

Two-Lane Blacktop: Slow Ride

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By Kent Jones

The two movies that opened the door to “youth culture” in Hollywood, *The Graduate* and *Easy Rider*, were milestones, to be sure. But can it really be said that they were milestones in the art of cinema? “I think *The Graduate* is not really a very good film,” said Monte Hellman when I interviewed him in 1984, “but it’s a great film because of just what it is.” In other words, nothing much as a *film*, strictly speaking, but quite something as a cultural event, the Saturday night at the movies that in 1967 gave the American middle class its first real glimpse of the paltry value placed upon its legacy by its own sons and daughters. “There are certain very strong stories or ideas for films that touch the core of the psychology of the audience so profoundly that they absolutely cannot fail,” Hellman went on to explain. *The Graduate* marked the beginning of countercultural consciousness in American movies. In the fading memory of that moment, now layered with so many ironic reversals, retrenchments, and disappointments, it is less the film that is recalled than the potent effect it produced, an effect largely unavailable to artists more nuanced and less fixated on the public eye than Mike Nichols. Shorn of its contemporary context, Nichols’s film is a nicely executed comedy of romantic embarrass-ment tarted up with Felliniesque close-ups, Antonioniesque spatial configurations, and Bergmanesque silences. If nothing else, *The Graduate* is a terminally “esque” experience.

A similar fate has befallen Dennis Hopper’s 1969 bombshell, a far better movie that finally breached the already crumbling fortress of old Hollywood. Andrew Sarris hit the nail square on the head, as he often did: “See *Easy Rider* for Nicholson’s performance, easily the best of the year so far, and leave the LSD trips and such to the collectors of mod mannerisms.” As Dustin Hoffman, Anne Bancroft, and Buck Henry were to *The Graduate*, Jack Nicholson and, to a slightly lesser extent, Peter Fonda were to *Easy Rider*. Hopper’s chosen cinematic forebears were, if anything, even headier than Nichols’s (Bruce Conner, Kenneth Anger, Jean-Luc Godard), but ultimately, both films rested their thematic affectations, stylistic embellishments, and musical accoutrements on the shoulders of less noticeable elements: bravura comic timing in the former and beautifully crafted characterization in the latter.

Hellman was able to make his greatest film thanks to the massive success of these two cultural coups, *Easy Rider* in particular. “We realized that the reason that deal was made was because of *Easy Rider*,” he told me. “There was no question that we appreciated its success as a ticket to a kind of freedom that wouldn’t have been available to us otherwise.” The now celebrated moment of youthful enfranchisement that began sweeping through Hollywood in 1969, allowing films as diverse as *Taking Off*; *The Hired Hand*; *Drive, He Said*; *Five Easy Pieces*; and Hopper’s infamous *Easy Rider* follow-up, *The Last Movie*, to

be made, did not last long—three years to be exact, until *The Godfather* ushered in a new era of high, wide, and handsome Hollywood moviemaking. They are not all great films, to be sure, but they inaugurated a wave of invention and exploration in Hollywood that more or less thrived all the way through the early eighties.

Two-Lane Blacktop (1971) was, to quote screenwriter and former *Time* critic Jay Cocks, easily the best of the “odd, off-pitch movies that followed in the wake of *Easy Rider* and were immeasurably superior to it.” (Just as *The Heartbreak Kid*, made a year later by Nichols’s old partner Elaine May, was immeasurably superior to *The Graduate*.) In *Easy Rider*, the fabled “road” equals freedom, befouled by ugly Americana, another big “theme.” But in *Two-Lane Blacktop* it becomes something altogether different and far more interesting: a repository of dreams and fantasies, for squares, hipsters, and obsessives alike. Where Hopper’s film is set in the Great American Dreamscape, Hellman’s vision of the American West is far less pretentious, parceled out in nicely measured, seemingly offhand portraits. Where Hopper wears his hipster credentials on his sleeve, Hellman obscures his and even tones down his well-made soundtrack choices in the mix. Where Hopper and Fonda “play” disenchantment and disaffection (offset by Nicholson’s authoritative charm), James Taylor, Dennis Wilson, and Laurie Bird are three nonactors who embody a sense of youthful restlessness (offset by Warren Oates’s heartbreakingly eloquent woundedness). And where *Easy Rider* is finally a series of choices and strategies and inventions clustered around a big thesis, *Two-Lane Blacktop* is a great film devoted to nailing the particulars of something far less likely to launch magazine think pieces or talk-show digressions. It is a movie about loneliness, and the attempts made by people to connect with one another and maintain their solitude at the same time—an impossible task, an elusive dream.

That is to say, *Two-Lane Blacktop* is not *Easy Rider II*—posters of Taylor and Oates did not adorn the walls of adolescent bedrooms. Defeated before its release by a well-meaning but misconceived advance publicity campaign (Rudy Wurlitzer’s original script was published in *Esquire* under the unfortunate heading “The Movie of the Year”—wish fulfillment run amok, or aground), misunderstood by critics and audiences in search of the next big Youth Movie, and subsequently reviled by the very studio that had produced it, Hellman’s film was something of a buried treasure for many years. There were prints here and there, but they were scarce. Universal studio boss Lew Wasserman maintained a deep-seated personal dislike of the film, presumably because it both epitomized the generational upheaval of its era *and* failed to incite the new youth audience to empty its pockets. Universal’s studio projectionist took an equally dim view, and for years the studio print was shorn of its final images (in which the film appears to burn out from the center—every projectionist’s worst nightmare). *Two-Lane Blacktop* turned up on public television once in the eighties, panned and scanned. A few new prints were struck in the following years, but it was not until the late nineties, when it appeared on laserdisc and then DVD in the correct aspect ratio, that it assumed its proper place as one of the most striking American films of

its era. At this point, it is well on its way to being recognized as one of the greatest, and most moving.

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The man who was characterized by Sam Peckinpah on national television in 1973 as “the best director working in America today” got his start in movies the same way many of his contemporaries did: working for Roger Corman. After establishing a solid track record as a stage director (Martin Landau, in an introduction to Charles Tatum’s book on Hellman, remembers his old friend’s production of *Waiting for Godot* (1957), with Jack Albertson and Joey Faye, as exemplary), Hellman was thrown headfirst into the deep end of the moviemaking pool by Corman, with *Beast from Haunted Cave* (1959). A drive-in quickie shot in a matter of days in Deadwood, South Dakota, it is infinitely superior to its “sister film,” Corman’s own utterly forgettable *Ski Troop Attack* (the cost-conscious Corman was famous for piggybacking one production on another). From there, Hellman became a kind of in-house fixer—working as associate producer on *The Wild Ride* (1960), chipping in on the direction of the misbegotten *The Terror* (1963), and shooting extra footage for assorted Corman productions in order to bulk up their running times for television broadcast sales. “That was probably the most fun I’ve ever had,” Hellman said.

Producer Fred Roos, then developing properties for legendary producer-exhibitor Robert Lippert, saw *The Terror* and inquired as to its true directorial provenance. Corman got the credit, but according to Hellman, he was himself responsible for about a third of the film, Corman for about half, and the young Francis Ford Coppola for the rest. Roos hired Hellman to direct back-to-back Lippert productions in the Philippines, both from 1964, a war movie called *Back Door to Hell* and a crazily plotted thriller called *Flight to Fury* (later to become a Tarantino favorite), written by Hellman and his friend Jack Nicholson. Hellman and Nicholson were members of a loose-knit group of Los Angeles theater/film artists that also included Landau, Shirley Knight, Robert Towne, and Harry Dean Stanton, and the two men formed a kind of partnership that soon led to another, more legendary doubleheader. *The Shooting* (starring a brilliant young actor named Warren Oates, with the young Nicholson as a mysterious gunman) and *Ride in the Whirlwind* (both 1966) are twin westerns, the first and more enigmatic of the two written by Carole Eastman (under the pseudonym Adrien Joyce; Eastman would later write *Five Easy Pieces*), and the second by Nicholson himself. The productions were financed by—who else?—Corman. “Roger saw the scripts that we came up with and was ready to chuck the whole thing. But he realized that . . . if he canceled them, he’d be out five thousand dollars,” Hellman said. There was a three-week break between the Lippert movies but only a week between the westerns. Along with Corman himself, Monte Hellman was one of the hardest-working men in show business.

Hellman and Nicholson began with the idea of making a pair of “classic” westerns in the tradition of *The Gunfighter* and *My Darling Clementine*, “but we were also influenced by various European filmmakers of the time,” Hellman said. His European influences dovetailed with those of Nichols, but they appear to have been more fully absorbed—in many ways, the westerns were exemplary hybrids of old Hollywood and new Europe, beautifully recombined offspring of Beckett (a Hellman hero), *Rio Bravo*, and *L’avventura*, with powerful genetic instruction from Jacques Rivette’s *Paris Belongs to Us* (“What struck me,” Hellman said of Rivette’s film, “was that people kept walking in and out of doors—scenes that would be cut out of most other pictures became the basis of the movie”). Appropriately, *The Shooting* and *Ride in the Whirlwind* gained their first notoriety in Paris, in 1969.

After a few years of kicking around, doing odd jobs for Corman, and suffering an assortment of false starts on, among other things, an adaptation of Barbara Garson’s play *MacBird!*, Hellman said, his agent “found some people in Hollywood who had read a few French reviews,” and he was hired to direct a script called *Two-Lane Blacktop*. In its original incarnation, he claimed, *Two-Lane Blacktop* read like a Disney version of *The Gumball Rally*. “It was the most insipid, silly, sentimental, dumb movie you could imagine. But it was about a race. I was attracted to just the idea of a cross-country race.” Hellman and his producer, Michael Laughlin, hired novelist Rudy Wurlitzer to do the rewrite, on the basis of his 1969 novel *Nog* (which came with a ringing endorsement from Thomas Pynchon: “Hopefully another sign that the Novel of Bullshit is dead and some kind of reenlightenment is beginning to arrive”).

The casting of James Taylor was Hellman’s brainchild. “I saw a billboard on Sunset Boulevard, and I just flipped over his face,” Hellman told me. “James came out and did a screen test, and he had a mustache. We weren’t sure whether we wanted him with or without it, so in the screen test he shaves it off.” (This footage, sadly, has been lost.) A May 1970 shoot was set, but the production company Cinema Center suddenly dropped the project in April. Hellman and Laughlin made the studio rounds (“MGM thought it would be a boring film because it all took place in a car. One of the things I had to do when we were presenting it to them was demonstrate how many different camera angles you could get in a car. I think I came up with twenty-four”) and finally made their deal with Ned Tanen, who was heading up a new, youth-oriented production unit at Universal. The film was made for \$850,000, and it was shot in sequence. Hellman took his crew caravan-style on a real cross-country trip—from Los Angeles to Needles, California, to Flagstaff, Arizona, to Santa Fe and Tucumcari, New Mexico; then to Boswell, Oklahoma; Little Rock, Arkansas; Memphis, Tennessee; and Maryville, North Carolina. This highly unusual practice did not exactly endear the director to his actors, who were doubly exasperated by getting their script pages only the night before their scenes. “In life you don’t know what’s going to happen to you next week, so I didn’t feel that that was crucial to being able to play the scene,” Hellman told me. As a result, his first-timers—Taylor, who had just been anointed

the singer-songwriter of the moment with *Sweet Baby James*; Wilson, drummer for the Beach Boys and musical mentor to Charles Manson; and Bird, a teenager with a strange history that fit her role as a drifting hitcher perfectly—stay off-kilter but fresh, maintaining a Bressonian early-morning clarity.

The rough cut of *Two-Lane Blacktop* was three and a half hours long. “We were contractually obligated to deliver a two-hour movie, so we lost half the script,” said Hellman. “We lost some good scenes, for sure, that I fell in love with.” Gone are the flavor and color of street-racing life and the road, evoked so beautifully in Wurlitzer’s script. What is gained is a trancelike absorption in movement and ritual. Hellman’s film, like *Paris Belongs to Us*, is composed of many of the in-between moments that most filmmakers would cut. In the process, a strange terrain of tenderness and disconnection inhabited by the four principal characters is mapped out: their shared remoteness is exactly what makes it safe for them to venture into one another’s company. This movie about a cross-country race between a car freak in a lovingly souped-up ’55 Chevy and a fantasist in a store-bought GTO moves at an even, gliding pace, and it’s all about stopping to gas up, eat, make some bread in local quarter-mile drag races, pick up hitchhikers, let the engine breathe, share a drink. The characters think they’re in a race, but they’re really players in a theater of life, the stage of which stretches from sea to shining sea.

Though he reads “hippie,” Taylor is the classic introvert-specialist, for whom everything is swallowed up and contained by the road (if *Two-Lane Blacktop* were made today, he and Wilson would be tech-heads). Oates is the smiling extrovert-dreamer, for whom everything becomes a part of the *Playboy* dream he’s spinning on his drive across America. Taylor’s aquiline face may be the visual center of the movie, buoyed by Bird’s pout and Wilson’s pudgy, stoned softness, but Oates is its emotional core. There’s not another character like Oates’s in all of American cinema. Fredric March’s drunken manager of small loans in *The Best Years of Our Lives* and Bogart’s forlorn convict in *Dark Passage* come close, but neither recedes so completely into the lonely smallness of a bruised ego. Oates’s nameless would-be hipster is perfect in every way: V-neck sweaters (they keep changing color), driving gloves, a wet bar in the trunk, music for every mood, a cocky grin that looks like it’s been practiced in the mirror. This nameless driver has bought the James Bond ideal of the well-rounded man, but he prefigures Woody Allen’s Zelig in the desperate speed with which he adapts himself to every new situation and passenger. I can’t think of another performance that registers even the slightest prick of wounded feelings with such care. “Why aren’t you in Bakersfield?” says a down-home cracker in response to the GTO driver’s spiel, and Oates tries to Band-Aid the hurt on his face with a touching smile (his weathered face and toothy grin were never as beautiful as they are here). The actor imbues his character with a strong sense of physical maladaptation—he can’t even lean against a building comfortably—and puts the softness in the American character on display to devastating effect.

Unlike Oates's GTO, who projects his desperate longing out onto the open spaces, for Taylor's Driver the road, to paraphrase Joni Mitchell (coincidentally, she joined Taylor for a good portion of the *Two-Lane* shoot), is a refuge. Or perhaps a cocoon. That's why the film's last image is no modish affectation. "It was really the most intellectual, conscious manipulation of the audience that I've ever done," said Hellman. "I thought it was a movie about speed, and I wanted to bring the audience back out of the movie and into the theater, and to relate them to the experience of watching a film. I also wanted to relate them to, not consciously but unconsciously, the idea of film going through a camera, which is related to speed as well. I think it came to me out of a similar kind of thing that Bergman did with *Persona*." Hellman is literally arresting his character's fantasy of dissolving into pure speed and limitless road (the burn of the image begins in Taylor's head), a fantasy shared by countless movies, then and now. Including *Easy Rider*.

Two-Lane Blacktop is the least romantic road movie imaginable. Nonetheless, Hellman saw it as a romance, in the tradition of *The Clock*, *A Man and a Woman*, and *The Apartment*. On the drawing board, perhaps. In finished form, it is a great film about self-delusion. Warren Oates's GTO (as he's credited) is every pontificating drunk, every reformed junkie or born-again proselytizer, every guy who moves to another town to begin again. "We're gonna go to Florida," he tells Bird in the film's most acutely poignant moment. "And we're gonna lie around that beach, and we're just gonna get healthy. Let all the scars heal. Maybe we'll run over to Arizona. The nights are warm . . . and the roads are straight. And we'll build a house. Yeah, we'll build a house. 'Cause if I'm not grounded pretty soon . . . I'm gonna go into orbit." Meanwhile, she's ready to doze off in the passenger seat. Like all dreamers, he's just talking to himself.