CHAPTER TWO

Resisting Abstraction

There is nothing false about the materials.

Siegfried Kracauer, reporting on his visit to the UFA film studios in Neubabelsberg

There is a widely accepted notion, outlined in Chapter One, that New Hollywood was often ambitious in its thematic reach, constantly raising Big Questions about US American national identity. This might also be characterized as an emphasis on rhetoric at the expense of mimesis; a prioritization of ideas and their articulation ahead of physical matter and its aesthetic reproduction. What would happen to our idea of the socio-political New Hollywood if we interpreted some of its major films according to mimesis-oriented criteria? To what extent do its films offer up images and patterns which, contrary to widespread interpretations of the films at large, resist symbolic abstraction? Do the weighty allegories of works such as *Nashville* and *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) contain the materialist seeds of their own incoherence? 'Mimesis is the inescapable conceptual medium of Western thinking about art, artists and audiences', writes Matthew Potolsky (2006: 158). Ecocriticism has emphasized how the vital importance of mimesis also extends to the environment, precisely because mimesis is predicated on something tangible and influential which precedes textual representation. The term 'Prague Spring', explains Jonathan Bate in the introduction to his seminal *Romantic Ecology*, only has resonance as long as it remains the case that 'every winter will be followed by a spring which will bring warmth and new life' (1991: 2). The struggle for correlation between text and world does not immediately seem to be a concern for cinema in the way that it is for literature, and indeed the medium's apparent guarantee of that correlation has been cited as one of its fundamental

attributes. The subtitle of Siegfried Kracauer's most famous book speaks of film's ability to redeem physical reality, and Kracauer explains that this quality becomes especially clear when it is mobilized to counter the vague and the unsubstantial – a process this chapter will explore in some depth. Thomas Elsaesser sees something similar at play in New Hollywood, and in particular in the role of objects in the films of Robert Altman: 'instead of providing the elements of first-level verisimilitude and causal logic that guarantee the coherence of the secondary level of meaning, they become mere vehicles of phatic communicative contact, where discrete visual moments are underscored, tableau-like, but voided of any specific moral significance' ([1975] 2004: 290). This disconnect, I will argue, is a characteristic of New Hollywood, evidenced most clearly in national-commentary films and in particular *Nashville* and *The Godfather*, where the abstract rhetoric of US nationalism and the illusory relief offered by pastoral retreat (respectively) are brought into question by way of an emphasis on the material.

This material need not be green to warrant ecocritical attention. As a discipline, ecocriticism has long been uncomfortable with the assumption that 'nature' and 'natural', concepts which come laden with normative ideological baggage, are its objects of study. The work of Jane Bennett offers a provocative insight into what might serve as a better description of its true realm of enquiry: things. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Bennett draws on a range of philosophical traditions to advocate a greater awareness of what she calls 'thing-power' or 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (2010: 6). To assume that agency is a purely human privilege, she argues, is to seriously narrow our environmental, aesthetic and political imaginations; 'to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally [...] is to take a step towards a more ecological sensibility' (2010: 10, emphasis in the original). I find in New Hollywood cinema a number of gestures towards such horizontality, and away from symbolic abstraction.

Ecocriticism, Mimesis and Environmentality

Largely (though not wholly) hostile to what they consider to be poststructuralism's insistence on all-pervading textuality, ecocritics have tried to resurrect the vitality of the physical world as something to which most art and literature is still,

to one degree or another, beholden. 'The signified thus still has a primacy over the signifier (I am relieved to discover)', writes Terry Gifford (2000: 173). It is not surprising, then, that ecocritics have been drawn to the concept of mimesis, defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'the representation or imitation of the real world in (a work of) art, literature, etc.'. The diverging contentions within ecocriticism on the question of mimesis are well represented by a critical exchange between Lawrence Buell and Dana Phillips; the sharp differences between the two not only provide a revealing contrast of approaches but also give a sense of how ecocriticism might have injected a fresh urgency and immediacy into the topic.

The exchange was launched by Phillips's critique of Buell's work, in an article called 'Ecocriticism, Literary Theory and the Truth of Ecology' (1999, and later expanded into the book *The Truth of Ecology*). Described by Greg Garrard as an 'invigoratingly savage attack on crude mimeticism' (2010: 11), Phillips responds to the passages in Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) which argue that we should invest more importance in literature's referential aspect than its allegorical or ideological qualities. Buell proposes that 'the emphasis on disjunction between text and world seems overblown' (1995: 84), and places a good deal of the blame for this on the legacy of structuralism and poststructuralism. 'In contemporary literary theory,' writes Buell, 'the capacity of literary writers to render a faithful mimesis of the object world is reckoned indifferent at best, and their interest in doing so is thought to be a secondary concern' (1995: 84). But Buell does not limit the scope of his arguments to academic trends and fashions; the turn against literary realism is, for him, directly linked to society's 'false assumption that environmental interventions in its planned existence are nothing more than fortuitous occasional events. The notion of art (and other cultural practices) as discursive functions carried on within social "spaces" reinforces this mentality no less efficiently than air-conditioning' (1995: 111). Buell thus raises the stakes to a fully fledged social struggle, and argues that literature's mimetic efforts are far more environmentally progressive than the created worlds found in virtual reality:

> *One of literary realism's advantages, which standard accounts of its ideological agenda occlude, is precisely its comparative impotence: its inability to dominate the physical world that its texts register, and with this an underlying awareness of its own project as the inexhaustible challenge of not mastering*

> *reality so much as trying quixotically to get nearer to it than the conventions of classical and romantic representation had permitted. (1995: 113)*

For Buell, then, mimesis is not so much a quality that is achieved but an ongoing struggle that is characterized by a degree of humility towards our physical environment. It is a struggle against what he sees as the incessant abstracting impulse of literary theory and society in general, with the ultimate aim (even if this might never be fully attainable) of 'recuperating the factical environment' (1995: 86).

Dana Phillips takes issue with Buell on a number of levels, including his straw-man approach to literary theory and his potentially naïve faith in realism, but the real crux of his opposition rests on the question of to what extent a critical consideration of literature should take into account its mimetic fidelity. For Phillips, Buell in particular and ecocriticism in general have unfortunately embarked on a 'rescue mission' which amounts to little more than a wild goose chase:

> *Buell like other ecocritics falls prey to the false hope that there is some beyond of literature, call it nature or wilderness or ecological community or ecosystem or environment, where deliverance from the constraints of culture, particularly that constraint known as 'theory,' might be found. Do not get me wrong: I think there is a beyond of literature. There is, for example, nature. I just think that nature cannot deliver one from the constraints of culture, any more than culture can deliver one from the constraints of nature. (1999: 585)*

What Buell considers to be mimetic environmental literature unencumbered by social discourse or cultural expectations is actually a form of writing which is socially determined to its core – and that, says Phillips, is fine:

> *There is no doubt that literature can be realistic and even in some limited sense representational: it can point to the world. That is, it can point to some carefully circumscribed aspect of the world which it must describe and locate in more or less detail for a competent reader who understands what it is trying to do. (1999: 597)*

Allegory and ideology, argues Phillips, are not inconvenient intrusions on the purity of literature, but the very stuff of literature. To place absolute importance on literature's referentiality not only obscures this fact, but means that

ecocriticism 'may be reduced to an umpire's role, squinting to see if a given description of a painted trillium or a live oak tree is itself well-painted and lively' (1999: 586). The (absurd) logical conclusion of this, warns Phillips, would be to favour realistic bird-call impressions over and above Thoreau's *Walden* in a canon of environmental literature.

Not so, according to Buell's sustained response some years later in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*: 'mimetic particularity and referentialism don't tightly correlate' (2005: 37). Buell's main strategy of defence (or rebuttal) is to insist on the flexibility of mimesis, while refusing to lose sight of its centrality. What ecocritics value, he argues, is not a 'one-to-one correspondence between text and world, but rather a certain kind of environmental referentiality' (2005: 32) and 'continued interest in the matching, or non-matching, of wordscape and worldscape that takes quite varied forms' (2005: 39). To use two of Buell's examples, the giant horse-chestnut tree in *Jane Eyre* and the great elm in Thoreau's *Journal* enrich their respective texts because each of these trees had a particular status and knowable image within the environments of England and New England respectively – and not because they are depicted in any great amount of detail, nor because they succeed in achieving some kind of direct representation, or pure mimesis. For Buell, they are obviously not trees, but they are just as obviously far more than generic trees, which is evidenced by the fact that the passages simply make no sense 'without reference to natural history and/or cultural ecology' (2005: 37). As he argues, it is a given that the written word will only ever be 'abstract graphic notation' (2005: 33). 'Yet it is equally clear', he goes on to propose, 'that the subject of a text's representation of its environmental ground *matters* – matters aesthetically, conceptually, ideologically' (2005: 33, emphasis in the original). It is important to note here that Buell does not ignore ideological connotations, but sees them as being partly grounded in the character of a text's environmental referentiality – its environmentality.

It is fair to suggest that this type of critical exchange is characteristic of an earlier period in ecocriticism, when its practitioners were especially anxious to ensure a balance between academic distinctiveness ('let's take representations of nature at face value, because others critics don't') and critical rigour ('let's ensure that we interrogate literature *as* literature'). More recently, 'materiality' has emerged as a crucial issue for ecocritics and other critical thinkers sympathetic to ecological concerns, in such a way that seems to strike something of a balance between Buell and Phillips; the material world still stands as the crucial referent,

but the material world is not reducible to nature, and neither is 'theory' necessarily a distraction from that world. An important touchstone here is a 2012 issue of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, co-edited by Dana Phillips (with Heather I. Sullivan). It is dedicated to materiality in literature and theory, and it addresses 'the agency of material bodies participating in a broad spectrum of relationships with other forms of agentic matter on many scales. The contributors raise the questions of who or what has agency, when and how does agency make a difference, and what does it mean for human agency that it is surrounded by "vibrant" matter?' (Phillips and Sullivan 2012: 446). In bringing such a perspective to bear on New Hollywood, I do not claim that *Nashville* or *The Godfather* make philosophical statements regarding human agency, but rather that their aesthetic and tonal distinctiveness comes into sharper focus with the help of materialist ecocriticism.

Championing the Referent in Film Theory

Cinematography is so evidently able to offer up images which bear an extraordinary resemblance to their actual source that it is somewhat unclear what the notion of mimesis can bring to a debate about cinema; if the photographic image cannot help but present images which link directly to a real-world original, then surely our attention must move to how filmmakers subsequently organize these images. Yet there is another way of approaching film's mimetic credentials: if lifelikeness is more or less guaranteed, then mimesis becomes less about the medium's own ability than our approach to it – are we alive enough to cinema's unique capabilities? It is the closest art has come to letting us see the world clearly, so this line of thought would go, and it is up to filmmakers and audiences to treat cinema accordingly.

A number of film theorists (and practitioners) in the earlier part of the twentieth century pursued this idea, and although the strongest trends in film theory from the 1960s onwards have tended instead to emphasize other aspects of the medium, this notion of film's responsibility towards 'reality' lives on, most clearly in the persistent interest in the work of André Bazin[1] – regularly described as the most influential theorist in film history. In *Doubting Vision* (2008), Malcolm Turvey identifies this early twentieth-century grouping as 'revelationism', and groups together the work of Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs and Siegfried

Kracauer under this banner because of their consistent emphasis on cinema's ability to reveal aspects of reality which go unseen by the human eye. According to these four thinkers, 'cinema's most significant property, one which other arts do not possess (or at least do not possess to the same degree), is its ability to uncover features of reality invisible to human vision' (Turvey 2008: 3). Turvey goes on to critique the crude dismissals of human vision which he sees as symptomatic of revelationist writing, but what concerns us here is not so much the persuasiveness of these writers' rhetoric so much as their confidence in cinema's ability to reveal things 'as they are'. Elaborating on the contemporary influences on revelationism, Turvey quotes Hugo Münsterberg: 'Yes, by the miracles of the camera we may trace the life of nature even in forms which no human observation really finds in the outer world' (2008: 5). Whether or not this qualifies as 'mimesis', its resonance with the concerns of ecocriticism is unmistakable.

Despite their common distrust of human vision, Epstein, Vertov, Balázs and Kracauer differ in interesting ways when it comes to explaining cinema's special propensity for revealing reality *vis-à-vis* the weakness of human abilities: Epstein, explains Turvey, appreciates how cinema could capture the 'mobility of reality' and counter our natural tendency to immobilize through perception; Vertov emphasizes social realities as opposed to physical realities and embraces the autonomy of machines in general; Balázs laments the dominance of language over action, and our resultant inability to communicate non-rational concepts; Kracauer critiques modernity's emphasis on abstractions, for which science is the chief culprit, and celebrates cinema's ability to deal in material specifics. Although all of these theorists have ample secondary literature devoted to their work, it is worth staying with Turvey's analysis of them because he offers a particularly useful subcategorization. Epstein and Vertov, according to Turvey, assume certain innate handicaps on the part of the human eye, while Balázs and Kracauer instead identify cultural forces as the cause of our relative blindness. 'Balázs argues that it is, in part, a historical limitation that sight suffers from, a limitation from which it can potentially recover' (2008: 38), and 'for Kracauer it is a historical limitation specific to modernity that vision suffers from' (2008: 41).

At the risk of narrowing or simplifying ecocriticism, it would be fair to suggest that this latter approach is more in keeping with its concerns and its hope that art and literature can sometimes teach us about how we can better understand our environments – rather than achieve this understanding for us. As Scott Russell Sanders puts it, 'any writer who sees the world in ecological perspective faces a

hard problem: how, despite the perfection of our technological boxes, to make us feel the ache and tug of that organic web passing through us' (1996: 194). One could even say that the work of Balázs and Kracauer shares with mainstream ecocriticism a certain underlying optimism which has left it (like ecocriticism) open to accusations of naiveté. If the revelationist tradition in film theory offers a promising path towards understanding mimesis and environmentality in cinema, then Balázs and Kracauer (whose 'redemption of physical reality' is echoed in Buell's 'recuperating the factical environment' (1995: 86)) emerge as perhaps the most obviously ecocritical of that tradition. And Kracauer – with his particular emphasis on the struggle against abstractions – emerges as especially relevant to New Hollywood.

In *Theory of Film* ([1960] 1997), Kracauer's overall argument functions by defining the essential properties of film as a medium and then identifying particular tropes and techniques which capitalize on these properties most fully; therefore, 'applying Kracauer' risks becoming an exercise in simply spotting those features (or their notable absence) in any given film. Instead, his firm belief in the 'direct perception of the concrete achievement of a thing in its actuality' ([1960] 1997: 296), the most persistent theme in *Theory of Film*, will serve as a kind of guiding motif in the following analyses. Miriam Hansen (1993) has argued persuasively that it is a mistake to reduce *Theory of Film* to a mere relic of naïve realism, and that we should look beyond its surface simplicity and recognize the traces of profound historical trauma which help explain the work's flaws and contextualize its sometimes perverse straightforwardness. Her historicized account of *Theory of Film*'s protracted genesis is hugely valuable, but what Hansen laments, and even seems to apologize for – that under-theorized belief in a pre-eminent material reality – is precisely what chimes with Buell and ecocritical approaches to mimesis. 'If in the book,' writes Hansen,

> *the various ways in which film engages material reality [...] often read like a catalogue of aesthetic motifs or a celebration of the 'marvels of everyday life' [...] in the Marseille notebooks [dating from the 1940s] they still appear under the perspective of phenomena that push the boundaries of individual consciousness. (1993: 457)*

For Hansen, the latter perspective is more interesting or more valuable; for ecocriticism, it is not.

The theme of material integrity in fact falls into particularly bold relief very late on in *Theory of Film*, in the book's epilogue, when Kracauer briefly examines cinema's ability to debunk (or at least question) myths and prejudices by contradicting them through material reality. It is unfortunate that Kracauer did not expand on this fascinating dynamic more fully. In fact, the one example he describes (when D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) contrasts the sympathetic Chinese protagonist with two unpalatable missionaries) does not seem to quite do justice to Kracauer's ideas, because the generalities of prejudice are merely replaced by the generalities (or abstractness, to invoke Kracauer's supposed nemesis) of racial and cultural tolerance. If cinema *is* able to reveal the invalidity of broad and vague ideas through their confrontation with the material, then it surely follows that the material must not simply act as a springboard for more idealizing. Ideologies must be fundamentally thrown off course by material actuality, rather than redirected by it.

The debate between Buell and Phillips offers us an insight into the vital importance of referentiality and mimesis in ecocritical considerations of art and fiction, and Kracauer's *Theory of Film* suggests some ways in which cinema has a kind of ontological predilection for these qualities. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) offers an especially useful model for bringing both sets of concerns to bear (ecocritically) on New Hollywood. Like Buell, she is interested in a non-anthropocentric aesthetics – she wants 'to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it' (2010: 14) – and sees the relative autonomy of material as an important part of this. Her philosophy is overtly ecological (although often critical of environmentalist rhetoric). And yet Bennett is not primarily interested in 'nature' as it is widely understood; she writes about metal, food and electricity as worthy subjects for ecological consideration, and – like Kracauer – characterizes alertness to materiality as an ethical issue. She writes:

> *Vital materialists [...] try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them. This sense of strange and incomplete commonality [...] may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans – animals, plants, earth, even artefacts and commodities, more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically. (2010: 18)*

Such an approach draws on a tradition of thought which Bill Brown brings together under the rubric of 'thing theory', in an article where – paraphrasing Adorno – he considers 'the alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact' (2001: 12).[2] Bennett weaves together this ethical imperative with questions of contemporary politics and ecology, in terms which prove very resonant for the study of cinema – ecocritically or otherwise. 'Lingering in moments' in this sense might also be thought of as a rather poetic description of film criticism, whereby we enjoy the pleasure and privilege of attending to fleeting instances and worldly details. And while Kracauer's interpretation of *Broken Blossoms* renders material bodies subservient to the film's theme, Bennett's approach offers more scope for considering to the potential independence of materials, and their significance *in spite of* such themes.

National-Commentary Rhetoric

New Hollywood offers instances whereby this tendency, a kind of resilient materiality, comes to the fore. It has already been noted how commentators have found New Hollywood to be both politically engaged and rhetorically confused. Although I will not return to their critiques in detail, it is useful to bear in mind that the confrontations between abstractness and materiality described below provide one possible explanation for the films' supposed incoherence. Of course, abstractness is not an easy thing to identify in any work, but New Hollywood offers up a number of films which are almost inarguably attempting to deal with issues of US national identity – an ungrounded generality if ever there was one. These films of national commentary, *The Godfather* and *Nashville* in particular, offer an excellent opportunity to witness in practice what Kracauer proposed in theory: the fascinating dissonance between vague notions and cinema's unrelenting specificity.

Both films are habitually understood allegorically. Raymond Carney, making his case for the way in which the films of John Cassavetes resist 'metaphorical and philosophical expansions' (1985: 11), describes New Hollywood as a series of indulgences in such expansiveness, and specifically cites *The Godfather* and *Nashville* as films which 'have in common their eminently discussable generalizations' (1985: 11). And yet each film places such importance on the evocation of localized details and material environments (the mahogany and leather of Don

Corleone's office, the kitsch costumes of the Nashville music scene) that a tension emerges between their supposed symbolism and their apparent immediacy. Put another way, they invite extrapolation but also resist it, and ecocriticism's concern with mimetic fidelity illuminates this tension particularly well. Before looking more closely at examples of how these films develop such a tension, it is useful to consider the national-commentary status often awarded to both *The Godfather* and *Nashville*, because it is in the face of this that their mimetic currency seems so curious.

In *America in the Movies* (1989), Michael Wood offers some ideas on the complex relationship between the country as it exists in cinema, and the America 'out there in reality': 'it is a relation of wish, echo, transposition, displacement, inversion, compensation, reinforcement, example, warning – there are virtually as many categories of the relation as you care to dream up' (1989: 15). We could contribute (but not necessarily dream up) the category of 'grand commentary' or 'editorialization', whereby an American film explicitly engages with the United States as a subject. And, bearing in mind that symbiosis is central to Wood's relation, this commentary needs to be digested, reflected upon and solidified in the real world. Take, as a brief example, *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007); there is no denying that its immediate subject matter – oil, territorial invasion, corruption – has a direct relevance to deep-rooted concerns about America (contemporary and historical), its values and its governance. Yet so many films deal with themes that could be plausibly extrapolated into being 'American themes' (self-reliance, violence, capitalism etc.) that this is perhaps not enough; it needs to be echoed and somewhat confirmed by its reception. Anderson's film was greeted with just such a reception:

> *It's 1898, and Plainview is mining for silver. He's the great American entrepreneur, the ambitious loner, pushing farther west and pushing himself to his physical limits. (Mick LaSalle,* San Francisco Chronicle, *Friday 4 January, 2008)*

> There Will Be Blood *is genuinely widescreen, both in its mise-en-scène and concern with American values – God, oil, family – that have hardly receded into the mist. (J. Hoberman,* Village Voice, *Tuesday 18 December, 2007)*

> *Paul Thomas Anderson aspires to the creation of an American epic. (Richard Schickel,* Time, *Monday 24 December, 2007)*

> *[Eli and Plainview, the main characters,] engage in a wary, tortured dance that's supposed to lead us to an understanding of their similarities, their differences, and the ways in which the pursuit of their respective goals is part of this flawed but remarkable entity we call the American character. (Stephanie Zacharek, Salon.com, Wednesday 26 December, 2007)*

It is important to include here a negative review (Zacharek), if only to distinguish this process of confirmation from one of ringing endorsement. Even when Anderson's lofty ambitions are deemed beyond the reach of the film itself, there is nevertheless recognition of the reach – *There Will Be Blood* was offered and received as a film about America.

Much the same is true of *The Godfather* and *Nashville*. They remain two of the most critically acclaimed films of the period (and beyond), and although vastly different in tone and style, each in its own way tackles certain big ideas of Americanism, from multiculturalism and capitalism in *The Godfather* to populism and pluralism in *Nashville*. Nor should we ignore the more blatant instances where nationalism is invoked, such as the famous 'I believe in America' address to camera which opens *The Godfather*, and the huge United States flag which, in *Nashville*, acts as a backdrop to the climactic assassination. *Nashville*, with its fictional presidential campaign and overt reference to bicentennial celebrations, was more immediately understood as a work of national commentary. John Yates – taking issue with Altman's patronizing take on popular and populist culture – asserted that the film 'is obviously intended as a picture of common society' (1976: 23), and Michael Klein observed at the time how 'critics have been unanimous in their praise of *Nashville* and in viewing it as a satire upon the grotesqueries of "middle America"' (1975: 6).[3] One of those critics was Vincent Canby (1975) who, in the *New York Times*, declared that '*Nashville* is about the quality of a segment of Middle American life'.

Three years earlier, Canby had described *The Godfather* in similar, if more resounding, terms: 'Francis Ford Coppola has made one of the most brutal and moving chronicles of American life ever designed within the limits of popular entertainment' (1972). *The Godfather* is generally more oblique than *Nashville* in its treatment of American nationhood. (The producer, Robert Evans, on hearing that Coppola intended the film to be 'a metaphor for capitalism in America' rather than a gangster picture, responded, 'Fuck him and the horse he rode in on' (Evans 1994: 226).) Declarations such as Canby's were more characteristic

of later analyses, but this slight lag does not negate the film's rhetorical impact. It may even enhance it, as when Jonathan Rosenbaum saw in *The Godfather* a certain mentality which plagued the administration of George W. Bush, a mentality described by the critic as 'a cowardly form of pathos, and one which Americans have been living with on an intimate basis for the past eight years' (2010: 274). Having identified both films as works which are concerned with broad issues of American nationhood, I will not proceed to evaluate the relative success or failure, originality or predictability, of *Nashville* and *The Godfather* in their treatment of those issues. J. Hoberman has complained, in terms that are wonderfully apt for the present investigation, that *Nashville* indulges in 'themes as boomingly obvious and brilliantly insubstantial as a firework display on the Fourth of July' (2004: 208). That may well be the case, but that very insubstantiality is counterbalanced and confused by a lingering emphasis on materiality.

The Flag as Thing in *Nashville*

Nashville, with its huge cast of characters and plethora of intertwining stories, does not lend itself to a brief synopsis. The film's finale, however, has a relatively simple premise: an outdoor rally is taking place at Nashville's replica Parthenon, for presidential candidate Hal Phillip Walker. The event brings together the musicians, music fans, campaigners and promoters whom the film has followed along various (occasionally connecting) narrative strands. Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakley), the much beloved but very troubled singer, is assassinated, prompting a brief panic which is alleviated almost immediately by a huge communal sing-along.[4] This climactic concert is one of many performances throughout *Nashville* and is presented as being simultaneously the most contrived and the least contrived performance in the film. It is the most contrived inasmuch as John Triplette (Michael Murphy), the organizer on behalf of the presidential campaign, has done nothing but smooth-talk and lie in order to lure headline acts. And yet the conditions of this concert – the weather, the chaos, the huge spaces through which crowds move in and out – seem decidedly out of any person's control or design. This sense of exposure coalesces in a single, striking image, which acts as the concert's 'curtain raiser': a gigantic US flag blowing in the wind. It is no coincidence that this is the site where *Nashville*'s vast array of characters eventually comes together. As they stand before their flag, it is tempting to suggest that the

Figure 2.1 The flag as thing: *Nashville* (ABC / Paramount Pictures)

gathering is a mirroring, or channelling, of the US nation. This may be so, but it would be a mistake to turn away from the flag and towards the characters too hastily, as *Nashville* is as complicated and ambiguous in its deployment of this as it is in casting the fates of its ensemble.

The flag's presence in the scene brings to mind the often-quoted reaction to the Lumières' early films, and the apparent wonder generated by seeing the ripple of leaves stirred by the wind. Siegfried Kracauer returns to this more than once in *Theory of Film* and specifically quotes Parisian journalist Henri de Parville's description of this revelation as 'nature caught in the act' (Kracauer [1960] 1997: 31). I would like to follow the example of such an interpretation, focusing on the flag and the wind and resisting the temptation to accept the iconicity of the flag too readily. In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett describes the experience of coming across a collection of items (both organic and manufactured) in a gutter, and realizing that she had the choice as to whether to see them as human debris or 'existents in excess of their association with human meanings' (2010: 4). To apply this kind of perceptual experiment to the flag in *Nashville* is not, as it might first appear, to wilfully ignore the broader context of the film or scene. Coming after a string of shows in seedy bars and gaudy theatres, what is most striking about the finale is its undercurrent of disorder, even before the calamitous shooting, which is felt through its outsideness – cars roam chaotically around the grounds, the crowd moves at its own pace and leisure and the performers are not automatically the focus of attention. Country music, which the film has persistently characterized as a kind of synecdoche of superficial patriotism, is now removed from its comfort zone and made to fend for itself against the elements.[5] To this extent, the 'stage is set' for power and agency to slip away, and for meticulously controlled

symbols to become disjointed, their material severed from their intended meaning. *Nashville* is populated with numerous attempts to reveal the hollow cant of patriotic music; the flag fits into such a design perfectly, only here the revelation has a distinctly materialistic emphasis.

Is there anything inherently challenging in the image of a national flag blowing in the wind? One could even argue that a still, stagnant flag – stripped of its connections with expansive adventure, relegated from its lofty home atop a flagpole – has more critical capacity. However, to be playful and subversive with this quintessential American icon does nothing to challenge its iconicity and instead re-establishes its rhetorical force, simply in another guise. A closer look at the scene as a whole suggests why an object-centred analysis, particularly one that focuses on the flag, is appropriate. The scene in question begins with a close-up on a television screen, as a newsreader delivers an editorial on the strange campaign of Hal Phillip Walker. A gradual zoom out reveals the television set to be, rather incongruously, outdoors; the strange effect of political rhetoric being ironically re-formulated by its material medium stands as something of an overture for the scene proper. This begins with numerous long shots of preparatory action at the concert venue, which seem to award us a privileged, backstage perspective. Significantly, the flag at this point is visible though not foregrounded – it seems to exist as a performance prop. The scene's attention then switches to the arrival of the campaign organizer John Triplette, who is greeted by his local subordinate, Delbert (Ned Beatty). Delbert tries to tell an uninterested John about the history of the Parthenon, which was originally built as a plaster-of-Paris replica for centennial celebrations. Soon after, John is drawn into an angry exchange with Barbra Jean's husband and manager, Barnett (Allen Garfield). John has promised him that the concert will feature no prominent political signs. As Barnett gestures angrily towards the backdrop, we assume that he is referring to the Hal Phillip Walker banner which is visible; the curious possibility remains, however, that he is similarly upset by the flag, which looms above, unseen.

Before the camera begins to fix its attention firmly on the flag, these fleeting moments and exchanges sow the seeds for a grounded, utilitarian approach to its role. Political messages are seen as subservient to their material delivery; the flag is introduced as a piece of equipment, a tool for spectacle; the grand stage is itself undermined through insights into its material history; the presence of political banners is debated as matter of petty contractual wrangling. Thus, when the film cuts to a striking, screen-filling close-up of the flag, we have every reason not to

be (entirely) swayed by its iconicity. The slightly muted colours, whether a consequence of the overcast weather or the textures and dyes of the flag, encourage us to see the object as a specific material incarnation of a design. And the flag is most definitely not fluttering, but billowing; the rhythm of ripples as the wind envelops the flag is a consequence of – and a reminder of – its remarkable size. In this respect, the moment is designed to allow us to see not just a flag, but a sheet of material at the mercy of its environment. Jane Bennett, paraphrasing Adorno, talks of how the thing 'eludes capture by the concept' (2010: 13); *Nashville* establishes the conditions for just such an elusion.

One could argue that this mix of materiality and ideological usefulness is true of all flags in all films. But it is most common for these qualities to seem to be simultaneous, and to be subsumed by the broad ideological connotations of the flag as icon. This is how the flag is introduced in another New Hollywood film, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (Sam Peckinpah, 1970), when Hogue (Jason Robards) humbly accepts it as a gift and deferentially removes his hat. Minutes later he is hastily hoisting the flag in order to impress a woman; Peckinpah, in other words, deliberately has Hogue play free and easy with the flag's 'usefulness'. To take an extreme counter-example, the flag which is raised triumphantly at the end of *Drums Along the Mohawk* (John Ford, 1939) is so endowed with ideological power that even when the dialogue refers to its material presence ('Hey soldier, let me take that flag a minute'), it never comes close to being revealed in what Heidegger would deem its 'thingness'. This scene is especially telling because the characters in it have never seen the Stars and Stripes before and are literally being introduced to it. In this sense, *Drums Along the Mohawk* ostensibly presents a much better opportunity than *Nashville* for a flag to be revealed as a thing before it has accumulated overbearing ideological significance. Yet this only further emphasizes the contrasting processes being enacted in each film; while *Drums* heaps meaning on the thing, *Nashville* strives to reveal the thing behind the meaning.

Perhaps the most famous depiction of the United States flag in twentieth-century art is Jasper Johns's 'Flag' (1954–55), which has, ironically, grown into an icon of sorts in its own right. Johns introduced 'Flag' at a time when the mechanisms of McCarthyism meant that questions of Americanism were prevalent and urgent, and in this sense it is almost impossible not to think of the work as an overt intervention in contemporary political debate. But its boldness and directness do not automatically make for a strident rejection of whatever it is the Stars and Stripes 'means' or 'stands for', because the use of unfamiliar materials does not

disrupt or overpower the ultimate design. 'Something or someone is being played with, caricatured and snubbed,' writes Fred Orton, 'but the flag of the United States remains relatively intact' (1994: 128). The work does remind us that the flag is a contrived icon whose constituent parts are by no means inevitable, and to that extent asks us to acknowledge its profound instability, but this critique is contained and balanced by the resoluteness of the design. As Orton understands it, 'factitiousness is never allowed to disrupt, spoil or break the genuine flagness of the flag' (1994: 112). This idea of a critique being contained by the flag itself is a significant one in that it frames the issues spatially, implying that a genuinely subversive challenge to the flag would need to be launched from outside it – in terms of its environment.

Patton (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1970), a New Hollywood film even more direct in its national-commentary address than *Nashville*, offers a telling counter-example here. The film opens with a huge United States flag, which, it soon transpires, is a backdrop for Patton's (George C. Scott) address to his troops. Here, the frontal angle of the camera and the stillness of the conditions (the only movement is Patton's) conspire to reveal the flag in purely graphic terms. The brief series of close-ups which follow the initial long shot suddenly frame different parts of Patton's uniform against abstractions of pure white or unfocused red, and the flag seems to exist predominantly as blocks of colour. As with Johns, the 'flag-ness' of the flag is rooted in its design, and the strangeness of its presentation (in collage form with Johns; as a mammoth, inert screen in *Patton*) complicates our relationship with its meaning without trying to break down that relationship. But unlike 'Flag', the effect in *Patton* is not entirely contained by the flag's whole, and the peculiarity of the flag itself is partly generated by the environment in which it is placed. The flag sits before an obediently silent gathering of soldiers (whom we do not see), in a presumably huge hall (we hear the echoes of the shuffling chairs), and remains in its eerie stasis because of this protection. Although we do not see the hall, one can imagine that it is similar to the huge gymnasium we see at the climax of *The Parallax View*, when a vast array of empty tables (with red, white and blue tablecloths) are shown in a high-angle long shot, and – as in *Patton* – the graphic tools of nationalist rhetoric are shown as visual constructs. The insistent unnaturalness of these settings is decisively important, but – as Bennett suggests – the ecological interest of a site or a moment depends less on whether its constituent parts are 'natural' than on the potential it provides for letting materials challenge and disrupt anthropocentric intentions.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that all three films share an interest in the hollowness of spectacle and performance – and how in each instance the mechanics of performance are depicted in such a way as to threaten the ideological design of the performance. In *Nashville,* the audience has been privy to the cynical contrivance of the show throughout most of the film; *Patton* presents the General's performance as possibly delusional; in *The Parallax View*, when the pre-recorded sound falls out of synch with the rehearsal, it is a deeply ominous sign. These moments, which pointedly satirize slick American showmanship and expose the emptiness and artificiality of abstract ideals, recur in a number of New Hollywood films. Other examples include Jessica's (Julia Anne Robinson) Miss America charade in *The King of Marvin Gardens* (Bob Rafelson, 1972), Alice's (Ellen Burstyn) painful barroom show in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (*Martin Scorsese, 1974) and the whole of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They? (*Sydney Pollack, 1969), not to mention later echoes in *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976) and *The King of Comedy (*Martin Scorsese, 1982).

In *Nashville,* the flag does not succeed in its role as a unifying and celebratory focal point. For Bill Brown, such failure is a necessary precondition of our ability to appreciate material otherness: 'we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily' (2001: 4). New Hollywood has within it a number of moments when production, consumption and exhibition become disrupted in this way. The flag in *Nashville*, so spectacular in its intended meaningfulness, is not only the starkest example of this, but an excellent point at which to begin thinking through the ecocritical significance of such a 'relapse' into thingness.

The Car Crash as Assemblage in *Nashville*

Soon after we see the flag in *Nashville*, the singer Barbara Jean is shot, and by this point the film has woven a complex web of associations between claustrophobic spaces and hypocrisy, performance and politics, popular culture and alienation, the cynical romanticism of country music and the failed promises of American culture. It is therefore impossible not to feel the profound symbolic significance of the assassination, although this is simultaneously tempered and confused by

the scene's resistance to symbolic abstraction. Is the shooting an act of desperation, a strike by the common man against the hollow cant of mainstream US nationalism, or a direct by-product of that nationalism? Is it a gesture of liberation, implosion or revenge, a seminal moment or an inevitable climax? Each makes sense in its own way, but each seems like something of a betrayal of the scene's grim realism, which has worked so hard to convince us of the vivid day-to-dayness of events; Altman's penchant for the wonder (and darkness) of contingency and congruency is surely a struggle, in the spirit of Kracauer, against such a totalizing impulse. In fact, the only wider conclusion that seems proper is that the shooting – which appears to us in extreme long shot – was somehow made possible by the vast openness of the outdoor setting.

This push and pull between symbolic resonance and material matter-of-factness recurs throughout *Nashville*. The flag is possibly the most vivid example of an icon which can be deconstructed in this sense, but others include songs (*Nashville*'s fictional candidate, Hal Phillip Walker, at one point proposes a new national anthem) or even dramatic motifs, such as the road trip, modern America's equivalent of lighting out for the territory. The icon of the road trip cannot be tested through outsideness (because this is already complicit in the icon), but through simultaneity: numerous people trying to 'live the dream' at once. *Nashville* reminds us that one car on the open road is simply one of many cars doing exactly the same thing; as in the flag sequence, everyday logic – a logic determined by the environment – poses a serious challenge to the apparent transcendental status of the icon. The famous traffic-jam scene early on in *Nashville* is when we are first introduced to the full canvas of characters, a coming together which does not happen again until the climactic rally described above; it would be fair to suppose that these ambitiously vast scenes are prime instances of *Nashville* entering into national-commentary mode. The conscious attempt to bring into focus a broad cross section of society is surely when the film veers most closely towards the generalizing impulse – and also when its materializing impulse is most conspicuous, and most challenging.

This sequence also points to another aspect of Jane Bennett's work, namely her interest in 'assemblages'. Bennett borrows the concept of the assemblage from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, conceding that her own notion of thing-power 'tends to overstate the thinginess or fixed stability of materiality' (2010: 20). If the intent is to recalibrate our relationship with things, part of that shift

requires us to think of things less as inert nodes than as participants. Bennett explains the alternative value of assemblages in the following terms:

> *Assemblages are not governed by any central head; no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen (a newly inflected materialism, a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. (2010: 24)*

Bennett uses the model (in the loosest sense of the term) of the assemblage to interpret the giant blackout that swept across North America in the summer of 2003 as a happening whose agency was spread across countless points, human and non-human, 'from a quirky electron flow and a spontaneous fire to members of Congress who have a neo-liberal faith in market self-regulation' (2010: 28). There are many moments in *Nashville* (and perhaps throughout Altman's oeuvre) which warrant a similar multi-focal diagnosis, but none more so than the car crash in which all the main characters are caught up – and all respond as if it were an event beyond their power and control. The baffling distribution of cars and people appears as something like an enactment of the absence of traceable causes and effects.

As the cast of characters hop in their cars and race along the motorway, only to collide into one another, the process of demystification operates in two clear ways: through the basic premise, according to which all the participants are travelling from Nashville airport to the city (and so the journey is established as nothing more than a practical chore); and through the matter-of-fact tone of presentation, whereby no tension whatsoever is generated and no pointers are deployed to signpost the significance of the movement.[6] We do not see, for example, individual characters in their cars as they crash, but instead witness the event from a distance. There is no dramatic emphasis on the disjuncture between road-trip romanticism and everyday calamity. The point is not to triumphantly unveil the lie which lurks behind the myth but to scrutinize the myth as it unfolds in something as close as possible to material actuality. Bert Cardullo makes the important distinction between the scene as an ambitious statement and the scene as a simplistic metaphor: 'Altman does not so much advance the highway traffic jam [...] as a

pure, all-embracing emblem for America as he does ground it subtly in the reality of his *Nashville* to evoke on screen what he perceives to be the dominant quality of American life today' (1987: 225).

When Kracauer turns to motifs, he does so not in order to critique their relative groundlessness in the face of cinema's materializing impulses (as mentioned earlier, this conflict is pursued surprisingly briefly in *Theory of Film*), but rather to insist that 'they are identical with, or grow out of, one or another property of film' ([1960] 1997: 272). One could reasonably suggest that the road trip qualifies comfortably in this respect, incorporating as it does a number of Kracauer's 'general characteristics' of film, including movement, the transient and the familiar. Yet, keeping in mind the pile-up scene in *Nashville*, it is interesting to note that Kracauer identifies one motif as occupying a unique position: 'the flow of life'. Elsewhere in his study, Kracauer explains what he means by this: 'The concept "flow of life" [...] covers the stream of material situations and happenings with all that they intimate in terms of emotions, values, thoughts. The implication is that the flow of life is predominantly a material rather than a mental continuum' ([1960] 1997: 71). And after briefly discussing some choice examples of this later on, Kracauer muses that 'these films feature life, especially everyday life, as a series of contingent events and/or a process of growth; and all of them feature it in such a way that it appears to be an end in itself' ([1960] 1997: 273). Whereas a conventional road-movie structure would be more likely to pursue a 'mental continuum' (physical journeys standing for spiritual quests), *Nashville* realizes this ideal of a motif being ultimately answerable to its material ingredients, a process of growth that is an end in itself.

Nashville pre-empts the temptation to interpret this scene as metaphor through the absurd enthusiasm of Opal, the English journalist (Geraldine Chaplin). 'I need something like this for my documentary!' she exclaims. 'It's America. All those cars smashing into each other'. Yet that is not to say that we cannot draw any wider significance from how the film chooses to emphasize the material. The way in which strangers are suddenly thrust into each other's lives, for example, has definite traces of optimism and communality: the famous singer meets his fans; the political strategists have a relaxed joke together; the English journalist meets the black Americans she thinks she knows all about. It is not all a pretty picture, of course, but there is a certain optimism in the suggestion that people's true characters are now able to come to light, and there is a distinct sense of a fresh start, a blank slate – or rather, a jumble of individual blank slates.

Ultimately, though, anything resembling a moral, or even a theme, seems incidental at best. Instead, an emergent situation with no ostensible cause or effect has arisen, in which human characters have no more or less agency than the machines with which they collaborate. Efficacy, as Bennett describes, 'becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts' (2010: 23).

Two-Lane Blacktop (Monte Hellman, 1971) could be described as a New Hollywood film which pursues precisely these concerns, reaching similar ends, but through vastly different means. It too attempts to 'boil down' the myth of emancipatory and revelatory travel to its raw material ingredients, but instead of reminding us that no car is an island, it ventures in the opposite direction by emphasizing the crushing loneliness and alienation which inevitably come with a determination to pursue life on the road. In the film, three men who are defined entirely by their devotion to driving (they remain nameless and appear in the credits as 'the driver', 'the mechanic' and 'g.t.o.') prove incapable of honesty, empathy, compassion or communication. 'The girl' (Laurie Bird), half-heartedly seduced by all three, is also constantly on the move, but she is more enamoured of the *idea* of the never-ending road trip than the means which make this possible; 'screwdrivers and wrenches don't make it for me', she complains. And herein lies the peculiar approach of *Two-Lane Blacktop* to its characters' devotion to the open road. The driver and the mechanic, though cold and distant, retain a curious kind of moral authority because they pursue their way of life with consummate devotion to its material necessities. Like *Nashville*, *Two-Lane Blacktop* questions the value of open-road escapism by refusing to let it exist as myth or fable, and insisting it be understood and interrogated as a material experience.

Ecocriticism helps us understand the dynamic of this more fully, shedding light on the role that environmentality might play when a text's ideological themes are complicated by a lingering emphasis on the physical referent: 'guided by film, then, we approach, if at all, ideas no longer on highways leading through the void but on paths that wind through the thicket of things' (Kracauer [1960] 1997: 309). It was noted above how Siegfried Kracauer focuses on movement and inanimate objects as being natural subjects of cinema. These he describes as 'recording functions', but he also proposes certain 'revealing functions', beginning with 'things normally unseen'. Within this category he mainly focuses on the especially small and the especially big, but then puts forward the fascinating subcategory of 'blind spots of the mind'. This critical potential (because revealing

blind spots of the mind cannot be anything *but* a critical activity) is exhibited especially well in the lingering image of a flag blowing in the wind. National flags surely exemplify Kracauer's notion of objects that, 'because we know them by heart[,] we do not know [...] with the eye. Once integrated into our existence, they cease to be objects of perception' ([1960] 1997: 55). *Nashville*, as discussed above, employs this critique in more than one instance, using the vagueness of nationalist rhetoric as a counterpoint.

A different, but closely related, trend in New Hollywood departs significantly from this image of Kracauer's, even if the ultimate effect is comparable; it is a trend exemplified by *The Godfather*, and one characterized by the dramatic clash, rather than the gradual juxtaposition, of the ideological and the material. While Kracauer speaks of helpful guardianship through 'the thicket of things', *The Godfather* achieves its aims through something more akin to shock therapy.

Challenging the Pastoral in *The Godfather*

If the subject of the following discussion is how *The Godfather* critiques certain vague notions of American national identity by grounding them materially, then it may seem strange to concentrate on the most dreamlike chapter of the film, Michael's (Al Pacino) stay in Sicily. However, it is in the Sicily sequences that the film enacts those notions – a new world of beauty and opportunity, freedom and abundance – which it also simultaneously debunks. Michael's blissful, and borderline unbelievable, experiences in Europe are juxtaposed with scenes of suspicion, greed and paranoia back in the United States. The film offers a vision of the optimistic pastoral narrative so often tapped by American patriotism – fleeing an inhospitable homeland in order to discover liberty and community (not to mention space) across the Atlantic – but knowingly inverts the America/Europe dichotomy. Cutting back and forth between mythical pastoral splendour and grim urban grittiness prompts us to further suspect the pastoral as groundless fabrication. We see a similar frustration at play, a comparable embrace of gritty 'down-to-earthness', in many New Hollywood films, including of course *Nashville*. In *The King of Marvin Gardens*, for example, the Staedler brothers (Jack Nicholson and Bruce Dern) linger in a dreary and seedy Atlantic City, arguing over the allusive dream of relocating to Hawaii – an idyll we never see in the film. But

it is in *The Godfather* where pastoral reveries are most brutally cut down, and by considering a key sequence from the film according to Leo Marx's ([1964] 1976) influential template of American pastoralism, we can not only appreciate how its juxtaposition of paradise and 'reality' is part of a long American tradition, but that it modifies this template in interesting ways. The cinematographer Gordon Willis explains his approach to these sections in distinctly pastoral terms: 'I maintained that all the scenes in Sicily should be sunny, far off, mythical, a more romantic land' (Cowie 1997: 59). Terry Gifford (1999) has identified three main definitions of 'pastoral', and his second definition – where the term is used relatively loosely, to describe work which broadly celebrates the rural in contrast to the urban – applies here. But so, perhaps, does his first definition, in which the term 'pastoral' operates rather more strictly and according to particular motifs, such as the prominence of shepherds (the first thing we see in the Sicily of *The Godfather*), the subject of love and the 'discourse of retreat' (1999: 46).[7] Gifford's third definition of 'pastoral' refers to its use in the pejorative sense, critiquing an excessively idealized notion of the countryside. *The Godfather* relates most clearly to this definition, not as an argument for more valid depictions of rural life, but rather as resistance to ungrounded idealism.

The most regularly cited investigation into questions of the pastoral in American culture is *The Machine in the Garden* by Leo Marx ([1964] 1976). In trying to understand the Americanization of the pastoral ideal, Marx refers to 'the singular plasticity of the American situation' ([1964] 1976: 119), the belief of American writers that, unlike Europeans, their version of pastoral need not be restricted to abstract fantasy, but could – and should – be thought of in immediate and practical terms. Marx identifies this trend in Jefferson's punctilious list-making in *Notes on the State of Virginia* and a similar attention to mundane details in Thoreau's *Walden*, perhaps the two 'most pastoral' works in the American canon. In the case of *Walden*, this sense of particularity largely stems from the simple fact that Thoreau's book is a record of personal experience, but Marx sees this very fact as significant – particularly American – in itself. *Walden*'s topography, he explains, is 'another embodiment of the American moral geography – a native blend of myth and reality' ([1964] 1976: 45), and a brilliant realization of the fact that because America promised to actualize Old World pastoral fantasies, its own pastoralism had to carry that burden of material truth. According to Marx, America's privileged position as a living pastoral project inevitably gave its writers the opportunity to report back on the lived experience, which is why Thoreau

celebrated the wonders of nature through the voice of 'a hard-headed empiricist' ([1964] 1976: 243).

This is not a concept which transfers seamlessly onto cinema; as has been discussed in relation to Kracauer, film is automatically particular and ontologically 'tuned in' to material reality. It is not possible therefore to identify any particular ecocritical significance in those films which invoke pastoralism through specifics. Yet the tension which Marx identifies, the disconnect between idealism and pragmatism which he actually believes to be managed and overcome by Jefferson and Thoreau, *can* be thought through via cinema. It is this disconnect which runs throughout Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (released a year later than *The Godfather*), as Holly's romantic and self-consciously literary narration rubs up against the often pitiable reality of what is on screen.[8] It is this disconnect which runs through *Deliverance*, with its assault on romantic preconceptions of rural America. And it is this disconnect which informs Michael's trip to Sicily in *The Godfather*, as images of idyllic new beginnings are constantly interrupted by decidedly less appealing images of the American experience – not in theory, but in practice. The transitions between the three Sicily sequences and 'life back home' are almost didactic in the ethical and evaluative suggestions they make; Michael's romantically honourable wooing of Apollonia (Simonetta Stefanelli) on a sunlit country walk is shortly followed by Sonny's (James Caan) sordid pleasure-seeking in a seedy New York apartment block; from Michael's dreamlike wedding night consummation, we cut to Kay (Diane Keaton) alone in the rain, shut out of the Corleones' lives by a looming iron gate. (In his monograph on the film, Jon Lewis notes how the interiors evoke a 'comfort and safety' which are 'not found in the few scenes shot outdoors' (2010: 22), but his analysis does not take into account the Sicily scenes, where those qualities are exaggerated almost beyond plausibility.) Yet the two worlds are not kept entirely apart, and it is by adapting Leo Marx's central and most famous thesis – that the American pastoral has at its heart the motif of the beautiful and untouched landscape being rudely interrupted by technology – that the relationship between the two can best be understood. In *The Godfather*, Sicily is most definitely 'the garden', while the offending 'machine' is the car.

Marx explains the format of this trope:

> *The setting may be an island, or a hut beside a pond, or a raft floating down a river, or a secluded valley in the mountains, or a clearing between impenetrable*

> *walls of forest, or the beached skeleton of a whale – but whatever the specific details, certain general features of the pattern recur too often to be fortuitous. Most important is the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction. It invariably is associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape. ([1964] 1976: 29)*

This dynamic is, I suggest, adopted and adapted in, amongst other New Hollywood films, *The Godfather*. However, while Marx identifies in his selection of literary examples quite a clear sense of resentment towards the mechanical intrusions, *The Godfather* remains much more ambivalent.

Michael Corleone has taken his first substantial step towards a life of crime and has fled to Sicily, where he is in hiding. Our introduction to Sicily is prefigured by a number of short scenes which make clear the unpleasantness of the world he is leaving; a dying father, quarrelling in-laws and financial strain all take their toll on the gloomy Corleone household. As Don Vito (Marlon Brando) lies in his bed and closes his eyes, the image fades into one of pastoral beauty; the rolling hills of Sicily and the relaxed farmers tending their sheep are unambiguous signposts of a happier, simpler place. But the cross-fade from Don Vito's face also hints at a temporal shift, as if we might possibly be entering a memory of his – after all, the environment of this scene could plausibly be that of his youth, and would we not expect childhood memories to come to an old man lying sick in his bed? We have therefore entered a comprehensively pastoral mode, comprehensive in that it suggests both a better place and a better time, and makes the two almost indistinguishable. But having only just entered the garden, we are almost immediately introduced to the machine – a car pulls up beside Michael, and the driver warns him that it is unsafe to travel on foot. Michael is enjoying the beautiful landscape far too much to pay heed to the warning, and it is as if his trip to the town of Corleone would somehow lose its spiritual significance were it to be taken in a car. However, the distinction between Michael's state of pastoral reverie and the looming threat of cold reality, in the shape of the car, has been established.

Yet again, care must be taken not to talk in terms of symbolism. Judith Vogelsang (1973) has convincingly detailed how cars in *The Godfather* are an important motif detailing the gradual solidification of the Corleones' criminal business, and yet it would be misleading to suggest that in this sequence the car 'symbolizes' the inescapable life of sin which Michael is trying to flee. Instead, it

acts as a quite literal burden to Michael, physically interrupting his enjoyment of the environment, reminding him of what he wants to forget, spoiling the dream which he is tantalizingly close to making his reality. Thus, when he begins to teach his new wife to drive, it is an ominous development, and as if to emphasize the sense of two disparate worlds cross-contaminating, the driving lesson doubles up as an English lesson. Another car arrives, and Don Tommasino (Michael's guardian in Sicily, played by Corrado Gaipa) gets out bearing the news of Sonny's murder, delivered just as Apollonia honks the horn impatiently – an incongruous sound in this environment at the best of times, and even more ugly and alien at a moment of deep sadness. In the following scene, as Michael is looking for Apollonia in order for them to move to a safer compound, he is told: 'she's going to surprise you. She wants to drive. She'll make a good American wife.' This bittersweet pronouncement is both undermined and confirmed when the car bomb detonates soon after; in taking the wheel of the car, Apollonia asserts her newly found bond with America, but instantly suffers the violence which is apparently intrinsic to such a pact. The pastoral idealism and romantic optimism is exploded and destroyed with such finality that no character in *The Godfather*, Michael included, ever speaks of these events. Here the machine does not accentuate the beautiful innocence of the environment as it does in so many of Marx's examples, but destroys it through the insistence of its materiality.

Figure 2.2 The machine in the garden: *The Godfather* (Paramount Pictures)

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that *The Godfather* posits the car bomb as a necessary evil, the jolt that is needed to reassert Michael's true situation. Terry Gifford describes the 'essential paradox of the pastoral' in the following terms: 'a retreat to a place without the anxieties of the town, or the court, or the present [which] actually delivers insights into the culture from which it originates' (1999: 82). *The Godfather* betrays a similar habit of utilizing the environment of the retreat for morally progressive ends, but at the same time refuses to allow 'the retreat' the credibility or power needed to 'deliver insights'. Instead, what we apprehend is the fateful inevitability of materiality in the face of the ideal. My analysis of *The Godfather* thus marks a subtle departure from the arguments of Jane Bennett, who would question the efficacy of situating materiality as an inert opposite to the pastoral. As discussed earlier, Bennett's emphasis is on the *active* potential of matter.

Philip Roth uses a remarkably similar dramatic effect in his novel *American Pastoral* (1998). Although by no means employing a conventional pastoral set-up (the title challenges the reader to find the pastoral within the story and the 'American' within the pastoral), the novel is, like *The Godfather,* interested in the fallout which occurs when abstract promises of opportunity, freedom and abundance fail to materialize. And Roth too introduces a bomb in order to explode the myth in the most tangible of ways. The novel's central character, Seymour Levov, has come as close as possible to embracing and realizing all the tenets of mainstream American idealism (ethnic assimilation, heroic athleticism, wealth through honest toil, a beloved homestead, a beautiful wife, etc.), and has done so assuming that the achievement of these goals should equate to some kind of immunity. Then Levov's daughter, Merry, explodes a bomb in protest against the war in Vietnam (and in protest at Levov's own, and his wife's, incessant success), killing an innocent man. Describing the nature of the chasm that separates Seymour and his wife from Merry, Debra Shostak explains that 'their devotion to a dream of materialism divorced from historical identity comes to seem to her the central empty promise of American culture' (2004: 103). Here materialism is not a state but a value system, and ultimately just as empty as the pastoral in *The Godfather*. Levov's subsequent sadness and incredulity are less about the tragedy itself than the fact that it happened in spite of his life-long effort to subscribe to all those ideals he thought Americans were supposed to subscribe to. Seymour's brother Jerry, frustrated with Seymour's obliviousness to the ugliness and violence of everyday America, announces with cruel triumphalism, 'the reality of this

place is right up in your kisser now' (Roth 1998: 277). Trying to extract an explanation from Rita, a (possible) accomplice of Merry's, Seymour desperately asks, 'What is the aim of all this talk? Will you tell me?'.

> The aim? Sure. To introduce you to reality. That's the aim.
> And how much ruthlessness is necessary?
> To introduce you to reality? To get you to admire reality? To get you to partake of reality? To get you out there on the frontiers of reality? It ain't gonna be no picnic, jocko. (1998: 143–144)

In this spirit, and much like *The Godfather*, *American Pastoral* suggests that the violent reminder of life outside the dream could and should serve a purpose, alerting the dreamer in question that his delusions are not only susceptible to violence and catastrophe, but possibly culpable for it.

Returning to *The Godfather,* but moving beyond the pastoral, the famous appearance of the decapitated horse's head can be seen as a variation on the process described above; here abstract power is toppled by the horrendous intrusion of blood and flesh. *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) does not, I would argue, operate according to such violent interventions of the material. That is not to say it has abandoned the pastoral tropes exhibited in the first film, but it develops a far murkier relationship between ideals and tangible reality. Sicily, for example, is demoted from its position as paradisiacal dreamland, and violence is now presented as native to, rather than intruding on, its culture. And although Michael's urge to move away and begin afresh has not entirely disappeared, it has mutated into an unhappy compromise; the family has relocated to the apparently new pastures of Nevada, but has only sunk deeper into crime and corruption. The sharp distinctions drawn in the first film – between family and enemies, urban crime and rural innocence, romanticized past and inescapable present – have worn away in the second. In the wedding scene which opens *The Godfather*, Don Corleone is careful to cordon off his own criminal machinations from the joyous celebrations around him, and he deliberately sees to one before enjoying the other. In the equivalent celebrations in *Part II*, Michael's plotting with local politicians is inseparable from the party, as photo opportunities and political endorsements become part of the fabric of the event. Revisiting *The Godfather* in the light of its sequel helps illuminate just how concerned the original film is with borders and barriers, enclosures and demarcations, the establishment of different planes of existence.

The same becomes apparent when reviewing *The Godfather* in light of Mario Puzo's original novel. To investigate all the fascinating shifts of emphasis from page to screen is not feasible here, but the differing treatment of Michael's trip to Sicily in the book and the film already reveals some important distinctions. Puzo does not, for example, have Michael suddenly appear in an other-worldly haven; we learn about his escape from New York and boat trip to Sicily, where – instead of absolving himself of his New York sins, as the film suggests – Michael learns the history and customs of Mafia culture and ponders the fate of his father's New York enterprise. In the novel, Sicily is less an escape from the New York underworld than an outpost of it, albeit one surrounded by beautiful scenery; we learn of Don Tommasino's criminal credentials and that Michael's shepherds-cum-guardians double up as hitmen – a quintessentially anti-pastoral detail! Perhaps most revealingly, the car bomb in the novel actually serves as the catalyst which allows Michael to return to New York (his enemies assume he died in the explosion); in the film, as described above, the bomb's effect derives from its utter finality. The cumulative picture that can be drawn from these comparisons with *The Godfather*'s two closest intertexts shows a film intent on distinguishing one world from another, and pitting them against each other. As discussed above, the impetus to structure a pastoral setting by way of material intrusion is one mapped out by Leo Marx, but diversions from Marx's formula are just as enlightening as adherence to it. For example, Marx returns again and again to the idea that American authors of the nineteenth century sought a middle landscape between the Edenic beauty of untouched America and the onward march of industrialization; as has been shown, *The Godfather* works against any such notions of compromise.

The impossibility of a middle landscape is perhaps most clearly spelled out in a sequence in *Badlands*, where an experiment in pastoral compromise irredeemably fails. A central scene in the film shows the fugitives, Kit (Martin Sheen) and Holly (Sissy Spacek), attempt to set up home in the woods. The presence of make-up, guns, radios and oil paintings in their sylvan retreat immediately establishes a tension between the couple's supposed desire to escape their previous lifestyle and their reluctance to do away with that lifestyle's materials. The film affirms this incompatibility when Kit fires a gun, prompting an onlooker to report their presence. (Ben McCann (2007: 85) has instead located the collapse of the idyll as the moment when Holly looks into the Stereopticon and wishes she was somewhere else. I would argue that this complicates the pastoralism without

fundamentally undermining it.) After living happily amongst the trees with a variety of modern trappings, the gun, it seems, is one machine too far. There are obvious reasons why *Badlands* posits the gun as the limit, the point of no return for Kit and Holly's pastoral fantasies; it links back to their original crime of killing Holly's father and it amply fulfils Leo Marx's criteria for the machine as 'a sudden, shocking intruder'. Yet a closer look at the scene in question reveals the gunshot as an even more deliberate move against pastoral fantasy.

It is dusk, and Kit is wading in the river, fishing. We have already seen him fail miserably at this, and he is failing again. In the far distance a white truck drives past, and Kit looks up to follow it. It is more than a glance – he stands erect in order to see the van properly – but it is difficult to ascertain whether he is looking nervously (Kit is wanted for murder) or longingly. After one final attempt to catch a fish he sheepishly brings out his gun; the film cuts briefly to a distant onlooker, back to Kit shooting, and finally once more to the onlooker, who hastily walks away, presumably to report what he has seen. Kit has already displayed his willingness and ability to adapt to the woodland environment in a number of ways, so what prompts him to turn to the gun? Did the passing van remind him of the impossibility of a new start in a new world? After all their effort, he and Holly are barely a stone's throw from the nearest main road. 'Let's not kid ourselves', he could be thinking, 'I might as well just shoot'. This is the first fateful decision made in the scene; the second is on the part of the onlooker, who does nothing until he sees Kit shoot, at which point he decides that this stranger is definitely to be dealt with. It is not clear whether this man knows anything about Kit (or that there is a

Figure 2.3 The 'real' Kit: *Badlands* (Warner Bros.)

murderer on the run) – from his perspective, the gunshot reveals Kit to be either an insensitive trespasser or a dangerous criminal. Both are accurate, and however much we might sympathize with his impatience, Kit's recourse to shooting is an assertion of his real character in the midst of pastoral delusions. It is this aspect of *Badlands* which establishes its surprising correspondence with *The Godfather*.

Conclusion

However sad the intrusion of the machine may be, in both *The Godfather* and *Badlands* it doubles up as a necessary evil. Ugly, dangerous and unwelcome on a dramatic and aesthetic level, the car and the gun also have about them something of the solid, inevitable and unavoidable: something of the material. The discussion may seem to have departed somewhat from this book's concern with environmentality, as car bombs and litter are being perversely described as carrying more ecocritical potential than the beautiful landscapes they disturb. Yet it is just such a perversion which helps to reveal ecocriticism as a supple and varied critical approach. The ecocritical logic applied to get to this point has been, I hope, clear. Taking as a starting point the enlightening critical exchange between Lawrence Buell and Dana Phillips on questions of mimesis and environmentality in literary depictions of nature, connections were drawn between the work of Siegfried Kracauer and Jane Bennett. Bennett's thoughts on the ecological importance of materiality, in politics as well as in textual representations, have a distinct affinity with Kracauer's film theory, and in particular his belief in cinema's ability to debunk abstract ideological notions in the face of their material contradiction. *Nashville* and *The Godfather* offer surprisingly rich examples of this productive friction. Both can be understood as national-commentary films, but ones complicated by certain materialist tendencies. In *The Godfather*, pastoralism emerges as the abstract ideological notion in question, and Leo Marx's machine-in-the-garden hypothesis helps to illuminate how American films in particular might go about exposing and demystifying it.

Of course there are voices within ecocriticism which would place far more faith in the progressiveness of the pastoral mode (Garrard 1996), and voices – Dana Phillips for example – who do not regard fidelity to the referent as an important ecocritical quality. The intent here has not been to locate the essential values of ecocriticism and apply them to New Hollywood, but to try to better

understand an apparent conundrum, that many New Hollywood films seem to be at once rhetorically ambitious and determinedly low key. Ecocriticism helps us to appreciate this less as a contradiction than a kind of internal struggle, where a film's tendencies toward symbolism or abstraction are tempered and challenged by a reluctance (or inability) to let go of materiality in all its difficult and obstinate glory.

As with *The Godfather* and *Nashville*, many of the films that will be analysed in this book warrant attention precisely because they resist convenient allegorical interpretations. An intensified emphasis on materiality has, I hope, emerged as a vital characteristic of New Hollywood, at least in the range of films so far discussed. This remains crucial to the analysis in the following chapters, which will also begin to look beyond texts and textual details, and find different ways in which the distinctive environmentality of New Hollywood can be understood in the context of broader events and themes – in American cinema, American culture and the American environment. More so than in this chapter, following chapters will begin to position films within broader industrial, aesthetic and environmental phenomena, but in each case I still strive to offer some sense of how a particular film develops its own peculiar environmentality. To pose this as a question: How can we contextualize moments and passages of vivid materiality without blunting their power and their distinctiveness?

Notes

1. To mention Bazin risks confusing the notion of mimesis with 'realism', which would be misleading; one of the triumphs of Bazin's writing is the way it explores the relationship between these two ideas.
2. Brown has written a book about the role of the material object in American literary culture: *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2001). Unfortunately it does not include any reflections on the American flag, which is considered at length later in the present chapter.
3. The following year, the same publication, *Jump Cut,* published a piece which examined more closely those elements in *Nashville* which allow critics 'to say that Altman is making metaphors for America' (Feuer 1976: 31).
4. The heady mix of entertainment, community and violence has obvious affinities with the real-life events of December 1969 and the Rolling Stones' free concert at Altamont, during which one person was murdered and a further three people died.

5. Jan Stuart documents the huge physical and logistical challenges faced by Altman and his crew for this scene in particular, in *The Nashville Chronicles* (2000: 257–272).
6. In July 2000, the magazine *Premiere* invited key members of the film's cast and crew to reunite for a commemorative photo-shoot and group interview. The resulting images, a series of glossy staged tableaux with Altman at the centre, provide a curious counterpoint to the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of the ensemble set-pieces in *Nashville* itself.
7. There is another concrete affinity between *The Godfather* and the details of the pastoral tradition, although it is probably coincidental: Gifford points out that the very origin of the pastoral, the *Idylls* of Theocritus, arose out of the Greek general (who was stationed abroad) writing series of poems based on shepherds' song competitions in his native Sicily (1999: 15).
8. It is significant that, in *The New World* (2005), Malick went on to produce one of the purest expressions of American pastoral rapture in cinema.

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