

Marek Paryż

Regeneration Through Acquisition: Undoing the Pastoral in Sam Peckinpah's *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*

Abstract: The article explores the deconstructive use of the pastoral in Sam Peckinpah's film *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970). The film is singular in how closely it recreates the pastoral configuration of space as described in Leo Marx's "Pastoralism in America." However, Peckinpah evokes pastoral images and sentiments in order to raise questions about the validity of the pastoral as an entrenched American symbolic narrative in the face of specific contextual factors, especially possessive individualism as an important manifestation of transactional relations in capitalism. By constructing a metaphor of the exploitation of nature by man, Peckinpah addresses, even if by way of implication, the issue of ecological consciousness.

Keywords: Sam Peckinpah, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, the pastoral, possessive individualism, environment

This article examines *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970), Sam Peckinpah's most unusual Western, in reference to the American pastoral tradition so as to suggest the possible ways in which the film addresses the environmental issues at the time of its production. With its insistence on the protagonist's oscillation between settled and unsettled areas, the Western in general evokes pastoral spatial notions and resulting sentiments more palpably than any other American narrative genre. Despite the conventionalization of the pastoral in the Western, *The Ballad* remains a singular film in how literally it represents the tripartite pastoral space comprising an urban settlement, a wild territory, and a borderland, as described in Leo Marx's seminal "Pastoralism in America." The first fifteen or so minutes of the film introduce the three elements that determine its spatial imagery, and the action is mostly set at a place proudly called Cable Springs—a waterhole and an adjacent building—located in a desert mid-way between two towns somewhere in Nevada or Arizona. In a word, this is a miniature version of the borderland. However, Peckinpah begins to undermine the values encoded in pastoralism even before the associations that it furnishes can be fully recognized. As the opening credits unfold, we see a series of shots of Cable Hogue on a divided screen, as he walks

on through the desert with increasing difficulty because of his exhaustion and a violent sand storm. By far, this is the most symptomatic image of the forces of nature in the whole film, and it anticipates the illusions of pastoralism which Peckinpah suggests only to undo them. The director's unique variety of the pastoral results from the pairing of tone and context. With respect to tone, the combination of mockery and nostalgia yields a demythologizing strategy which, nevertheless, leaves a space for a reaffirmation of the pastoral as an emotionally charged, culture-specific narrative paradigm. This kind of reinvention of a familiar trope is possible thanks to the employment of a predominant comic mode with a tragic twist. With respect to context, Peckinpah addresses possessive individualism as a category that testifies to the permanence of and concomitantly reveals the pitfalls of the capitalist hierarchy of values. By articulating the conflicts inherent in the uses of the natural environment in a democratic nation thriving on a corporate economy, *The Ballad* engages in a dialogue with the discourses of environmentalism, shaping the contemporary imaginings about man in relation to nature.

Leo Marx locates the origins of the modern European and American versions of the pastoral in the ancient Near East because this is when the defining features of the pastoral, especially those regarding the specificity of space and of human attitude, first became manifest. At the roots of the pastoral, there is an experience of space, as it were, and it shapes human sensibilities, ultimately establishing intellectual and ideological horizons. What is crucial for this kind of experience is a movement between civilization and wilderness and an exposure to the symbolic orders of values ascribed to these two realms: civilization creates sophisticated individuals, but at the same time it has a corrupting influence on them, whereas wilderness can regenerate humans, but it stimulates their savage instincts. The pastoral space is where a balance between the two domains can be achieved thanks to the mediating work of the shepherd. This "liminal figure" stands for "a complex, hierarchical, urban society" when seen "against the background of the wilderness," and epitomizes "the virtues of a simple un-worldly life, disengaged from civilization and lived... 'close to nature'" when seen "against the background of the settled community with its ordered, sophisticated ways and its power" (Marx, "Pastoralism" 43). Marx meaningfully adds: "To mediate in this context means, quite literally, to resolve the root tension between civilization and nature by living in the borderland between them" (43). Peckinpah reminds us that, in the historical context of the American West, the use of pastoral tropes was not meant to alleviate tensions, but rather to create certain tensions and channel them appropriately. In *The Ballad*, the borderland is not a space of mediation, but of expansion—despite a very small scale—a space where predatory tendencies prevail. The borderland is where the outposts of civilization are built, and *The Ballad* tells the story of such an outpost. As Annette Kolodny puts it in her discussion of the figurations of womanhood in the discourses of American colonization: "casting a stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed" already meant "civiliz[ing] it a bit" (9).

The inscription of human relations into a natural landscape entails an imposition of a power structure whose character depends, in no small degree, on the figurative conceptions that underlie the perception of that very landscape. In his discussion of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a text projecting the metaphors that informed the understanding of the design of English colonization in the Elizabethan era and in crucial ways influenced the later idea of American expansion, Leo Marx speaks about the regimes of power that were conceptually attached to the metaphors of the garden and the wilderness. The garden "conveys an impulse-centered, anarchic, or primitivistic view of life"; therefore, "[t]o depict America as a garden is to express aspirations still considered utopian—aspirations, that is, toward abundance, leisure, freedom, and a greater harmony of existence" (*Machine* 42–43). The wilderness, by contrast, is a "violent image" and as such it "expresses a need to mobilize energy, postpone immediate pleasures, and rehearse the perils and purposes of the community" (43). In *The Ballad*, the wilderness and the garden constitute the film's central dialectic, perhaps best captured in the phrase "cactus Eden" which one of the characters coins to describe the uniqueness of Cable Springs. This dialectic does not have an easy, predictable resolution. The wilderness does not naturally evolve into a garden as a result of human settlement, and even if it appears to, the inherent regime of power does not need to change in the process. Paul Seydor has identified *The Tempest* as an important reference for *The Ballad*, claiming that the essential common feature is the convention of the storm which signifies "revelation": "we seem to burst through one kind of existence into another where time ceases to exist.... However, it is only a trick of perception, and the instant passes quickly enough" (234). The film revolves around an interplay of appearances or illusions and crudities, with the pastoral as a narrative medium furnishing meanings which can be repeatedly rejected and restored.

Due to its most conspicuous forms of emplotment, *The Ballad* has been called a story of love and a story of revenge (cf. Seydor 222–230; Gourlie 121–124), but at the background of the love-and-revenge plotline the film tells a story of settlement. Indeed, throughout the film we follow the successive stages in the process of settling a place. Having set up a few bare signs of permanent human presence that imply a title to ownership, such as an encircled waterhole, Cable goes to the nearest town and finalizes the purchase of two acres of land. We then see him collecting an assortment of planks which he miraculously finds in the desert; in this, interestingly, he resembles Robinson Crusoe searching for bits and pieces of wreckage from his ship. We briefly witness Cable and his occasional companion Joshua, a self-appointed minister of a non-existent church, building a house. Then they bring in various fixtures, most notably a "city bed," a symbol of urban comfort. It's not that Cable longs for the urban life—the opposite is true, in fact—he just has a weakness for beds. When prostitute Hildy comes to stay for a time at his place before going to San Francisco, they enact a domestic fantasy and virtually live as husband and wife. As Paul Seydor points out, Hildy brings "grace, civility, and

charm” into a place marked by the signs of male activity: “the house is built, the corral is finished, the business is under way, the place is well supplied” (241). Admittedly, this sequence stands out in the film as a result of an overstylized presentation of the couple’s amorous affair. As they sing a song together and the colorful images are so different from the film’s predominant imagery, *The Ballad* nods toward the genre of musical comedy. Such an unusual reference should not divert our attention from the fact that the domestic fantasy marks the fulfillment of Cable’s effort at settlement. In his clean and neat clothes, he assumes a new persona—a patriarch. Accordingly, he finds an heir who will take over Cable Springs, even if a rather accidental one. The man in question is Bowen, Cable’s former companion who once did not hesitate to leave him to die amidst the dry land. As he humbles himself before Hogue and begs his mercy, he is unexpectedly reborn as his successor; the filial connection is suggested by Bowen walking around in his long johns, just as Cable used to. Importantly, by paying close attention to the stages of settlement *The Ballad* envisages the West as a process rather than a region (cf. Hausladen 6–7).

By far, the most symbolic occurrence in the course of Cable’s settlement is when he pulls up an American flag he has received from a coach driver. When he first holds it in his hands, he cherishes it for a while and seems to be truly moved, and so do the few people gathered around him. This scene evokes very meaningful appearances; first and foremost, it falsely suggests a redemption of Cable’s selfishness, as he enrolls in a national endeavor. In reality, however, once the flag has been pulled up a pole, it becomes one of the many fixtures at Cable Springs and ceases to signify any kind of patriotic obligation to the hero. After a lofty moment, things get back to normal; a ritual has been enacted, and the presence of the flag does not ennoble Cable’s intentions by any means. The film thus shows that national enterprise and individual interest are parallel, but randomly convergent pursuits. It is exactly this randomness that disrupts the teleology of expansion which emphasizes the interdependence of national and individual strivings as embodied, for example, by the historical heroes of the American West. Paradoxically enough, it is hard to say what Cable actually strives for. To make another reference to Robinson Crusoe, it can be said that just like the shipwreck who has saved a sack of money from the ship and now ponders its uselessness, Cable does not have much use for the money he has earned from selling water to a coach company. He has bought a fancy bed and new clothes and improved the water installation—this is as much the images imply about how he spends the money. He possesses all that he needs under the circumstances, and yet he exercises strict monetary rules, as if he were unable to control the imperative to have more. There is something fundamentally illogical about such an attitude unless imbalance constitutes a norm. All in all, Cable’s motivation boils down to an almost instinctive possessive drive, and this feature, far from being accidental, reflects the degree to which the protagonist has internalized specific requirements of his culture. Or it signifies something opposite, given that we

know next to nothing about the hero's background or his exposure to particular cultural factors—namely that the very basic capitalist principle of owning more arises from an innermost human need. If this is the case, pastoralism turns out to be an artificial way of combating excessive, but essentially natural human tendencies.

Cable literally bites into the land, and although he does not reach into the interior any further than he has to, the metaphor of consumption thus evoked carries important meanings. The opening shot of the film shows a lizard on a stone; the close-up makes it appear big, and perhaps this is how a starved man perceives the animal. This man is Cable and he will not satisfy his hunger; his companions Taggart and Bowen shoot the lizard and take it away, together with his rifle and horse. The fact remains, however, that in the opening picture the desert serves the hero what it has best—the lizard may not taste well, but it has beautiful colors—on a plate because this is what the flat stone looks like. Later on, this initial metaphor is enhanced by the scene in which Cable and Joshua offer a meal to a group of coach passengers. They enjoy the meal immensely and even ask for extra helpings until one of them asks the hosts about the ingredients of the “desert stew.” Joshua mentions “breast of quail, dove thighs,” and Cable continues to recite the recipe: “rattle snake, ground squirrel, black gopher, horny toad, grasshoppers for seasoning and pack of rats and prairie dogs to fill in.” The guests spit out the food, stand up and quickly walk away from the table. Despite such a comic twist, the metaphor of consumption is a serious one as it helps to illuminate the question of necessity. In a sense, the film proceeds from necessity to opportunity, but it soon becomes apparent that there is not much difference. The film's very beginning puts emphasis on necessity as conditioned by the instinct of survival, but there is an immediate switch to opportunity which necessitates a series of actions. In this way, by virtue of sequential logic, pursuing an opportunity becomes a necessity. And thus consumption resulting from hunger does not differ drastically from consumption resulting from greed because one is not less natural than the other. Consumption expresses human possessive nature which surfaces when outside conditions allow, and in *The Ballad* they do, as reflected in how easily Cable gets a bank loan to establish himself in the desert and how quickly he makes a deal with the coach company. As a matter of fact, Cable is much more interested in creating and sustaining such conditions than in consumption *per se*.

While Cable can be seen as an embodiment of the American expansive spirit, there is one thing about him that contradicts the logic of expansion—his immobility. He is confined within the limits of his two acres; all in all, he feels indifferent about such a situation, but he has moments of doubt, even if infrequent. At one point he says: “Well, sometimes, I wonder what the hell I'm doing out here.” This would be an understandable enough self-reflection if there were another and better place for Cable to belong to, but there is not. His spatial identification remains vague; he expresses his dislike of towns—“In town I'd be nothing. I don't like being nothing”—but this is the only existential alternative that has been mentioned at all. As Michael Bliss observes:

“Cable seems unable to exist profitably outside of the desert, where his assertions of self must be viewed as the solitary voice of one crying in the wilderness, a voice that, subsumed by those of other people, would be reduced to merely another noise within a frightfully loud din” (139–140). Although in his speech at Cable’s funeral Joshua says that he “loved the desert,” nothing in the film confirms this. Whatever options for life the hero would have toyed with, they are bound to be abstractions. Cable deludes himself that his stay in the desert is temporary—“Right here I have a good start,” he says as if he intended to establish himself elsewhere after a time—but he ends up right where he started. Such a positioning of the protagonist within the space is starkly at odds with the pastoral imaginings. Leo Marx writes: “What is attractive in pastoralism is the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural. Movement toward such a symbolic landscape also may be understood as a movement away from the ‘artificial’ world” (*Machine 9*). The possibility of movement is thus essential in pastoralism, whereas *The Ballad* puts emphasis on settlement and immobility. For the people who stop at Cable Springs for a brief rest, the owner has merged with the meager architecture to the point of becoming a human landmark, as it were. The only direction of movement that is possible for Cable is the opposite of what Marx has described; it is a movement toward the town where he is “nothing.” Importantly, this one-directionality strongly implies that Cable Springs is an extension of the civilized territory, and not a pastoral space of mediation. Carolyn Merchant thus describes the role of ownership in “the emergence of civilization from the state of nature”: “Laying out an orderly grid on the landscape enclosed land within a boundary, creating the potential of its ownership as private property. Outside the boundary was disorderly wilderness, inside ordered civilization. The civil was thus imprisoned within the wild” (74–75).

Peckinpah’s film offers an exaggerated, stingingly ironic view of ownership, and the theme is introduced early on, in the opening sequence, when upon parting with their companion Taggart and Bowen tell him: “It’s all yours, Cable,” meaning the desert sand. Immediately after discovering the waterhole, Cable begins to define himself through his “possession”: “Me and my waterhole.” These words express the symbolic power of language in determining the rules of ownership and, more generally, a whole range of contractual social relations. Getting his name written down in the register of land owners is a life-changing experience for the hero, who happens to be illiterate. Indeed, his illiteracy makes his reliance as an owner on the symbolic power of language appear even more conspicuous. In no time does Cable with his waterhole become a part of a larger network of entrepreneurial activities, which also includes a bank and a stage company. The film also touches upon the moral aspect of ownership; in one scene, when feeling embittered, Hildy openly alludes to Cable’s extreme ruthlessness as an owner as if there were no better way to offend him. In Peckinpah’s film, there is a symptomatic tension between the concern with ownership and the pastoral imag-

inings, and pastoralism provides a contrasting frame of reference for the economic ideas addressed in *The Ballad*. As a mobile figure, the shepherd moves within a wide orbit and heeds no limits, which signifies the possibility of loosening the strictures dictated by the rules of ownership. Therefore pastoralism functions as a symbolic foil for economically motivated interference with the landscape, but itself lacks economic viability.

Carl Abbott writes: "Managed water—and mismanaged water—is one of the central stories of the modern and modernized West. It is a story of utopian dreams and corporate power, of semisuccessful democracy... and bitter conflicts among Indians, ranchers, farmers and environmentalists" (89). In their discussion of environmental themes in Westerns, Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann observe that "water-rights films from [Gene] Autry's *Man of the Frontier* and *Rovin' Tumbleweeds* to Sam Peckinpah's *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* foreground an environmental history that valorized both water and land as property—a fair use model resting on conquest more than conservation" (82). There is a crucial difference between a fair use and a wise use of natural resources: the former model presupposes unrestrained development leading to economic prosperity, which in turn facilitates the working out of the best solutions for protecting the environment, whereas the latter model postulates sustainability and limited development with a view to ensuring the well-being of the future generations (83). The Westerns that tackle the issue of water rights usually provide a justification for the rule of fair use. Murray and Heumann make a reference to Richard Slotkin's fundamental differentiation between two styles of interpreting and applying the Frontier Myth: "progressive" and "populist." The progressive style "reads the history of savage warfare and westward expansion as a social parable, explaining the emergence of a new managerial ruling class and justifying its right to subordinate lesser classes to its purposes" (Slotkin 22). By contrast, the populist style measures progress "by the degree to which the present state of society facilitates a broad diffusion of property, of the opportunity to 'rise in the world,' and political power" (22). The water-rights Westerns consistently employ the populist style and typically pit the powerful representatives of the nascent corporate class against a weaker but morally superior class of farmers. However, as Murray and Heumann conclude, "Missing from the conflict... is the environment, the water and land for which they fight. Ultimately, both progressive and populist views of progress rest on an empire-building model that exploits resources and desecrates the environment. Whether the empire sustains either the few or the many, the environment suffers" (104). Peckinpah reinterprets this conflict by having Cable enact it single-handedly, as he changes from a vagrant into an owner and learns entrepreneurial rules and skills, thus, in a sense, coming to occupy the middle ground between the two groups usually involved in the fight over the right to water. Such a portrayal of the character strongly suggests a convergence of the progressive and populist myths of the frontier.

Despite the presence of themes that repeatedly undermine pastoral associations, in *The Ballad* it is the pastoral that constitutes a narrative paradigm into which the hero's story has been inscribed. This is best reflected in Joshua's funeral pseudo-sermon which concludes the film, and it is worth quoting his words in full:

Cable Hogue was born into this world, nobody knows when or where. He came stumbling out of the wilderness like a prophet of old. Out of the barren wastes he carved himself a one-man kingdom. Some said he was ruthless. He charged too much, he was as stingy as they come. Yes, he might have cheated, but he was square about it. When Cable Hogue died there wasn't an animal in the desert he didn't know. There wasn't a star in the firmament he hadn't named. Now the sand he fought and loved so long has covered him at last. He never went to church. He didn't need to. The whole desert was his cathedral. He loved the desert. He built his empire and was mad enough to give it up for love.

In his speech, Joshua insists on the connection between pastoralism and possessive individualism and creates an illusion of its naturalness. He romanticizes Cable as a man who loved the desert, embraced its creatures and named the stars—none of which is confirmed on the screen—and concomitantly reminds the few mourners about his ruthlessness and stinginess, speaking about these proclivities with understanding. Moreover, Joshua implies that the pastoral economy inevitably evolves into a form of capitalism for the simple reason that the maximization of profits is an absolute principle. In the funeral speech, Cable's story unfolds in accordance with the mythical story of American Adam: he is a man of unknown origin, endowed with a potential that leads him to the establishment of "a one-man kingdom" (cf. Seydor 248). By alluding to the Adamic myth, Peckinpah's film mythologizes Cable as a hero, but at the same time it undermines the myth through a reductive, economic reinterpretation. Cable seems to have discovered a purpose in life only after learning that the waterhole is located by a stage route and realizing that it can be profitably used.

Given the various reversals of the pastoral in *The Ballad*, it is justified to consider the film as an example of the anti-pastoral insofar as it "expos[es] the distance between reality and the pastoral convention when that distance is so conspicuous as to undermine the ability of the convention to be accepted as such" (Gifford 128). However, the conclusion of the film comes with a twist that makes one wonder about the continuing cultural validity of pastoralism. After the coincidental arrivals of Bowen, Hildy and Joshua at Cable Springs, there comes a short happy period, directly preceding the main hero's death. The characters begin to resemble a community, to care for one another, which may hint at the regenerative influence of the place. In a truly melodramatic fashion, Cable renounces his unrelenting business philosophy for the sake of love—he says he is ready to leave with Hildy for San Francisco—and he generously names Bowen his successor. Presently a widow, Hildy is a respected

woman and behaves in a wifely manner. Bowen takes up an honest job, perhaps for the first time in his life, and he will make sure that what Cable had built will not be wasted. Joshua offers a sincere blessing to the three, as he has no selfish interest to pursue at Cable Springs. A sudden cessation of the happiness ushers in a nostalgic tone. Symptomatically, even if the characters experience transformations, they are not fully aware of that and, for sure, they would not identify nature as a factor behind personal change. This is why *The Ballad* is a far cry from "the post-pastoral," which is characterized by "an awe in attention to the natural world" (Gifford 152). If anything, Peckinpah's film is the opposite of the post-pastoral, thus it engages in a critical dialogue with the contemporary discourses of environmentalism which have helped to heighten the consciousness of man's presence in nature which Gifford associates with the post-pastoral.

The history of the American West has played an important role in the shaping of American ecological consciousness as this historical process powerfully articulates two issues that are crucial for the ways of thinking about man and the natural environment: the inevitability of development and the necessity to control it. In the decades following the Second World War, the states located in the western and southwestern regions were among the fastest developing parts of the United States. In *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America*, Robert G. Athearn demonstrates that the quarter of a century after the war witnessed "a phenomenal surge in the West's population, which has left statisticians scrambling to keep up" and provides some telling statistics: "In 1947, about one out of every nine Americans lived in the seventeen westernmost states. By 1980, about one in five did.... After 1960, the population of the mountain and southwestern states has grown usually twice as fast as that of the Northeast and the Midwest" (205). Market conditions during the war increased the profitability of farming and cattle breeding, and the boom thus started continued well into the time of peace. A number of military facilities were established in the Western states, both scientific centers and army bases for all kinds of troops; Athearn quotes relevant statistics: "In 1976 the government spent \$ 32.00 per person on defense industry in New York but \$ 275 in Colorado" (206). The infrastructure of transportation grew at an impressive pace, which in turn contributed to the increasing popularity of western tourism and accelerated the commodification of the West. Athearn writes: "Along the highways in the West an average of a thousand new motels appeared each year between 1945 and 1960, and with them, countless restaurants, service stations, and false fronted gift shops selling rubber tomahawks, leather vests, hats of great gallonage, and other 'authentic' frontier gimcracks" (207). It goes without saying that all this would not have happened on such a great scale if it had not been for the West's resources: timber, gas and oil. It is not accidental, therefore, that the attention of preservationist organizations focused on the West. Their efforts to control the growth of urban areas or industrial enterprises and to defend the natural expanses culminated in the ratification of the Wilderness

Act of 1964 which “carved out fifty-four areas from the national forests—9.1 million acres, all of it in the West—and decreed that they would be kept safe and secure from all development whatsoever” (Athearn 213).

By the time Peckinpah made *The Ballad*, it had become evident that the problem of nature was not only a regional concern, but a national and a global one. Suffice it to say that 1970, the year the film was released, saw the launch of Earth Day, an initiative proposed by US Senator Gaylor Nelson and aimed at raising ecological consciousness among the Americans. Given the variety of contexts in which the questions of ecology were raised, it comes as no surprise that the conceptions of nature grew in prominence in the symbolic discursive sphere in the 1960s and 70s. When set against the contemporary issues of environmentalism, Peckinpah’s film can be seen as a critique of the mythicized notions of nature and the ways in which they have been applied in real conditions. What tells a lot about the cultural climate of the time when *The Ballad* was produced is the fact that the release of the film coincided with the publication of Charles A. Reich’s *The Greening of America* (1970), a very popular book projecting a social fantasy derived, albeit not exclusively, from pastoral imaginings. Reich’s work combines utopianism, pastoralism, idealism and radicalism in an attempt to put forth a call for a revolutionary renewal of the nation before the fulfillment of a technological apocalypse many harbingers of which he notices in the contemporary reality dominated by machines. The writer talks about three stages in the development of American consciousness. Consciousness I, representative of the pre-industrial era, combines an Adamic character with an entrepreneurial attitude, therefore it balances certain positive and negative features: “plainness, character, honesty, hard work” alongside “self-interest, competitiveness, suspicion of others” (23). Consciousness II is connected with the emergence and solidification of the Corporate State which exacts absolute obedience of the people for whom it has created an illusion of support. Consciousness III, anticipated and welcome, is the mindset of the rebellious youth from the 60s who want to retrieve the ideals of individualism and establish a dehierarchized national community based on a fundamental principle of honesty toward oneself and others. Admittedly, the role of nature in the new order is expressed through platitudes: “The new consciousness.... seeks restoration of the non-material elements of man’s existence, the elements like the natural environment and the spiritual that were passed by in the rush of material development” (382). However, Reich’s pastoralism does not have that much to do with the idea of nature as such as with the overall vision of all Americans living in a space in which everything has been perfectly balanced, and all constitutive elements of the reality have been reduced or expanded to what the writer believes to be the right proportions.

Clearly, *The Ballad* undermines the kind of utopian pastoralism that informs *The Greening of America*. To begin with, the film unmasks the illusion inflated in the title of Reich’s book; Peckinpah’s “green” America invariably has a faded, grayish shade, the

color of the bushes growing in the desert. First and foremost, however, Peckinpah's critique has to do with ideas and values, not with the use of imagery. He emphasizes one crude fact that the likes of Reiche would refuse to acknowledge: self-interest never abates, and this law of life, so to speak, manifests itself on a grassroots level in particular. Cable's determination to collect money from every single visitor who drinks water at his place and his inability to spend what he has earned attest that self-interest is a lasting tendency, even if it turns into its own parody. Challenging pastoral social fantasies, Peckinpah poses a question whether Americans strive for balance or, on the contrary, seek self-empowerment through some form of symbolic expansion, for example in the professional, communal or intellectual domain. Not only is it impossible to erase egoistic motivation, but it is such motivation that triggers off larger processes once the effect of scale has been achieved. Joshua thus envisages the future growth of Cable Springs: "I foresee a great community springing out of the sand, busy thoroughfares, alabaster buildings, a thriving community filled with the faithful." These words, like everything else that the preacher says, should be taken with a pinch of salt, but the vision they convey should not be easily dismissed. The Puritan City Upon a Hill has been replaced by a city in the desert, but the analogy is unmistakable: both imaginary cities epitomize the course of development as decreed by God, history or yet another force that man simply must obey. Interestingly, Joshua's vision seems to evoke the "White City," the symbol of American progress displayed at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893: "The centerpiece of the Exposition.... was the 'White City,' an architectural extravaganza in ersatz marble the pinnacle of Euro-American civilization, the original 'alabaster city... undimmed by human tears'" (Slotkin 63).

The literary work that comes closest to *The Ballad* in terms of setting and imagery, while it represents an ideological opposite, is Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968), describing the author's experiences and observations from the time when he served as a seasonal park ranger in Arches National Monument in Utah. Although the time of action covers only six months, from April through September, it registers his memories from the first two years of his work as a park ranger. The similarity to Thoreau's *Walden* is not accidental, and it's not primarily structural. Abbey, a future environmental activist and prominent member of the organization called Earth First!, recreates the Thoreauvian myth of the spiritual exploration of nature in a completely new historical context. In essence, he learns to understand what it means for a human being to be a part of the universe: "By taking off my shoes and digging my toes in the sand I made contact with that larger world.... All that is human melted with the sky and faded beyond the mountains and I felt, as I feel... that a man can never find or need better companionship than himself" (121). The desert becomes an emanation of the most fundamental laws of life that extend beyond the realm of humanity: "Completely passive, acted upon but never acting, the desert lies there like

the bare skeleton of Being, spare, sparse, austere, utterly worthless, inviting not love but contemplation” (300–301). Understandably, in comparison with *Walden*, *Desert Solitaire* conveys a much stronger sense of urgency, which results from the recognition of the threat posed by development and of the necessity of preventive action, hence the didactic overtones in Abbey’s work. Whether Abbey’s self-myth is utopian (Phillipon 233–239) or romantic (Knott 111–132), the pastoral plays a crucial role in its narrativization. His pastoral attitude is characterized by escapism, albeit with an addition of pragmatism as he functions within an institutional structure. The point is that Abbey’s pastoralism defines his position in a conflict of values, and therefore it forecloses the space for mediation instead of opening it.

In *The Ballad*, the desert landscape does not represent any transcendent quality, and the complete absence of the signs of sanctity from the natural environment justifies all the possible ways in which it can be used by man. Peckinpah thus defines man in relation to nature in strictly utilitarian terms, and, at the same time, he ironizes a downright utilitarian attitude by ascribing religious connotations to it. Frank Burke argues that “the religious imagery, patterns, and characterization of *Cable Hogue* are primarily derived from the Old Testament” (141). The critic goes on to say that the protagonist “is clearly and pointedly defined by two Old Testament quotations voiced by other characters in the film: ‘Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away’ and ‘Vengeance is mine saith the Lord’” (142). There is yet another biblical quote that applies to Cable with equal adequacy, especially to his effort at settlement: “God blessed the and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gen. 1:28). Although Cable does not father any progeny, he proves to be capable of establishing symbolic familial relations with Hildy and Bowen. And there is no doubt whatsoever that he does subdue the earth, and comes about this task very literally. Therefore—paradoxically—the religious allusions to be found in *The Ballad* testify to the reduction of Cable’s life to its bare physical dimension. As Burke puts it, Cable “remains trapped in a principally physical existence. Not only does he stay tied to a single geographical place, his life become characterized by physical acts: providing water... killing Taggart, getting hit by a car, dying” (141).

Although *The Ballad* portrays a contrasting attitude toward nature, it does not aim to counter the kind of idealized view of man amidst the wilderness as that articulated in *Desert Solitaire* with a more probable story of greed and exploitation; rather, when seen in the context of the environmental writing of the day, it confronts one myth with another. First and foremost, Peckinpah’s allegorical and mythopoeic film narrative helps to identify the processes of symbolization and mythologization. The director emphasizes their cultural validity and, at the same time, calls for a critical reassessment of the effects of symbolic constructions on real-life alternatives. When analyzed in a larger cultural context, *The Ballad* enables us to see how easily the pastoral—an entrenched, emotionally charged, symbolic narrative paradigm—becomes ideologized through dis-

cursive uses in a broadly defined public sphere. Such discursivization of the pastoral is inevitable, given the cultural history and continuing appeal of its tropes. What matters, in the end, is the ability to see the nuances of symbolization and to strike through the illusions which it creates.

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