

## **“No Parents, No Church or Authorities in Our Films”: Exploitation Movies, the Youth Audience, and Roger Corman’s Counterculture Trilogy**

### **I. From Bikinis to Bikers**

In early June 1966 James H. Nicholson, president of American International Pictures, the US film industry’s most important “major-minor” studio and its leading producer of low-budget, independent movies for youth audiences, announced a sharp change of direction for his company. The era of saucy-but-wholesome “beach and bikini” pictures that had been AIP’s stock in trade for the past three years—ever since the success of *Beach Party* had birthed a lucrative cycle of movies built around the vacation frolics of scantily-clad high-school hotties—was over. Henceforth AIP would offer its customers stronger, more challenging fare in the form of what Nicholson called “a series of protest films” (qtd. in “From Sand in Bikini”) designed both to reflect and exploit the turbulent, anti-authoritarian turn taken by American youth culture at mid-decade.<sup>1</sup>

The first of what *Box Office* labelled AIP’s “protest dramas” was *The Wild Angels*, according to *Variety* an “almost documentary style” depiction of the transgressive lifestyles of California’s outlaw motorcycle gangs most closely associated with the Hell’s Angels, then enjoying a period of nationwide notoriety thanks to exposés in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, and *Time* and *Life* magazines.<sup>2</sup> Only a couple of years before, Nicholson had stridently defended his beach-bikini pictures as “the epitome of morality,” deflecting accusations of prurience by insisting that “there are no overtly sexy sequences and no sex talk among the kids”; “the stars of AIP’s beach pictures,” he noted, “are always talking about getting married” (qtd. in McGee 219). Now, though, his company revelled shamelessly in the shockingly anti-social content of its product. AIP’s publicity notes for the press screening of *The Wild Angels* sensationalized the film’s biker gang as “a group of

fanatical rebels ... bent on kicks” which, “guided by a morality of its own,” seeks to “revenge itself harshly on society ... for what it feels are unwarranted intrusions and frustrations.” A provocative advertising campaign screamed, “Their credo is violence, their god is hate!” And reviewers played their part, dwelling on the film’s multiple instances of depravity and moral turpitude: “a sick, unclean, revolting spectacle,” concluded *The Hollywood Reporter*, remarking that “even necrophilia, the most loathsome of perversions, is presented with detachment” (Powers).

Trading bikinis for bikers was an unqualified success. By the end of 1966 *The Wild Angels*, which cost AIP only \$360,000 to make, had grossed over \$5 million, becoming by far the company’s highest earning film to date and ranking thirteenth in *Variety*’s year-end box office chart. AIP embarked on a cycle of biker films comprising a further twelve pictures over the next five years, while the company’s competitors in the youth exploitation market jumped on the biker bandwagon, creating a flourishing subgenre that between 1966 and 1972 would encompass some three dozen films in total.<sup>3</sup>

Even the majors took note. *Easy Rider*, the joint project of *Wild Angels* star Peter Fonda and AIP alumnus Denis Hopper, and a property on which AIP itself passed, was picked up by Columbia. When this variant of the disreputable AIP biker formula became the fourth highest-grossing film of 1969, making over \$19 million from a meagre \$370,000 budget (Hill 30), Hollywood was shocked into rapidly recalibrating its production practices to cater to the hitherto derided youth audience which AIP had spent the previous fifteen years cultivating. As Paul Monaco argues, “*Easy Rider* convinced the industry that movie production for the future would have to be based largely on a search for formulas and aesthetics that could truly excite the core audience of moviegoers—now composed almost entirely of adolescents and young adults” (188). AIP’s shift from bikinis to bikers had precipitated a fundamental change in the model of American film production and transformed the industry’s perception of its

market. *The Wild Angels* can thus be seen as a key precursor of the innovative and challenging films of “the New Hollywood” with their repudiation of the mainstream family audience, “their highly critical attitude towards major American institutions,” their “increasingly liberal attitudes towards sex, race and ethnicity,” and their “realistic, politicised and artistic outlook” (Krämer 85, 87).<sup>4</sup>

At the helm of *The Wild Angels* was Roger Corman, AIP’s most prolific producer-director. By 1966 Corman was a forty year-old veteran of 45 films made in a crowded thirteen years, “a one-man studio system” whose nose for the youth movie market had enabled him to “set in granite the teenpic exploitation style” (Doherty 126-27). *The Wild Angels* conformed to the teenpic exploitation formula in terms of shoestring finance, whirlwind production schedules, eye-popping publicity, and an exhibition strategy focused on regional markets and drive-in theatres. But its departure from the formula in terms of content pointed towards a new, socially-conscious direction in Corman’s teenpic work that would open up a rift between the director and his bosses at AIP, for all Nicholson’s commitment of the company to “protest” pictures. Five years earlier, Corman had gone out on a limb to make what for him was an unusually personal and political film, privately financing *The Intruder*, a serious, adult, and overtly liberal dissection of racism in the painfully desegregating American South. Distributors—including AIP—and exhibitors backed away from such sensitive material and a Corman project failed to cover its costs for the first and only time in his career. Chastened, Corman returned to AIP and his home turf of exploitation genre movies, resuming his cycle of Edgar Allan Poe-derived horror films that were second only to the beach-bikini pictures as company cash cows in the first half of the Sixties. Yet the startling success of *The Wild Angels* convinced Corman that contemporary sociological and political themes could be incorporated into the youth exploitation formula without destroying a film’s commercial prospects. In this respect *Angels* was the prototype of what Corman

called “my new technique”: “I will deliver the entertainment that the public expects to see in these films, but sub-textually there will be certain themes in there that are important to me” (qtd. in Love). Thus, Corman used *Angels* as a platform to depart from what he called “‘studio-like’ films” and to make instead “pictures of the times” (qtd. in “Midsection” 44), venturing deeper into the territory of the emerging dissident youth cultures that were objects of increasing fascination for the national media. With two subsequent AIP films, *The Trip* (1967) and *Gas-s-s-s* (1970), he would test the limits of the company’s commitment to “protest” pictures and complete a remarkable movie trilogy that remains the most sustained and sensitive engagement with the countercultural movements of the Sixties of any American entertainment filmmaker.

While *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip* have received attention in the contexts of the history of the exploitation film or of Corman career surveys, remarkably little has been said about the trilogy’s culminating and most radical film, *Gas-s-s-s*, nor about the series itself as a studied intervention in and reflection of the cultural politics of its moment of production. In what follows, I want to suggest that Roger Corman’s counterculture trilogy rewards closer analysis than it has so far been granted. Not only does it allow us to track Corman’s own evolving political position in that brief spell when he permitted his personal convictions to seriously inform his films, but, more importantly, through film aesthetics, marketing, and reception, it maps the contours of the increasingly influential youth audience of the period. In particular, it traces that audience’s fractured cultural identity and fragmented demographic composition, its conflicted ideological formation, and its contradictory relationship to the capitalist entertainment apparatus. The trilogy’s innovative yet unstable blend of exploitation conventions with elements of the European art film on the one hand and countercultural political attitudes on the other would ultimately blow apart the formulaic teenpic as defined by Corman and AIP in the 1950s, severing that partnership for good and abruptly terminating

Corman's directing career. And in its tentative movement towards a political utopianism qualified by humor and self-reflexive irony, it repudiated the mounting despair that seized the youth movement at decade's end, standing as a rebuke to virtually every other filmic representation of the cultural revolution of the Sixties, which preferred to indulge in narratives of ambivalence, dissipation and defeat.

## II. "The Outsiders' Point of View": *The Wild Angels*

In retrospective accounts of his career, Corman presents *The Wild Angels* as evidence of an increasing artistic and political adventurousness marked by a growing interest in and sympathy for outsiders and youth rebels. "My filmmaking instincts, like my stance in politics, were growing more radical," he remembers (Corman and Flood 131). In fact, a year prior to making the film, Corman had left AIP for Columbia only to be frustrated by a dearth of meaningful projects at the major studio. At the behest of Nicholson and AIP vice president Sam Arkoff, Corman agreed to return to his old employers, but not to the formulaic, set-bound genre pictures they expected and desired from him. "I said no, I wanted to do a contemporary film about young people today and I wanted to shoot it all on natural locations" (qtd. in Mason 63). His proposal to develop a film around the Hell's Angels grabbed Nicholson's and Arkoff's attention due to the topicality of the subject, but they wanted a moralistic narrative that presented the Angels from the condemnatory perspective of straight society, along the lines of Columbia's 1953 social-problem biker film, *The Wild One*. "I'm not interested in the point of view of the Establishment," Corman told them, "but the outlaws', the outsiders' point of view.... I wanted to make a realistic, possibly even sympathetic, film about them" (Corman and Flood 132).

To that end, Corman developed the story in close consultation with the Angels, basing it around a series of incidents related to him and writer Charles Griffith by the bikers

themselves in alcohol-and-dope-fuelled bull sessions charged to the AIP expense account. For additional authenticity, the Angels were retained to play the gang members, with the use of professional actors restricted to the few central parts. A loose, episodic narrative structure and a detached, documentary shooting style enabled Corman to eschew melodramatics and overt moralizing. Indeed, Corman noted that during filming “my sympathies did start to go a little bit to [the Angels]” as a result of the oppressive interest taken in them by the California police. The bikers “were, in many respects, being unjustly hassled by the law,” and Corman felt obliged to intercede on their behalf in order to keep the production to schedule (qtd. in Love 64).

Understanding that the studied neutrality of Corman’s depiction of the gang would open AIP up to condemnation, the company prefaced the film with a pre-emptive foreword that also signalled its shift from escapism to engagement with contemporary reality: “The picture you are about to see will shock and perhaps anger you. Although the events and characters are fictitious, the story is a reflection of our times.” Reviewers agreed, calling the film “astonishingly honest” (Hawkins) and “an authentic slice of contemporary American life that speaks volumes for the world we live in today” (Thomas, “Wild”). Even a horrified Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* was forced to allow that the film “gives a pretty good picture of what these militant motorcycle-cult gangs are.” Moreover, despite the bikers’ “mindless brutality” (Thomas), reviewers conceded that their alienated, anti-authority worldview held an irresistible appeal for the young. “Not since *The Wild One*, *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* will youthful audiences find such deep identification” (Thomas), concluded the *Los Angeles Times*, while the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* noted that “the treatment creates sympathy more with the ‘outlaws’ than with the law” (Hawkins).

Shock and anger inevitably followed, especially when *The Wild Angels* became the sole US representative at the 1966 Venice Film Festival whose director, Luigi Chiarini,

declared it “one of the most important American films of the past ten years” (qtd. in “Lotsa”). “An embarrassment,” concluded Bosley Crowther of the kudos a festival screening granted this “brutal little picture,” while *Time* magazine noted that in Europe “audiences like to be shown how beastly Americans are” (“Cinema: Varoom”). Founder of the National Society of Film Critics, Hollis Alpert, protested that the Motion Picture Association should have quashed the film’s Venice appearance, taking Corman to task for his stylistic and moral detachment: “what is being seen at Venice is a sensationalistic view of one small aspect of American life ... with little or no attempt to supply it with understanding or meaning” (53)

Yet despite such establishment alarm and Corman’s professed interest in the outlaws’ point of view, *The Wild Angels* cannot be read as a celebration of the biker lifestyle, nor as an indictment of bourgeois normality. For all Corman’s documentary approach and his avoidance of an explicit moral perspective, the film is nevertheless defined by what Bill Osgerby identifies as exploitation cinema’s characteristic “aesthetic of astonishment” (“Sleazy” 103). Plot, dialogue and characterization are minimized in order that priority can be given to the extended presentation of spectacular acts of transgression, emphasizing the Angels’ otherness and, ultimately, their impotence. Rape, promiscuity, theft, violence, vandalism, sacrilege and substance abuse are lingeringly and lasciviously dwelt on, but more importantly are presented as essentially joyless reflexes performed in a kind of rote automatism leading inexorably in the direction of death and despair. The protagonist, Angels “president” Heavenly Blues, initially appears to be something of an existential hero, “a modern-day cowboy” (Corman and Jerome 133) as Corman saw him, blazing out of the bland suburbs into the sublime expanses of the western landscape in the film’s glorious pre-credit sequence. But he is quickly exposed as lamely inarticulate and his “philosophy” to be less liberated hedonism than sullen, dead-end nihilism. “We wanna be free to ride our machines without being hassled by The Man,” he declaims in his one direct confrontation with

authority, but then trails off bathetically, “And we wanna get loaded!” And the film concludes with Blues expressing disillusionment with the biker lifestyle, admitting defeat as both leader and outlaw. His scheme to bust a buddy free of the law backfires, resulting in the buddy’s death; his old lady ditches him for a less tormented and introspective hellraiser; and his gang drifts away, leaving him isolated at his buddy’s graveside. “There’s nowhere to go,” he laments in the closing frames, passively awaiting arrest as police sirens draw closer, not even granted the dignity of a climactic showdown with The Man.

Nor, even, does *The Wild Angels* bear out Sam Arkoff’s claim about the new formula adopted by AIP to capture the youth audience of the mid Sixties. “We started looking for our audience by removing the element of authority from our films,” Arkoff claimed. “We saw the rebellion coming, but we couldn’t predict the extent of it, so we made a rule: no parents, no church or school authorities in our films. If they must appear, they will be bumbling, ineffectual people” (qtd. in McGee 242). The film’s opening sequence of Blues riding free along the coast and into the desert ends with him encountering a grizzled, hard-grafting oil-rigger at a fellow biker’s workplace. The worker impresses some paternal advice and historical perspective on the bemused delinquents, upbraiding them for sporting Nazi insignia. “If you guys had been in Anzio you’d know what that junk means,” he admonishes. “We used to kill guys who wore that kinda garbage!” And in the central biker-funeral scene, a kindly and tolerant preacher who welcomes the gang into his church is subjected to multiple indignities; bound and dumped into a coffin, he is forced to witness the systematic desecration of the altar as acts of monstrous indecency unfold before him. “How thou art fallen from Heaven, oh Lucifer!” he laments, quoting Isaiah 14:12, offering a biblical perspective for the judgement of the Angels’ actions. These parental and religious figures may be ineffectual in so far as they are powerless to curtail the Angels’ mayhem, but they are sympathetically-drawn and voice cogent and clear critiques of it.



Thus, built into *The Wild Angels* is a coherent moral perspective based on straight bourgeois values and encompassing what, during the era of the Motion Picture Production Code that by 1966 was virtually in abeyance, would have been called “the voice for morality.”<sup>5</sup> Yet Corman’s flat, dispassionate style and avoidance of overt preaching allowed audiences to revel in the Angels’ spectacular mayhem and inarticulate resentment of “The Man.” In this respect the film exemplifies the contradictory or paradoxical nature of both exploitation and cult cinema. According to Eric Schaefer, exploitation cinema’s “constant push at the boundaries of respectability and taste” is inseparable from its “impulse to exert bourgeois control over ... the social Other” (341), while for Barry Keith Grant cult films are likewise characterized by an “ability to be at once transgressive and recuperative” (19). And both forms foster modes of spectatorship in which intense engagement with isolated moments of extreme spectacle or excess supersedes or indeed subverts recognition of overall narrative morality or meaning.

This was the aspect of biker movies that most struck novelist Joan Didion in 1970 when she subjected herself to nine of them, including *The Wild Angels*, within the space of a week for the benefit of *Life* magazine’s readers. Noting how the teen audience responded viscerally and vocally to the films’ moments of outrageous transgression—as if in defiance the overwhelmingly depressing tenor of the story arcs—Didion remarked that “bike movies have constituted a kind of underground folk literature for adolescents, have found an audience and fabricated a myth to express precisely that audience’s every inchoate resentment.” The audience’s social profile also struck Didion. These were not the protest generation or flower children hip to the counterculture zeitgeist but disaffected working-class and hillbilly kids, “boys who majored in shop and worked in gas stations and later held them up ... children of vague ‘hill’ stock ... whose whole lives are an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.” These habitués of the low-rent drive-ins where *The Wild*

*Angels* did such spectacular business came from the same deprived and denigrated social stratum as many of the Hell's Angels themselves, whom Corman had recognized as "essentially dispossessed": "these guys were at the bottom," he reflected in 1972; "they were not highly intelligent, they came from broken homes, they had very little schooling" (qtd. in Mason 64)

Although it made possible the experimentalism and rebelliousness of the New Hollywood and launched a brief vogue for films about youth countercultures, *The Wild Angels* and the entire biker-movie subgenre that flowed from it spoke to a growing division within the youth audience of the Sixties that was socio-economic in nature but was expressed in political and aesthetic terms. In a 1969 feature on teenpics for *Rolling Stone* magazine, Richard Staehling observed that biker pictures played pretty much exclusively to the lumpen mass of has-been delinquents and "aspiring young cycle bandidos" that frequented provincial drive-ins, while the counterculture kids "are most likely down at the Bijou stoned out of their minds watching *Weekend* or *2001*" (42). He was registering a divide that was most starkly revealed by the work of youth opinion researcher Daniel Yankelovich, popularizer of the term "the generation gap." "A sharp split in social and moral values is found within the youth generation, between college students and the non-college majority," Yankelovich argued. In the late Sixties, "the gap *within* the generation proves to be larger and more severe than the gap *between* the generations" (*New Morality* 4, author's emphasis). *The Wild Angels* touched a nerve with increasingly disaffected non-college youth, whilst slyly objectifying and "othering" its biker protagonists, themselves representatives of this group. But pursuit of his radicalizing artistic and political impulses would lead Corman away from this lumpen segment of the youth audience and towards identifying and opening up a new youth-market fraction, the very kids that a couple of years down the line would be grooving to the arty

psychedelia of *2001* or the insurrectionist avant-gardism of *Weekend*, “stoned out of their minds.”

### III. “Following the Counterculture of the Day”: *The Trip*

If *The Wild Angels* presents the biker gangs as both terrifying embodiments of otherness and pathetic losers, *The Trip* represents a distinct shift in tone and mode of address in the treatment of a countercultural subject. Like the Hell’s Angels, LSD usage came to Corman’s attention as a result of alarmist media coverage. By March 1966, according to *Time* magazine, the US was gripped by an LSD epidemic (Stevens 370), while the March 25<sup>th</sup> cover of *Life* trumpeted “the exploding threat of the mind drug that got out of control.” Three separate Congressional hearings on LSD were underway and state legislatures were locked in a race to prohibit the terrifying substance. Less than three weeks after California and Nevada passed bills criminalising possession of the hallucinogen, and before *The Wild Angels* had gone into release, AIP announced that Roger Corman’s next project would be to produce and direct a picture “based on the social problems and tragic results from the use of LSD” (“Corman Takes ‘Trip’” 1)

The tone of AIP’s press release indicates that the company envisaged a sensationalist treatment of the subject in the shock-horror mode that had defined exploitation films about drugs since *Reefer Madness* (1936) and *Assassin of Youth* (1937) proposed that a whiff of marijuana was a one-way ticket to psychosis, murder, and suicide (Schaefer 217-52). Corman, however, had other ideas. Not only did he prepare for the film by taking LSD himself, experiencing “the most wonderful trip imaginable” (Corman and Jerome 146), he also hired talent that was immersed in and “a hundred per cent committed” (151) to the psychedelic revolution—Peter Fonda to star, Denis Hopper to support and direct second unit, and Jack Nicholson to write the script. Nicholson and Corman agreed that they “didn’t want a

flat-out exploitation film” but “had higher aspirations this time” (Nicholson qtd. in Corman and Jerome 148). Thus they eschewed the classic exploitation strategy of staging a titillating spectacle of otherness within a framework of more or less overt moral condemnation.

Moreover, Corman insisted that the story be structured around the figure of a “burned-out TV commercial director in L.A. ... sort of a stand-in or alter-ego for me” (145), allowing him to express his frustration with the materialism and conservatism of the film industry.

*The Trip* draws its spectator into a much more complex and ambiguous position with regard to its protagonist than does *The Wild Angels*. Peter Groves is no revolutionary, but he is an appealing figure, sympathetic to and curious about the drug culture and psychedelic philosophy. Dissatisfaction with his empty bourgeois existence prompts him to take an LSD trip in order, as he puts it, to gain “insight” into himself. Peter thus functions as a surrogate for both Corman the frustrated artist and the open-minded spectator who wishes to be given a guided tour of some of the counterculture’s more publicized lifestyle practices. And the use of an intelligent, sympathetic protagonist enables Corman to move beyond the sensationalist, slyly moralizing exploitation formula whilst not jettisoning entirely the commercial appeal of the exotic and the spectacular. Indeed, depicting Paul’s trip from a subjective viewpoint allows for plenty of aesthetic shocks and spectacular visual sensations. His acid odyssey includes a good deal of liberated psychedelic sex and far-out, mind-blowing imagery, and climaxes in a rock music club on Sunset Strip where topless go-go dancers gyrate under groovy lights to the heavy vibes of the Electric Flag.

But the classic exploitation cinema’s aesthetic of astonishment is subsumed into a more sophisticated and self-reflexive modernist discourse which complements the film’s ideological ambiguity. From the opening scene, in which the viewer is immersed in one of Paul’s TV commercials as if it were the discourse of the film itself, *The Trip* cleverly blurs the objective and subjective realms, destabilizing the spectator’s point of view and playing a

series of witty games with the vocabulary of film and TV while interrogating the politics of these institutions. The film's most interesting and ambitious sequence is a good example of this. In it Paul watches himself standing trial for purveying "lies" as a director of phony TV commercials. While dizzying montages of imagery play around him, in which commercials for cars and washing machines are intercut with footage of the period's major political upheavals from the Civil Rights struggle to the Vietnam War, Paul is judged guilty by Max, the supplier of the LSD and the film's main embodiment of the countercultural worldview.

Max compels Paul to face his male sexual double standard, admit responsibility for the breakdown of his marriage, and confront the implications of his role as a manufacturer of exploitative consumer fantasies. If *The Wild Angels* was haunted by the "voice for morality" of Hollywood's moribund Judaeo-Christian Production Code, *The Trip*'s voice for morality is Max, speaking the hip argot of the psychedelic rebel. And it is Max's verdict of ideological guilt that prompts Paul's trip to take a dark and paranoid turn. Corman admitted that his own preparatory acid trip "was so good ... I decided that when I shot the movie it would have to show some bumper scenes or else the film would seem totally pro-LSD" (Corman and Jerome 146). But it is important to note that the spectre of death that stalks Paul has more to do with his sense of personal and political culpability than with any objective mental or physical harms attributed to the drug by the authorities seeking its prohibition. Indeed, the annihilation Paul fears—and that was stressed by the promotional campaign's "A Lovely Sort of Death" tagline—is not literal but symbolic, that of his bourgeois self, threatened with disintegration as a result of the insight generated by the psychedelic experience. For Paul discovers, as a Haight-Ashbury acid-head told a researcher in 1967, that in light of psychedelic experience "everything you were programmed to believe in turns out to be a shuck" (Von Hoffman 139). Thus, as well as offering a non-judgemental exploration of the

hip drug culture for the curious observer, *The Trip* also mounts a penetrating analysis of the bourgeois mentality from a hip perspective.

While the film ultimately avoids committing Paul to any definite course of action or engagement, he nonetheless emerges from his trip “reborn,” as the film’s press notes put it, clearly embarked on the process of rejecting the bourgeois self that stood trial in his visions. To Corman’s chagrin, AIP reacted to the film’s open-mindedness by re-imposing the exploitation conventions Corman had jettisoned. An alarmist foreword was added, stressing the “illegal,” “dangerous,” and “fatal” aspects of LSD use and justifying the film as a “shocking commentary” on an issue “of great concern to medical and civil authorities.” And a downbeat final image was inserted in which Paul is caught in a freeze-frame which cracks apart ominously to the sound of sinister music, undermining the theme of positive rebirth through LSD.

Nonetheless, many reviewers saw *The Trip* as an unambiguous endorsement of psychedelics. On NBC’s *Today* show, Judith Crist denounced it as “a nauseating 80-minute commercial for LSD”; the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures condemned it as “thinly disguised pornography”; the broadcasting industry’s Code of Good Practices rejected radio and TV ads for the film which, it judged, presented LSD as “acceptable and exciting ... with no evidence of any danger or possible remorse”; the squares at *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* alike dismissed it as “a put-on”; and the British Board of Film Classification refused it a certificate until 2003.<sup>6</sup>

Much of this hostility stemmed from the fact that it was impossible to dismiss *The Trip* as just another exploitation cash-in despite its August 1967 release date coinciding with the much ballyhooed San Francisco Summer of Love. Not only ideologically but aesthetically, too, Corman had pulled free of exploitation conventions to an extent that discomfited even the movie-industry trade press. “Is Corman simply exploiting a new horror

avenue or is this an honest attempt to reproduce ... an actual hallucinatory experience?" wondered *Variety's* reviewer (Review). The film's elliptical narrative, visual inventiveness, and philosophical seriousness were closer to European art cinema than American exploitation fodder, many recognized. "There hasn't been such textural richness on the screen since the heyday of Sternberg," remarked the *Los Angeles Times*, judging *The Trip* "the most unabashed art film ever to come out of Hollywood ... a 'Marienbad' for the masses, Ingmar Bergman for the teenyboppers" (Thomas). However, as Eric Schaefer has noted, "the line between art cinema and exploitation was often a thin one" (331). With *The Trip* Corman utterly erased it, and in doing so opened up a new kind of audience for films with countercultural leanings. This audience differed significantly from the one that had supported *The Wild Angels* only a year earlier, and it would be the audience that made possible the emergence of the New Hollywood as the major studios absorbed the lessons of *The Trip* and its even more profitable spin-off, *Easy Rider*.

Corman acknowledged that "instead of the working class Hell's Angels" *The Trip* dealt with a "counterculture group [that] was higher up on the social scale" ("My Nine"). So too was the audience that turned the film's \$340,000 budget into a gross of \$6 million by the end of 1967. While *The Wild Angels* had done most of its phenomenal initial business in the drive-ins and provincial theatres of Northern California and the mid- and south-west, *The Trip* took off in metropolitan theatres in Los Angeles and New York, and in college towns (McGee 249-50, 256-57). Moreover, the media outlets that championed rather than condemned the film pointed to a new confluence of sophisticated, liberal adults with educated, anti-establishment youth that would briefly sustain the New Hollywood's interrogation of American moral and ideological norms into the mid-1970s. Representing liberal adult opinion, *Playboy* ran a lavish four-page spread on "the real impact and import of *The Trip*" ("*The Trip*: Pictorial" 106), pushing its own angle on the psychedelic experience

which, as LSD guru Timothy Leary had recently told the magazine, “is basically a *sexual* experience” (*Playboy* Interview 95, original emphasis). And for radical counterculture youth, the country’s most-read underground newspaper, the *Los Angeles Free Press*, hailed the film as “an occasion for rejoicing ... the purest cinematic exercise ever to come out of Hollywood” (Youngblood). A good deal of clear demographic water separated *The Trip*’s cheerleaders from the disaffected, lumpen youth audience that had made *The Wild Angels* a hit.

One immediate consequence of *The Trip*’s success was that two of its key personnel proposed consolidating the new youth audience by combining the arty experimentalism of the drug film with the outlaw chic of the biker movie. From the start, Corman backed Hopper’s and Fonda’s *Easy Rider*, fully expecting to produce the picture for AIP. But when Nicholson and Arkoff balked at giving the volatile Hopper directorial responsibility, Hopper and Fonda took the film to Columbia, the first of the majors to venture into the countercultural youth market. Nonetheless, Corman saw the film as an extension of the project he’d begun in 1966: “You can almost chart a line from *The Wild Angels* to *The Trip* to *Easy Rider*, following the counterculture of the day,” he has remarked (qtd. in Love). In fact, though, the sequence tells a more complex story. As we have seen, *Angels* deviated from the classic exploitation formula only far enough to make its treatment of outlaw bikers piteously condescending rather than hysterically condemnatory. And *The Trip* was as much a departure from its predecessor as an extension of it, tapping a very different, educated, middle-class audience with its art-house style, philosophical self-reflexivity, and sophisticated critique of bourgeois selfhood. To retain that audience, *Easy Rider*’s synthesis of cycles and psychedelics carefully remodelled its bikers from working-class deadbeats into romantic archetypes, “innocent individualists” (Shickel) whom even *Time* (“Cinema: Vroom”) and *Life* magazines could approvingly associate with the American literary and philosophical traditions. But while the



film's celebrated LSD sequences drew on *The Trip*'s visual experiments, they abandoned Corman's clear political perspective and his optimism about the psychedelic experience, indulging in a hipper, artier version of the traumatised freak-out characteristic of traditional exploitation drug treatises. Where *The Trip* envisaged positive rebirth through acid and the repudiation of bourgeois assumptions, *Easy Rider* saw only terror, disillusionment and death, the self-confessed failure and futile demise of its protagonists reflecting a darker turn within anti-establishment attitudes between 1967 and 1969. Thus the countercultural line connecting the three films was a good deal more twisted than Corman in retrospect presents it to be.

#### **IV. "The Contradictions and Absurdities of Modern Society": *Gas-s-s-s***

Another consequence of *The Trip*'s success was that AIP embarked on a counterculture movie cycle just as it had on a biker movie cycle a year before. However, *The Trip*'s inheritors were marked by a noticeably more hostile and alarmist view of the drug culture and the youth rebellion than was their progenitor. Indeed, AIP's counterculture cycle hewed closer to the classic exploitation approach taken by *Riot On Sunset Strip*, the Sam Katzman-produced quickie that AIP had picked up for distribution in March 1967, than to *The Trip*'s sympathetic open-mindedness. Focalized through a hard-working L.A. cop whose teenage daughter becomes embroiled with hippies, *Riot* climaxes with the girl hospitalized after a terrifying LSD freak-out and the policeman-father ready to go to war against the feckless kids who dosed her. AIP's own productions avoided telling their stories from *Riot*'s parental perspective, but they nonetheless presented drugs as a menace and youth rebellion as self-indulgent destructiveness. In *Maryjane* (released January 1968), a pot-smoking clique tears apart a small-town high-school, destroying the career of a respected teacher and nearly causing the death of a talented student. In *Psych Out!* (released March 1968), a young runaway seeks her drop-out brother in San Francisco's hippie Haight-Ashbury district, only

to encounter drug-induced mental breakdown, violence, arson, and suicide. And in *Wild in the Streets* (released May 1968), a youth take-over of the USA effected by LSD and rock music results in the establishment of an ageist dystopia in which the over thirty-fives are herded into psychedelic concentration camps. In comparison with that kind of negative propaganda, *The Trip* could realistically be construed as a commercial for both psychedelic drugs and the countercultural assault on bourgeois mores.

Thus, between the summer of 1966 and May 1968—the period stretching from the hippie “riots” on Sunset Strip that inspired Katzman’s film to the student strike at Columbia University that inaugurated a new wave of youth militancy—AIP was responsible for producing and/or distributing the first five mainstream-release movies in the US to deal explicitly with the youth counterculture of the moment. But only *The Trip* offered anything like a balanced account of the subject or sought to go beyond the shock-horror aesthetic of classic exploitation. In the summer of 1968 Corman told film journal *Take One* that he chose to work with AIP because “I much prefer financial limitations to the creative limitations of the big studios” (Corman, “A Letter” 13). And he announced his intention to build on *The Trip* by “doing contemporary pictures based on the contradictions and absurdities of modern society” (14). These would include an anti-war satire on the military-industrial complex, an anti-racist drama about a white backlash against a black sheriff in a Texas town, and a re-release of his anti-segregationist film *The Intruder*. But the tension between Corman’s increasingly progressive vision and AIP’s reluctance to depart from classic exploitation formulae, already signalled by the company’s interference with *The Trip*, meant that none of these projects would be realized. However, even as *Easy Rider* alerted the major studios to the business sense of catering to the counterculture audience, and even as the counterculture itself took on a more strained and oppositional complexion in the first year of the Nixon

presidency, Corman embarked on a film that can be seen as a rebuttal of both the reactionary turn of AIP's counterculture cycle and the romantic despair of *Easy Rider*.

*Gas-s-s-s* went into production in fall 1969 in the immediate afterglow of the Woodstock festival, celebrated even in the straight media as an apogee of countercultural unity and idealism. Unlike *Angels* and *The Trip*, the film spoke unequivocally for and was aimed unwaveringly at the denizens of the youth culture itself. "I felt morally, politically, that our films should be on the counterculture side," Corman recalls (Corman and Jerome 166). Accordingly, *Gas-s-s-s* depicted an absurd society from an unadulterated youth perspective, speaking throughout the language of hip and taking seriously the utopian fantasy of a world rid of corrupt and complacent adult authority and inherited by idealistic and politically-conscious under twenty-fives.

Yet, committed as Corman claimed to be and radical as his film in many respects was, the director was perhaps more acutely attuned to the demographic realities of the movie marketplace than were his bosses at AIP who earlier in 1969 had taken their company public and were now more concerned with the sensibilities of shareholders and stock analysts than ticket buyers (McGee 272). By 1970 the median age in the US had fallen below twenty-nine for the first time since records began, over fifty per cent of the population was twenty-five or under (Bureau of Labor Statistics), and the 12-29 age group was accounting for seventy five per cent of movie ticket sales (Hillier 38). With the traditional adult and family audiences dying out and the film industry in crisis, a story based on the youth-culture axiom, "never trust anyone over thirty," in which the entire over twenty-five population has been obliterated by nerve gas leaked from a secret army biological warfare unit, came close to being a straight depiction of social reality and made plenty of commercial sense. Thus, while not as nakedly opportunistic as *Angels* or *The Trip* which cashed-in on nationally publicized moral panics, *Gas-s-s-s*'s explicitly countercultural radicalism was not such a reckless gamble.

Still, *Gas-s-s-s* remains remarkable and unique among the thirty or so feature films made about the youth counterculture between 1966 and 1971 in its total identification with the youth viewpoint and its utter lack of cynicism or ambivalence about youthful political idealism.<sup>7</sup> And in formal terms it is marked by the complete absence of any of AIP's customary exploitation devices designed to titillate the curious outsider or prurient voyeur. In a pointed riposte to *Wild in the Streets*—which as the *Los Angeles Times* noted was “basically a revelation of how truly terrified adults are of youth” (Thomas, Review)—the eradication of the adult population is caused by an out-of-control military-industrial complex rather than by a violent youth revolution. *Gas-s-s-s*'s youth radicals are neither dangerous demagogues nor militant ideologues, nor are they doomed rebels or sacrificial victims of straight society like the protagonists of *Easy Rider* or of the majors' first New Hollywood efforts such as *The Graduate* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. They simply assume the responsibility of finding a mode of living that will be an advance on the world so carelessly destroyed by the parental generation. To this end, the film's lead characters embark on a journey from Dallas—city of JFK's assassination and symbolic birthplace of the Sixties—to a commune located at an Indian pueblo in New Mexico where society is being reinvented. En route, they encounter the hostile remains of the dying institutions of the old America while being joined by more young idealists, each representing the various aspects of a youth movement which, after 1968, was becoming increasingly fractured and sect-ridden (Anderson 356; Gitlin 396).

Comprising a hippie student radical, a proto-feminist intellectual, a black revolutionary, a rock 'n' roll-obsessed teenybopper, and a confused youth unable to commit personally or politically, *Gas-s-s-s*'s protagonists explore in humorous but nonetheless serious fashion the competing claims of non-violent and militant direct action, the meanings of sexual freedom, the dynamics of race and gender, the politics of rock music, and the bases of political commitment itself. But the factionalism of the youth movement is presented less as a

weakness than as a positive form of diversity and an opportunity for mutual learning: “We all have our inconsistencies, but that doesn’t stop the revolution, does it?” notes black revolutionary Carlos.

Moreover, Corman’s repudiation of exploitation conventions means there is no pandering to a potentially outraged or cynical adult spectatorship. Indeed, such a perspective is parodied throughout in the figure of Edgar Allan Poe—presiding spirit of Corman’s money-spinning AIP horror franchise—who observes the group’s progress from astride an *Easy Rider*-style motorcycle. “They started out so full of promise and new ideas,” he notes as tensions between the factions simmer. “Are they really any different?” Edgar is compelled to eat his words as the film climaxes with the coming together of the various youth tendencies in a spirit of peace to establish a utopian commune in the Indian pueblo. “Aren’t they all going to rape, cheat, steal, lie, fight, and kill?” enquires Edgar’s incredulous companion, Lenore, voicing the conservative view (and that of every AIP counterculture film save *Gas-s-s-s* and *The Trip*), in which youth radicalism was merely a cover for power trips, sexual incontinence, sleazy criminality or infantile, oedipal rage. “Nevermore!” answers Edgar’s pet raven, and the millennium arrives as a series of fallen liberators, including Lincoln, Gandhi, JFK, Che Guevara, and Martin Luther King, rise again to bless the new society, associating the youth revolt with the global struggle to extend human freedom. Over the closing credits (in a sequence cut from the released film) we hear God and Jesus debate whether it’s time to “fire up the golden chariot” and retire now that humans have made a heaven on earth.

With regard to the youth rebellion, then, Corman had moved from the modulated exploitation strategy of *Angels*, through the art-film inflected agnosticism of *The Trip*, to the outright affirmation of *Gas-s-s-s*. As he told *Film Comment* in 1971, the film evinces “a kind of questioning acceptance of many of the values ... of this [youth] culture” and concludes “with something I probably believe”: that “it is possible ... to move to a better way of life”

(qtd. in Goldman 51). Indeed, *Gas-s-s-s* not only repudiated AIP's other countercultural excursions, it also satirised Corman's previous efforts. The Hell's Angels appear as a group of ultra-conservative golf-playing country-clubbers who attack the hippies in the style of American generals conducting the Vietnam War. A rape scene (so prominent among *The Wild Angels*' titillating exploitation shocks) is abruptly transformed into an occasion for the victim to overpower her assailants and lecture them on what she insists are "the sexual needs of contemporary women." And *The Trip*'s dabbling in psychedelics is mocked in a joke about the old society developing an hallucinogen that projected movies onto the inside of the eyelid, enabling American film studios to become major drug pushers. Thus while extending the playful self-referentiality of *The Trip*, *Gas-s-s-s* adds an element of *avant-garde* counter-cinema to its discourse, critiquing Corman's previous work, drawing attention within the narrative to the operations of filmmaking devices, and constituting a kind of upbeat, Americanized revision of Jean Luc Godard's savage, anti-bourgeois, collapse-of-civilization road movie, *Weekend* (1967).

In its good humour and determined utopianism *Gas-s-s-s* bore the imprint of the Woodstock-era optimism in which it was conceived and shot. It re-imagined an America transformed by the "functional anarchy, primitive tribalism" (Hoffman 13) that for cultural revolutionary Abbie Hoffman were the hallmarks of the "Woodstock Nation" crystallized by the rock festival. But, a year on from Woodstock, the film was released into a darker climate overshadowed by the disaster of the Altamont festival, the US invasion of Cambodia, and the National Guard's shooting dead of student anti-war protestors at Kent State and Jackson State universities. Though *Gas-s-s-s* received a five-minute standing ovation at its Edinburgh International Film Festival premiere in August 1970 (Goldman 51), AIP held it back for a further seven months and, in deference to religious sensibilities, removed the character of God—who kvetched comically throughout—and a final sequence in which God and Jesus

bicker about whether to join the earthly revolution. Released eventually in March 1971 with neither a US press screening nor significant promotion, *Gas-s-s-s* was restricted to a handful of regional drive-ins and small-town theatres, bypassing the educated, politicized, counterculture audience for which it was made (Morris, “Fun”). With the surprising exception of *New York* magazine’s Judith Crist, scourge of *The Trip*, the trade press and straight reviewers either ignored or were nonplussed by it. But from a counterculture perspective *Rolling Stone* deemed it “truly hip,” an “important” and “brilliant parable on the state of the youth explosion/alternate culture/revolution.” *Gas-s-s-s* “deals with real problems (as opposed to the fake ones that most longhair pictures set up and knock down) with hardly a cop out.” This “sweetest, warmest vision of hippie heaven ever filmed,” judged the reviewer, “is the world that we all dreamed of—not some Hollywood straight’s idea of it.” The paen concluded by urging readers to bombard AIP with letters demanding a proper release for the picture, helpfully appending the company address (Goodwin, Review of *Gas-s-s-s*, original emphasis).

Such countercultural approbation for a movie was by this point rare. The majors’ brief and opportunistic cycle of campus unrest pictures, in which “student rebellion served as a colorful backdrop to more traditional and (ideologically) more easily contained stories of personal growth and change” (Bodroghkozy 42), had played out through 1970 to much derision from the underground press. And movement radicals had picketed theatres to protest film-industry ties with government and the military, as well as excessive ticket pricing for Warner Brothers’ *Woodstock* movie, indicative, they argued, of Hollywood’s propensity to co-opt and exploit the youth culture (Bodroghkozy 52). Meanwhile AIP’s own counterculture cycle had wound down by 1970 with two pruriently “permissive” sex farces—designed, as *Film Bulletin* noted, more to titillate “curious oldsters” and “the ballyhoo trade” than engage

“the college crowd” (qtd. in McGee 262)—and a confused sequel to *Wild in the Streets* that was even more damning of youth rebellion than its parent film.<sup>8</sup>

In this context *Gas-s-s-s* was an anomaly. Though its end-of-the-world scenario chimed with what Robin Wood has called the “apocalyptic” phase of American cinema (23), its apocalypticism is turned to peacefully constructive, optimistic ends. Perhaps the film’s utopianism was a mite facile; its only false note, according to the *Rolling Stone* review, is the swiftness with which the quasi-fascist groups that terrorize its protagonists along their journey are finally won over to the peace-and-love worldview and absorbed into the commune. But while the youth movement—driven by the hostility of the Nixon regime to a “sometimes frightening nihilism” (Gitlin 381)—was being “pulled apart by cannibal factions” (Miller 8), *Gas-s-s-s* celebrated countercultural unity and, in the words of the film’s commune spokesman, promised of the embattled hippie ideal that, “We can give it meaning if we live by it.”

Not only did *Gas-s-s-s* swim against the tide of crisis and confrontation that inhabited the movement at decade’s end, it also contradicted the tenor of the two biggest hits of the counterculture film cycle’s dying phase. Like *Gas-s-s-s*, *Joe* (released July 1970) and *Billy Jack* (released May 1971) were low-budget, independent features (indeed, *Billy Jack* began life as an AIP production). But unlike *Gas-s-s-s* they soared to box-office glory on depictions of murderous enmity between hippies and straights. In scenarios that appealed to the darkest fantasies of both factions, the films acted out in equal measure the militant anti-Vietnam War movement’s pledge to “bring the war home” (Miller 290-92) and conservative Governor Ronald Reagan’s comment regarding his forcible removal of protestors from University of California property: “If it takes a bloodbath, let’s get it over with. No more appeasement” (qtd. in Anderson 326-27).<sup>9</sup>



However, with the misses outnumbering the hits and the rightward turn in the political climate palpable, both the majors and the independents had by mid-1971 abruptly ceased to make films explicitly about and for the counterculture, electing to tap the youth audience in less direct and overtly political ways (Bodroghkozy 54). Corman, furious that *Gas-s-s-s* had been “emasculated” (qtd. in Morris, “Fun”) and was “playing to the wrong audiences” (qtd. in Goldman 51), severed ties with AIP in late 1970 and set up his own company, New World Pictures. Though Corman sought to hire filmmakers with what he defined as “leftist, antiwar sympathies from the 1960s” (Corman and Jerome 184), New World made no discernibly counterculture films save the biker-hippie hybrid *Angles Hard as They Come* (released July 1971) which failed to rekindle the alchemy of *Easy Rider*. Rather, at New World Corman concentrated on supervising the production of formulaic exploitation fare and quickly ceased directing altogether.<sup>10</sup> While he has attributed this career turn to creative fatigue and absorption in running New World’s business operations, it is clear that Corman’s withdrawal from directing had as much to do with the industry’s loss of interest in genuinely countercultural material and the failure to find the right audience for what he judged to be “the most intricate and most organized intellectual film that I have ever made” (qtd. in Goldman 53). *Gas-s-s-s*, like his other most personal and political project, *The Intruder*, illustrated the limits of Corman’s ability “to combine entertainment with a more subversive message ... to be both political and popular” (Corman, “From Countercultural” xvii). Nonetheless, despite precipitating Corman’s break with AIP, it stands as the most authentic realization of Sam Arkoff’s company “rule”: “no parents, no church, no authorities in our films.”

## **V. Conclusion: “Symbolic Crackerjack Prizes”**

Roger Corman's counterculture trilogy showed the producer-director allying his celebrated opportunism and nose for new commercial angles with a deepening interest in and commitment to the youth-driven cultural and political revolutions of the Sixties. But it also exposed the fault lines within the youth audience even as it demonstrated that audience's rapidly growing commercial power. Where the blank mayhem of *The Wild Angels* spoke to disaffected, provincial, non-college youth, *The Trip* struck a nerve with educated, metropolitan "counterculture kids" receptive to aesthetic self-reflexivity, philosophical seriousness, and cerebral interrogation of bourgeois mores. *The Trip*'s success offered cultural confirmation of the findings of youth-opinion researcher Daniel Yankelovich. These indicated not only a widening gap at mid-decade between non-college youth and college students, but also, from 1966 onward, a deepening confluence in educated youth between the search for new cultural values and the embrace of radical politics. Yet *Gas-s-s-s*, Corman's attempt both to celebrate and capitalize on this confluence, revealed how fragile and short-lived it actually was. Even as the film trickled onto screens after months of delay, Yankelovich was observing that "Radical political values and life style values which traveled together since the mid-1960s have, in 1971, begun to go their separate ways" (*Changing Values* 7). Corman attributed the film's failure to find an audience to AIP's interference and lack of support; but it is equally the case that the audience Corman envisaged for *Gas-s-s-s* no longer existed. The abrupt and "almost total divorce ... between radical politics and new life styles" that Yankelovich saw setting in among college students from mid-1970 (*New Morality* 3) meant that *Gas-s-s-s*'s radical utopianism would only have spoken meaningfully to a fraction of the demographic group that embraced *The Trip*.<sup>11</sup> And the dwindling ten per cent of students who, according to Yankelovich, continued to identify with the New Left were now deeply suspicious of any entertainment-industry attempt to woo them. Student radicals were boycotting movies and picketing theatres, concurring with Michael Goodwin—

the only counterculture voice to champion *Gas-s-s-s*—that even ostensibly genuine attempts to engage cinematically with the new culture, such as *Easy Rider* or Michelangelo Antonioni’s art-house take on the campus-revolt film, *Zabriskie Point*, were “hardly more than symbolic Crackerjack prizes, intended to get the ‘youth market’ into the theatre” (Review of *Trash*).

Just as the trilogy’s commercial performance exposed the unevenness of the youth demographic, so its shifting aesthetic strategies highlighted the limited ability of established exploitation-film conventions to engage a youth audience increasingly segmented according to class, education, and levels of politicization. While *The Wild Angels* took a step away from the confines of genre and sound stage towards an engagement with contemporary social reality, it nevertheless kept one foot very firmly within exploitation cinema’s traditional shock-horror-outrage territory. *The Trip* went further, taking leave of that territory entirely by jettisoning exploitation discourse in favour of the vocabulary and address of the European art-film. This not only reflected the growing sophistication of that segment of the youth audience that was busy adding political radicalism to its cultural iconoclasm, it also revealed the inability of a supposedly youth-oriented company such as AIP to follow where Corman and its audience led. AIP’s post-production imposition of a moralizing exploitation framework on *The Trip* initiated a stand-off between the company and its leading producer-director that came to a head with the struggle over the editing and release of *Gas-s-s-s*. But by then Corman had abandoned exploitation conventions altogether to permit him a fuller identification with the countercultural point of view—just as the counterculture audience disintegrated.

Corman’s post AIP career with New World illustrates how the disintegration of that audience prompted a swift unravelling of the ideological and aesthetic principles developed in the counterculture trilogy. Though Corman sought to base his new company’s output on

what he defined as “contemporary dramas with a liberal to left-wing viewpoint and some R-rated sex and humour” (Corman and Jerome 181), viewers would have to read very minutely against the grain of the sexy student-nurse stories, the Blaxploitation rip-offs, the sexy-women-in-prison scenarios, and the eco-disaster horror pictures in which New World came to specialize if they were to detect the politics therein. Gone were the explicit depictions of and engagements with oppositional cultures and movements that had structured *The Trip* and *Gas-s-s-s*; absent too was the overtly critical analysis of “the contradictions and absurdities of modern society” Corman had spoken of in the revolutionary climacteric of 1968. As he admitted of his New World output, “I frankly doubt the left-wing bent, or message, was crucial to the success of the films we would do. But it was important to the filmmakers and me that we have something to say within the films” (Corman and Jerome 181). The politics of the films were now deeply subtextual, reduced to “symbolic Crackerjack prizes” for the embattled liberals making them, as opposed to the kids watching them.

Aesthetically, too, New World’s material backed away from the incorporation of art-film, *avant-garde*, and counter-cinema elements that characterized *The Trip* and *Gas-s-s-s*. Though Corman maintained a commitment to art cinema by using New World to provide American distribution for new work by Bergman, Fellini, Truffaut and other European auteurs, his own productions showed no trace of alternative film vocabularies; rather, they settled for mere exploitation of the relaxed restrictions on sex and violence that resulted from the shift to age-based classification. In fact, it was the Corman protégés who’d graduated from apprenticeships with the exploitation master to become the leading figures of the New Hollywood—among them Denis Hopper, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Peter Bogdanovich—who did most in the 1970s to extend the language of American film by drawing creatively on international art cinema. Yet for all their relatively daring artistic innovations, the work of the New Hollywood directors seldom recaptured the political

openness or optimism of films such as *The Trip* and *Gas-s-s-s*. As Robert Philip Kolker argues, these directors mobilized alternative film forms to “carry on an ideological debate with the culture that [bred] them,” but unlike Corman in the latter instalments of his trilogy “they never confront that culture with another ideology, with other ways of seeing itself, with social and political possibilities that are new or challenging” (10). The experimentalism and critical tenor of the New Hollywood were, then, symptoms more of aesthetic than of political commitment, reflecting Yankelovich’s view that at the turn of the 1970s educated young Americans were “press[ing] forward in their search for a cultural revolution while taking a step backwards from political revolution” (*Changing Values* 7).

Today, in both film fandom and academic film studies, Roger Corman is celebrated and honoured as a pioneer and presiding genius of “cult film.” But even this designation reminds us of the historical crises that curtailed further development of the political work begun in *The Trip* and *Gas-s-s-s*. For the notion of cult film—which emerged in the early 1970s at precisely the moment of countercultural disintegration—can be understood as a compensation for the absence of politically oppositional cinema and any social movement on which such a cinema might rest. As theorists of fan cultures suggest, “it is by presenting themselves as oppositional that cult audiences are able to confer value upon both themselves and the films around which they congregate” (Jancovich et al. 2). However, this oppositionality is purely a matter of cultural hierarchies and has migrated entirely into the realm of taste. Cult film fans celebrate the culturally disreputable, the marginal, the transgressive, the kitsch, the lowbrow, as a means of separating themselves from and critiquing bourgeois norms and taste regimes. Yet they depend on the acquisition and possession of considerable cultural capital in order to do so. Cult fandom is thus a vehicle “through which the cultural bourgeoisie challenges the authority of the economic bourgeoisie” (Jancovich et al. 2). It allows fans, as Barry Keith Grant points out, to “gain the

double satisfaction of both rejecting the dominant cultural values and remaining safely inscribed within them” (19). Roger Corman’s journey from exploitation outsider, through counterculture rebel, to his current eminence as the King of Cult reflects the shifting nature of his relationship with a potentially dissident youth audience and marks the ebb and flow of both his and his audience’s ideological commitments and cultural position. In the era of cult, Corman’s reputation and *oeuvre*—along with those of many other hitherto disreputable filmmakers—have been thoroughly rehabilitated. But even as they are revived, revalued, and perhaps politically neutered as “cult films,” the components of Corman’s counterculture trilogy remind us of a brief moment when a genuinely oppositional but still popular American cinema seemed possible, a cinema that would represent more than “symbolic Crackerjack prizes” for viewers and filmmakers whose visions of radical social transformation were in the process of being co-opted or crushed.

## Notes

1. On AIP’s beach-bikini cycle see Morris, “Beyond the Beach,” and Caine.
2. The Hell’s Angels were featured in *The Saturday Evening Post*, 2 November 1965, 32-39; *Newsweek*, 29 March 1965, 25; *The Nation*, 17 May 1965; *Time*, 26 March 1965, 23B; and *Life*, 28 January 1966, 28B.
3. On the biker subgenre, see Osgerby, “Full Throttle,” Osgerby, “Sleazy Rider,” and Rubin.
4. *Angels* would ultimately yield \$10 million in gross returns.
5. “The voice for morality” was from 1934 a concept systematically applied to the policing of movies by the American film industry’s internal censorship body, the Production Code Administration, which granted the seals of approval necessary to any picture seeking a broad theatrical release (Martin 99). AIP was among the growing number of independent

companies that in the Sixties rejected the need for a Code seal, abjured membership of the Motion Picture Association which enforced the Code, and precipitated the Code's replacement by an age-based classification system from November 1968 on (Monaco 56-66).

6. Crist quoted in McGee 265; "Catholic Office"; "Radio-TV"; Crowther, "The Trip"; "The Trip Offers"; Malvern.

7. This estimate includes independent and major-studio productions that received reasonably wide promotion and release. It excludes, with the exception of *Easy Rider*, films of the biker subgenre, very limited-release underground and exploitation pictures, and films that only tangentially concern themselves with aspects of the youth counterculture.

8. The AIP sex farces were *Three in the Attic* (December 1968) and *Up in the Cellar* (August 1970). *Attic* became AIPs' biggest grossing film of the 1960s but the obvious spin-off *Cellar* fared poorly. The *Wild* sequel, *Angel, Angel, Down We Go* (November 1969), was an unmitigated disaster. See McGee 261-63.

9. *Joe* took over \$19 million to become the thirteenth highest-grossing film of 1970, while *Billy Jack* grossed over \$9 million to come in at number six in the 1971 box office chart (Hoberman 281-87, 304-8).

10. After the disappointment of *Gas-s-s-s*, Corman directed only two further films, *Von Richthofen and Brown* (1971) and *Roger Corman's Frankenstein Unbound* (1990).

11. Yankelovich concluded that the Vietnam War was the principal radicalizing factor for college youth in the late 1960s. As the threat of being drafted receded with mass troop withdrawals from 1969 onwards, political radicalism on campus declined precipitously, leaving the search for "self-fulfilment" through new personal values as the central preoccupation of American students (*New Morality* 5-6).

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