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## From Counterculture to Anticulture\*

Donald P. Costello

THREE films circumscribe the counterculture of the last decade. These three films have as their subject the counterculture, and they themselves became cultural events. *Woodstock*, *Easy Rider*, and *A Clockwork Orange*: they define, warn, and predict.

*Woodstock* (the event) and *Woodstock* (the film, which became the event for millions of the young) defined the counterculture of the 1960's. Of course, that definition did not *begin* the phenomenon of a youth culture that runs counter. Nor was *Woodstock* the first description of it. Anthony Burgess wrote his counterculture novel *A Clockwork Orange* over 10 years ago, and he has told us in a June 8, 1972, *Rolling Stone* article that he planned the book nearly 30 years ago. The droogs in that novel were some version of Teddy Boys or greasers or hipsters projected into an apocalyptic future: "The work merely describes certain tendencies I observed in Anglo-American society in 1961 (and even earlier)." Some of those tendencies, and several others, were exposed by the counterculture itself in *Easy Rider*, just before *Woodstock*. But *Woodstock* purified and refined the counterculture—and successfully made it self-conscious, mythologized it. And thus defined it.

The young of the 60's had contended that their culture was based not on exploitation but on love, not on violence but on peace, not on restraints but on freedom. *Woodstock* showed them that that was true. Their culture was communicated from one to the other not by mind and words but by sights and sounds. Sensations, feelings, intuitions, spontaneity reigned. To receive the message of the culture, then, required not sharpening the reason but expanding the consciousness.

*Woodstock* is perhaps the most verbally inarticulate film ever made. We hear conversations and interviews, but they are grunts, mumbles, you-knows, and exclamations. Words are indirect; the culture of the film seeks a more direct means of communication.

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\* This essay on counterculture films was written as a part of the Notre Dame symposium on American culture; it has also appeared in *Commonweal*, July 14, 1972.

The young of *Woodstock* communicate by their music and, in the skinny-dipping scene that won the film its "R," by their free and glistening bodies, ringed lightly with laughter, while the sound track contrasts the snipped and turgid voices of the townspeople, their words heavy with suspicion. The charming interview with the porto-san man stands out in our memory precisely because this humble old servant and admirer of the counterculture reveals himself through his medium and ours, words.

But the point of the film, the fact of it, is both the fact it records and the fact is re-created in thousands of movie theaters for those too young, too poor, too far away, too busy to have been an original citizen of the Woodstock Nation. Michael Wadleigh knew what he was about. His was not a film for observers but participants. The motion picture is the art form of the young precisely because it can do what *Woodstock* did: exploiting sights and sounds to a hyperrealism, it can create myth. The place Woodstock could not have been as visually and sonically perfect — loud, clear, selective, now ordered, now chaotic — as was this film which brought us into communal participation. No one could not hear it, God knows. No one could not see it, from arrival through cleanup. Accidents are made part of a pattern, are made inevitable: we prepare for the rain, we are uncertain and fearful as the rain begins, we exult in the joy of the mud in the rain's aftermath. Sights and sounds become one, reenforcing and building. The voices of Crosby, Stills and Nash, their instruments, their harmonies, blend on the sound track just as their images blend, harmonized, counterpointed, on the screen. Wadleigh underlines the frenetic quality of the sounds of *Ten Years After* with those seemingly uncontrolled images which snap from positive to negative, which spin into reverse images. If we had no drugs to give us extra eyes, to turn on and to sharpen the lights, the film gave them to us, especially by expanding the visual surfaces through multiplying the image and through dynamically varying the sizes and shapes of framed and unframed pictures. It was an initiation rite of sights and sounds, expanding both the consciousness and the self-consciousness of the young, uniting them in spite of real time and space distances into a community of illusion, into a culture aware of itself, aware of its superiority, aware that it is counter, a Nation apart.

*Easy Rider* had been made just a bit earlier by members of

the counterculture for other members of the counterculture, and it was a warning. The critics misunderstood the film because they saw only its self-consciousness and thought it was also self-pitying. The cultists deep into the counterculture misunderstood it because they would not accept its warning that the values of the counterculture were becoming indistinguishable from the values of the mainstream.

Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper show the new American Myth repeating the failures of the old American Myth. The new American pioneer, searching for freedom, rides not a stagecoach but a motorcycle, travels not West but East. Other travelers on the same road are not on horses or mules, but on jets and in Rolls Royces. But distances are covered: state lines are crossed, bridges—from here to there—flash by, the road goes on. The ability to move seems a refutation of static lives. The dream of freedom in this film is clearly an *American* dream. It is dreamed by a classic pair of comrade heroes, wearing a beautiful cloak of cool, weighted down by red, white, and blue, by stars and by stripes, and by names-titles-labels: "Captain America," who is also "Wyatt" (Earp), accompanied by "Billy" (the Kid). But the quest is not now—was it ever?—ideal; it is mercantile: The American Dream—both old and new—has become simply middle class. The new heroes are exploiters, buyers and sellers, who stuff the American flag with money and who are heading for rich retirement in Florida. *En route* they are haunted by the American past, which echoes only death: they continually pass graveyards; they sit and expand their own current consciousness on an old mound of Indian bones; a final stop in their trip is a bad trip in a graveyard just outside a slave market.

Can the new American be free of the death-ridden mercantile-based old America? Captain America has two chances to choose freedom: First, at the ranch where the naturalness of the horse is clearly contrasted with the ugliness of the motorcycle wheel, and where the simple satisfactions of domestic and diverse and fertile beauty allow the rancher, in Captain America's words, to "do your own thing in your own time." Second, at the commune where *Woodstock* values struggle for permanence, where Captain America sees a nonmercantile religious peace and unity, where the body is free and beautiful, not sold or violated, and where he can predict, "They're going to make it."

But Captain America and Billy do not choose the peace-freedom-love values of either the old-style rancher or the new-style commune. Billy speaks the words of their choice: "You go for the big money, man—and then you're free." George rides along with Captain America and Billy because he thinks that they represent freedom. George is aware that "we're all in the same cage," and he thinks that the movement of these new pioneers represents an escape. But Captain America and Billy carry George only to his violent death. Captain America and Billy learn nothing from George's death on the road to Mardi Gras. They travel on, across America.

They choose the mainstream American values: they take their money on to New Orleans at the time of Mardi Gras, the celebration that moves inexorably into the season of death, to the site of the old slave market and whorehouse where the flash-forward predicts Captain America's death in flames. In the self-discovery scene, Captain America's words "We blew it" are clear in meaning; and they are a warning for a counterculture that can't really be counter if it accepts the values of the dominant culture into which it enslaves itself.

The dialog says that the dominant culture is afraid of Wyatt and Billy because they are free. Money-slaves always hate those who are free. But *Easy Rider* questions whether the new Americans are free. Are they blowing their freedom, are they, after all, not the stuff of counterrevolution, but merely a sold-out generation? An easy rider is a pimp who lives off a whore-slave: Is the new generation made up of pimps who live off dope-slaves, whose ride is easy, without commitment, whose enslavement to easy money and instant pleasure means that when real values—of the past or the present—are there to be chosen, the only reply can be "We blew it"?

Stanley Kubrick takes the values of *Woodstock*, the prophetic warning of *Easy Rider*, and reduces them to the ashes of the future. If *Easy Rider* was prophetic, *A Clockwork Orange* may be apocalyptic. And it has become no less a cultural event than those other films, obviously striking sensitive chords in the movie public which is a young public. The representatives of the counterculture are now the droogs who do not hold to the values defined in *Woodstock*, but to their reverse; they do not have the ability to choose the old-style values or the new-style values that the characters in

*Easy Rider* consciously passed by. They are conditioned to other values, or to none at all. Value choice no longer exists. The impossibility of choice becomes the theme of the film. The droogs are not shown as choosing creatures, but seem conditioned by their society—apathetic, private, drug-laden—into behavior of violence, sex, and hatred, into anticulture. But the alternative, the Ludovico Technique of reconditioning, espoused by the law-and-order party, is equally anticultural because it, even more directly, eliminates human choice. “When a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man,” contends the Chaplain.

In the future society of extremes which Kubrick posits, man does not exist within recognizable human values. Peace has become totally replaced by violence. Freedom exists for no one, the victims or the victimizers. Love has been totally replaced by sex; a body is not any longer free or revered, but the subject of obscene graffiti and the object only of violence, a sickness to be cured. Kubrick caricatures, exaggerates, mocks, makes varyingly mad, all of his characters and events. Critics have complained that the victims are as unpleasant as the victimizers. Precisely. In this brilliant *reductio ad absurdum*, everything is indeed reduced and everything indeed becomes absurd. Even the style of the film is mocking: terrible humor undercuts the terrible violence. The artist’s stance toward his material is ice cold, uninvolved, primitive, dehumanized. All is juxtaposition, seemingly unguided; and we are left to sort out our own emotions and reactions as best we can. The violence and sex are exaggerated into stylized nonrealism: flying exits through the window two at a time in a better-than-any-Western style; slow-motion gore; fast-action sexual romps; a pop art explosion at the moment of the murder. In such an extreme world of the nonchoosing and nonhuman, no culture—mainstream or counter—can exist.

Clearly no communal culture, no passing on of values, remains in the future world of *A Clockwork Orange*. The rococo concert hall—now called “The Derelict Casino”—is deserted, decaying, dusty; it is no longer the site for the Rossini playing on the sound track but for the gang-bang being performed on the stage. Sometime after *Easy Rider*, the last picture show closed, not only in dim Texas towns, but throughout the modern world. Everyone has become, in the words of *A Clockwork Orange*, “a victim of the modern age.” Culture has retreated. People have locked their

doors against other people: "I never open the door to strangers after dark." They sit in chairs that look like wombs and eggs. Culture is anticulture because it has become private.

Communication is gone. "Oh brothers" is a verbal tag in a world totally devoid of brotherhood. The fascinating Anthony Burgess *Nadsat*, which in the medium of the novel rendered great respect to language because it allowed the reader the leisure to figure out and to savor the Russianisms, the coined words, the puns, the word-games, becomes in the quicker and nonreversible medium of the motion picture the primary symbol for the non-communication of nonculture. In case we *might* be able to figure out the meanings of the words, or remember them from the book, Kubrick has them spoken in a Cockney that begs for subtitles, has them shouted, screeched, mumbled, in huge echoing rooms, under blaring music. The Minister of the Interior gives us a key: "But enough of words. Actions speak louder than. Action now. Observe all." The counterculture's cry for the nonverbal has been heeded.

Verbal communication has so disintegrated in *A Clockwork Orange* that noncommunal music—private, on discs, cassettes, tapes—is the only art that remains; and it is stripped of human resonance—any type of music fitting any mood: Elgar in a prison corridor, "Singin' in the Rain" during rape and beating, Beethoven during the cutting of friends.

Despite the predictions in *Woodstock*, the departure of the articulate has not been accompanied by an arrival of the spontaneously good. The droogs don't effectively communicate even with one another, except by slashes and blows. Expanded consciousness has not resulted in humanly value-laden sights and sensations. On the contrary. In Kubrick's film the colors are primary, unsubtle. The landscape is vandalized, garbage-ridden. The taste in artifacts is totally pop and crude and vulgar: phallic lollipops; nude white plastic women bent into tables; huge plastic nipples as milk dispensers; a bloated phallic sculpture, now a dirty joke, now a work of art, now a murder weapon.

Words, music, artifacts are all disconnected from the human, from the value-carrying. And so, of course, has mind departed. The irrational tendency of the counterculture defined so clearly in *Woodstock* has triumphed in *A Clockwork Orange*. Alex the narrator tells us, "I was thinking all the time . . . thinking was

for the gloopy ones," and so he gives up thinking and at that moment attacks his friends, his "brothers."

In spite of its futuristic settings, does *A Clockwork Orange* really deal with the future? Or has the future become the present? Burgess, writing in *Rolling Stone*, has his opinion: "The age of violence and scientific conditioning it depicts is already here." Another counterculture story, running alongside ours, would seem to agree with Burgess: the "festival" films—from *Monterey Pop* to *Woodstock* to *Gimme Shelter*—clearly tell a story of apocalypse, with the death at Altamont somehow eerily present in the happy days of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin at Monterey. But that is a different story, even though the ending may be the same. The story of *Woodstock*, *Easy Rider*, and *A Clockwork Orange*—the three best films of the counterculture—is a story that deals with values of the past, of the present, and of the future, a story that takes us from documentary, to fiction, to . . . is it, let us hope, fantasy? Or is it not?