *ibid.*, p.51.
- ³ David Slater, 'Locating the American Century: Themes for a Post-colonial Perspective', *The American Century: Consensus and Coercion in the Projection of American Power*, edited by David Slater and Peter J. Taylor (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999), p.27.
- ⁴ Perry Anderson, 'Renewals', Editorial, *New Left Review* Second Series, 1 (January/February 2000), p.13.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p.11.
- ⁶ Raymond Williams, 'Tragedy and Revolution', in *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, edited by Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp.251-252.
- ⁷ I draw on Williams, *ibid.*, p.251. Significantly, within this context of pessimism, the recent film, *Very Bad Things* (Peter Berg, 1998) concludes in a strikingly similar way to *The Reflecting Skin*. A depressing, cynical film, *Very Bad Things* seeks to show that the world is beyond the control of the ordinary individual. Throughout the film, efforts made by its central characters to affect the direction of their lives result in disaster and the breakdown of friendships. In its very bleak concluding moments, intended as black comedy, a young woman, whose life has become the opposite of what she intended, runs out of her house screaming before falling on the ground where she writhes in despair. The final image of the film is an edge motif here, clearly not a symbol of subjunctive possibility, but a figurative abyss denoting absolute hopelessness. While the film certainly examines the smallness of the individual in relation to society and the system, its presentation of radical helplessness can only convenience the current hegemonic order.
- ⁸ Jameson, *op. cit.*, p.56.
- ⁹ Barry Gills, 'Wither Democracy?: globalisation and the "New Hellenism"', quoted by Neil Lazarus, 'Charting Globalisation', in *Race and Class*, Vol. 40, Nos. 2/3 (October 1998/March 1999), p.97.

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*See Appendix.

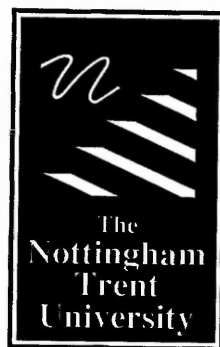
Appendix

In the following films, the edge motif features prominently as a new horizon of possibility, as a symbol of overcoming, or as a figure of anticipation, though seriousness of intent and conviction vary.

Confirming the affinity between SF narratives and the sublime, the motif is used strikingly in SF films such as *THX1138* (George Lucas, 1970), a film set in a post-holocaust dystopian future where humans endure a monotonous, sterile, subterranean order controlled by automatons whose purpose is to maintain a rigid economic rationale, and where the edge motif, a rising sun over the horizon, symbolises the rebirth of human passion, individuality and promises a new beginning beyond the technocratic order; *Logan's Run* (Michael Anderson, 1976), also depicts a dystopian future, where a youthful, hedonistic and compassionless population, living in a dome-city, are regulated and replenished by computer technology, in which 'the edge', a symbolic horizon outside the dome, signifies the re-emergence of empathy, an acceptance of difference and renewal; *A Boy and His Dog* (L.Q. Jones, 1975), another vision of a post-holocaust future which is characterised by violence and betrayal, and in which the edge motif, formed by a range of mountains and occurring after the rediscovery of friendship and integrity at the end of the film, offers an image of futurity; *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), a SF fantasy in which the edge motif, another symbolic horizon, figures the central protagonist's longing for freedom and adventure away from the drudgery of his family's farm, marking a dramatic turning point in the narrative; *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), in which 'the edge', a horizon once more, is deployed in the key moment where Superman, on the brink of maturity and of discovering his real identity, leaves his adoptive mother to put his powers into use against urban crime; *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (Leonard Nimoy, 1984), in which the edge motif is used extensively in the film's overarching narrative of creation (of life), negation and regeneration.

In the Western genre, two examples stand out: the countercultural movies *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn, 1970) and *A Man Called Horse* (Elliot Silverstein, 1970), in which (broadly) the edge motif functions to symbolise the protagonists' distance from their own, white, culture and their corresponding closeness to Native American peoples and nature. Other, less easily categorised films include *Conan the Barbarian* (John Milius, 1981), in which the motif, corresponding with a rising sun, prefigures Conan's rescue from death and anticipates his eventual victory over a tyrant whose death-cult has swept over the land; *Rumble Fish* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1983), in which the edge motif, occurring at the end of the film, offers the symbolic promise of freedom away from urban violence, entrapment and despair; *Free Willy* (Simon Wincer, 1993), depicting a troubled young boy's struggle

against a short-sighted and corrupt adult world in which the motif is used to configure spirited determination as a transcendental power; and, finally, the more recent *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) in which the motif, functioning within a critique of the effects of the culture industry, offers a figurative threshold to an existence beyond total media control and manipulation (a doorway out of Truman's enclosed and artificial world).



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