

# Ripped from Today's Headlines: The Outlaw Biker Movie Cycle

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When the "Pissed Off Bastards of Bloomington" and the "Booze Fighters" descended upon the small Californian town of Hollister during the 1947 Fourth of July weekend, turning the main street into a drag strip, outlaw motorcycle gangs emerged as a new form of social menace. Their exploits were first seen on film several years later in *The Wild One* (1953), but very few other biker movies appeared during the decade that followed. This all changed in the mid-1960s, however, when the headlines were filled with stories about the exploits of that most infamous gang of outlaw bikers, the Hell's Angels. Having spotted a story in *Life* magazine about a Hell's Angel's funeral, Samuel Z. Arkoff (the co-president of AIP) saw a hot topic that was ripe for exploitation (McGee, 1988: 55). He quickly enlisted Roger Corman to direct *The Wild Angels* (1966), with Peter Fonda starring as Heavenly Blues, a disaffected gang leader who suffers an existential crisis after the death and funeral of his friend, The Loser, played by Bruce Dern. The film went on to gross over \$5 million -- the twelfth biggest moneymaker of its year -- and kick-started a major cycle of exploitation movies about outlaw motorcycle gangs. Although they have now been somewhat eclipsed by Fonda's return to the saddle in *Easy Rider* (1969), over fifty "chopper-operas" were unleashed onto cinema screens before the cycle ran out of gas in the early 1970s.

The fact that the biker movie cycle began in earnest when it did -- almost twenty years after the Hollister incident and a decade after *The Wild One* -- can be attributed almost entirely to the flurry of media interest in the Hell's Angels at the time. This sense of topicality seems to be a trait common to most exploitation movie cycles, from 1950s rock 'n' roll films to 1960s LSD movies and 1970s blaxploitation. Riding the waves of current trends or controversies provides low-budget exploitation filmmakers with a means by which to market their swiftly made product. The more sensational the subject matter, the better. One need only look at exploitation movie posters and trailers to see how they promoted themselves around their timeliness, often literally lifting stories from newspaper headlines, as the case of *The Wild Angels* demonstrates.

As a means of translating front page headlines into fictional feature films, exploitation movies also commonly use pre-existing genres as readymade narrative and thematic templates. For example, rock 'n' roll and LSD movies often fashion their narratives around the conventions of the social problem film and blaxploitation films borrow heavily from gangster and hardboiled detective genres. Biker movies are no different. As Martin Ruben argues, outlaw motorcycle pictures are "essentially a western or war or gangster or cop movie in biker drag, with a little rape thrown in on the side" (Ruben, 1994: 376). For example, *Hell's Angels '69* (1969) is a heist movie in which two thrill-seeking rich kids use the cover of the club to rob Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas; *The Losers* (1970) is a war film in which a biker gang are enlisted for a mission in Vietnam; and the title of *Werewolves on Wheels* (1971) speaks for itself. The most common generic template, however, was that of the western, with the majority of biker movies drawing explicit parallels between outlaw motorcycle gangs and the Old West -- such that one might even be tempted to label them revisionist westerns.

In this essay, I will examine how press stories about the Hell's Angels were translated into the western-influenced chopper-operas of the biker movie cycle. By analyzing the intersection of topicality and genre conventions, my goals are twofold -- goals which are in many ways related, and which will hopefully shed light on each other. First, I wish to investigate the ambiguity surrounding representations of outlaw bikers, who remain elusive and contradictory figures. While some movies are more condemnatory than others, the depiction of most outlaw bikers falls somewhere between loveable rogue and demented storm trooper. My second aim is to better understand the dynamics of exploitation movie cycles. I especially wish to investigate why the cycles that appeared during the heyday of exploitation cinema in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s never managed to sustain themselves for longer than four or five years. Why, for instance, were biker movies enormously successful in the late 1960s, but not before or since? Obviously, topicality is a major reason for this: once a fad falls out of fashion, audiences cease to buy tickets. The biker movie cycle suggests, however, that more than just topicality is at stake. Following the infamous Altamont Speedway murder of December 1969, the Hell's Angels received perhaps more press than ever before and continued to attract news stories throughout the 1970s, but this renewed attention did little to reverse the steady decline in interest in films about outlaw motorcycle gangs, with few notable biker movies being released after 1971.

In his article, "The Short-Lived Life of the Hollywood LSD Film," Harry Benshoff turns to Rick Altman's recent work on genre to account for the brief lifespan of that particular cycle. Altman argues that, "[t]he Hollywood genres that have proven the most durable are precisely those that have established the most coherent syntax (the western, the musical); those that disappear the quickest depend entirely on recurring semantic elements, never developing a stable syntax" (Altman, 1999: 225). The LSD film became successful in the late 1960s, Benshoff argues, because of its semantic appeal, but lacked longevity because its syntactic meaning was muddled. In other words, the cycle possessed recurrent signs and iconography (such as psychedelic drug trips), but failed to organize them into stable, coherent meanings. As Benshoff remarks, "Were the films celebrating LSD use and colorful sensory expansion, or were they dramatizing the negative effects of LSD abuse?" (Benshoff, 2001: 29). The biker movie cycle could be characterized in a similar manner. The films possess a very recognizable set of semantic elements (such as choppers roaring down an open highway and filthy bikers wearing denim, skulls and swastikas), but remain quite ambivalent about what they all add up to.

Although very useful, such an approach perhaps risks oversimplifying the dynamics of movie genres, not least because one could equally argue that all genres -- even the most durable -- contain complex and sometimes muddled syntactic meanings. Moreover, the fact that some movies from a particular genre or cycle possess antithetical viewpoints to others, while some possess no discernable viewpoint at all, does not in itself seem a sufficient explanation for why that genre or cycle failed to endure. Again, we can find this pattern occurring in just about every genre or cycle.

This essay will instead argue that the lack of longevity of many exploitation movies cycles is not simply a result of them failing to develop a stable syntax, but is more specifically a result of them fusing together two separate forms of media -- news reports and movie genres -- each of which already possess their own well established semantic and syntactic structures. In other words, by combining topicality with genre conventions, exploitation movies often cause two separate and distinct sets of semantic and syntactic structures to butt up against each other and come into conflict, thus destabilizing the meanings contained within the cycle of

movies. This seems particularly pertinent for exploitation movies because they rely so heavily on pre-existing entities such as popular fads and scandals or well known narrative and generic formulas. Tracing how the image of outlaw bikers from newspaper and magazine stories was relocated into motion pictures and amalgamated with the conventions of the western will illustrate some of the ways in which this fusion of topicality and genre often leads itself to confusion.

### **The Media's Making of a Menace**

During the 1964 Labor Day weekend, a number of Hell's Angels were accused of gang rape in Monterey, California. All charges were promptly dropped due to lack of evidence, but the incident caught the eye of local State Senator Fred Farr, who demanded an immediate investigation into outlaw motorcycle clubs. Two weeks after the Monterey incident, Attorney General Thomas Lynch sent a circular letter to over one hundred district attorneys, sheriffs and police chiefs, requesting information on the motorcycled menaces. The Lynch Report, a fifteen-page government exposé of the filthiest biker exploits, was released to the media the following March. As gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson has pointed out, the accuracy of this report and its statistics were highly questionable: "As a historical document, it read like a plot synopsis of Mickey Spillane's worst dreams" (Thompson, 1965: 524). However, within days the Hell's Angels were the subjects of feature stories in the nation's foremost newspapers and magazines, most notably *The New York Times* (California Takes Steps to Curb Terrorism of Ruffian Cyclists, 16 March 1965), *The Los Angeles Times* (Hell's Angels Called Threat on Wheels, 16 March 1965), *Time* (The Wilder Ones, 26 March 1965) and *Newsweek* (The Wild Ones, 29 March 1965). Over the subsequent weeks and months the Angels acquired a certain ubiquity, with numerous follow-up stories about their lifestyle and exploits appearing in, among others, *The Nation* (Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders, 17 May 1965), *The New York Times* (10,000 in Beach Riot in New Hampshire, 20 June 1965), *Life* (Come to the Riot, 2 July 1965), *Newsweek* (Bikies' Fun, 5 July 1965) and *The Saturday Evening Post* (The Hell's Angels, 20 November 1965).

The image of the outlaw bikers created by this press coverage was almost entirely negative, presenting them as savage monsters who represented the gravest of threats to civilized society -- with most reports taking the condemnatory Lynch Report at face value, using it as their primary source of information. That the biker movie cycle was so heavily based on this coverage of real bikers seems of particular significance because the Hell's Angels were in a sense "created" by these press stories in the first place. As Thompson has argued, "The significant thing about *Time's* view of the Angels was not its crabwise approach to reality, but its impact. At the beginning of March 1965 the Hell's Angels were virtually nonexistent" (Thompson, 1967: 28). Indeed, the Monterey incident had not been a major national news story at the time it happened, and it was only after the media frenzy prompted by the release of the Lynch Report that the Hell's Angels club became Public Enemy #1.

Only two journalists for the mainstream press seem to have strived to offer more sober analyses of the Angels. One was William Murray in a cover story for *The Saturday Evening Post*. His account of the Angels is still a fairly negative portrait, but he does pause to remark on how outlaw bikers have become potential scapegoats for all and sundry:

They are in a perfect position to be exploited by politicians anxious to impress the electorate, by policemen unable to put a stop to high end crime, by hustlers

looking for a new teenage fad to launch and by reporters and commentators hungry for headlines. (Smith, 1965: 39)

The other was Thompson, probably the only journalist to befriend and ride with the Angels, who chronicled his experiences in *The Nation* (The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders, 17 May 1965) and in his book, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (1967). Thompson does not altogether deny the barbarity and lawlessness of some of the club's exploits -- especially after they stomped him -- but he spends considerable time examining the inaccuracies and exaggerations of the Lynch Report and the subsequent media frenzy. For example, he calls the 16 March 1965 article in the *New York Times* "a piece of slothful, emotionally biased journalism [and] a bad hack job" (Thompson, 1967: 36), blasting it for misquoting the Lynch Report and failing to mention that all charges in the Monterey rape case had been immediately dropped. Indeed, Thompson argues that the Angels became headline news largely because of "a curious rape mania that rides on the shoulder of American journalism like some jeering, masturbating raven. Nothing grabs an editor's eye like a good rape" (Thompson, 1967: 13).

The remarks of Murray and Thompson seem to point towards an attempt by the Lynch Report and the mainstream media to define and maintain the status quo by demonizing the Hell's Angels and other outlaw motorcycle clubs. That the public image of the Hell's Angels was "created" by news media aimed at middle-America -- with much of their headline information deriving from law enforcement officials -- cannot be overstated, not least because biker gangs were almost exclusively comprised of working-class young men who had rejected the system. Much of the press coverage seems to exhibit a whiff of class fear, and the outlaw bikers clearly represented a threat to an image of the United States that the lawmakers and mainstream media were attempting to promote. This is particularly pertinent given the escalating civil unrest during the mid-1960s, of which outlaw motorcycle clubs were a facet: the aforementioned publications seem to have been engaged in an effort to valorize American national identity in the face of growing turmoil and embarrassment, both at home (civil rights protests, student movements, etc.) and overseas (the cold war, Vietnam, etc.). *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, for example, even published pictorial essays during the period that used images of the nation's cities and landscapes to glorify an idea of "America the Beautiful" (Klinger, 1997).

The demonizing of the Angels contributed to this sense of nation defining by associating outlaw bikers with values antithetical to those of middle-America. The threat that bikers were seen to pose to "ordinary" society was articulated by aligning them with an enormous range of deviant or antisocial discourses, including filthiness, vulgarity, abnormal sexuality, violence, criminality, fascism, alcoholism and willful unemployment. For example, the Lynch Report states that, "[p]robably the most universal common denominator in identification of Hell's Angels is their generally filthy condition. Investigating officers consistently report these people, both club members and their female associates, seem badly in need of a bath" (Thompson, 1965: 523). This is seconded by the *Newsweek* article of 29 March 1965, which remarks, "Who is a Hell's Angel? You can tell him by his back and his odor" (1965: 25). Similarly, the press coverage was particularly fascinated with the Angels' deviant sexual proclivities, from gang rape and orgies to the alleged trading and selling of women. As *Time* magazine remarks, "no act is too degrading for the pack" (1965: 23). The *Newsweek* article even erroneously speculates on the homosexuality of the Angels, an inference no doubt stemming from their custom of French kissing one another for shock value. The Angels proved to be particularly good fall guys in all of this because few people

had actually seen one in person, and because the Angels were more than willing to play up their immoral reputation as a means of counterattacking the conservative, middle-class values they had rejected in the first place.

The motorcycle itself turned out to be one of the arenas in which this sense of national definition was most pronounced -- serving as a microcosm of a very specific set of tensions about nationhood, class and technology in sixties' America -- with a fierce ideological battle being waged by the mainstream news media over the vehicle's cultural meaning. First, there was an attempt to claim back the machine from its subcultural infamy among outlaw bikers, by equating it with discourses of civility and respectability. Second, there was a related attempt to counter the so-called "invasion" of the market by the Japanese manufacturers of lightweight bikes (spearheaded by Honda) -- an invasion that was part of the larger transformation of Japan into a world leader in high technology, including automobile, camera and electronics industries. Honda first started marketing motorcycles in the United States in 1959 and had dethroned American manufacturers as the market leader by the time of the mid-1960s biker scandals. The company achieved this in part through their enormously successful advertising campaigns, which featured respectable, middle-class riders (young lovers, businessmen, grandmas) and the catchphrase, "You meet the nicest people on a Honda" -- an obvious slur on the bad reputation acquired by American bikes like the Harley-Davidson.

Efforts to salvage the respectability of the American motorcycle had been felt ever since its image had been sullied by the Hollister incident. For example, a month after Hollister, an article appeared in *Life* (*Life Goes Motorcycling*, 11 August 1947) which focused on law-abiding, respectable motorcyclists. Similarly, the American Motorcycle Association (AMA) had fought a long war with outlaw bikers, proclaiming that renegade motorcycle clubs represented only one-percent of all riders -- to which the Hell's Angels responded by proudly wearing "1%" badges. However, concurrent with the 1960s outlaw biker scandals and the Japanese invasion, the desire to rehabilitate the image of American motorcyclists was particularly pronounced. Many of the same publications that condemned the Hell's Angels also ran numerous articles about respectable, middle-class motorcyclists, including *Time* (*Two-Wheeled Chic*, 11 September 1964), *Popular Science* (*Civilized Cycles: Everybody Rides 'Em Now*, July 1965), *Popular Mechanics* (*Spotlight on the Commuter Cycle*, November 1965), *Esquire* (*Varoom at the Top: The Madison Avenue Motorcycle Club*, November 1965), *Seventeen* (*For the Fastest Ride Out of This World, Take a Motorbike*, November 1966), *Newsweek* (*Plight of the Motorcyclists*, 27 March 1967) and *The New York Times* (*New Breed of Motorcycle Buff is Businessman 5 Days a Week*, 16 June 1969).

The *Esquire* article, for example, reports that even the "respectable professional men" of Madison Avenue are beginning to ride motorcycles to work, that "varoom-varoom is now an established middle-class noise." Striving to dispel consumer fears of being associated with the Hell's Angels, the article announces that it is at last safe for anybody to purchase a motorcycle: "the old brute has been tamed, the rude beast sophisticated" (Summer, 1965: 141). In a similar manner, the *Time* article focuses on a life-insurance salesman whose motorcycle club is made up of "professional people and businessmen who've always had the forbidden-fruit desire to try it, but were afraid of the image" (1964: 78). And the piece in *Newsweek* centers on the president of a textbook illustrating company, asking us to pity big-city motorcyclists: "even if his black leather jacket has three buttons and a Brooks Brothers label, he's still a Hell's Angel to most of the populace" (1967: 88).

Perhaps most revealing and emblematic is another article in *Esquire* magazine (The Upward Mobility of the Motorcycle, November 1965). The piece offers advice to the potential buyer by ranking models of motorcycle into a class hierarchy, coupled with illustrations of each bike's archetypal rider:

	Model:	Rider:
CLASS I:	Harley XLR-TT	Roger Reiman, AMA Grand National Champ
CLASS II:	Harley Electra-Glide	Your Local Neighborhood Cop
CLASS III:	Triumph Bonneville	Steve McQueen
CLASS IV:	Yamaha YD3-3	Dick Smothers
CLASS V:	Honda Trail 90	Ann-Margret

The politics underlying this guide are quite striking. There is a clear attempt to venerate American technological achievement, valorizing Western technology over Eastern. Even though the lightweight Japanese bikes were far more popular and accessible vehicles at the time, the classification system ranks the heavier, meatier, less manageable American bikes much higher. The Japanese bikes are also characterized as less manly vehicles, with the Honda being dubbed a "lady's machine" and the Yamaha being ridden by a boyish Dick Smothers. In contrast, the rider of the British Triumph is Steve McQueen, who we are told does his own stunts, and the Harley-Davidsons are characterized by serious, professional, adult riders such as Reiman and the cop.

One can also note that all of the riders are again clean-cut, respectable citizens. In yet another attempt to claim back the Harley-Davidson from the Hell's Angels, outlaw bikers appear in none of the illustrations. Instead, the Harley is given respectability by associating it with a policeman out looking for a Hell's Angel "who has taken his Harley and cut off the fenders, chromed everything, chopped the frame to lower the saddle, and looks mean" (Gottlieb, 1965: 138). In other words, the Angels not only represented those things middle-America found undesirable, they were also portrayed as abusing that which society did value, tainting "superior" American technological artistry by stripping down and bastardizing the factory specifications of their bikes.

From this overview, one can see how the press coverage of motorcycles and the Hell's Angels was engaged in a process of shaping and defining American culture and society. Throughout, discourses revolving around issues of modernity and respectability are continually evoked and mobilized. In the face of stiff competition from Japan, the reports champion the achievements of American modernity, whilst also seeking to regulate their "proper" use -- i.e. professional commuting or well-defined leisure use. Similarly, by demonizing outlaw bikers for their antisocial values and lives of degradation, the reports denote what constitutes morally upright, civilized behavior. In other words, the news media created an image of outlaw motorcycle gangs as a social problem in a manner commensurate with its own ends, and it was this sensationalist image which attracted the interest of exploitation filmmakers like Arkoff and Corman.

## The Menace in the Movies

The sense of outlaw motorcycle gangs as a contemporary social problem clearly carries over into the narratives of the biker movie cycle. The topicality of the films is evident in the manner in which many of the biker exploits detailed in the press coverage also show up in the movies as well, from the story on biker funerals in *Life* magazine that inspired *The Wild Angels* to endless examples of gang rape, drug taking, bar brawls and innocent civilians being terrorized. Many films of the cycle even feature real members of the Hell's Angels, providing the spectacle of authentic outlaw bikers for audiences who might never have seen one in the flesh. For example, several real Angels were cast as extras in *The Wild Angels* and the Oakland Chapter appear as themselves in both *Hell's Angels on Wheels* (1967) and *Hell's Angels '69* -- with major speaking parts in the latter.

These biker movies are not documentaries, of course, and they augment their topical elements with ingredients culled from genres like the western. Parallels to the western are perhaps most famously rendered in *Easy Rider*, which names its protagonists after iconic figures of the Old West (Billy and Wyatt) and during one scene crosscuts between them tending to their bikes and a cowboy tending to his horse. This analogy is further evident throughout the cycle in the iconography of the biker riding his chopper on the high plains, resembling a cowboy on his horse (not least because bikers are seen riding through the same Mojave Desert landscapes used to shoot many westerns), and in narratives of outlaw bikers descending upon small communities, which recall similar western plots of outlaw gunslingers riding into town. *Angels' Wild Women* (1971) and *Hellriders* (1974) even explicitly refer to their small town settings as being movie locations for westerns. A number of biker movies also feature Native American characters: the hero of *The Born Losers* (1967) is part-Indian; *The Savage Seven* (1968) is set on a reservation; and one of the gang members in *Satan's Sadists* (1969) is Native American. Furthermore, several biker movies even remade earlier westerns: *Hell's Belles* (1968) reworks *Winchester '73* (1950) and *Chrome and Hot Leather* (1971) borrows many elements from *The Magnificent Seven* (1960).

As we have already seen, the press coverage of the Hell's Angels was enveloped in a process of defining American life and culture, drawing on discourses of modernity and respectable, civilized society. The defining of America is also central to the structures and concerns of the western genre, which similarly employs discourses of modernity and civilization to do so. Newspaper reports and movie westerns, however, obviously offer different ways of looking at and representing society, generally possessing different syntactic meanings. Newspapers provide present tense analyses of current events. Reports about the Hell's Angels, for example, are very specific to a set of tensions in 1960s American society and industry. Westerns, on the other hand, offer re-imaginings of a past era and only address contemporary society indirectly, through historical allegory. They rewrite the nation's past as a means of understanding its present: their retelling of the birth of modern America reflecting the nation's current state of being. In other words, while both the press coverage of bikers and the western genre address many of the same issues, they do so within different sets of semantic and syntactic structures.

This was particularly pronounced during the late 1960s with the release of a new wave of westerns, including *The Shooting* (1966), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *High Plains Drifter* (1972). Many film scholars have pointed out how a significant transformation of the western genre took place during the period. Robin Wood argues that the western genre became much

more violent, nihilistic and anti-social as it entered an "apocalyptic" phase (Wood, 1978). Will Wright and Thomas Schatz both describe a shift from "classical" to "professional" westerns in which the preservation of social values became increasingly less important (Wright, 1975; Schatz, 1981). And J. Hoberman argues that "confidence in the western began to ebb in response to the struggle for civil rights at home and the questioning of imperial ambition abroad" (Hoberman, 1998: 86). In other words, in contrast to the aforementioned news media -- which condemned outlaw bikers and celebrated respectable, civilized riders, promoting an idea of "America the Beautiful" -- westerns (and other film genres) of the late 1960s began to express antiestablishment sentiments by presenting outlaws as heroes and by depicting society and lawmakers as inherently corrupt.

By fusing the two together, one could say that biker movies often get caught in the crossfire. The cycle's syntactic meaning becomes unstable precisely because of the differences between the press coverage and the western genre. The ensuing conflict is particularly historical in character, in that the contemporary concerns of the press reports and longer term historical myths of the western genre are played out at the same time in the biker movie, creating a tension between past and present. Biker movies cannot simply be classified as revisionist westerns, because westerns are historical narratives that function as allegories of the present day and biker movies significantly differ by being set in the present tense, not the past. Nor can they simply be seen as analogues of the press coverage, because they take topical, contemporary narratives and filter them through the myths of the Old West. These tensions result in dual, often contradictory readings that compete for meaning within the texts, especially when such issues as modernity and civilization are evoked.

While far from comprehensive, I will illustrate this through an analysis of some of the primary components of the biker movie, all of which involve a blending of press reports and movie westerns: (1) how bikers are configured as outlaws; (2) the relationship between bikers and the small towns they invade; (3) the relationship between bikers and modern cities and technology; and (4) the representation of movement and travel.

1. In most biker movies, it is unclear whether we should revile or celebrate the outlaw motorcycle gangs, which seems to stem from how outlaws were configured differently in press reports and western movies during the period. How one responds to the gangs in biker movies is heavily colored by whether one reads their outlaw status against attitudes in press stories or attitudes in contemporaneous westerns -- perhaps more so than how any specific film might encourage us to respond. For example, even in films which depict bikers as unrelentingly despicable and villainous, such as *The Born Losers* or *Satan's Sadists*, one could argue that the gangs still possess many of the same antiheroic, antiestablishment traits that made outlaws popular in the westerns of the period. Conversely, in films which represent bikers in a fairly sympathetic light, such as *The Savage Seven* or *Hell's Angels '69*, the gangs cannot quite shrug off the baggage they carry from their press reports, which made them seem so heinous that surely *nobody* could embrace them whole-heartedly.

2. The sense of bikers as outlaws is commonly reinforced by tales of them invading small, rural townships, a regular feature of press reports ever since the Hollister incident. In these news stories, the small town appears to be a repository for traditional American values. The notion of the ostensible "purity" of the small town being raped, pillaged and defiled by outlaw bikers seems to serve as yet another means by which the news media sought to illustrate the perceived threat of the Angels to the American way of life. The small town has played a similar role in the traditional settlement and frontier narratives of the western genre,

representing the birthplace of modern American society, the place where civilization was built out of the wilderness. Many of the westerns of the 1960s, however, subverted this image by representing the small town as a place of corruption, violence and death, undermining and critiquing "traditional" American values. In *High Plains Drifter*, for example, the small town is literally painted red and sent to hell for its sins.

Again, the biker movie cycle seems to get caught in the crossfire. The thrust of the press reports remains present, with the rape and murder of innocent small town folk often used as shorthand for the bikers' cruelty and savagery. However, like their western counterparts from the era, biker movies also frequently represent their small towns as dying communities on the verge of extinction. For example, the village the bikers travel to near the beginning of *The Wild Angels* resembles the ruined shell of a township. In *Hellriders*, Adam West plays a doctor who likens living in the town to waiting for a patient to die, and the fight to expel a vicious biker gang raises questions about what it is that the citizens are actually fighting to save. *Angels Hard as They Come* (1971) offers another variation by being set in a literal ghost town, aptly named "Lost Cause." Located in the middle of a barren desert -- a defunct mineshaft serving as a symbol of the land having been used up -- the town serves as the setting for a nihilistic confrontation between two biker gangs and a group of hippies who had futilely hoped to resurrect the town as a commune. Numerous other biker movies also seek to unearth the corruption at the heart of small town America. For example, the town authorities in *The Born Losers* are as ineffectual and as pigheaded as the biker gang is sadistic, with the hero Billy Jack (Tom Laughlin) being the only one "man enough" to fight for justice, and the town in *Angels' Wild Women* even turns out to be a cover for a cult of Manson-style murderers.

3. Although "runs" to rural areas were frequently reported on in press stories, outlaw motorcycle clubs were in reality based in major metropolitan areas such as Oakland, San Francisco, San Bernardino, Sacramento, and Los Angeles, and the terms under which bikers were "created" by the press cannot be divorced from their relationship to the city, technology and modern industry. (One could even speculate that it was only because they were becoming increasingly visible in major urban centers that big city newspapers and magazines paid them any notice in the first place.) It is in this context that one must read the labeling of them as threats to society and modernity, because outlaw bikers were in effect the byproducts/victims of how modernization impacted American industry during the period. As Edward Soja has pointed out, the middle third of the twentieth century saw California (where the majority of outlaw bikers were based) embrace Fordist and Postfordist urban-industrial development schemes, becoming a center for high-technology industries such as aeronautics, advanced electronics, space exploration, weapons research and massive national defense contracting. As a result, he argues:

The middle segment of skilled, unionized, and well paid blue-collar workers has been shrinking, with a small number of its expelled laborers floating up to an expanded white-collar technocracy but a much larger proportion percolating downward into a relatively lower-skilled and lower-wage reservoir of production and service workers, swollen by massive immigration and part-time and female employees. This downward percolation of formerly well established union workers was once described as a demoralizing 'K-Marting' of the labor market. (Soja, 1993: 207)

The Hell's Angels of the 1960s represented a disaffected portion of this K-Marted labor force, most being blue-collar workers from factories and steel-mills whose livelihoods had been destroyed by technological industrialization. As such, the Angels were a thorn in the side of any attempt to promote the United States as the pinnacle of modernity and respectable civilization -- superior to social and industrial competitors like the Soviet Union and Japan -- because they represented a very visible and disgruntled reminder of the costs paid for the supposed advantages of the American way of life. In other words, the press coverage of the Angels could be seen as papering over the ideological cracks of modernization. By demonizing outlaw bikers for tainting American technological achievement and threatening respectable civilians, attention is directed away from how the Angels' activities were in many ways calculated and legitimate responses to their socio-economic disenfranchisement. As a result, the image of outlaw motorcycle gangs popularized by the mainstream news media was one founded upon a set of tensions very specific to social and industrial transformations during the period.

By lifting this image of bikers out of the press reports and placing them within the contexts of the western genre, this sense of historical specificity becomes destabilized. The result is that two separate and distinct moments of socio-industrial change become blurred. As already noted, westerns function as historical allegories, only addressing contemporary concerns indirectly or metaphorically. This becomes quite problematic in the case of biker movies because western narratives are firmly associated with an earlier, very different socio-historical moment -- the industrial revolution and the birth of modern America -- which commonly plays out in stories about agrarian communities being wiped out by modern technology and industry, perhaps best symbolized by the protagonist being run over and killed by a car at the end of *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970). When these two separate sets of connotations butt up against one another in the biker movie cycle, conflicting structures of meaning emerge, often resulting in anachronism because the films are positioned in relation to two different moments of social and industrial change.

*The Born Losers* seems a particularly pronounced example of this. Billy Jack is a Vietnam veteran who runs into trouble with a motorcycle gang upon his return to the United States. A dichotomy is established in the film between life in America before he left for Vietnam and life after. Prior to leaving, Billy Jack had made his income through horses and the rodeo circuit. Upon his return, he learns that these are no longer viable professions because horse riding and rodeo have been replaced by motorcycle riding and outlaw biker gangs. The dichotomy is clearly intended to evoke nineteenth century modernization narratives about the death of agrarian life, as found in the western genre, but comes across as quite absurd and anachronistic in the context of a late 1960s setting. This kind of explanation for the rise of outlaw motorcycle gangs fails to ring true because that particular narrative does not correspond to the specific socio-industrial climate from which outlaw bikers really emerged.

Such tensions are further complicated in most biker movies by only showing bikers on desert highways or in rural towns, heightening parallels to the western by removing all signs of modern urban spaces. By eschewing representations of contemporary city life, biker movies effectively make motorcycle gangs the embodiments of modern society because, by way of their machinery, they are the most technologically advanced community. Their attacks on small towns represent the threats of city life and modern technology on rural life, replaying those nineteenth century narratives of modernization. However, the image of outlaw motorcycle gangs from press reports also still persists, wherein bikers were instead represented as Neanderthal savages and threats to modern society -- a threat imagined to be

almost like the barbarity of a pre-civilized age invading the present day. Furthermore, modern technology is represented in this press coverage not as a threat to agrarian life, but rather as something to be celebrated: bikers are condemned not because of their association with modernity, but because of their perceived abuse of it.

This tension is especially evident in films which feature the real Hell's Angels, such as *Hell's Angels '69*. In this film, it is a particularly distracting experience to watch Sonny Barger (the President of the Hell's Angels) perform as himself. This is in part due to the fact that he is an appalling actor, but it is also because we simultaneously read him as both Sonny (himself) and "Sonny" (a character in a fictional story). Sonny is a man who lived in Oakland and possessed a very specific and well publicized relationship to that city, both in terms of his socio-economic status and his reputation. "Sonny," on the other hand, is represented as a nomadic wanderer who camps out in the Mojave Desert like a cowboy and has no apparent ties to the social, economic or industrial infrastructures of modern city life. Were the two to actually meet, they probably wouldn't recognize each other -- yet both battle for dominance in Barger's far-from-Oscar-caliber performance.

4. Perhaps the most commonly shared characteristic of biker movies is the riding montage. No biker movie is complete without at least three or four lengthy sequences of little narrative value during which bikers are seen rolling in packs down an open highway, often with a pop song playing in the background. The emphasis given to this aspect of biker life seems to mirror the fascination press reports had with the Angels' holiday runs. As noted earlier, accounts of motorcycle riding in newspapers and magazines were organized around delineating between socially valuable and socially unacceptable uses of the vehicle. In one corner were placed forms of travel that serve a useful social function, such as stories about commuting businessmen or respectable professionals who have taken up riding as a weekend hobby. In the other corner were placed outlaw motorcycle gangs, who show no interest in contributing positively to society and instead use their motorcycles to tear up the countryside and terrorize the community.

Travel and movement are also important facets of the western genre, stemming from pioneer narratives of journeys westward to the land of milk and honey -- thus also aligning travel and movement with social progress and modernity. In many westerns of the 1960s, however, the journey narrative is another element of the genre that is subverted, attacking those traditional associations of movement with modernity and new birth. For example, in films such as *Ride in the Whirlwind* (1966), *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, movement is ultimately futile and divorced from social progress: the protagonists are instead fleeing society, and only with their deaths do the journeys end. Travel is also associated with aimlessness, nihilism and death in *High Plains Drifter* and *The Shooting*. In the former, Clint Eastwood's title character is a ghostly apparition, an angel of vengeance who drifts the high plains, dishing out biblical retribution. In the latter, a journey through increasingly barren landscapes explicitly turns into an existential metaphor, a manhunt with no discernable motivation or purpose.

The riding montages in biker movies are similarly depicted as being aimless and without final destination. This is reinforced during one riding sequence in *Hell's Angels on Wheels* which is accompanied by a song entitled "Going Nowhere," as well as by Fonda's nihilistic statement at the end of *The Wild Angels* that "there's nowhere to go." It remains unclear in most movies, however, whether such sentiments critique or celebrate this nihilism. In many ways, like the news media accounts of motorcyclists, this aimlessness can be read critically as

a form of movement without social value, representing a waste of the freedom offered by modern technology and the open road. *The Wild Angels*, for example, opens with a shot of a young boy in a garden riding a toy tricycle, the camera placed behind the garden fence so that it appears to be a set of prison bars. The boy escapes the confines of the garden, but his mother catches him before he gets far -- just as he is about to run into Fonda on his chopper. The contrast is fairly clear: the little boy longs to break free from the confines of normal family/society and Fonda represents a grown-up version of the boy who has achieved that goal. However, the film seems to go on to convey that Fonda and his biker friends are wasting that freedom by directing it only towards unchecked hedonism. This is most evident in Fonda's uncertain and hesitant response to a challenge from a priest about what they plan to do with their freedom: "We wanna be free to, to do what we wanna do. We wanna be free to ride... And we wanna get loaded. And we wanna have a good time!"

On the other hand, however, riding sequences could be seen as possessing an attitude towards aimless movement not too different from the many oppositional westerns of the period, films which dissociate movement from social purpose and progress. Riding montages are commonly marked by a sense of pleasure and community among the bikers, a pleasure and community that could not be achieved within the confines of ordinary society. This is reinforced by the manner in which they are shot to convey a dance-like sense of smooth, fluid movement: the bikers weaving in and out, gliding alongside and in harmony with the camera, as though we are riding alongside them. Moreover, these montages can also be seen to embody a countercultural sentiment that going nowhere is cool -- something no doubt appealing to rebellious teen audiences. Indeed, the lack of social purpose is perhaps mirrored in the gleeful lack of narrative purpose of most riding montages. To return to *The Wild Angels*, for instance, the opening sequence ends with the camera returning to its initial position behind the bars of the fence, as the mother returns her little boy to the confines of the garden. After a moment of stasis and silence, the film cuts sharply to Fonda roaring down the freeway to an invigorating blast of rock 'n' roll music. The juxtaposition is extremely kinetic and energizing, celebrating movement and vitality for its own sake, and encouraging a rush of adrenaline akin to being an outlaw biker oneself.

## **Conclusion**

This case study has only focused on one particular cycle, and is therefore far from comprehensive. Biker films provide an especially pronounced example of the kind of syntactic collision I have described, but the essay's thesis seems relevant to other exploitation movie cycles as well, since so many set out to combine hot topics with well-plowed genre conventions. For example, Benschoff notes how LSD films frequently poach from horror movies and social problem films. By expanding his discussion to compare those generic elements to how LSD use was represented in the press, one would again see similar patterns of overlap, collision and syntactic instability to those found in biker movies.

This seems particularly common among exploitation films because of how audience demographics affect semantic and syntactic structures. The sensationalist elements that commonly attract exploitation filmmakers seem to serve markedly different ends depending on whether they are being read in a newspaper or seen on a drive-in movie screen. The shocking and sensational aspects of the Hell's Angels, for example, attracted the attention of *Time* and *Newsweek* in the first place because they were deemed newsworthy and of relevance to a readership interested in current affairs and social commentary. The structures and formulas of news stories tend to focus mainly around discourses of crisis, catastrophe and

criminality, and the exploits of the Angels neatly fit those discourses because of their criminal behavior and the perceived threat they posed to respectable, law-abiding citizens.

Those sensationalist elements have a very different function within the structures and formulas of exploitation filmmaking. Subjects like criminality, violence and sex are generally present in exploitation movies to titillate rather than inform. The historical and industrial contexts of exploitation films attest to this. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the primary exhibition space for such films was the drive-in circuit. As both Kerry Segrave and Randall Clark have detailed, the major studios refused to distribute first-run, second-run and often even third-run releases to drive-in theatres, so independent companies like AIP stepped in to fill the void with youth-oriented exploitation pictures, often using ad campaigns that fanned the fires of the generation gap between teenagers and parents (Segrave, 1992; Clark, 1995). This drive-in audience has regularly been characterized, by critics and filmmakers alike, as an unsophisticated crowd -- hence the emphasis on action, titillation and sensationalism in most exploitation movies.

A neat dichotomy between informed, educated *Newsweek* readers and titillated, unsophisticated drive-in audiences is of course far too simplistic. One could certainly argue that news stories aim to titillate as well as inform -- as the newsroom saying goes, "if it bleeds, it leads" -- and obviously not all members of drive-in audiences were unsophisticated grunts. However, a degree of differentiation remains relevant, if only because exploitation filmmakers imagined their audience to be more turned on by cheap thrills than weighty social commentary. As a result, by lifting the sensationalist or fashionable ingredients from news stories, exploitation films could be characterized as being more interested in the semantic elements of the press coverage than the syntactic meanings. What *Time* or *Newsweek* ultimately have to say about the Hell's Angels seems less relevant to the workings of biker movies than the fact that outlaw motorcycle gangs were a hot topic with many titillating and exploitable elements. In other words, exploitation films seem to, more often than not, pay little regard to replicating the structures of meaning in which those elements first appeared. In the case of the 1960s biker movie cycle, the western genre seems to have been chosen because of its ostensible similarity to the motorcycle gang phenomenon in the press, since westerns also feature semantic elements such as outlaws, savages, desert wildernesses and small towns. The fundamental differences between their deeper structures of syntactic meaning, however, ultimately results in confusion and ambivalence, and leaves the Hell's Angels as elusive and as contradictory today as they ever were.

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*Ride in the Whirlwind.* Dir. Monte Hellman. Proteus Films. 1966.

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From *The Wild Angels* in 1966 until its conclusion in 1972, the cycle of outlaw motorcycle films contained forty-odd formulaic examples. All but one were made by i... The title of *The Wild Angels* gestures toward a movie antecedent "The Wild One" and a contemporary social manifestation, the Hells Angels. The compact between fictional filmic aspects and highly charged topical subject matter was a long-standing characteristic of American International Pictures' marketing strategies, especially in its cycles of pictures oriented toward its youthful audience and featuring juvenile delinquents. In the early years of the 1960s, the company toned down the sensational aspects and focused on films that celebrated the consumption habits of America's teenagers. Outlaw biker clubs formed in the late 1940s on the West Coast after the end of World War II. Their culture was first popularized in the Marlon Brando film *The Wild One* (1953), which tells a story based very loosely on actual events. The film's success was followed by a string of low-budget exploitation films aimed at a teenage audience such as *Motorcycle Gang* (1957) and *The Hot Angel* (1958). "Ripped from Today's Headlines: The Outlaw Biker Movie Cycle". The Ripped from the Headlines trope as used in popular culture. It's that mostly familiar, spiffed up and neatly tied off version of the sensationally However, the original inspiration behind the title was the stock Warner Brothers film studio's tagline "Torn from today's headlines!"; Warners used this catchphrase often beginning in the 1930s to promote the gritty realism of their "social problem" films. When it's done with more than one real-life story, that falls under Patched Together from the Headlines. Advertisement: Most often seen in political cartoons, where the entire purpose is to comment on current events. Born Today Most Popular Celebs Most Popular Celebs Celebrity News. Community. Help Center Contributor Zone Polls. A biker returns from Thailand to set things straight with his girlfriend. One gang leader wants him for delivery of 2 motorbikes filled with crystal meth and another gang leader wants him for murdering his brother. Director: Joseph Kahn | Stars: Martin Henderson, Ice Cube, Monet Mazur, John Ashker. A gang of outlaw bikers pull a home invasion on a disgraced Anthropologist hiding a secret locked in his cabin basement. Director: James Bickert | Stars: Jett Bryant, Madeline Brumby, Paul McComiskey, Olivia LaCroix. Votes: 1 288.