"The Cylinders Were Whispering My Name"

The Films of Monte Hellman

Kent Jones

"How can you put yourself in any kind of historical perspective while you're living your life?" I wanted Monte Hellman to talk about where he thought he fitted into the American cinema of the early 1970s – not the Spielberg-De Palma-Coppola-Lucas New Hollywood but the Dennis Hopper-Bob Rafelson version, the one that got rolled over, the one of which Hellman was, in my eyes, the undisputed king. But I was approaching Hellman as a bygone figure from the past while he saw himself as very much alive, a working director. His string of failures, career disturbances, disappointments and bad distribution deals formed a Stroheim-like image of Hellman in my head that he himself could not afford to recognise. I had a self-congratulatory image of myself as a knight restoring the king to his throne, but that was a young man's folly.[1]

I did a long telephone interview with Hellman 10 years ago. I was in my early twenties and I had been transfixed by The Shooting, his 1966 western, on late night commercial television a couple of years before. Even on a black and white 7-inch screen with commercial interruptions, the uniquely jagged rhythm of this film, the unusual argot of its characters and its unsettling atmosphere of dread kept me up until three o'clock in the morning. Not long after, there was a double bill of Hellman's two finest films, Two-Lane Blacktop and Cockfighter, at an excellent New York revival house called the Thalia. I was an intern at the *Village Voice* at the time, and the late Tom Allen, a wonderful writer with the distinction of being the only full-time film critic who was also a Jesuit monk (as well as an admirer of Bunuel and a disciple of George Romero), wrote about Two-Lane Blacktop in a section called 'Revivals in Focus' (after Tom died of a heart attack in 1988, the column came to an end – it was virtually obsolete by that time anyway). Tom was complimentary towards the film ("a minimalist road movie with maximalist detail") but with a certain reticence.

For me, this double bill (the version of Cockfighter I saw was called Born To Kill, a slightly different cut with some added tits and ass courtesy of producer and project originator Roger Corman) was a revelation. This was the beginning of the 1980s, the worst decade ever for American movies (thank God

for Martin Scorsese and Alan Rudolph), and to encounter such lean, concentrated artistry, focused on such unusual sides of American life, was sheer joy. I went through old copies of the *Village Voice* and found Andrew Sarris's qualified assessment of Two-Lane Blacktop – he had singled out Warren Oates and praised Hellman without being really enthusiastic about him or the film. David Thomson, in his 'Biographical Dictionary of Film,' had compared the film unfavourably to American Graffiti of all things. Jonathan Rosenbaum had reviewed Cockfighter favourably in *Film Comment* (special praise for the authenticity of the Southern accents) but had reservations about Blacktop. In each case, with the exception of Rosenbaum, Hellman was treated more like an interesting oddity than an artist. It was as though it was not right that an artist with such a quiet, reflective temperament should exist on this side of the Atlantic – he could be taken any way but on his own terms, because he did not fit into a fixed image of a bustling, lively, populist America.

One of Monte Hellman's central film experiences as a young man was Jacques Rivette's Paris Nous Appartient, the most ambitious, rarefied and least appreciated (in America) of the groundbreaking New Wave films. "That was a very powerful film as far as affecting me and my ideas about filmmaking," Hellman told me. "What struck me about Paris Nous Appartient was that people kept walking in and out of doors – scenes that would be cut out of most other pictures became the basis of the movie." That's a good description of Hellman's own approach to filmmaking (with the exception of Silent Night Deadly Night 3, Hellman begins each of his films in media res – we go right into action as though there was no proper way for a story to begin except to slice into ongoing life), and if there's any director that Hellman strongly resembles both temperamentally and as a storyteller, it's Rivette. Both are cerebral artists who operate at a distance from their stories and their characters, and ellipsis is an important feature of their respective arts. But Rivette is protected in France – he's never been a popular artist but then he's never had to be. The state subsidised *Avance sur recettes* program aside, there's a cultural niche created for people like Rivette and Rohmer out of respect for their artistry. But in America you're only as good as your last picture, and Hellman has to prove himself anew every time he makes a movie, which is rarely. His last completed film, Silent Night Deadly Night 3: Better Watch Out, was a straight-to-video slasher sequel. Although its material let his college intern sniff at, Hellman applied himself to that project with the same seriousness and professionalism he has brought to all his films.

Which brings me to Pauline Kael. I also looked up Hellman's films in her *5001 Nights At the Movies*. I can't provide a direct quote because I threw away my copy of that book years ago, but suffice it to say that she was not impressed. There's a tiny capsule review of The Shooting that dismisses it as a quasi-exis-

tentialist exercise that doesn't merit scrutiny. Even more damning was her pan of Malick's BADLANDS with the ultimate putdown – a comparison with "some films made by Monte Hellman". This is vintage Kael – she takes one look at somebody, they rub her the wrong way, and the game's over. She skewered any hint of intellectualism in the cinema (sorry – the movies), but the great paradox of her career is that her Movies-Are-A-Popular-Art-Form-And-Have-No-Room-For-Intellectualism polemic was practised in a magazine whose readership was and remains intellectual, literary-minded Americans. And for someone who supposedly knew movies and what made them work so well, she certainly imposed a lot of restrictions on them. Just like an anxious mother, Kael was always trying to get all her ducks in a row. People often refer to her constant use of the word 'we' (as in, 'We don't feel anything for these characters because we just don't like them') as royal, but to me it sounds maternal.

For this mother hen, if you were a Hellman or a Malick, a Rafelson or a post-TAXI DRIVER Scorsese, you weren't just a black sheep – you weren't even worth discussing. The kids had strict orders to look the other way if they saw you walking down the street. Kael was once quoted as saying that the 1970s was the golden age of American movies, and I would tend to agree with her, but she was responsible for creating a tone that killed off a lot of possibilities during that era (ironically, so was Andrew Sarris, though to a far lesser extent, with his love for 'classical' cinema). It's largely because of this reactionary tone that spread throughout film criticism that the cinema of the early 1970s, meaning the post-EASY RIDER films (TWO-LANE BLACKTOP, THE LAST MOVIE, THE HIRED HAND, the films of Rafelson and Schatzberg, etc.) is still remembered as an aberrant hallucination and that the Spielbergs, the Lucases, the De Palmas represented a glorious return to form. Two brief ironies. Quentin Tarantino, perhaps the ultimate Kael-ite filmmaker (he's a huge fan of her final, improbable nomination for the pantheon, CASUALTIES OF WAR; I'm told that she was nuts about PULP FICTION), is a big Hellman fan (Hellman served as an executive producer on RESERVOIR DOGS). The second irony is that Sam Peckinpah, Kael's favourite director of the 1970s, went on the *Tonight Show* in 1973 and announced, for all the world to hear: "The best director working in America today is Monte Hellman".

So what follows, sad to say, is a defence of the work of Monte Hellman in addition to being a brief history of his career. At this late date, it should be a tribute, but the reality is that anything written about Monte Hellman in America must be a defence (the only book ever written on his work, by Charles Tatum, Jr., is in French). With Leo McCarey and Delmer Daves close seconds, Hellman gets my vote as the cinema's most under-appreciated great director.

When I re-read the interview, I was appalled by the number of "What were you intending when you did this?" questions, every one of which Hellman an-

swered with a subtle rebuke – "You just don't *think* about those things when you're directing a film." Hellman, however, wasn't just playing the Old Pro game. "Maybe one of my tragic flaws is that, I hate to use the word but I'm a kind of an intellectual," he told me, a self-description that is impossible to imagine coming from a member of the old guard. "Now, if I wanted to emulate somebody I'd say I'd like to be Howard Hawks," he told me, and in retrospect Hellman seems more in the tradition of a Hawks than was initially plausible (it's interesting to compare him with directors like John Carpenter and Walter Hill, who ape the outward appearances, stylistic tics and world view of Hawks's films, but seem miles away from him otherwise). Hellman's storytelling instincts are like Hawks stripped down to his essence, and his sense of action and space are just as concrete and logical. Arguably, Hellman and the early Rafelson and McBride are a more natural bridge with the old Hollywood, having absorbed the (thematic) influences of the New Wave, Michelangelo Antonioni and Ingmar Bergman, than directors like Coppola and Spielberg who denied those influences and settled into genre formulas. It's ironic, too, that Hellman the "intellectual" is a less self-conscious artist than many of the 'entertainers' who made and spent fortunes throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Monte Hellman was born in Brooklyn in 1932, but his family moved to California when he was six and he's lived there ever since. He gained some experience as a still photographer in high school, studied theatre at Stanford and went to film school at UCLA but quit after a year and a half to travel through Europe. When he returned, he joined a summer stock company based near San Francisco called the Stumptown Players and got his first experience as a director on *Night Must Fall*, *The Skin of Our Teeth* and *Of Mice and Men*, among other things. The company went under after three seasons, and he went to work at ABC cutting commercials into 16mm prints. He was promoted to Assistant Editor on the television series *Medic*, which got him his entry into the editor's union (Hellman is credited as editor on many of his own films). He became bored and moved to LA, where he started another theatre group and directed a production of *Waiting for Godot* (an important work for Hellman) with Jack Albertson and Joey Faye (this production is praised by his old friend Martin Landau in his introduction to Tatum's book). "After a year we got evicted... and [Roger] Corman said, 'This is enough playing around – it's about time you did something to get healthy'" which resulted in Hellman's first film, Beast From Haunted Cave.

Beast From Haunted Cave was the first of three times in Hellman's career when he would make one film back to back with another, in this case Corman's Ski-Troop Attack (Corman often piggybacked one film onto another as a cost-saving measure). "He gave me this project and I started working with the writer, Chuck Griffith, and tried to at least transform it into something that was inter-

esting to me. I had no interest in making a monster movie per se, but it was also a gangster movie – it was really Roger's version of Key Largo, which he's done about five times." Actually, the most poetic material in this movie, about a gang of hoods who heist gold ingots from a small reserve and then have a guide (Michael Forest) escort them through snow country, revolves around the beast and his victims, who are spun into cocoon-like webs and stood up like figurines. Hellman also builds up to the uninspiring first appearance of the monster by keeping him hidden or seen in fleeting cutaways, the shrewdest of B-movie ploys. "I made the best movie I could under the circumstances, for $35,000."

It is an education to compare this novice effort to the Corman film. Ski-Troop Attack is an awful movie about an American reconnaissance group in Germany during World War II. Every so often a piece of archival footage is spliced into the Deadwood, South Dakota landscaping the laziest way imaginable, but even lazier is the action – randomly shot, badly blocked and not at all keyed to the landscape: the actors could just as well be milling around a tennis court. Corman was just marking time and grinding out drive-in fodder, but his young first-timer made the most of his minimal settings and mapped his action with great visual acuity (his training as an editor was probably a help in what would prove to be one of his greatest talents). It would be ridiculous to go into detail about Beast, but as an apprentice effort it's impeccable. Hellman had an innate grasp of something that has always eluded Corman as a director, which is what Manny Farber dubbed "negative space". Simply put, it's using what's offscreen to dynamise what's onscreen, harnessing the experience and cultural background that an audience brings to a film and using it to make the onscreen material "resonate", to use Farber's term. Hellman had this in spades right from the start.

Hellman began making movies in a relaxed, no-pressure atmosphere, and it's possible that he would never have found his footing as an artist if he had not had the luxury of low expectations and the freedom to fail. "Today you've got to make a success of your first movie. It never occurred to us whether we would or wouldn't get a second shot. You know, we made these movies, and we never thought anybody would take them seriously... I remember at the premiere performance of Beast From Haunted Cave, a friend of Gene Corman's [Roger's brother] who was a well-known Hollywood writer at the time came out of the picture saying, 'You know, I don't think that beast was so badly burnt that he can't come back for another movie.' I think the times were different – there was a different attitude towards life."

Hellman got an agent and looked for more directing work at the big studios but had no luck. He did some "odd jobs for Corman," one of which was associate producer on a 1960 film called The Wild Ride directed by his friend Harvery Berman. He also knew one of the actors in that film, Jack Nicholson,

and it was at this time that they became close friends (they would eventually form a business partnership). Hellman was assistant director on The Intruder (one of Corman's very best films as a director) and was given the task of adding scenes to Beast From Haunted Cave and Ski-Troop Attack as well as Creature From The Haunted Sea and The Last Woman on Earth, for sale to television. "That was probably the most fun I've ever had, because I was the producer, writer and director, and I had absolute control over the crew and how the money was spent and everything. It was really fantastic, plus the fact that it was totally off the wall stuff – it was like 'Saturday Night Fever'." For Creature, Hellman shot a scene in which Robert Towne, who played the lead, has his tennis shoes polished (Towne was part of an acting group that Hellman helped to form, which also included Nicholson, Harry Dean Stanton, Shirley Knight and Rupert Crosse, who played the manager in Cassavetes' Shadows; the class was taught by Martin Landau). He also shot the title tune ("a *really* great song"), written by Carol Eastman (aka Adrien Joyce: she would later write Hellman's breakthrough film The Shooting as well as Five Easy Pieces and Schatzberg's Puzzle of a Downfall Child).

A year later, the pennywise Corman shot two days of Boris Karloff walking around a leftover set before it was demolished and gave a young UCLA film school graduate named Francis Coppola the chance to build a movie around the footage. There was no script, so Coppola wrote one quickly and did five weeks of work, most of which Corman threw out (according to critic and filmmaker Bill Krohn, Coppola went over budget – some things never change). Corman hired a new screenwriter, and Hellman directed all of the exteriors for what would eventually become The Terror (according to Hellman, he's responsible for about twenty-five minutes of the finished film, Coppola is responsible for around ten, and the rest is Corman's). The Terror was seen and liked by producer Fred Roos, who was developing projects for Robert Lippert. In the meantime, Hellman got a job on the editing team of Bus Riley's Back In Town at Universal. "He knew Francis and I had both worked on it, didn't know who had done what, so he cabled Lippert that he wanted Francis and me to direct these movies in the Philippines. They tried to find Francis and they couldn't, so they hired me. When I was speaking at the British Film Institute, I said, 'If it had gone the other way around, Francis might have become rich and famous.'"

On a small passenger ship to the Philippines, actor John Hackett reworked the script for Back Door To Hell, written by Dick Gutman, while Jack Nicholson wrote Flight to Fury based on a page-long outline by Hellman and Roos. Shooting on Back Door began in July 1964, and there was only a three-week respite before the start of Flight to Fury. "Because I was doing the second picture I wasn't able to edit the first one, so somebody did a rough cut on it. I was aghast at how terrible it was. So when we were shooting Flight to Fury, I

would get up at about five in the morning, have breakfast and then leave for the location at about six. We had drivers, and I would sleep from about six to seven while we got to the location. We would shoot until six at night, and get back to the house at seven. I would take a little nap and then have dinner, and then at nine o'clock Roos and I went to the cutting room to recut BACK DOOR TO HELL. And we would work until about two in the morning, and then come back and sleep from two-thirty to five and start the whole process over again."

BACK DOOR TO HELL and FLIGHT TO FURY are the kind of movies that really aren't made anymore. They are low budget-low profile films that afford their director the opportunity to practice his or her craft – Joseph H. Lewis, for instance, made dozens of them before his GUN CRAZY-SO DARK THE NIGHT period in the late forties. Neither film is ambitious, and there is nothing in either that shines beyond the creative ingenuity with which they simultaneously obscure and exploit their drive-in budgets. BACK DOOR TO HELL is a modestly tough movie on the theme of pacifism vs. viciousness in battle, about an American reconnaissance mission sent to help a group of Filipino rebels (the movie is marred by a final, ridiculously gung ho montage of American invasion stock footage that was inserted by Lippert and 20th Century-Fox after the film was cut). Hellman builds his movie around hard physical details and situations, an old B-movie virtue: the rigging of a pulley to carry a radio across a river, the shock on a Japanese private's face when he opens the door of a hut and finds Nicholson tapping out a coded message on a wireless set, a soldier with his dead buddy slung over his back as he marches (Hellman's camera fastens on the body until it registers graphically). It has a lean action sequence that's a good example of Hellman's supremely clear sense of space. The Americans join the rebels in a raid on a Japanese stronghold, an exciting criss-cross of gunplay, running and explosions within a consistently clear physical arena. This may sound like a minor virtue today, but it's a test few modern filmmakers could pass, nor would many think it worth the effort. The director makes great use of two sharp performers, the ethereal Annabelle Huggins (her delicate face and voice are used sparingly, to light parts of the movie with a soft glow) and Conrad Maga as Paco, the rebel leader. He is a solid, severe actor with a wiry body and a cheerless, determined face. Everything that Paco does is based on necessity. "His boots! His boots!!" he whispers urgently to Jimmie Rodgers' pacifist Lieutenant Craig, who has just killed a Japanese sentry. He's mystified as Paco unties the man's boots and throws them away, so that the Japanese will think he's been killed by bandits.

Despite Hellman's dissatisfaction with the finished product ("All I could really do was patch it up as best I could"), BACK DOOR TO HELL is a better movie than FLIGHT TO FURY. A Tarantino favourite, FLIGHT is once again interesting for the modest virtue of its clean action and decidedly weird structure.

Light-footed, surprising and funny (in an oddly detached way) until its assemblage of adventurers and diamond smugglers crash land in the jungle midway through, it devolves into a succession of stock situations enacted by Greenstreet/Lorre clones. Nicholson's gambler, a bizarre variation on Robert Walker's vampiric charmer Bruno in Strangers on a Train, meets Dewey Martin's Joe at the gaming table in a casino, and from then on he won't let him out of his sight. He follows Martin onto a plane as he flees a murder rap, and sits next to a shy young lady played by Hellman's first wife Jocelyn. "Do you know anything about death?" he asks her out of the blue. This is a very queer character whose scenes suggest an improbable hybrid – an Albert Camus comedy. The young Nicholson, thin, reedy, and faintly neurotic, gives the guy a strange pathos until both the movie and his character turn disappointingly mechanical. He represents the opposite of what Hellman intended – a light variation on Beat the Devil – but he is the most interesting thing in the movie.

Back Door and Flight suffer from an interesting problem that doesn't turn up too much in American cinema: they are cursed with their director's talent. Both films provide ample evidence of Hellman's gift for uniformity, which is not entirely beneficial (the closest analogy I can think of is The Black Book, Anthony Mann's beautiful but godawful noir version of the terror in post-revolutionary France: Mann's talent for visual clarity is everywhere in evidence, and it highlights every ridiculous twist and turn of a horrendous script). Hellman is not a director of rhetorical flourishes or sudden jolts of action – he concentrates on the whole picture, and sets his action in one key. His films tend to unfold in a smooth, even fashion, the better to follow small events and large trajectories. These movies are fastidious to a fault, and Hellman never really goes for broke and digs into their possibilities the way that a less talented but more vulgar director like Corman might have (on a good week). At this point Hellman was still operating in his mentor's shadow – Flight to Fury in particular is prime Corman material, a quick knock-off of several other movies cobbled together in a few days. But Hellman had a special kind of temperament that would finally find its level with his next two films.

Before they left for the Philippines, Hellman and Nicholson had worked on a script called Epitaph that they wanted to do with Corman (there is an extract in Tatum's book). "It was to star Jack and Millie Perkins, who was my next door neighbour. Roger had agreed to produce the picture and give us the money for it." The story was about a young actor in Hollywood and his circle of friends, and was explicitly autobiographical – they planned to incorporate footage from Nicholson's earlier films into the action, which covers a three-day period in which the actor tries to raise money for an abortion for his girlfriend. "When we came back, we went to Roger to make the picture, and he said that he had changed his mind, that he didn't want to do it anymore, that he thought it was

too European a film... but he said that rather than totally renege on his deal we could make a western, you may as well do two, because you can make two pictures for the same price as one." Hellman and Nicholson rented office space in Beverly Hills, hired Carol Eastman, and a month later had two scripts, which would become The Shooting and Ride in the Whirlwind.

The joke was on Corman, since it's difficult to imagine films more "European" than this diptych. "Roger saw the scripts that we came up with and was ready to chuck the whole thing. But he'd already invested $5,000, and he realised that for a $75,000 budget, if he made the movies he couldn't get hurt. Whereas if he cancelled them he'd be out $5,000." So for the second time in a year Hellman shot two movies back to back. Back Door to Hell had started in July 1964 and Ride in the Whirlwind wrapped in June 1965. He had three weeks between his Filipino movies, but there was only a week between the westerns. Outside of Corman himself and James Brown, Monte Hellman was the hardest working man in show business.

It was surprising to me that Hellman and Nicholson had set out to make 'classic' westerns (in preparation they watched many of their favourites, including My Darling Clementine, Stagecoach, Shane and One-Eyed Jacks). "What we were trying to do was make an A western on a B budget. We wanted to do something that had the feeling of The Gunfighter, but we were also influenced by various European filmmakers of the time." This was a dilemma for many young directors during that period, and I think that the only one for whom the mixture of influences came easily was Hellman (one of the reasons was that his budgets were so low that he didn't feel compelled to hedge his bets the way other people did). While movies like The Graduate, Mickey One and Point Blank were selling a new hybrid model of flash filmmaking with varying degrees of success, along came two unassuming westerns that incorporated a European sensibility without any fuss. They remained virtually invisible here for years and gained their first notoriety in Paris, where they became cult hits when they were released there in 1969.

This issue of "European-ness" is always a focal point of any discussion of Hellman. Americans (or, rather, Hollywood executives) prefer their European influences to be ornamental rather than structural or thematic, and Mike Nichols' The Graduate, which offers itself as a Europeanised object, is a case in point: its catalogue of borrowings from Resnais, Bergman and Fellini is central to its identity and its aesthetic (such as it is). Nichols's film, which Hellman greatly admired for the way it struck a nerve in American culture ("There are certain very strong stories or ideas for films that touch the core of the psychology of the audience so profoundly that they absolutely cannot fail. I think The Graduate is not really a very good film, but it's a great film because of just what it is"), was made around the same time as the westerns and was probably

the model for American cinema in years to come. It fetishised its influences in order to identify itself as classy, provocative and advanced: it came with a shiny badge of cultural approval pinned to its lapel. Hellman's films may not have jumped into the cultural fray with as much of a splash as The Graduate, but thirty years later they are as fresh and as modern as the day they were made, whereas the high-profile movie that won all the awards has become a relic. These two small, unassuming westerns seem as definitively European as the Mike Nichols paste-up, but on a more vital level.

The Shooting and Ride in the Whirlwind are singularities in American cinema. The only other films that they resemble are Budd Boetticher's Randolph Scott westerns, but those films are grounded in character while Hellman's have a distanced tone that forefronts a looming sense of dread. Hellman is now in awesome control of his medium: the advance on the Filipino films is enormous. They mark the beginning of many things for Hellman. This is the first instance of his quiet, intellectual temperament in a fully sympathetic situation. Both westerns are carefully tailored to particular landscapes, which will become a Hellman trademark, and they represent the first real instances of his storytelling style, composed of regular, daily events as opposed to dramatic events coated with a patina of dailiness – this would later separate him from nearly every other American director. It is also the beginning of his collaboration with a toothy, ruminative actor named Warren Oates, an acquaintance of Nicholson's whom Hellman had seen and admired in a production of *One Flew Over the Cookoo's Nest*.

"Carol Eastman would bring me stuff every three or four days. She didn't have the story plotted out. She really worked more organically and let her creative juices carry her where they would. She didn't know where she was going to wind up, and I think that's why there's a tremendous feeling of suspense about the movie." Suspense is not exactly the right word, because we're not anticipating anything but trying to figure out the foreboding enigma on screen. The westerner, alone in the wilderness, hears a small sound and tenses – he's so tuned to the environment that he knows that something is coming. It's a moment we all know from thousands of westerns, but what makes it unusual here is that it's the very first thing we see in the movie, and it establishes a mood of paranoia and dread that does not abate until the final seconds of the film. Hellman's affinity for Beckett is at its most pronounced here: we know next to nothing about the four principal characters beyond the fact that they are travelling across the vast western American landscape (the films were shot in Utah).

Eastman loosely based her screenplay on a Jack London story (two men meet in a hotel bar, one of them looks at a painting, and it reminds him of an incident that is very close to the narrative of The Shooting). Oates's Willet Gashade is a prospector who returns to the mine he operates with his brother

Coigne to find a sheepish helper named Coley (Will Hutchins) scared out of his wits, his partner Leland Drum dead and buried, and Coigne nowhere to be seen. "Now become calm and tell me so's I can understand where it's going," says Willett to Coley as they sit and talk by lamplight. Coigne and Leland went on a bender, Coigne killed a child in the street, came back to camp to take Coley's horse Shorty and fled. The next night someone came and shot Leland down as he was drinking his coffee. Coley tells his story over a terse flashback – Leland hunkered down in the dark by the campfire, teetering back and forth before he falls over from the fatal gunshot. "Is that the whole way of it, Coley?" says Willet. "My mind's all unsatisfied with it." Willet is exhausted, and he takes Coley's gun to sleep with him – someone has been tracking him, too. The sense of familiarity and the strange vernacular ("I think it was based on [Carol's] idea of Germans in Texas or something, this kind of sentence structure that was not really English") offsets the paranoia and makes it all the more invasive.

The Shooting, whose plot is set in motion by a murderer in flight from the law, has a moral framework that's uncommon to the genre. The cowboy who sleeps with his gun, a familiar western trait, is a special circumstance here brought on by fear: action is brought down to a more human, less mythical level than usual as Hellman creates a very modern feeling of disrupted normalcy. "One thing that really affected both films was the shooting of Kennedy. That's the socio-political background of the films, The Shooting consciously and Ride In The Whirlwind unconsciously." The sense of immanent danger that colours The Shooting capitalises on one of the most recognisable features of the western – the wide open yet dangerously close-quartered landscape. There's a moment early on where Gashade sits in the spot where Leland died, drinking coffee, while Coley is singing a song in the background on the left. "Somethin's comin'," Gashade mutters to himself and puts down his coffee. Hellman cuts to a gloved hand stroking a fallen white horse and putting a cocked pistol to its head. As the gun goes off Willet and Coley freeze, and then Coley runs like a banshee as Willet stands up: the camera tracks around Oates, keeping him as its axis, and follows Hutchins's movement as he runs up the hill for cover (unaccountably leaving a trail of flour dust as he goes). It's a mysterious shot that strobes between subjective and objective, concreteness and abstraction. And it crystallises a key thematic aspect of the movie: while Coley is scared out of his wits, Willet is magnetised by the ominous developments.

The shooter is a woman who speaks in riddles, played by Millie Perkins with a flat, toneless voice. She's killed her horse for some unknown reason, and she wants to pay Gashade a generous sum of money to lead her across the desert to a town called Kingsley. The enmity between them – he's immediately suspicious and she's disdainful – is complicated by Coley's romantic attach-

ment ("You sure have a pretty way"), and a triangular road show of fatalism, cross-purposes, warning signs and red herrings is set in motion. They make their way through rough, varied terrain that becomes less and less inhabitable. Hellman's fluidity with landscape here is a welcome contrast to the abrupt change-ups that characterise most westerns, which tend to jump from one picturesque valley and rock formation to the next with no topographical logic.

The woman periodically fires warning shots, and we eventually learn that she is signalling her location to a mean, beady-eyed hired gun who will join them on their trek through the desert (the gunman, played by Nicholson, is introduced just like Perkins in a sudden close-up insert). The landscape gets rougher and the behaviour gets more and more threatening, as it gradually becomes clear that they are tracking someone. In the final moments of the film we realise that Coigne is the pursued man and that it's the woman's child who has been killed. The film starts to slow down in the manner of Godard's stop motion inflections in Sauve Qui Peut, and we hear Gashade shouting "Coigne!" Coigne appears from behind a rock, and Willet is staring into his own eyes – they are twins. The symbolism seems obvious, but to dwell on it would obscure the fleeting violence of the images. I asked Hellman if his inspiration was the Zapruder film, but he said it was actually the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby. In fact, the ending of The Shooting plays out like a cross between those two cultural touchstones, and locks down the narrative that precedes it with breathtaking finality.

The most troubling aspect of the film is Willet's death drive. He knows that the journey will end in doom, and the money doesn't make much difference to him. He doesn't seem at all curious or drawn to the woman, but he is somehow compelled to join her. It's that mysterious compulsion that drives the action (I would have to disagree with the frequent label of "existentialist" that is hung on Hellman in general and this film in particular, often by Hellman himself – anarchist would be more like it. If you refuse to believe that Gashade would just pack up and follow this woman to his doom then the film won't mean much to you, but anyone who lived through the 1960s and 1970s ought to be able to understand the urge to embrace oblivion rather than risk the possibility of dullness by resisting it. This is the one film that I know of that distils that bygone tendency into a pure, recognisable form.

Ride in the Whirlwind is a different kind of story. The mood here is tired and a little sad, and its setting is green and mountainous where The Shooting's is parched and flat. Every tic of The Shooting's four principal characters is burned into your brain, but the cowboys in Ride in the Whirlwind (Nicholson, Cameron Mitchell and John Hackett) are insignificant men who seem to be receding into the landscape, which is appropriate since their lives are turned upside down by a mistake. They stop for the night at a small house

occupied by a group of thieves, and before they get on their way in the morning they are caught in an ambush by vigilantes. Hackett is shot down but Nicholson and Mitchell get away, and they're hunted down like criminals and subsequently forced to act like criminals: through no fault of their own, their lives have been negated.

"There was the whole feeling of guilt by association, at the same time as there being a real feeling that, in a sense, you get what you deserve, that if you're gonna sleep with criminals and eat with them you better take the consequence." Ride in the Whirlwind is no tirade against injustice, but there is no sense of a moral implication as Hellman suggests, either. Unlike The Shooting, which is about the feeling and the fulfilment of paranoia, Ride in the Whirlwind is a demonstration of the kind of nightmare scenario that would play out again and again in the America of J. Edgar Hoover and the impending law and order of Richard Nixon. In that sense it has a populist perspective while The Shooting is closer to the luxuriant self-obliteration embodied by the music of the Velvet Underground. One works from the outside and the other from the inside, one is closer to the dilemma of poor Afro-American inner city dwellers while the other is akin to the feelings of white, alienated, affluent suburbanites.

Not that these films are in any way polemics – they are both as compactly mysterious as a Borges story but as imbued with the pleasure of physical detail as Hawks – but rather to suggest the social undercurrents that give them their power. The fact is that the seemingly modest Ride in the Whirlwind might be the finest visualisation of the 19th century American west on film, more vividly imagined than anything in Peckinpah. Nicholson based his script on homesteaders' diaries, and the movie fixes on rhythms, rituals and silences, so that the loneliness and boredom of life in the wilderness, as well as the importance of little bands of people who stick together to brave its hardships, become palpable. After the initial hold-up of a stagecoach (a perfect scene, all about the logistics, finding the best tactical positions from a bluff overlooking the road, the waiting, a silent passenger in a suit looking dreamy and bored), we come upon the three partners. Nicholson's Wes has a carbuncle that's been bothering him, and it's nothing but complaints between these three in a lived-in, autumnal image with an austere beauty (the colour in both films is purposely dulled, flattened).

The outlaws live in a tiny cabin in a valley, and they are led by Harry Dean Stanton, in eyepatch and homburg (and looking almost exactly the same as he does thirty years later). They are friendly but taciturn and only slightly threatening, used to living alone in the wilderness. One fascinating character is played by Rupert Crosse, a lanky, imposing man and the crack shot of the group. He appears to be the authority figure but he barely says three words in

the whole movie. Interestingly, there is nothing made of his being black (pretty unusual for 1966). The peculiar focus of this film allows for a very private sense of character, deeply rooted in environment, weather and circumstances.

When the vigilantes come, they smoke out the thieves after a languorous, protracted exchange of bullets. Wes and Vern climb up a rockface and bust in on a family that lives on the mountaintop, an older married couple and their daughter Abby (Millie Perkins). The father (George Mitchell), a plain, rumpled man, is outside chopping wood at the time. That's how he spends most of his life, and he expects Abby to call him before every meal and have his "wash-up" ready for him: the film is so keyed into dailiness that its pivotal moment comes when he goes to do his pre-dinner ritual and the wash basin is empty. Abby has forgotten to prepare it because she's so nervous, and her father comes undone, which sets the sad but inevitable denouement in motion.

Wes and Vern don't waste any time pleading their innocence. They know that there is no way they will be able to prove their essential goodness, and they don't have the time to try. Again, this is a new moral framework for westerns and, in this case, for American movies in general. In the movie's scheme of things, since Wes and Vern have been forced to behave like criminals, for all intents and purposes they have become criminals. Nicholson and Hellman worked hard to avoid clichés on this film, and one of the most deeply rooted clichés in American cinema is the innately good man, able to prove his innocence sufficiently to satisfy the community of the film. In the morally frank vision of Ride in the Whirlwind, that cliché (which is perpetuated in current American cinema) is not even a possibility. When Vern shoots the enraged, stupid father in self-defence, the transformation is complete. At the end of the film, Vern himself has been shot, and he sits by a tree to wait for the posse to come and finish him off. He tells Vern to move on and leave him to die, like Hawthorne's Roger Malvin. The last shot of this haunting film, once thought to be a more conventional appendage of The Shooting but really every bit its equal, is Nicholson riding over a hill and out of sight into a troubled future.

Back in the 1980s, it seemed natural to compare Hellman to Wim Wenders, but in retrospect he seems much closer to certain post-new wave French filmmakers like Jean Eustache, Maurice Pialat, André Téchiné and Philipe Garrel. In their work, daily life is front and centre, and there is no moral formula by which people are judged – their films move side by side with their characters. It's no wonder that Hellman found his first real popularity in France, where the westerns achieved a cult status after making the rounds of the international festival circuit (AIP refused to pay Corman's asking price, and the films were never properly released in America). "I think The Shooting played for 13 months and Ride in the Whirlwind for 6 or 7 months, and they've been playing on and off ever since. Because of that and because of the influence of

Cahiers du cinéma and other European critics in Hollywood, I got a reputation just in Hollywood. At that time, there was an envy of Europe and European filmmakers, and the studio executives really were... you know, there was kind of a snob appeal about something from Europe." Then Hellman added, "I don't think that's true anymore," the understatement of the decade.

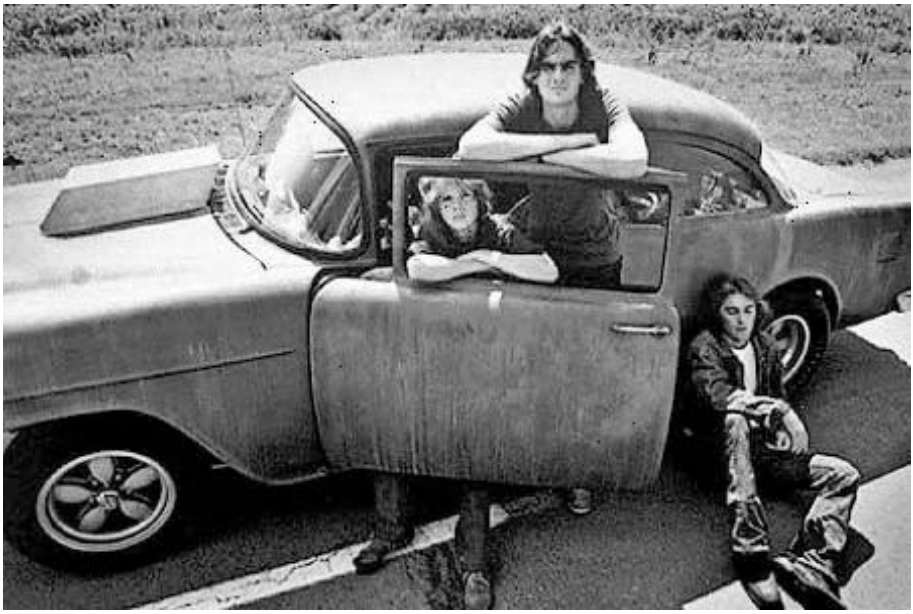
Hellman kicked around for a few years after completing the westerns (they took six months to edit). He was a dialogue director on Corman's The St. Valentine's Day Massacre and edited The Wild Angels, the musical sequences in Rafelson's Head and a film Corman directed under a pseudonym called What's In It For Harry? During this period his long string of failed or discontinued projects began. "I had a deal with Roger to do a picture called Explosion at AIP. It was about a black sheriff in the south. We developed the picture, and it was cancelled the week before we were to start shooting. Then I was hired to do a picture based on the play *Macbird*, and that fell apart, I guess, when Robert Kennedy was assassinated. Then I went to Europe to do a picture based on *The Two Faces Of January* by Patricia Highsmith." The money never materialised for that project, and Hellman returned to LA. "My agent found some people in Hollywood who had read a few French reviews, and he got me hired to do Two-Lane Blacktop."

Two-Lane Blacktop originated at a production company called Cinema Centre with producer Michael Laughlin (who would later make The Christian Licorice Store and Dusty and Sweets Mcgee). The company put up $100,000 for an original screenplay by Will Corry, and Laughlin, a Europhile, offered the script to Hellman. According to Tatum, Hellman felt that Corry's script, about a white man and a black man racing across country, was "interesting but not fully realised". He gave me a different opinion. "It was... The Gumball Rally. Only it was a Disney version of that, if you can imagine such a thing. It was the most insipid, silly, sentimental, dumb movie you could imagine. But it was about a race. I was attracted to just the idea of a cross-country race." He and Laughlin agreed that they had to find a new writer – "When I think about it, it's absurd: they paid $100,000 for this script that we *totally* threw out" – and Hellman decided on novelist Rudy Wurlitzer, whose only previous screen credit was as a co-writer on Jim McBride's Glen and Randa. "I read a novel that he had written called *Nog*. There was one scene in particular that was so absurd and so brilliant that I just couldn't resist him as a writer. These three people are camped out in the wilderness, two guys and a girl. And the hero of the story is sent off to gather firewood. He comes back to find the girl and the other guy fucking. And the hero says, 'So I started fucking her from behind.' And he said, 'First he came, and she came, and I plunged on alone.' That had so much... that was the human condition." Hellman finally tracked down Wurlitzer in San Francisco.

It's unclear whether the casting of James Taylor was the brainchild of Hellman, Laughlin or Fred Ross. "I saw a billboard on Sunset Boulevard and I just flipped over his face," Hellman told me. "James came out and did a screen test, and he had a moustache. We weren't sure whether we wanted him with or without it so in the screen test he shaves it off." Everything was all set for a May shoot when Cinema Centre suddenly dropped the project in April. Hellman and Laughlin made the studio rounds ("MGM thought it would be a boring film because it all took place in a car. One of the things I had to do when we were presenting it to them was demonstrate how many different camera angles you could get in a car. I think I came up with 24") and finally made their deal with Ned Tanen, whose independent production unit at Universal was also responsible for Frank Perry's Diary of a Mad Housewife, Milos Forman's American debut Taking Off, Dennis Hopper's The Last Movie and Peter Fonda's The Hired Hand (which was, at one point offered to Hellman). They made the film for $850,000 and Hellman had final cut – a standard deal with Tanen's artists. "We realised that the reason that deal was made was because of Easy Rider. There was no question that we appreciated its success as a ticket to a kind of freedom that wouldn't have been available to us otherwise."

Hellman shot Two-Lane Blacktop in sequence, and took his crew caravan-style on a real cross country trip – from LA to Needles, California to Flagstaff, Arizona to Santa Fe and Tucumcari, New Mexico, then to Boswell, Oklahoma, Little Rock, Arkansas and Memphis and Maryville, Tennessee. This highly unusual practice did not endear the director to his crew and his actors, who were doubly exasperated by getting their script pages only the night before their scenes. "In life you don't know what's going to happen to you next week, so I didn't feel that that was crucial to being able to play the scene today." As a result his less experienced actors – Taylor, Beach Boys' drummer Dennis Wilson and newcomer Laurie Bird (a teenager with a strange history that fit her role as a drifting hitcher perfectly) – stay a little off-kilter but fresh, in a prolonged state of early morning clarity. Taylor's line readings are awkward, but his lanky physique and beady hawk face are perfect for an obsessive racer who cannot leave the protection of his 1955 Chevy.

The first rough assemblage of Two-Lane Blacktop was four hours long. "We were contractually obligated to deliver a two-hour movie so we lost half the script. We lost some good scenes, for sure, that I fell in love with." It's possible to go back and look at Wurlitzer's original script (the whole thing was published in Esquire before the film came out under the heading 'The Movie of the Year', one of the worst marketing decisions of all time), in which the characters are a bit more filled out than in the finished film. The influence of Paris Nous Appartient is especially telling here. Two-Lane Blacktop is made up of



James Taylor, Laurie Bird and Dennis Wilson in Two Lane Blacktop

many of the alleged in-between moments that most filmmakers would automatically cut. I'm thinking of one scene in particular, in which Taylor and Wilson confront Warren Oates and decide to race him across country. Quite a bit of time is devoted to Oates leaning against a wall drinking a bottle of Coke, putting it half-finished in the bottle rack, drinking from it again, putting it back. The scene is made up of milling around, quietly delivered taunts from Taylor and Wilson at Oates in his flashy yellow GTO, and a geography of hurt feelings, needling, and insecurity is laid out around a sleepy gas station. It's a scene that defines the film and lays the groundwork for the strange mixture of tenderness and disconnection that develops between these four people. More correctly it is tenderness via disconnection, because the remoteness they all share provides a barrier that makes it safe for them to relate to each other. Everybody except Laurie Bird's petulant hitcher is magnetised to one another, and without the bond of conflict they remain undefined.

A common thread in 1970s art is the importance of landscape as connective tissue, as a touchstone, a home, a cure or a self-influenced punishment. Two classic instances: Joni Mitchell's 'Blue' and Bob Dylan's 'Blood On the Tracks', musical masterpieces of melancholy and regret intimately tied to wanderlust, names of places and people ("I looked for you in old Honolulu, San Francisco or Ashtabula" and "The last time I saw Richard was Detroit in 1968"). The phe-

nomenon of the road movie is actually the fullest expression of a spirit that disappeared (from American culture) in the 1980s. Landscape in 1970s art and thought is important even in works where it is not immediately obvious – for instance, Joan Micklin Silver's lovely Chilly Scenes of Winter, where the funk that has settled over all the characters seems intertwined with the snowy, overcast weather around Salt Lake City. Think also of the plays of Sam Shepard, or the writings of Gregory Bateson that were popular at the time and his insistence that Man be referred to properly as Man In Nature. We look back fondly on the best of 1970s cinema now, with its flux, its resistance to pinning people or places down with ready formulations, as an antidote to the current norm of easily tagged characters fastened to a spruced and polished backdrop. Around 1983 is when the shift begins – to Reaganism, new ageism, and in movies to a grid mentality that follows the Hitchcockian formula of emotion and camera distance to the letter and lowers it to the level of a business calculation. Man as the ultimate owner of his destiny returns and landscape disappears, becomes flattened out and standardised or turned into an exotic effect moulded to fit whatever drama is at hand.

Two-Lane Blacktop offers an oblique tour of a wide variety of suburban, desert and rural settings that are never editorialised or offered for delectation. What is striking is the way Hellman gets the rolling rhythm of a changing landscape behind unchanging people. "For me, space is not neutral," Hellman told Michel Ciment in a 1973 *Postitif* interview, "not only in life but also in my films. New Mexico is not Oklahoma, and I never used a scene outside of its geographical context. The landscape is different and, from this point of view, everything was very precise. It's like the sound or the dialogue: I don't want to make an element of the film obvious. In a sense I'm a landscape painter, but I don't want to show a landscape only for its beauty, or to enhance its value." This is a holistic approach to filmmaking that puts Hellman in a select group whose other members include Hawks, Dreyer, Bresson, Renoir and Murnau. But Hellman is not an optimist like Hawks, or a sensualist like Renoir. Nor is his vision organised around transcendence or spiritual immanence like Murnau, Bresson and Dreyer. If this seems like an exaggerated claim, I think that there's a reason for that: along with Cassavetes and the Straubs, Hellman is one of the great materialist filmmakers – past the point of rejecting or questioning God, like Bergman and Godard, these are artists for whom the question of God doesn't even come up. This probably accounts for their lack of popularity with the critical establishment, who regard transcendence or its rejection as a necessary component of great art.

This movie about a cross country race between a car freak in a souped-up 1955 Chevy and a fantasist in a slick GTO moves at an even, gliding pace, and it's all about the racers stopping to gas up, to eat, to make money in a short lo-

cal race, to pick up hitchhikers, to let the engine breathe, to share a drink. There's a poignance in Hellman's tough-minded approach, which does not highlight or build up but maintains a steady forward motion. All the fumbling attempts to reach out to another human being dissolve into the flow of film time. Hellman takes a sleepy Arkansas town on a rainy Sunday morning and works the specificity of place, time and circumstance to maximum effect. Taylor and Wilson stop to steal some local plates so they won't get pulled over, and the square Oates decides he needs some too – he's so drunk he falls asleep on the ground, leaning against the front of his car with the screwdriver in his hand. They can't leave him behind, though. They think they are in a race, but Hellman allows us to see that they really aren't. They are really players in a theatre of life.

Taylor and Oates attempt to absorb every person or place that crosses their path with their respective mindsets. Taylor is the introvert, and everything for him is swallowed up and contained by the road. For the extroverted Oates, everything becomes a part of a dream that he's spinning as he drives across America. Taylor's aquiline face may be the visual centrepiece of the movie, buoyed by Laurie Bird's pout ("I don't see anybody paying attention to *my* rear end") and Dennis Wilson's pudgy stoned softness, but Oates is its emotional centre. While it seems obvious on reflection that Hellman and Wurlitzer planned on such a mind-body bifurcation, it doesn't smack of schematising the way it's enacted.

There's not another character like Oates's in all American cinema. Fredric March's drunken manager of small loans in The Best Years Of Our Lives, Dana Andrews's melancholy regular guys in his films for Preminger, Christopher Walken's mercenary in The Dogs of War, Bogart's forlorned convict in Dark Passage – they all come close in their feeling for lonely smallness and bruised egos, but none of them are willing to recede and verge on disappearance the way Oates is here. In V-neck sweaters (they keep changing colour), driving gloves, a wet bar in the trunk, music to suit every mood, a cocky grin that looks like it's been practiced in the mirror and a different story for everyone he picks up along the road, this man without a name has bought the James Bond/Playboy ideal of the well-rounded man, and he adapts himself to every mood. Oates's weathered face and toothy grin never seemed as beautiful as they did here, and there is no other performance that I can think of that registers the slightest prick of wounded feelings with such care and sensitivity. "Why aren't you in Bakersfield?" says a downhome cracker that GTO picks up on the road, and Oates tries to band-aid the hurt on his face with a smile.

The man in the GTO never states anything directly, and a wealth of potential backstory is allowed to build in our minds. Oates gives him a strong sense of physical maladaption – he can't even lean against a building comfortably.

Plenty of American actors have tried to show the void lurking behind grandstanding bravado, but it's usually spoiled by a subliminal hogging, a fear of being plain. Only Oates has been brave enough to put the softness in the American character on display, the degree to which a personality can be a desperate invention. It's notable that the one real success GTO has in the movie – he smooth-talks a couple of rednecks out of beating up Taylor and Wilson by concocting a story about how they're singers and he's their manager – is thanks to his skill as a championship liar. He tries to lose his knowledge of his own desperation and dissatisfaction in the limitless possibility of the landscape.

Taylor's driver, on the other hand, tries to burrow into the landscape. That's why the last image of the movie, in which the film appears to catch in the projector and burn, is no late-1960s affectation à la Thomas Crown Affair. "It was really the most intellectual, conscious manipulation of the audience that I've ever done. I thought it was a movie about speed, and I wanted to bring the audience back out of the movie and into the theatre, and to relate them to the experience of watching a film. I also wanted to relate them to, not consciously but unconsciously, the idea of film going through a camera, which is related to speed as well. I think it came to me out of a similar kind of thing that Bergman did with Persona." Hellman knows that the efforts of Taylor's character to disappear into speed are not just futile but a lie. What better way to draw us out of Taylor's head than to arrest the illusion and burn up the frame from its centre? If the film were made today, it would undoubtedly end with a realisation of Taylor's impossible fantasy, just as Ed Wood ends with the premiere of Plan 9 From Outer Space at the Pantages Theatre. This type of 'ambiguity' – really a way for the filmmaker to have his or her cake and eat it too – has no place in Hellman's bluntly realistic scheme of things.

Two-Lane Blacktop is the least romantic road movie imaginable in that it confronts its subject and lays bare its illusions. Although it doesn't posit itself as a critique of America, in the end it is a much sharper and more complete comment on American dreaming than Ragtime, Nashville, The Godfather or Four Friends. Those films are panoramas of pain and deceit, but they are also banquets. Oliver Stone, for instance, makes films that attempt to transfer national traumas from the American subconscious whole onto the screen, but they are the formal equivalent of ten national holidays rolled into one. The celebration of America is supposedly irresistible, often taken as integral to any understanding of the country as a phenomenon, but films like Hellman's or Bob Rafelson's see a sombre, more pleading side. Hellman sees Blacktop as a romance (his principle prototypes were Minnelli's The Clock, Lelouch's Un Homme et une Femme and Wilder's The Apartment), but that may be its least interesting aspect: it is really a film about self-delusion. Warren Oates's

GTO driver is every born-again Christian, every pontificating drunk or junkie, every young person who marries or has a baby or moves to another town because they think it will change their life, every sharp young tycoon in training who plans to make a killing in real estate and then rest on easy street. His most poignant moment is another tall tale, this one told to Laurie Bird, who's almost asleep in the passenger's seat. "We're gonna go to Florida, and we're gonna lie around that beach and we're just gonna get healthy. Let all the scars heal. Maybe we'll run over to Arizona. The nights are warm... and the roads are straight. And we'll build a house. Yeah, we'll build a house. 'Cause if I'm not grounded pretty soon... I'm gonna go into orbit." He's really just talking to himself.

After Two-Lane Blacktop, Hellman developed Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid with Wurlitzer, but the deal went sour, and the film eventually went to Peckinpah ("I didn't understand the difference between a development deal and a go picture. I wasn't that smart from a business point of view"). He also acted in James Frawley's The Christian Licorice Store, which features cameo appearances by Jean Renoir and his wife Dido. He went to Hong Kong to shoot In a Dream of Passion (the adaptation of La Maison Des Rendez-Vous) to be produced by Gary Kurtz. Sets were designed, and casting was in progress. Hellman wanted Sean Connery, his producer wanted Jon Finch, Finch's agent told Hellman that his client wasn't interested, and the film folded (Finch would later meet Hellman and tell him that he never even saw the script). Hellman soon returned to Hong Kong to direct a Hammer film called Shatter, only to be fired in mid-production ("I got fired basically because of a difference of opinion as far as treating racial subjects in the picture"). He returned to America, and Roger Corman offered him a project that he had been nurturing for some time, based on the Charles Willeford novel Cockfighter.

Hellman quickly became frustrated by the situation in which he had landed. "Roger already had a screenplay and I tried to do what I normally do, which is to remould it to suit my own purposes. I hired Earl Mac Rauch to do a re-write, and I guess after the first week Roger really started getting depressed, because it was really his baby and not mine, and he told me that I could have Mac for just one additional week." Hellman and Rauch were forced to concentrate on the scenes involving Frank (Oates) and his lover Mary Elizabeth (Patricia Pearcy), so that only the beginning of the film, a riverside encounter in the middle and the ending reflect their work. Hellman does not like Cockfighter for this reason, but his difficulties aren't reflected in the finished product.

Cockfighter (which also came out under the titles Gamblin' Man and Wild Drifter in addition to Born to Kill) is about Frank Mansfield out of

Decatur, Georgia, who speaks only in voiceover throughout most of the film – he's taken a vow of silence because it was his loud mouth that cost him a sot at the cockfighting championship the year before. He has asked his girlfriend to hold off marrying another man, so that he can prove himself stable enough for a long-term relationship. She has never seen the most important aspect of his life, and he invites her to the championship. The story falls far afield of many norms at once – of decency (the subject matter), of morality (no one gets their comeuppance for indulging in the evils of cockfighting), and of storytelling and movie acting (the hero doesn't speak). And what's so striking about Hellman's approach is its feeling of familiarity. We seem to light upon every scene, with delicacy and an appropriately southern sense of ease. The first thing we see is the inside of a moving trailer, the camera panning to the gentle rhythm of Michael Franks's score. The light is warm, cozy, and then we hear the weathered voice of Warren Oates in a conversational tone: "I learned to fly a plane... and I lost interest in it. Water skiin'... I lost interest in *it*. But, uh, this is somethin' you don't conquer. Anything that can fight to the death and not utter a sound, well..." The camera settles on a bird with brilliantly coloured feathers in a cage on a counter. The film never loses this intimate tone.

This is another remarkable performance from Oates, who doesn't play the driven side of Frank's personality. The determination comes through in his concentration. There is no wasted motion – depriving himself of speech has focused Frank as well as the actor who plays him, and every gesture is gracefully communicative. There's a wonderful scene where someone tells Frank a joke, and he waits a beat before taking off his hat and slapping it three times against his leg, then putting it back on: he's so focused that he can't be thrown by pleasantries. But the performance also has carefully inserted moments of wild abandon, like the flashback to Championship eve when he bounces off the walls of his tiny motel room boasting that his bird can take anybody else's. This is a whole, finished portrait, and a ridiculously unheralded performance.

The cockfight sequences are impromptu but heavily ritualised gatherings. It's easy to imagine another director cutting to close-ups of bloodthirsty yahoos swigging beer as they lay odds on unsuspecting birds. Here the crowd is spirited but respectful: they are participating in a tradition that has gone on for generations. There is no bloodlust, but there is a strict set of rules and codes of behaviour. "We went down there to Georgia and we just started living in that world, which is really a very important part of the life there, particularly the subculture [of cockfighting]. I really loved the people, and as I got into it, I was making a picture about them and about their life. That aspect of it I like a lot. The documentary aspect of it appeals to me."

Hellman shows a warmth in Cockfighter that is not so abundant in his other work. These may be "appalling people" (an appalling description from

Leslie Halliwell's film guide) because of the sport they engage in, but they conduct themselves with gentlemanly politeness and communal good spirits. This is the most Rossellinian of Hellman's films, in that he demonstrates the desperate competitive drive of people without dramatising it by documenting their gatherings and cutting to the ferocity of the cockfighting (no doubt it is what Roger Corman meant when he complained that Hellman had made a "quiet" film). When Hellman does cut to the birds themselves in quick flashes, the effect is striking: in the hands of Director of Photography Nestor Almendros they become bright bursts of action painting. The game cocks are not symbols but extensions, facilitators – the birds are engaged in a struggle to survive that the people thrive on at a vicarious level filtered through rules, ceremony and decorum. In a strange way, the cockfights imbue these people with poignancy rather than ugliness – their frame of experience is small and circumscribed, their desires so ritualised, it is as if their existence depended on the framework of winning and losing in order to have meaning.

The film is filled with warm, sharply funny interactions between Frank and a circle of people who share this genteel world: his sister and her husband (Millie Perkins and Troy Donahue), his partner Omar (Richard B. Shull), his principal rival Jack Burke (Harry Dean Stanton) and a cockfighting judge who recognises Frank as the purest trainer on the circuit (author Charles Willeford). It is punctuated by eye-popping, wholly unexpected bursts of physical energy, another anomaly in his work (this is more of a Corman trademark, but Hellman handles a scene like the one where Ed Begeley, Jr.'s farm boy goes ballistic on Frank because his beloved game cock has lost a match with more tonal control than Corman could ever manage). Beneath the gentility, however, what sets everyone in motion here is a very American desire to win that is made all the more powerful because it's so subtly delineated. Frank sends his sister and brother-in-law packing and moves his entire house off his property because he wants to use it to train his birds. He wants Mary Elizabeth to see him and accept him in his world, but that's secondary.

The ending of the film is extraordinary. Frank's game cock goes round after round with Burke's, and wins just before he collapses: finally, Frank has a real emotional attachment to this bird, which gets him the cockfighting medal. This prompts Mary Elizabeth to walk out in disgust. "That bird had more heart than you do," she says, and Frank throws the bird to the ground, steps on it, rips its head off its body and shoves it into her hand. She shudders with horror, then gamely wraps the head in a handkerchief, puts it in her pocketbook and walks away. "She loves me, Omar," says Frank to his partner, his first words in the entire movie. It's a truly transcendent moment, a surging electric exchange of the life force that lifts the film to another plane: the sphere of life may be circumscribed, an endless repetition of competitive rituals, but within that world

forces can transform themselves into spirited energy. Frank is right, she does love him, because she performs an act that matches his in audacity and sheer spontaneous expression.

During the three years between Cockfighter and his next completed film, Hellman did post-production work on a biography of Muhammed Ali called The Greatest after director Tom Gries died (he would perform a similar chore a couple of years later when he did extensive post-production on the doomed Avalanche Express after Mark Robson died), he directed an episode of the TV cop show *Barretta* and edited the action sequences in Peckinpah's The Killer Elite. At Christmas time 1976, producer Elliot Kastner called Hellman from Rome and told him to come and shoot a western – the script needed just a little work. "I got a couple of writer friends to agree to do a rewrite. 'This is terrible, we can't rewrite this,' they said, and I said, 'Well, just write me a new script.'" Kastner hated the new script and checked out, but the Italian producers loved it, and Hellman left for Spain to shoot what would become China 9, Liberty 37.

China 9, Liberty 37 (the title comes from a Texas road sign Hellman saw as he rode a cross-country train home after finishing Cockfighter) is a lovely film, and a somewhat flawed one as well. Its tone is lonely and sad, very close to Cockfighter, only lacking its bursts of energetic behaviour and its vibrant visual scheme. There is a pervasive sense of winding down that hovers over this movie – you can feel the uptake as horses gallop and as people walk. The weatherbeaten poetry may come in part from the fact that Hellman's father died during pre-production – in fact the character of Clayton Drum (Fabio Testi) was written to relate to certain experiences in his life. Drum is a hired gun, and he's pardoned from the gallows on condition that he kill another hired gun named Sebenec (Warren Oates) who won't sell his property to the railroad. But he finds that he likes Sebenec and decides not to murder him. Sebenec's young wife Catherine (Jenny Agutter) is sexually attracted to Clayton, and sleeps with him the morning that Clayton leaves. Sebenec divines the truth and attacks Catherine, who stabs him in self-defence. She runs after Clayton, who is less than pleased to have her tagging along, but they enjoy a few passionate nights together before they are caught – by Sebenec, who has survived, and his brothers.

After the blazing originality of the previous four Hellman pictures, the strict adherence to generic character ideas throughout much of China 9, Liberty 37 is disappointing. It's arguable that the common denominators of the western genre are also present in The Shooting and Ride in the Whirlwind – the hired gun, the lonely cowpokes, the homesteading family alone in the wilderness. But in China 9, behaviour is much more constricted than in any previous Hellman film, and two of the principal characters are severely lim-

ited. It's partly an acting problem – Testi is loveable in a way, and Hellman works hard to make his bulk play credibly onscreen, but he is never really animated dramatically or visually. Agutter was one of the loveliest actresses of the 1970s, but she was fatally inexpressive, and her Laura Ashley brand of demureness is miles away from a frontier wife, even a pampered one. There is also something beyond western stereotypes that hampers the script by Douglas Venturelli and Jerry Bryant (who ran the famed Z channel for movies in LA, and who would later commit suicide). The sexual politics that colour the relationship between Clayton and Catherine are typically late-1970s – "I want to be with you tonight – and I hate you for it," he tells her, and they come to terms with their lust like model pop-psychological partners. This is followed by an extended slow-motion sex scene accompanied by a maudlin Ronee Blakely song that may be the most modish thing Hellman's ever filmed. Their relationship is not really articulated and short-circuits on platitudes, although it must be said that, with the exception of Cockfighter, romantic pairings have never been a strength for Hellman (the love story between James Taylor and Laurie Bird, contrary to Hellman's assessment, is probably the least developed aspect of Two-Lane Blacktop). After Clayton kills one of Sebenec's brothers in self-defence, they flee, and their magical encounters with a travelling circus and a fanciful dime-novelist who wants to write Drum's story (Sam Peckinpah in a dry, detached performance – he delivers his lines in a failed high-dramatic voice) don't have very much to bounce off of in order to spark their intended poetry.

Predictably, this movie comes to life in every sequence with Warren Oates. Each Oates performance for Hellman is a fully-formed creation – the lean, paranoid Willet Gashade; the dreaming, lonely man behind the wheel in Two-Lane Blacktop; the rousing but rigorously single-minded Frank Mansfield; and Matthew Sebenec, a rumpled, ageing, wary gunfighter. He's quiet, settled in, dresses in clothes that look like sacks – and he's deeply distrustful in a way that seems to be the result of years spent in an isolated setting. The dailiness that runs through all of Hellman's work is most pervasive and touching in the scenes with Oates, an actor who knows how to do dead time and put life around the edges. Oates's scene where he goes bananas after he discovers that Agutter and Testi have slept together is wonderful. Catherine comes in from outside, and Sebenec gets amorous. "I have to make breakfast," she says. "Fuck breakfast," he says, before he notices that her night gown is wet and sees Clayton riding away. "You've been with him, haven't you? I'll be damned... I'll be god*damned*!" This is a different kind of hurt from that of the GTO driver in Two-Lane Blacktop – this is the hurt of a cuckold, a soft, nondescript older man with sunken shoulders whose wife has proved his worst fear: that he does not satisfy her sexually. Sebenec is more immobilised than any other

Oates/Hellman character, partly because Hellman builds the latter part of the film on parallel editing that carries an ideogrammatic force but keeps actors in a tableau stance. Sebenec's slowly evolving forgiveness of Catherine is collapsed and cunningly delineated through ellipses, and after a predictable shoot-out with Clayton, the film ends on a fine image – Sebenec and Catherine riding away as their house burns behind them, a beautiful symbol of the rebuilding of their marriage.

"We were both born in July, and we had a natural affinity for one another," Hellman said of Oates. He wouldn't talk much about his friend and most vital collaborator, perhaps because it was too painful – it had been only two years since Oates had died of a heart attack at the age of 53. But what could he add that would amplify their achievement together, which already speaks so eloquently? Monte Hellman and Warren Oates the great unrecognised actor/director partnership – they are as important as Ford/Wayne, Sternberg/Dietrich, Mann/Stewart and Scorsese/De Niro. And in modern American cinema, where every actor looks like he or she has just come from the gym, where self-promotion and self-expression have become confused and entangled, Warren Oates, the actor who was unafraid of playing small, insignificant men and who cultivated not an ounce of glamour, is missed beyond measure. He did some good work for Peckinpah, but not even Alfredo Garcia can compare to the poetry of his films with Hellman, who dedicated Iguana, his next completed film, to Warren Oates.

China 9 was never released in America. The Italian owners took a severely recut and re-looped version to Cannes in 1982 and were going to sell it to the world television market, but Hellman also attended the festival (he appears in Wenders' 1982 Cannes documentary Chambre 666) and convinced his ex-lawyer, who was then a Lorimar executive, to buy the film and at least show it on TV in its correct form. It only had a quick theatrical run at the Thalia (a virtual Monte Hellman admiration society) in 1983. After China 9, Hellman almost shot a German spy story called Secret Warriors, but the company that was going to finance the project went bankrupt with Téchiné's The Bronte Sisters; almost shot a film called Dark Passion for Paramount and "they elected not to go ahead with that"; almost shot a film called King of White Lady at Zoetrope but got stuck on the same development merry-go-round as Nicholas Roeg and Franc Roddham. In 1983, he shot a seven minute short called Francis Coppola: A Profile for the Playboy channel. It would be five years before he would direct another film.

"Compared to Iguana, all my previous work is like Walt Disney movies," Hellman told Tatum. I'm not sure if this holds water – the endings of Ride In The Whirlwind and Two-Lane Blacktop are pretty tough, but Iguana is a different kind of film ("... the first art-essay film by Monte Hellman," wrote Bill

Krohn), and it sets itself on a more explicitly metaphysical plane. Hellman was able to bring the Alberto Vasquez-Figueroa novel to the screen (although the avowed source for the main character of Oberlus, the harpooner, is Melville's *The Encantadas*) in part because of a mistake: according to Tatum, an interpreter mistranslated a letter from an Italian producer who did *not* want to do the film and made it appear that he was giving Hellman a green light. The movie was shot in 1987, in Rome and the Canaries, which doubled for the Galapagos Islands. The action is set in the early 19th century. Oberlus (Everett McGill) jumps from a whaling ship, where he is tortured and ridiculed by his shipmates as well as his captain (Fabio Testi – the part was supposed to go to Patrick Bachau) even though he is the best harpooner on board. Half of his face is covered with a growth that makes him look like an iguana. Oberlus goes to an island and takes some sailors hostage who have been sent ashore to capture him – he makes them his slaves, and builds a small society that is based on the only thing he knows: force. When a woman named Carmen (Maru Valdivielso) comes ashore with her lover, Oberlus murders him and captures her to become his sex slave. He impregnates her, but vows that if the baby looks like him, he will drown it to save it from the tortures he's suffered.

Iguana is a thrilling film, and a pretty odd and amazingly rarefied one as well. It's not just a question of Hellman being out of step with modern filmmaking (thank God for small favours!). The kind of film language and syntax that characterise Iguana have all but disappeared from cinema, at least in America, and its brio is refreshing. The movie has a hard, raw physical beauty, worked so carefully that it seems to have been carved out of the landscape, and its few manmade details are exquisite, particularly a chest full of nautical effects. But it's also unbelievably brusque. It's possible that the financial constraints were so great that Hellman developed an aesthetic of poverty to cover his lack of production values, but his storytelling is pushed to its extremity here, and scenes are short and blunt with little room to breathe. Tatum writes that Hellman's customary "montage à la Rivette" is gone here, but I would say that on the contrary this begins as Hellman's most Rivettean film, with especially strong echoes of Noroit (safe bet Hellman has never seen it, of course) because of the shared pirate milieu. The first section of Iguana cuts back and forth between two apparently unrelated stories – Oberlus on the island and Carmen at home with her father and various lovers – and when they meet, the convergence isn't just narrative but poetic, much in the manner of Rivette.

But the thesis form of the film is very non-Rivette, and it is not especially suited to Hellman, who works best with situations that slowly evolve over expanses of space and time. Moreover, that thesis is so despairing that I have to question how much it's actually embraced by its author and how much it's a provocative dramatic conceit. The film is punctuated by horrendous acts of

cruelty. Oberlus engages the most literate of his captives, Dominique (Joseph Culp), also the most eloquent spokesman on behalf of good will in the world, to teach him to read. Later, he decides to punish one of the slaves for insubordination and tells Dominique to decapitate him before the count of ten. If he doesn't, Oberlus will hand the sword to the other man and count to ten, and go back and forth all night if necessary before one of them kills the other. Dominique finally kills the other man, who is his friend, and his entire belief system is shattered.

Oberlus's stark vision of life is perpetually fulfilled. At the end of the film, he guides his slaves over the top of the island as they run from men searching for Carmen. She is ready to give birth, but Oberlus won't let her stop running, and the baby is born in a cave on the beach. Oberlus takes one look at it and pulls it out of Carmen's arms. As Carmen screams and the braying of tracking dogs becomes louder, he walks into the ocean and drowns himself and his child. The end of the film is undeniably powerful, but the extent to which that is due to the cumulative impact of the rest of the movie is doubtful. The bold-faced point-making that characterises the script is rendered potently as action, but the theme is never carefully elaborated. It is just cruelty, endlessly restated. Altogether, Iguana is one of Hellman's most fascinating films, but it strikes me as the result of an uneasy marriage between the deeply personal and the readily available. The inevitable post-script, of course, is that Iguana is far and away Hellman's most invisible film, seen by next to no one – the only writing I know of on this strange, one of a kind movie is by the invaluable Bill Krohn in *Cahiers du cinéma.*

What is there to say about Hellman's next film, Silent Night Deadly Night 3: Better Watch Out? First of all, it's completely singular as a slasher film, as Krohn has pointed out – it proceeds at a hypnotically slow pace, and a high percentage of its murders occur offscreen. The most striking sequences in the film involve the young heroine Laura (Samantha Scully), who is blind and has psychic powers (she's channelling into a maniacal, comatose killer), and Hellman holds his camera on her for long stretches, building an unsettling, dreamlike tone. Krohn has compared Hellman to Jacques Tourneur, and the comparison is apt: both are quietists, with a feel for mood and overall tone rather than dramatic attack. Hellman certainly applies himself to the horror genre just as conscientiously as Tourneur always did, without a trace of the slumming artist. But I think that providing shocks is somewhat alien to Hellman, and that Better Watch Out has some of the same problems as Back Door to Hell and Flight To Fury. Its tone is *so* uniformly oneiric that it isn't really scary. Tourneur's The Leopard Man, for instance, is one of the great, sustained pieces of 1940s Hollywood filmmaking, and it works from within the genre, building to terrifying set pieces. But Hellman applies himself *over*

the horror genre, and his elegant tone feels a little divorced from the material. He has spoken of Better Watch Out in personal terms, as the second part of a "Beauty and the Beast" trilogy (in fact, there is a clip from The Terror in the film: a gas station owner who is about to be murdered is watching it on Christmas Eve), but at a recent season of his work at the BFI he would not allow it to be shown. Better Watch Out is an impressive film, but Hollywood in 1995 is a different world from Hollywood in 1942 or 1958 (the year of Tourneur's British Curse of the Demon). The second sequel to a slasher movie is now considered the bottom of the barrel by a community of pretentious, instant auteurs and business sharks, notwithstanding the fact that there is more artistry in a single sequence of Better Watch Out than in the collected works of Richard Donner.

"I think that we suffered, in a sense, from a kind of hubris," Hellman said of himself and his compatriots at the Corman factory. "We really were egocentric. We really were more concerned about feeling good about what we were doing and making films that we ourselves really liked. And not concerned with what the critics were going to say, or how many tickets we were going to sell. We just assumed that that was part of it, that you make a picture and people go to see it. It was before the time, such as now, when, if the picture doesn't have the potential to do a certain kind of box-office, they don't even run it... Somehow, the film schools got turned around in a funny way, and they're teaching people how to make money. They're teaching them how to make a success in Hollywood, and that never occurred to us or was never part of the training that we went through." The "we" here is instructive, a reminder of all the great creative teamwork that went on during that period: Corman's sweatshop, Warhol's factory, Oshima's 'gang', Bergman and Fellini's stock companies, the loose assemblages around Rivette and Rohmer. Those days are gone, and now everyone is a solitary artist.

Ned Tanen once said that Two-Lane Blacktop was the finest film he ever worked on, and he has reason to be proud: after the dust has cleared, it stands, along with Cockfighter, as one of the great works of the American cinema. Even a Hellman film that is not wholly satisfying, like Better Watch Out, has greatness in it. Hellman's cinema, on the whole, from Beast from Haunted Cave on, reflects the hypnotic side of existence, the immersion of consciousness deep within the rhythm of living. "Basically, I've never done my own movies. I've been a director for hire, and I've tried to do what I could with the projects I was assigned to." For a director for hire, Hellman has never compromised his own artistry, softened it for popular consumption or twisted it into a pretzel like Coppola. "His example is a source of the greatest strength," Martin Scorsese wrote of John Cassavetes. And so it is with the less flamboyant but equally uncompromising Monte Hellman. "I could've easily made a picture

that reflected the popular taste and that people wanted to see, but that would've been boring to me. You spend three months or six months or a year or two years working on a film, and if all you're thinking about is making a lot of money... you know, it's two years of your life. If you're making a picture that's gonna bore you in the process and afterwards when you have to look at it, it doesn't seem to be worth it."

Hellman defended Coppola, that most solitary of all artists, against my assertions that he was one of the filmmakers who had pushed him into the shadows ("Whether you agree or disagree with what he does or how well or badly he does it, he's true to those demons within himself, and I don't think that that's true of a lot of filmmakers today"). Hellman may be right, but Coppola was one of the pioneers of what Noel Carroll identified in his 1981 *October* article as the "two-tiered system of filmmaking", in which the director satisfies audience demands and winks at cinephiles at the same time with references to other movies. Coppola was once a patchy director, and now he's a patchwork director, sewing together entire movies out of memories of old ones – Bram Stoker's Dracula is one of the most grotesque films ever made by a supposedly major director, and its "artistry" is never sustained for more than a second at a time. But it's possible to sustain a modicum of sympathy for a megalomaniac like Coppola, because there are few alternatives left. The influence of films like his own or those of Spielberg or Lucas ("In Star Wars, they literally put up every air battle that was ever shot and copied them. I mean, that seems to me such a dearth of imagination that I can't even conceive of it," said Hellman) coupled with rock videos and the validation of something called post-modernism bred an army of young directors with a concept of film as nothing more than an unmodulated stream of visual shocks. The artistry of a Monte Hellman seems outmoded now, which is a tragedy. The work of this ridiculously underappreciated director seems all the more precious when set against the products of the supremely silly moment in American cinema that was the 1990s, with movies like Forrest Gump and Schindler's List. Which just goes to show, to quote Jean-Marie Straub on Dreyer's failure to find money to make Jesus, that "modern society isn't worth a frog's fart".

Note

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