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Borrowed Glory: "The Sugarland Express"

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Everyone knows the feeling. The cars ahead slow down. There is a little twinge of excitement as we wait to see what is up ahead: an accident, perhaps a truck jackknifed alongside the freeway, ambulances leaving the scene, who knows? Then we reach the crest of the wave and look right and left. In vain: there is nothing to see. We accelerate out on the other side, feeling a little guilty about regretting our disappointment. The accident is long since over but cars behind us are already slowing down to see it just as we did in an automatic commemoration of Incident.

Moralists condemn the impulse to slow down and look as morbid: mass man transfixed at the sight of the misfortune of one of his fellows. One thinks of the spectators on the streets of New York urging the poor madman on the roof to "go on and jump!" or, from the angle of the victim, of Arthur Bremer deciding which presidential candidate to kill to make a name for himself.

But the moralists are, as usual, unfair. There is a generosity as well as sadism in the spectator on life. Most people are nearly as fascinated by the good fortune of another as by disaster. The newspapers get closer to the truth with the concept of the "human interest story." Readers are interested in any extraordinary event which touches the life of someone like themselves, whether it is winning the Irish sweepstakes or sliding over Niagara Falls. The human interest story is "human" because it concerns an ordinary human being, not a politician or a star. It is interesting because something out of the ordinary happens to such a person.

There is still something disturbing about the whole phenomenon. The time spent driving to work feels empty and trivial, like a nickel dropped in a rigged slot machine. But for the person involved in the accident alongside the road, this day, this instant was vital. It may have been awful, even fatal, but it was not...nothing. The big winner, like the big loser at the tables of life becomes the cynosure of all the small stakes gamblers who go home nightly with a few dollars less. He deserves to be famous because he has a destiny.

Closeness to fame is tremendously satisfying to ordinary people, even the farthest closeness of the mere spectator. Sociologists tell us that it helps to conquer "anonymity," that scourge of mass society. Condemned to triviality and boredom in his private life, modern man becomes "somebody" when his life intersects with history. The public borrows glory from the human interest story, comments on it in bars and during TV commercials, and escapes vicariously for a moment into a world where something happens.

Director Steven Spielberg has created an interesting film about borrowed glory in *The Sugarland Express*. The story is based on a real incident. In 1969 a young couple kidnapped a Texas highway patrolman in his own car. They led a caravan of police halfway across the state to the home of the wife's parents where her children were living.

The husband was killed by the police on arrival, the hostage freed and the wife sent briefly to prison. She was later released on the death of her mother to take care of her children.

The finely crafted screenplay, by Hal Barwood and Matthew Robbins, departs from the fait divers to introduce fictional elements which raise the dramatic stakes. In the filmed version of the story Lou Jean Poplin has lost her baby to foster parents ruled more fit than she by the Child Welfare Board. Driven by maternal love she springs her husband, Clovis, from prison, involves him in a fruitless attempt to reclaim Baby Langston and eventually sends him to his death on the doorstep of the foster home. Meanwhile, thousands of simple people line the route of the hijacked patrol car, fascinated by this break in the continuum of daily life, anxious to glimpse or touch the "stars" in this real life drama rolling through their communities. The long ride across Texas gains a compelling reason and dramatic context from these alterations in the original story.

The drama in the hijacked patrol car is governed by what the screenwriters facetiously call the principle of "unconstitutional behavior." In real life decency and mutual respect are supposed to diminish tensions and defuse potentially violent conflicts. But tension and conflict is the very stuff of the conventional film story. Without them the passive and skeptical viewer cannot be transformed into a compulsive witness to the excitement on the screen. Conclusion: dramatic construction requires the suspension of decency and respect. Then crises can be made to emerge from "unconstitutional" actions which violate the deepest human rights of some of the participants. Each scene can draw its force from the unequal physical or, still better, emotional power of the characters.

The dynamo of this film is the young mother, Lou Jean Poplin, played by Goldie Hawn. She rules her hijacked patrol car with the single-minded ruthlessness of a dictator. The unfairness is redoubled and rendered sympathetic by the willing submission of her subjects. The hostage, Maxwell Slide, is threatened and used. Yet he changes teams as the film progresses. He begins by menacing his captors with the rigors of the law, but soon participates in friendly small talk, then warns Clovis of the police trap into which he is walking and finally protects Lou Jean from stray bullets as snipers kill her husband.

Clovis himself is unscrupulously manipulated. In his supreme moment he hears Slide's warning and seems to understand it. Yet when Lou Jean, in a frenzy of anticipation, insists that he enter the foster home to get the baby, he stumbles from the car to his death. Neither the film nor Clovis blames Lou Jean. He is more a blind sacrifice to love than her victim.

The Poplins seem to stumble on tragedy without ever clearly understanding what is happening to them. But there is one character in the film who does understand. He is Captain Tanner of the Texas Highway Patrol, the man saddled with overall responsibility for the case.

Tanner wants to enforce the law but even more he wants to save the hostage, one of his own men. To avoid driving the kidnapers to a dangerous despair he accepts a trade-off: the baby for the hostage. He gives his word of honor to Clovis but he cannot live up to it. Lou Jean's crime calls forth Tanner's treachery. Tanner's aide asks him, "You ain't really gonna let them take that baby, are you?" And then it is clear that Tanner's

responsibilities extend also to a child whom he cannot return to parents hell-bent on self-destruction. He replies, in anguish, "I don't see how we can do that."

All Tanner can do is prolong the agony in the hope that the kidnappers will end it voluntarily, without bloodshed. He is trapped by this hope into encouraging Lou Jean and Clovis to go on when what he would most like is to discourage them into surrendering.

But there is no easy way out for Tanner. His long waiting game is extremely hazardous. Outside the patrol car another drama is taking place. As the "Express" wends its way across the blasted landscape of Texas the observers are caught up in the excitement. The Poplin's escapade releases all the ignoramuses from the hold of daily habits. A mass frenzy surrounds their passage, shaking whole communities from the perpetual siesta in which they slumber. Civilization, or what this end of Texas uses for it, breaks down as hotheads hunt the Poplins and sentimentalists line the streets to cheer them on.

Against this background Tanner appears as a voice of reason in a country of madmen. He wins the right to rule by his conscientious attempt to maintain order against sheer anarchy, to protect lives while all around him are swept up in the storm. His responsibility becomes total. He represents the interests of Society against the disruptive forces unleashed by the Poplins.

But what society does he represent? Certainly not the Texas backwoods in which the movie takes place. The film, like Tanner himself, is slightly condescending toward these rural vestiges of an older America. Indeed some measure of condescension seems inevitably to infect films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Badlands*, and this one. The intention of the makers may not be to patronize the characters but to display their universal humanity beyond social type and stereotype. Yet the viewers' glance is never innocent.

For the urban spectator in a bourgeois society the rural individual has all the low-comic potential of servants in aristocratic theater. *The Sugarland Express* does not fail to exploit this potential, especially in the characterization of Lou Jean. There she is: taking out her chewing gum to kiss her husband and putting it in again when the kiss ends in an argument, pulling an endless stream of Texas Gold Stamps from a gas station dispenser while dozens of police cars idle in the background, putting her hair in curlers in the back of the hijacked patrol car as she rushes to her doom.

If the hero of the Western is not seen in this light as an ignorant hick, it is only because of his mythic stature as a member of what Sergio Leone called "the ancient race of men."⁽¹⁾ The heroes of the "Rural" are presented more or less realistically as people like ourselves but even less able than we are to criticize and cope with the modern world.

In fact Lou Jean can scarcely understand the bureaucratic tangle in which her baby has been lost. Her account of the problem is so confused we can readily imagine that she has made a tragic error, that the baby would be hers again if only she would file the right form in the right office. Clovis, according to the screenplay, is "a farm boy without too much hay in his loft." Slide wears a uniform but he and Clovis are cultural equivalents. They could change places without changing the substance of the film. And the people who line the highways, join the caravan, hunt down the Poplins are all lost souls, living in a fantasy world unwittingly created by Lou Jean, not in the "technetronic" jungle of modern urban America.

In contrast, Tanner is the only modern man with a major role in the film, the only person with roots in the world we live in. He first appears in what looks like a big city courtroom wearing a suit and tie. He would be at home in the glass towers of Dallas where economic and political decisions are made.

There is thus a bit of Kipling's "white man's burden" in the portrayal of Tanner. There have always been southerners who complained of colonization by the industrial North. *The Sugarland Express* justifies this imagery by depicting an almost colonial society in the throes of a terrible crisis. Tanner is forced by the insanity around him to play the role of colonial master, enforcing the harsh discipline of a foreign, rational culture on populations of ignorant—and restless—natives.

This conservative imagery is gratuitously threatened by Bonnie and Clyde liberalism through an unfortunate mistake in casting. For a moment it seems as if the rich and unsympathetic foster parents are the villains of the piece. They would make good villains: there is an evil stepmother who has only to touch Baby Langston to make him cry, and a Connally-image stepfather whose only line is vicious and vengeful. All we need is a bloodcurdling sneer or two from Tanner to be thrust into a tale of class conflict and legal kidnapping of the children of the poor. Had the foster parents themselves been respectable poor there would be no temptation to view the film as concerned with class issues.

In fact it is not, as everything about Tanner is meant to prove. The film is determined to capture our sympathy for this "good cop" who has not killed a man in eighteen years on the force. He quickly figures out that Lou Jean and Clovis are just irresponsible kids, and delays as long as he can the fatal bullet that finally kills Clovis and brings the "Express" to a halt. This strong and reassuring representative of Order bears no ill will toward the criminal he must execute. The rather sentimental ending also contributes to banishing social content from the film in an effort to insure it a purely human significance.

Yet *The Sugarland Express* cannot completely escape from its own social message. The world of the film is a hopeless one, an almost Kafkaesque system of misunderstanding and retribution. The rigid society of the film is beyond redemption, even in the hope of rebellion and change. So great is the gap between the consciousness of the protagonists and the reality around them that no political protest against their condition is imaginable. Here instant stardom and borrowed glory provide a momentary compensation for ignorant people unable to deal with a society they cannot begin to understand.

Thus the chaos and conflict sparked by the Poplins never achieve the political level. The issue is always the crime and never its causes. Each spectator chooses sides, some for the Poplins, some against, and it is this active engagement that takes the place of political struggle.

"OUR NAME IS POPLIN TOO" read the red letters painted on an old bed sheet as the caravan passes by. Two hunters dream of bringing them down: what a story that would be. We know no reasons for these choices. But whether the urge is to kiss or kill Lou Jean and Clovis the people line up along their route full of excitement, each seeking to share in the event, to borrow a little glory from it. We can imagine these bit players in the great human interest story of life basking later in the reflected light of the Poplins' fame as they return to off-screen lives of dreary anonymity.

The film is "framed" in a way which refuses us any image of the colonial powers back in the cities, the rulers of this barren land and people. Their exclusion is dramatically justified for they are never objects of struggle. The injustices they may have committed are not even perceived as such by the Poplins and those who line the roads.

The conventional story form seems to force the filmmaker's hand in contact with this sort of material. The film's content provides no opening onto a sociology of the characters and their dilemma. They are depicted in frozen postures of reason and emotion, lawfulness and criminality, civilization and anarchy. No mediation within the drama itself can release them from the grip of these ideal forms.

The story therefore moves inexorably toward a conservative conclusion: the "people" are not yet ready for "self-rule," nor even the struggle for it. Maybe in 50 years, if ever, they will be able to manage their own affairs—then they can confront the powers that be—but for the moment they are safer from themselves and each other contained by Tanner and the law, by a modern world they cannot comprehend.

The exclusion of the "colonizers," indeed of politics in general, is a "structuring absence" in this film, in much the sense intended by the famous Cahiers du Cinema article on Young Mr. Lincoln.⁽²⁾ It is not that *The Sugarland Express* should have included a dramatically extraneous political content in order to conform with the wishes of progressive viewers and critics. Rather, the whole structure of the film, as it moves from crime to retribution, depends for its effect on the absence from the scene of the socioeconomic forces which first set the stage for the drama by creating the conditions for the crime and arming the law against it. The intrusion of these forces would disorganize the narration and gut the characters of the mythic dimension they gradually acquire as embodiments of unambiguous, opposed principles.

And yet *The Sugarland Express*, even without violating the canons of crime-does-not-pay narration, is much more than its own banal moral. It is the desperate energy of Lou Jean's struggle that places the whole film in tension with the stylized conventions to which it outwardly conforms. Her defeat is superficially justified but the viewer feels that he too has lost in the end. In the final scene the memory of her agony threatens the standardized law and order conclusion and, in revealing its cruelty, transforms it into an elegy.

Silhouetted by the setting sun against the Rio Grande, the heavysset Tanner contrasts as a fatherly figure with the youthful image of Slide. Clovis is dead. Tanner returns Slide's gun to him: the episode is now ended which began when this little prop was misplaced. Slide says, "He took my gun, but he was never gonna use it." These two men have alone understood what happened and been changed by it. The law and order they represent triumphs with hollow sadness in their persons. Order is reestablished as Fortinbras enters for the final scene of Hamlet, but so much has been lost along the way.

Of course the film does not ask us to take Lou Jean's "side" in romantic protest against society; the necessity of her defeat is compelling. Artistically, this film challenges not society, an object it could never touch in any case, but the triumphant stereotype of the conventional Hollywood narration through which society rules the cinema. (3)

Indeed, so conscious of this was the studio that produced it that for some time before the film's release there was talk of providing it with a more optimistic conclusion. Had this line won out and a new scene been added in which we saw, for example, Lou Jean mourning Clovis but holding a happy Baby Langston in her arms, then all the

ambiguity of the film would have been lost in false compassion and moral compromise. As it stands the integrity of this film, whatever makes it serious and valuable, lies entirely in its ruthlessness. *The Sugarland Express* is not a political film but it displays intolerable tensions for which it finds no resolution. An upbeat ending would have transformed it into reactionary junk.

Does the film then make some deeper statement about reality, beneath the surface of its conventional narration? The conflict between Tanner and Lou Jean invites generalization. He is not the undivided moral locus of the film: he is its rational "head" in contrast with Lou Jean, who asserts the unqualified rights of the "heart." Is the film a comment on the alienation of reason and feeling or, in social terms, on "the dilemma of modern man in a technocratic society?"

It would be a mistake to turn it into a mere analogue for larger problems. It remains specific, committed to its characters and their situation and does not even hint that it should be taken as an image of the modern world. Yet there is nothing specifically Texan about the central phenomenon with which the film is concerned. In fact, this film like most others is a product of the most massive, organized and commercially profitable business ever dedicated to the proposition that borrowed glory is the substance of life: Hollywood.

In this respect *The Sugarland Express* seems consciously to comment on itself as entertainment. Hollywood creates stars and spectators as does Lou Jean. She produces, directs and stars in her own drama until the law stops the show. As the caravan approaches the small town of Rodrigo, Tanner learns that its streets are full of eager spectators. He pleads with Clovis to pull over and wait until the town is cleared. But Lou Jean protests, "I like the people. I want to see the people and I'll betcha five dollars the people want to see us." And so we do.

At the dawn of the era of talking pictures, the German critic Walter Benjamin wrote that film confirms "modern man's legitimate claim to being reproduced."⁽⁴⁾ In the film age fame loses its aristocratic alibis as ordinary people turn into stars and stars into ordinary people. Everyone has a right to be seen, to be famous, regardless of birth, merit or achievement. All this Lou Jean instinctively understands. Everyone can get on "The Sugarland Express."

Of course, Lou Jean does not "represent" Hollywood. She shares in some mysterious force which makes Hollywood possible. The Film Capital's mission is to create imaginary events which count as breaks in the dull continuum of daily life. Like Lou Jean the people who make movies release us in another world from the chains of boredom and impotence in this one, create spectacles that can serve as substitutes for freedom and power. And Hollywood sinks its roots in the very same soil of disruption as "The Sugarland Express." However conservative its conclusions, its fantasies contain an obscure threat to propriety and order, parading criminals and madmen before us as more or less attractive heroes, toying with sexual license and violence, ignoring all the rules of taste in the pursuit of effect. Like Lou Jean, the movies must be policed and controlled, by codes of ethics, ratings and community standards, by, ultimately, its own stylistic conventions.⁽⁵⁾

The temptation to pursue the analogy must be resisted. Hollywood may be playing with fire, but it is an always controlled blaze burning out only useless brush. And the spectators are rarely lost on a by-way so far from the main road of progress as the

characters of *The Sugarland Express*. Real films never have the power over their audiences that Lou Jean wields over those who line her route, but then neither is cinema so dangerous to its makers and society.

Perhaps this film is less an image of society or Hollywood than a fantasy about the power and limits of film-making. *The Sugarland Express* seems to hint at a dream of its creators, at an identity and social function extrapolated from the actual place of cinema in modern society.

The makers of this film might say of their heroine, as Flaubert said of Madame Bovary, "Lou Jean, *c'est moi*." In the fondest fantasies of movie-makers, in their secret dreams of omnipotence this may be literally true. The film god provokes and in that very act contains all the centripetal forces of society, ritualizes and thereby overcomes the lapses of order which threaten civilized life while making it tolerable. Even omnipotent the cinema does not really challenge power: it trails a policeman behind the camera.

"He took my gun, but he was never gonna use it."

Notes

1. In *Once Upon a Time in the West*.

2. ``What will be attempted here through a rescansion of these films. . . is to make them say what they have to say within what they leave unsaid, to reveal their constituent lacks; these are neither faults in the work. . .nor a deception on the part of the author; . . .they are structuring absences ..." *Cahiers du Cinema*, No. 233, 1970.

3. Adorno and Horkheimer propose that it is in style that the dominant social system expresses its power in the artistic domain. This is transparently clear in cinema, which in bad works reduces to a pure stylistic exercise, the simple deployment of a stereotype. The path from the interests of the ruling class to the official prohibition on showing crime pay in cinema to the stylistic conventions that govern narration in typical Hollywood films is an easy one to follow. The authors remark: "That factor in a work of art which enables it to transcend reality certainly cannot be detached from style; but it does not consist of the harmony actually realized, of any doubtful unity of form and content, within and without, of individual and society; it is to be found in those features in which discrepancy appears; in the necessary failure of the passionate striving for identity. Instead of exposing itself to this failure in which the style of the great work of art has always achieved self-negation, the inferior work has always relied on its similarity with others--on a surrogate identity." *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 131-2.

4. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 232.

5. An instructive illustration of the ambiguity of the portrayal of criminality in film is to be found in Robert Warshaw's "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" in *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Doubleday, 1962).