

Easy Rider

Good flic?

Paul Taylor

1969

If you read the *South End*, *The Metro*, *The Detroit News* or *Free Press*, you already know the story of "Easy Rider." But that's all you know.

Despite the number of reviews which claim to analyze or criticize "Easy Rider" as a movie, none have considered what its effect as a film is. It may be a good story, but from the reviews, it's hard to tell whether "Easy Rider" is a good movie.

The problem with most contemporary film criticism is that it deals with films thematically. The model for this type of criticism is found in reviews of literature. What is wrong with this type of film criticism is that, while it can tell you if the movie contained a good story, it doesn't tell if the story was a good movie.

Such criticism tends to view the cinematic part of the film as criticizable only on the basis of personal like and dislike. The critic's criteria are only knowable after comparing his review of several films with your own feelings about the same films.

It is a less than satisfactory way to approach the criticism of what has become the most exciting art form of the century. It is unsatisfactory because it implies that there is no coherent way of approaching the medium.

In literature, the difference between prose and verse is so important that it is assumed that the reader's reaction will be affected by the form as much as the content.

In painting, the choice between oil and water color determines not only what the subject will look like, but often what the choice of subject will be.

The exception to this type of criticism of film is a group of critics and critics-turned-film-makers in France in the 1950s. These men came to the attention of the film world and were named the "New Wave."

They developed a structural theory of film criticism based on the proposition that the director of a film has the same relationship to his work as does an author. The director writes his film.

The good director is the one whose films reflect his personal view of the world. This occurs in each of his films to a greater or lesser degree. Those films that he directs that are outstanding are those in which his personality is most evident. This does not necessarily show in the story.

Under the American studio system, the director seldom had the autonomy to write the screenplay for his own films. Most often, the story line was derived from a book or written by a professional writer under contract to the studio. In order to get his personal view into the film, the director was forced to use the language of the medium.

John Ford makes the same type of western over and over because he is interested in the problems of duty, honor, and individualism and so he uses a cinematic form which is able to emphasize these ideas.

Relegating story line to a minor position, this theory attempts to organize the whole of cinema by the author ("auteur") principle. Instead of there being thousands of films, all of which must be criticized one by one, the theory insists that each film forms part of the body of works of its director. Consequently, a director is judged on his total production rather than by each film.

“Easy Rider” is Dennis Hopper’s first attempt at direction. What is revealed about Hopper in this film is that he owes a great deal to both the traditional American cinema and to the French New Wave.

The long shots of the desert recall John Ford’s films, in which nature is made to seem grand and overpowering—something which goes beyond man’s ordinary experience. It is no accident that there is an affinity between motorcycle films and westerns.

It is not so much the similarity between the relationship of man and beast and man and machine as it is the suitability of traditional American cinematic form to both types of subject matter. The limits of the form and the relationship of the form to subject matter are shown by Hopper in “Easy Rider.”

In the first half of the film, Hopper relies on his understanding of American form to depict the past. The emphasis on the desert is an attempt to establish a relationship between the opening scenes and the journey. It is a frontier of sorts. The stationary camera, and the lack of in-scene editing evoke a feeling of calm and peace.

This half of the film is about the past and also the future. The past is dealt with by introducing a farm family. The virtues of such a life are emphasized by the film techniques used. They are the same virtues as those seen so frequently in the traditional American western.

Juxtaposed with this portrayal of the past is Hopper’s attempt to consider the future. Again it is by introducing a family. But the character of this future family is so different from that of the first farm family that the form which is adequate for the earlier family portrayal is unable to be used here.

It is here, the commune scene, that Hopper is forced to abandon his American style, and it is the shock of the transition, as well as the unsatisfactory treatment of the concept of communal living, which draws the viewer’s attention.

The preceding shots are long in duration with only minimal editing used to join them together. There are no special camera techniques used and none are needed. The commune scene is made by rapid cutting and selective focus. In one case, Hopper uses a soft focus three-hundred-and-sixty-degree pan shot, taken of Fonda, Hopper and the members of the commune standing in a circle staring deadpan straight ahead. (A shot taken directly from Godard’s “Weekend.”)

It is not so much Hopper’s perception of the commune’s significance which makes this scene the worst of the film as it is a combination of his perception of the actual fact of communal living and the shock of changing so suddenly from one style of film making to another.

But this change in technique was necessary. The scene required a form other than that of the traditional American cinema. That is, the future of the commune is so removed from what now exists that the form of life cannot even be talked about in the same language.

The meaning of the situation of the future requires a new way of considering that situation. Whatever Hopper may lack in perception of the commune politically, he makes up for by his cinematic perception.

His real talent was in being able to recognize the limits of form and to attempt to overcome those limits. In this particular instance, Hopper applied the form developed by the great Russian film makers Eisenstein and Pudovkin and popularized recently by the French New Wave.

Briefly, this form is based on the theory that motion can be divided into component parts. This is called “montage” film form. The whole application comes by taking these components and joining them together in a way that conveys a total image. The parts can be filmed in several takes, at different times and from different camera positions. Their relationship does not have to exist in reality, but only in the completed scene.

Pudovkin’s example of this makes the concept of montage very clear. If you take a picture of a man’s face and then show a picture of a baby smiling, you get one specific image. If you take the same picture of the man’s face and then show a hand holding a knife and then show a smiling baby, you get a different image.

The two pictures are the same, only you have introduced a third component which changes their relationship. But none of the three pictures had to be taken at the same time or even taken with the purpose of joining them together. The spatial element exists only in the joined film segments.

What makes Hopper’s use of these two different forms so important is that he appears to be the first American director to fully understand the relationship between form and content. More than just understanding, Hopper is able to use both forms in one film and use them effectively, an innovation.

The fact that, following the commune scene, Hopper shifts back to the American form, attests even further to his understanding. The other scene in which montage form is used is the “trip” scene. Again, when faced with a situation which goes beyond everyday experience, Hopper makes use of a form which suits the content.

The second half of “Easy Rider” is about the present. It begins with the shutting of a jail cell door. In fact, it is only at this point that we learn the names of Hopper and Fonda. Calling Fonda “Captain America” helps to clarify the ambiguity of the first half.

There is something ironic in the choice of this name that can only be appreciated in the context of the present. The screenplay, written by Hopper, Fonda and Terry Southern, is one of the weak points of the film, but in this case it hits the mark. Captain America is middle class America turned inside out.

It’s not true, as a character in “Easy Rider” says, that Fonda and Hopper are free and it is their freedom which is so frightening to the straight people they meet. Rather, it is their lack of freedom and the reminder to those who look at them that they are also unfree, that causes rage.

Captain America and Billy are only trying to find out what America is all about. They find the answer in a way which has become synonymous with contemporary America.

The real importance of “Easy Rider” has been overlooked by the critics. It is not that it is the first movie to deal honestly with the drug-motorcycle scene and hippies, but rather that it is the first American film to try and deal with the problems of contemporary America by considering alternatives in terms of both theme and form.

If the thematic alternatives considered seem dismal, then perhaps that is the truth of the actual situation. You could fault Hopper for not considering other alternatives, but not for being honest about the ones he does look at.

What is innovative is not only his examination of alternatives, but his use of different film styles to heighten his delineation of alternatives. His unique ability is to relate form and content.

Perhaps the commune scene is remembered because the ending of the film would have been so much pleasanter if Captain America and Billy could have stayed there. But then Hopper would have to have lied about the central problem of the film: America in the 1960s.

What Hopper has done in “Easy Rider” parallels the work of Jean-Luc Godard, the French film maker, and in my opinion the finest director in the world. The comparison seems fitting. Hopper is obviously influenced quite heavily by Godard’s conception of film. The most important lesson learned from Godard is the relationship of form to content.

“Easy Rider” is one of the most important films of the sixties, Along with Arthur Penn’s “Bonnie and Clyde,” and John Boorman’s “Point Blank,” it represents a new consciousness in American films: A consciousness freed from the restrictions of form inherent in the American movie of the last fifty years.

Hopper does not reject that form, as has the American underground cinema, but he appreciates its limits. He uses those limits as a point of departure as he aims toward a new American Cinema.

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