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The Car Chase as Allegory for the Loss of the American Dream: The Case of Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry

Abstract

This paper focuses on the John Hough film *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* (1974). Using the work of Sabina Spielrein, this paper situates the car chase in the film as allegorical and as representing a desire for economic and social rebirth for its titular characters. However, the economic, political, and social upheaval of the period means that such desire is impossible to fulfill. Contextually, the promise of systemic change, so potent in 1960s America, had not fully materialized. The car chase that makes up much of the film then becomes a death drive for the characters. This positions the titular characters as variations on the absurd hero that Albert Camus articulates in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. They flee from institutional authority with little hope of escape, yet they flee anyway, finding meaning in the rebellion. *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* differs thematically from the car chase films of the late 1970s and early 1980s. These later incarnations reappropriated the car chase to mute the genre's capacity to provide a critique of dominant social and political discourses. *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* is underrepresented in critical writing, and this paper seeks to redress this underrepresentation.

Keywords: New Hollywood, car chase, Sabina Spielrein, Albert Camus

1. Introduction

John Hough's *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* (1974) was a low-budget, commercially successful film that capitalized on the road movie culture, which had already gained a foothold with film audiences in the early 1970s. Much of the film takes place on the road, and the viewer is placed inside the car

with the titular characters. The film thrives on pursuit: the authorities pursue Larry (Peter Fonda), Mary (Susan George), and Deke (Adam Roark) because they have engaged in criminal activity, while Larry, Mary, and Deke pursue loose goals in a manner that is often destructive, self-righteous, and self-sabotaging. Whereas many road films of the era, such as Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), Richard C. Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* (1971), Sam Peckinpah's *The Getaway* (1972), and Steven Spielberg's *The Sugarland Express* (1974), were met with commercial and critical success, either at the time of their release or in the following decades, *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* is almost completely absent from critical writings about New Hollywood, or even writings about car chase films/road movies.

This paper situates *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* amid the New Hollywood movement and then explores the car chase that makes up the body of the film by positioning it as allegorical. Its central characters, Larry, Mary, and Deke, attempt to make the ambiguous promises of the American Dream – the economic prosperity and aspiration accomplishment – a reality by stealing what they want rather than working conscientiously within the social system. In doing so, they reject the ideological tenets of the American Dream while validating their outcomes.

It is difficult to definitively articulate the American Dream as a concept. James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America*, published in 1931, is credited with first using and popularizing the phrase American Dream. The oft-quoted definition Adams provides: "a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (404), is not the totality of his position. Even though this passage provides perhaps the most understood definition of the American Dream, Adams was aware of how such notions could easily be corrupted. Adams cautions against reliance on state representatives and industry leaders, "I have little trust in the wise paternalism of politicians or the infinite wisdom of business leaders" (415). For Adams, achieving the American Dream must be a communal event driven by communal values. Interestingly, he also states a likely reason for the failure of the American Dream and, in doing so, inadvertently provides a succinct summary of the New Hollywood context, "[I]f we fail, there is nothing left but the old eternal round ... the failure of self-government, the failure of the common man to rise to full stature, the failure of all that the American

dream has held of hope and promise” (416). In the context of *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, Adams’ American Dream has failed, and what remains, particularly for Larry, alongside resentment, is defiance and a desire to find opportunity in wealth no matter how it is achieved.

Variations of the American Dream predate Adams, not in the naming but in the notion of upward economic and social mobility through hard work. Elements can be found in The Declaration of Independence (1776) and in Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis (1893) and its elevation of American identity over European forefathers. The potency of the phrase American Dream in its various incarnations, for Cal Jillson, comes because “[n]o phrase captures the distinctive character and promise of American life better than “the American Dream”” (1). The nature of that promise is contextual, however Jillson sees it “is the promise ... that hard work and fair play will almost certainly lead to success.” Further, there is an egalitarian aspect that makes it available to “[a]ll who are willing to strive, to learn, to work hard, to save and invest” (6). Yet, the social and political upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s created fractures that, for Lawrence R. Samuel, demonstrated “that the rules had changed ... No longer would hard work and saving money lead to the primary symbol of the American Dream—a nice home in the suburbs” (97-98). In *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, Larry and Mary seem to see the American Dream as a ruse that functions to quell the anxieties and frustrations of the working and middle class by offering hope on an unreachable horizon. It is a dream they no longer believe in, at least not in the sense that it can be achieved within the inequitable confines of the law. More broadly, New Hollywood contends that it never really was achievable.

In *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, there is a perception that institutional gatekeeping functions to deny access to the American Dream for people like Mary and Larry. Law enforcement functions in the film as literal and figurative roadblocks to Larry and co. reaching their goal. Curiously, Larry’s actions and decisions throughout the film, as the only driver, are often short-sighted, unnecessarily dangerous, and threaten to derail the likelihood of achieving the wanted outcomes. The trio’s desire for freedom, defined here as an escape from the Sisyphean labor within their particular context, to be achieved by economic wealth and the promises it holds, is seemingly punished as the film ends with their fiery deaths. This seems to position the film as a cautionary tale, a morality play, reminding the viewer of the consequences of deviant behavior.

However, the drive to claim aspects of the American Dream, which is no longer seen as attainable by honest means and now must be seized or stolen rather than earned, is, for Larry and co., premised on personal desire and a sense of being cheated. Larry and Mary are not Arthur Penn's Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) and Clyde (Warren Beatty), reacting against depression-era poverty and becoming, reasonable or not, folk heroes to the broader community. Nor are they Roman Polanski's Jack Gittes (Jack Nicholson), striving to overcome institutionalized corruption and exploitation to assist the vulnerable. Larry, Mary, and Deke act for themselves. Larry and Deke go so far as to threaten to kill the family of Fairview Save Mart owner George Stanton (Roddy McDowall) when they rob him. Their target is not banks or ruling elites but their fellow working class. There is, in Larry and co., a sense of impending doom, just as there is in Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde (1967). Bonnie's poem, shown in the film, as published in newspapers, frames that duo as hounded and blamed unfairly by authorities, and concludes:

Some day they'll go down together;
And they'll bury them side by side;
To few it'll be grief
To the law a relief
But it's death for Bonnie and Clyde. (01:39:30-40)

This poem has application, to varying degrees, for other duos and groups in the New Hollywood canon, such as in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and Robert Altman *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971). The contention here is that Larry and Mary are driven towards a different form of death than many of their contemporaries.

This paper, using Sabina Spielrein's essay "Destruction as The Cause of Coming into Being," frames Larry, Mary, and Deke's drive not as toward the death of the physical self, but as a drive toward a rearticulation of self. A self that is free from the confines of past circumstances and demands that have, particularly for Larry and Mary, stifled mobility. Their actions and their fiery demise at the end of the film, from an absurdist perspective, such as that articulated in Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, reveal the absurdity of pursuing nationalist myths such as the American Dream within an externally imposed framework. That being said, if the trio is viewed as

absurdist heroes there is a celebration in defiance. This defiance, an unwillingness to subjugate one's life to institutional regulation, makes the very struggle Larry, Mary, and Deke engage in an act of scorn.

2. New Hollywood and The American Dream

Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry is a New Hollywood film. New Hollywood, or New Wave American Cinema, was a period of filmmaking that emerged in the late 1960s and came to somewhat of a conclusion in 1980, its ending often marked by Michael Cimino's tumultuous *Heaven's Gate* 1980. This period of filmmaking is littered with work by iconic filmmakers, writers, and actors working across a range of genres, in films such as *The Wild Bunch*, *Easy Rider*, Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1971), Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), and Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978). Thematically and structurally, New Hollywood films are informed by the specificity of their production, which was a time of significant political, social, and economic uncertainty.

For Christian Keathley, New Hollywood conveys the "Vietnam war's [1961-1975] defining experience: the onset of trauma resulting from a realization of powerlessness in the face of a world whose systems of organization – both moral and political – have broken down" (293). Likewise, writing with a focus on 1974, the year of the release of *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, David Cook sees that social and political distrust more readily emerged as "the authority of the Nixon administration began to crumble, as our [American] war effort in Vietnam became increasingly futile, and as book after book critical of the Warren Commission appeared, [and] the American public lost faith in its institutions as never before" (116). New Hollywood films, for Yannis Tzioumakis, "were welcomed by a young generation that was disillusioned with the state of things" (171). One of those things was the mythology in which the United States was encoded, specifically the American Dream. Peter Fonda, as Larry, was already recognizable as a counter-culture figure from *Easy Rider* and the character Wyatt or Captain America. Along with partner Billy (Dennis Hopper), he smuggles cocaine from Mexico to California, and the two make a large sum of money, buy motorbikes, and set off across America. In this way, they have seemingly achieved financial independence, yet as they travel across America, they remain outsiders. Their wealth does not insulate them from societal critique or guarantee safety and security. While Billy celebrates their achievement, "We did

it ... we're rich, man. We're retired in Florida, mister." Wyatt is not so sure and laments, "We blew it" (Hopper 01:29:14-01:29:45). Later, they are both killed – shot by disapproving citizens while riding their motorbikes on an empty road. Such an outcome suggests that even if Larry, Mary, and Deke had escaped death, their dreams were not guaranteed. *Easy Rider* makes evident the arbitrary nature of the American Dream, its exclusiveness, and the sense that one must be a particular type of American to live the dream.

Larry and Mary are frustratingly aware of their exclusion. They are unable to access the economic or social capital necessary for upward mobility, so they rebel and decide to take it from others. Early in the film, Deke arrives to pick Larry up from Mary's apartment after Larry and Mary's one-night stand. Deke focuses in on a bumper sticker on Mary's truck, "WILL THE LAST PERSON IN SEATTLE PLEASE TURN OUT THE LIGHTS" (00:02:04) The sticker, a copy of a billboard erected in 1971, references the impact of the downturn in Boeing on Seattle, an event that, as Dana Cloud states, led Boeing "to lay off 60,000 workers in Seattle" (42). The presence of the bumper sticker positions Mary as one of the many that had fled Seattle as "[u]nemployment hit 16% in 1971, the highest in any U.S. urban area since the Depression" (Read). In *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, the need for money to alleviate a cycle of exclusion drives Larry and Deke to rob a supermarket. Mary joins them in the getaway, annoyed at Larry for leaving her disrespectfully after their night together and cornering him into taking her along. Tellingly, she is not concerned about the robbery, seemingly because she understands Larry and Deke's need.

In establishing *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* as a continuation of New Hollywood, there are clear character similarities to other films of the period, specifically *Bonnie and Clyde*, a film noted for its outdoor, on-location shooting, car chases, and its violent ending that results in the death of the titular characters. This type of road movie, popular during the period, was defined by critic Thomas Elsaesser, writing in 1975, as having the "sweet poignancy of defeat" (286). Lawrence Webb argues that "it was in part due to a new generation of filmmakers for whom the authenticity and verisimilitude of location shooting was fundamental to their artistic vision" (35). Other films, such as *The Getaway*, in which the film's characters escape authorities, and, to a lesser extent, *The Sugarland Express*, in which one main character is killed and the other survives, all involve the

desire to escape restriction and authority, all involve pursuit, with the protagonists as fugitives often with a specific goal, but a loose plan.

Jeff Menne, in writing about Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967) and *Bonnie and Clyde*, uses the term 'genre of defection,' and sees that "what the genre seemed to narrativize was the more or less nonnarrative condition of negation, a rejection (of "society," of "institutions") implying no positive recommendation of its own" (78). Such a term can be applied to *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, which, like *Bonnie and Clyde*, involves a kind of romantic relationship, a rejection of social mores, but no workable or sustainable alternative. Menne sees, for the *Bonnie and Clyde* characters, and, as this paper argues, for *Mary and Larry* also, "their broken drifting hangs as a question, one no longer answerable in the terms of the American romance, as to where one goes when fleeing society" (84). Yet, it is not society in its entirety that is being avoided, at least not in *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, but rather its confines or class barriers, limitations, and questionable promises. *Mary and Larry* want to be part of society, but they want greater opportunities that their thus far conditional membership has failed to provide.

Larry and Deke dream about NASCAR racing success but are unwilling to persist on the idealized path of hard work and determination. Elsaesser sees this as an important aspect that differentiates New Hollywood films from many of their predecessors, particularly regarding character arcs and motivations. New Hollywood "makes an issue of the motives – or lack of them – in its heroes ... this has implications for the narrative form and thereby for how one sees these films" (280). Further, he sees that the journey motif in such films "warns one not to expect an affirmation of purposes and meanings. Taking to the road comes to stand for the very quality of contingency" (281).

Contingency then, in this form, is an escape, an act of fleeing or getting away, literally, from the narrative confines of Classic Hollywood. Yet, *Larry*, whose motives lead the film, is only unmotivated insofar as he does not specifically challenge a stated corrupt group, individual, or institution. He does not act for a stated, or even a misguided, communal good. *Larry* acts for himself, and the film does not attempt to flatter him or charm the audience by employing standard narrative tropes. This is individualism, a variation of the type that has been long revered for settling a wild and fictive American frontier. There is also a reasonable logic to *Larry's* actions to gain enough money so that he could become a professional race driver. In this, *Larry* clings to the idea

that financial success will lead to dream fulfillment, and the caution offered by *Easy Rider* is ignored. A similar caution is offered in Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) through Billy (Richard Gere), who concocts a strategy to take over a wealthy farmer's estate. His fixation on financial wealth leads him into increasingly dangerous situations, ruining his relationship with his lover and culminating in his death.

Larry's is not the only drive, although it dominates the film. Certainly, Deke and Mary have their own, if limited, agendas. Deke, it is discovered later on in the film, has destroyed his reputation as a mechanic on the professional circuit because of his drinking problem. He seems to be looking for redemption, and Larry is the only viable pathway he has. Initially, Mary seems to be looking for attention from Larry, regardless of the form it takes. Yet, she comes to reject the way Larry treats her as disposable.

Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, and even George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* (1969) and *The Wild Bunch*, the journey in *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* has an ambiguous destination undermined by the methodology. In comparison to blockbuster road movies, such as Hal Needham's *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) and *Cannonball Run* (1981), with their explicit and measurable destinations, Larry and co. are aiming for a Walnut Grove and an escape, but there is no sense of how these will establish NASCAR success. Interestingly, the blockbuster manifestations of the car chase film remove the existential crisis that underpins films such as *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*, and return the viewer to Classic Hollywood structures.

What Larry, Mary, and Deke seek, it seems, is some form of frontier, a space without regulation, of the type articulated by the Western film genre mythologies. For Grzegorz A. Kleparski and Małgorzata Martynuska, the "early settlers were pioneers wandering westwards ... Thus, the first road stories describe people seeking escape and a change of fortune" (70). Conversely, K.R. Cornett argues, "[w]esterns and road films must in some ways articulate their relationship to landscape, and thus to history, and this is the source of their divergence" (44). In classic Westerns like John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), and *The Searchers* (1956), the landscape can be both civilized and wild; there is space for the outlaw and the law. However, New Hollywood Westerns *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*, and *The Wild Bunch* lament the loss of the frontier and the bureaucratization of life. Likewise, New Hollywood road films lament the loss

of space, space available for individualism. Philip Gillett identifies *Easy Rider* as the film that “began the cycle of road movies which offered escape from conformity, courtesy of the conformists who made the vehicles and maintained the roads” (157). That is, escape is conditional and finite. This realization in *Easy Rider* and other New Hollywood films is also a realization that the narratives, the national myths that once provided hope for freedom, were now sold at a cost, and that this cost, measured by conformity or capacity to pay, was no longer open to just anyone. The echo of Wyatt’s “we blew it” in *Easy Rider* applies more liberally to the country as a whole. Going your own way was likely to get you killed in New Hollywood films, regardless of your motivations. Jake Gittes in *Chinatown* fares a little better than Larry despite Jake’s admirable yet misplaced altruism. Death, of the body or the spirit, in New Hollywood reflects inherent concerns that America itself is suffering a similar type of death.

3. Destruction as The Cause of Coming into Being

Sabina Spielrein’s paper “Destruction as a Cause of Coming into Being” predates Freud’s better-known *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and its death drive theory by several years. Spielrein, who studied under Jung and Freud, articulated her own vision of the connection between sex, reproduction, and destruction, a vision that has clear application to *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry*. The relationship between Spielrein’s work and *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* is found in Larry’s drive to destruction, which is not focused on the sexual self or on the destruction of the physical self, but rather the destruction of the past self, the socioeconomic self, the self that adhered to the restrictions of social regulation. Yet, in striving to achieve this, there is also the potential for the destruction of the physical self, which, like a Damoclean sword, remains potent throughout the film. Larry’s driving is often reckless and courts disaster, but it also demonstrates a public rejection of the social norms, rules and regulations, and national myths he sees as limiting and disingenuous. Spielrein contends that the “personal psyche can only desire pleasurable feelings, but the collective psyche teaches us what we desire, what is positively or negatively feeling-toned. Therefore, we see that the collective desires living within us do not correspond to personal desires” (162). This reads in part as a critique of Jung in the sense that his notion of the collective psyche, with its supposed innate instincts and archetypes, does not, in some contexts, relate to the

personal psyche. To resolve such friction, one can commit fully to the personal, or the collective. In broadening the understanding of the collective and moving beyond the supposed innate to incorporate social pressures and demands, there is, in the context of the film, a more overt friction. A friction that comes from collective demands to adhere to collective needs, that is, to follow rules and regulations, which, in the hierarchical capitalist social system, rarely allows for the type of upward economic and social mobility of the kind Larry desires. Indeed, in the context of the film's production, the collective needs subjugate the personal, and the promises the collective has long promoted, such as variations on the American Dream, are absent. There is seemingly no reward for the individual. Larry's choice of the personal over the collective leads him to risk the lives and well-being, physical and emotional, of others to achieve his aims.

Throughout the film, Larry deliberately engages in competition and combat with authority. The robbery of the Fairview Save Mart founds Larry's willingness to elevate the personal and to confront the collective authority. Deke breaks into the home of Save Mart's manager, George Stanton, and threatens to harm and kill his wife and young daughter. Larry then goes directly to Stanton's office to collect payroll from the safe. Larry wears gloves, as does Deke, but they do not cover their faces. Stanton seems reluctant to comply at first, so Larry calls Deke to make the threat clear. Later, after leaving the Save Mart with Mary, whom Larry grudgingly includes, and reconvening with Deke, Larry reveals the purpose of the robbery: "We're going to own NASCAR" (Hough 00:20:09-13). Yet, such a dream would bring him a public profile. Having robbed the Save Mart and potentially other stores prior to this, he would be reasonably recognizable. Moments later, over Deke's police scanner, it is made clear that authorities have identified the car, a blue 1968 Chevy, and have a description of the trio, yet Larry continues to drive in such a way that invites catastrophe. Here, Larry's drive to escape has two interrelated purposes. He drives, as Spielrein argues, to escape the collective, but this must have a tangible form. The internal and the external must marry. Larry courts ruin on the road through disregard for rules, just as the mindset he has adopted has usurped his previous belief in achieving a version of the American Dream through hard work.

To demonstrate this to Mary, Larry takes a hard skidding right into the path of two speeding trucks. They part, and Larry races between them, but the car scrapes against one of the trucks, cracking

the car's windshield. It is a wild maneuver. Mary calls attention to Larry's driving, stating, "You keep this up you're gonna haul in a cop" (Hough 00:28:26-9). However, Larry's actions give further evidence, according to Spielrein, of his need for the destruction of the old self and the birth of the new: "Self-preservation is a 'static' drive because it must protect the existing individual from foreign influences; preservation of the species is a 'dynamic' drive that strives for change, the 'resurrection' of the individual in a new form. No change can take place without destruction of the former condition" (174). Larry has no concern for self-preservation if it is only to maintain the status quo. He must risk the physical self to preserve or recreate not the species but the opportunity for change. Here, species is substituted with the evolution of self. This internal drive for change, or escape, is measured by its real-world application. The resurrection comes not through reproduction but through transcending the socioeconomic boundaries that formerly defined one's station in life. The punishment that Larry is willing to endure is jail or death. His reproductive drive is in the desire to improve the self in a context different from that in which he currently exists, and that context is both spatial and nonspatial.

Interestingly, Larry's sex drive is relatively absent, and his connection with Mary is based on a need they both have for reinvention. The sexual liaison between Larry and Mary takes place before the film, and their relationship during the film seems premised on Larry belittling and humiliating Mary as if to emotionally bludgeon her into accepting subjugation. Indeed, for Larry, Mary's role, through much of the film, is a functional one. This also marks, for Larry, the intersection between masculine performance and self-development.

In taking the social constructivist approach to gender performance, established by Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu, and R.W. Connell, Helen McFarlane examines the relationship between criminality and masculine performance. McFarlane notes that "what is considered as being a 'real man' is informed and sanctioned by gender relations and these are embedded within cultural, political, social and economic discourses" (323). Like Connell, McFarlane sees that "hegemonic masculinity espouses a particular male form as that of heterosexuality, dominance, power, authority and legitimacy" and that this exists comparatively with "subordinate masculinity" commonly presented as "homosexuality, illegitimacy, femininity, marginalisation and oppression" (324). In this sense, Larry asserts his hegemonic position through his sexual encounter with Mary

and through his authority over the car he drives and the road he claims. In this way, he remains obedient to social constructs pertaining to gender and gender performance. McFarlane also argues that, in terms of criminality, “men contravene their legitimate masculinity by resorting to illegitimate means.” That is, “men who offend ... exhibit the characteristics of subordinate masculinity [and] can also be considered as upholding the characteristics of a failed and marginalised masculinity” (324). Such definitions have limited application and must be differentiated by the clearly defined legal/illegal context of behavior. Still, the film seemingly inverts this notion, as many of the traditions of the past, the adherence to social norms, have, in part, emasculated Larry. His failure to perform on the racetrack, his failure to fund his racing dream, comes, from his perspective, as a result of the context he found himself in. Emasculation is tethered to social subjugation and impotence in terms of achieving personal desires. Conversely, this impotence is challenged by Larry’s demonstrated sexual coupling with Mary. Larry’s criminality is also an attempt to assert a socioeconomic dominance that would mark him as having the type of power, authority, and legitimacy McFarlane associates with non-criminal hegemonic masculinity.

When Larry and Mary fight, and the Chevy runs off the road and needs repair, Larry and Mary then argue and separate until Deke makes it clear that Mary will be needed to assist with repairs. Curiously, it is here that Larry reveals his frustrations and rejection of the American Dream edict: “Mary, I’ve busted my crank for the last five years trying to win enough money to build some real speed. I finally had to take it. I had to steal it” (Hough 00:35:50-00:36:03). Larry states that he feels emasculated by his struggle, by his inability to access the American Dream through established and endorsed means. In car parlance, a crank, or crankshaft, drives the engine. Larry’s use of the term is euphemistic and suggests flaccidity. The car, his use of it, is again an extension of self. He overcomes dysfunction, personal and societal, by rejecting the notion that he himself is to be blamed for his failings: rather he sees them as constructed by the social system.

In this rejection, Larry invites sanction or punishment. Spielrein asks, “what is punishment in reality? It is an injury to the individual; because the reproductive drive requires destruction of the individual” (179). Mary, it is revealed later in the film, has also been willing to transgress social boundaries. Captain Everett Franklin (Vic Morrow) is leading the police pursuit of the trio, and having learned Mary’s name and knowing the trio has a police scanner, addresses her directly over

the scanner as he searches overhead in a helicopter: “Mary, are you ready to go back to the joint? ‘Cause that’s what parole violators get. Some people shouldn’t upgrade themselves, and you did. Highest you ever got was shoplifting” (01:14:27-37). Given the bumper sticker on Mary’s car, her shoplifting seemingly came in the wake of the economic downturn. It also highlights Mary’s vulnerability. Likewise, Franklin’s advice, “some people shouldn’t upgrade themselves” (Hough 01:14:32), although clearly directed at Mary’s presumed involvement in the robbery, also reinforces the same patriarchal thinking Larry employs with regards to Mary, that she should stay in her proverbial lane.

McFarlane concludes that “[t]o deviate from, and contravene, the laws of society in order to accrue a wage, generate social capital and to ascribe to the notion of idealized man when people do not have the resources necessary to do so legitimately, results in the marginalized” (327). This approach can be better applied to Mary, whose position in the film is challenged because of her gender. Larry, as Mary states, treats her as a whore. She tracks him down after he sneaks away from their tryst and states, “You owe me fifty bucks... if you treat a decent girl like a whore, she ought to be paid like one, right?” (Hough 00:13:33-45). Later, when the trio stops at a bar, Larry points out a sign that states the bar does not serve “risqué women” (01:01:40). Likewise, the very title of the film casts doubts on Mary’s character, Kleparski and Martynuska ponder that Mary “is presumably dirty because she engages in sex freely” (72). Although, this is an overstatement. Mary and Larry have sex once in the film; she is no more engaging freely in sex than Larry, but still garners her the title of dirty, while Larry is crazy, perhaps because of his desire for escape, for his driving, or for both.

It is seemingly only Deke’s intervention that prevents a further assault. Here, there are aspects of Larry’s performance anxiety, which is both sexual and social, and related to imbedded patriarchal hierarchies and to Larry’s need for dominance to reconcile broader concerns about his, thus far, failure to achieve his own desires. Mary seeks, for most of the film, recognition and acceptance from Larry and Deke to transform self, as a way to be reborn. As Mary and Deke talk, Deke states, “You don’t have to be here, Miss Mary. You really don’t have to be here” (Hough 01:18:11-17). Here, Deke seems to be channeling Spielrein, “[y]ou feel that the enemy is within; its characteristic ardour compels you, with inflexible urgency, to do what you do not want to do” (156). For Mary,

there are other options. When Larry returns, fences are quickly mended with a handshake.

However, when the trio returns to the Charger, Mary sits in the back seat with Deke rather than upfront with Larry to suggest that she sees her personal desires, whatever they might be, can be achieved without allegiance to an abusive partner.

The death and destruction of social and legal boundaries and the rearticulation of self – a rebirth of self that comes through robbery and escape, not only from authority but from the limitations of the past – is not realized for long. Moments after believing they have escaped police pursuit, as Deke and Larry celebrate, their escape car slams into a goods train and explodes in a fireball. Here, the film provides, it seems, a sense of moral consequence for the trio's behavior. Such an ending confirms McFarlane's view, "it is hegemonic masculinity that is portrayed as the ideal to which men should aspire ... whilst marginalised masculinity is an evil to be avoided" (325). Such a cautionary tale confirms the righteousness of the trio's death. The ongoing popularity of the film, however, challenges this to some degree. *Film Talk*, citing figures from a 1992 *Variety* article on the highest-earning films of 1974, places *Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry* at tenth. Despite Larry's reasonably unlikeable personality, he provides the viewer with the notion that marginalization can be overcome by flouting convention, even if only temporarily, and such a notion, in the context of the film, and seemingly for decades afterward, appeared to resonate with viewers. This ongoing popularity then works to undermine and challenge the moralizing that the film presents at its conclusion. In Larry, Mary, and Deke, there is, however fleeting, a resonance for the viewer in their defiance and happiness.

4. Absurdism and the Morality of the Road

Larry, and to a lesser degree, Deke, are no longer concerned with adhering to formal rules and regulations present in society. Their robbery and their desire to use the stolen money to advance their racing careers come with little in the way of regret. Not that it should, but unlike its contemporaries, *The Sugarland Express*, and to a lesser extent, *Bonnie and Clyde*, the film makes no attempt to position Larry and Deke as working for a sympathetic cause or acting out against injustice. Larry and Deke act for themselves, but they do so because, from Larry's perspective, to do otherwise is to surrender one's life. Mary, however, does not seem to have reconciled such a

point of view, not totally, and is still encumbered, restricted, and struggling to conform to the gendered stereotyping of her context.

In *Larry*, there are elements of Albert Camus' absurdism. Camus, in his iconic work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, begins by identifying the "one truly serious philosophical problem ... suicide" (1). The relationship between Spielrein's notion of destruction and Camus's absurdism, for *Larry*, is found in his drive to destruction, toward killing an aspect of self. *Larry*, aware of the indifference of the world to his struggles, makes meaning through his desire to be a race car driver, but he must take action to achieve this desire, inside or outside of the formal rules and regulations. There are moments when *Larry* expresses an indifference to his circumstances that strays close to defeatism. After the trio discovers, via the police scanner in their car, that the police have a description of them, he comments, "You know what it means when somebody like me gets off to a bad start? Not a god-damn thing" (Hough 00:25:26-33). *Larry*'s comment suggests he is accustomed to difficult circumstances, 'bad starts' both in racing and life. Yet, as the film demonstrates, these situations are exacerbated by his actions.

Larry continues to drive recklessly, such as rounding a corner and narrowly missing a bus. Interestingly, the driving that *Larry* does and the police pursuits that often follow occur in a relatively flat and barren landscape with vast fields of yellowing grass and single-lane roads where traffic is sparse. There are few tangible obstacles in *Larry*'s way, yet he drives with an abandon that draws attention and creates obstacles he could otherwise avoid. Soon after evading the first police pursuit, *Larry* jumps the car over a weighbridge, opening to let through river traffic. It is a ferocious stunt, and *Larry* again courts danger. When the trio arrives to exchange cars in a busy flea market, the police arrive soon after and drive their car through the narrow street of the flea market and spot the abandoned blue Chevy. The trio watches, unseen, from a distance, now in a lime green '69 Dodge Charger. Rather than waiting for the police to pass, *Larry* tears away from the market, drawing attention and knocking off the open door of a police car. There was a clear option to sit and wait and avoid detection. Moments later, as *Larry*, tearing along another empty country road, spots a police car, he roars past, stating, "Hi guys" (Hough 00:57:20). The police immediately begin the pursuit, although the police car soon careens off the road and through a billboard. However, it reports on the trio's position. Either way, the well-being of others is

unimportant to Larry. He finds justification for his action in the pursuit of his goal, and the feeling of being left out, excluded. Yet, he inflicts harm on those around him, and risks becoming the very actor he rallies against.

Perhaps the most jarring example of Larry's drive to destruction comes when the trio stops at a bar to hide out. As they make their way to the pool table, Larry asks, "Hey Deke, you remember Robert Mitchum in *Thunder Road*?" (Hough 01:20:55-01:21:00). Arthur Ripley's *Thunder Road* (1958), about moonshiner Luke Doolin's (Robert Mitchum) conflict with authority, ends with Doolin's death in a fiery crash. Larry may well see himself as the cool Doolin, but he has neglected the broader narrative in which Doolin's unwillingness to change his behavior leads him to death. The car chase in *Thunder Road* ends when Luke, taking a sharp corner, is hit by another car, which then crashes into a telephone pole, which then falls on Luke's car. Yet, there was a pervasive sense of fatalistic suicide in Doolin's actions. In raising the question to Deke, Larry could well be signaling his desire for a similar end.

Conversely, Larry also shares some more specific traits with Camus' *Sisyphus*. In articulating the absurd, Camus sees that people long for structure and a rationale to their lives but that the world fails to provide such things. The structure and rationale for Camus are not innate but rather constructs, regulatory systems, imposed and often accepted as natural. Yet, they often fail to provide an agreeable justification for people to live by. The absurd is thus realized in the chasm between what the world is and what people desire it to be. This, coupled with the finite nature of existence and the inevitability of death, can create, for the individual, a sense of hopelessness or despair. Such angst can be soothed through fundamentalist ideologies, but for those outside of such ideologies, there can be a sense of isolation and futility in the patterns of life. Camus notes, "work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the 'why' arises" (11). Larry sees that the established patterns of his context, the notion that the American Dream is achievable if he just follows the course, is the unreachable tomorrow. Camus argues, "we live on the future: 'tomorrow', 'later on', 'when you have made your way'" (12), and that, as such, people often fail to act in their own self-interest. Larry, in turning away from the traditions of the past of hard work to achieve one's desires, realizes the absurdity of the American Dream, for like so much

else, it is a construct. For Larry, to have what he desires, he must take it; the success or the failure that comes from the act of taking is irrelevant – what matters is the effort. Camus notes that “the gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back on its own weight” (115). This repetitive and endless labor was punishment. Yet, in terms of his predicament before the robbery, Larry’s existence was just as repetitive.

As such, Larry’s reaction marks him as cynical of the society he lives in, the values and ideologies it promotes, and the pathways to the American Dream it offers. Mathieu Debic argues, “Sisyphean Cynicism would not make claims about the world, but seek to find a way to live in it” (175). For Larry to live in the world, he must create something, and this leads him to break the law. However, as Debic continues, “the Sisyphean Cynic must remain mindful that such behavior may be necessary to tarry with the absurd and avoid the trap of hope” (177); hope that the American Dream is available to those who maintain the status quo. That Larry no longer has hope in anything other than himself means that he recognizes and accepts, like Sisyphus, that, as Debic defines, “societies of control engage in constant modulation of creative energies. They fill the horizon, obscuring the possibility of anything beyond them with the smoke of tendencies to reify the world the way it is now” (179). Larry, as Camus states of Sisyphus, has a “scorn of the gods” (119), their edicts embodied in the rules and regulations that leave him unable to access the capital required to achieve his desires. The gods are, in this sense, the representative agents of the state, such as Franklin, who, for most of the film, hovers in the clouds with a veritable heavenly gaze, seeking to limit and control Larry’s escape. Franklin clarifies this point when he says of Larry, “I admire any man who tries to get anything he wants any way he can, as long as it’s legal” (Hough 00:36:52). Larry gives Franklin the middle finger when Franklin’s helicopter engages the Charger, not because of his hatred of Franklin himself but because of the limitations and authority Franklin represents. Larry does not desire death but desires an escape from a life that is Sisyphean, one that, for the film’s viewers, is ostensibly recognizable. Larry, like Sisyphus, has a “hatred of death ... passion for life” (Camus 119), but these do not keep him from a flaming death. Yet his death comes through defiance, through an unwillingness to conform and submit himself to the moral and virtuous permissiveness of the political and social institutions that were, in 1974, so clearly on display.

Larry, however, does not travel alone. His actions, however justified or necessary he might see them, profoundly affect others. While Deke remains relatively passive for most of the film, Mary's journey is very different. Mary's attempts to bond with Larry are apparent, and Larry only takes her with him after the robbery because she initially refuses to return his keys. When Mary and Deke talk in the Walnut groves, Mary acknowledges "I do lie a little ... I lie all the time" (01:17:15-25), as she tries to explain what she perceives as her problematic behavior, but Deke asks her, "Why do you think being good's the whole story?" (Hough 01:17:55) Mary is, it seems, in a similar position to Larry, yet she evidently remains loyal to social norms, having already felt the weight of state-sanctioned regulation through imprisonment. She seeks male validation for much of the film and, although she rides next to Larry, there is never any suggestion from her or Larry that she should share the driving, which would give her agency in directing their lives and guiding their narrative. Earlier in the film, Larry abandons Mary at a grocery store after asking her to buy a bandage for Deke's hand, and once she enters the store, he speeds away. Mary, however, has taken the directions to the second getaway car, and Larry must return for her. The dynamic between Larry and Mary is one of Larry trying to leave Mary behind, manipulating her when he needs something done, but unconcerned about her happiness. Mary, meanwhile, is determined for Larry to be compelled toward her.

Deke's question, though, is penetrating, and it asks Mary to consider why she makes the decisions that she makes. It asks Mary to consider what she hopes to gain out of her time in the car. Deke, like Larry, wants to be part of NASCAR, but Mary seemingly just wants to flee and there is no stated destination. Prior to the stop in the Walnut groves, Larry, driving at high speed, collides with a pickup truck that emerges from a side road. The front end of the Charger is damaged. Larry blames the pickup truck driver rather than his own speed. Larry, referring to the driver of the pickup truck that he knocked over, states: "I'll kill him, I'll kill him" (01:13:09) and Deke responds, "You probably did" (01:13:13). Mary is shocked and confronts Larry, "people don't even rate a glance with you" (01:13:29). The point is as much a reflection of Larry's attitude to her as it is to the driver of the other vehicle. Mary's point is also a salient one, and Larry's reply, "when you're racing you don't stop and get out of the car to find out if the other guy made it through a spin alright. Not if you want to keep on driving" (Hough 01:13:33-42), frames his actions, his behavior, as a race, a

competition to be won or lost, and thus he never needs to “stop and get out,” not for Mary or for the driver of another vehicle. That is, his own needs are always of paramount importance. As such, for Mary, Larry’s willingness to objectify, sexualize, manipulate, and then abandon her marks him as thoroughly aligned with the patriarchal social system, and, from her perspective, his drive to transformation is limited. These events and Deke’s question bring, for Mary, the beginnings of introspection.

At a deeper level, Deke’s question reflects aspects of feminist discourse at the time of the film’s production. The notion of women as culturally constructed, and as “other” in relation to men, was advocated in Betty Friedan’s influential *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan articulates the restlessness and frustration felt by many women who saw themselves as restricted and trapped by pervasive patriarchal institutions that provided them limited mobility and identity. Notably, Friedan sees the media as a particularly pervasive patriarchal institution striving to keep women as wives, mothers, and homemakers. She saw that women believed there was a danger in rejecting such definitions because women then risked being stripped of identity and function and being ostracized socially and culturally. Hence Mary’s title of dirty. For Friedan, “it is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife, the continual demands on her time ... are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices” (31). Friedan saw that women could liberate themselves through full participation in society. Yet, this has not been the case for Mary. Her initial pursuit of Larry could well be the pursuit of a partner, a male partner, one that would reshape her identity. When Larry first agrees to let Mary accompany him, he tells her, “Okay, Miss Mary, have it your way, but anytime you want out, you just holler, hmm?” (00:14:49-54) After Deke’s question in the Walnut grove, Mary confesses, “I don’t have anything else to do” (Hough 01:18:20). Mary’s options seem limited socially and economically, especially given her criminal record. She rides with Deke and Larry in the hope that their rejection of the American Dream and broader regulation is a more comprehensive rejection of social mores, only to find it is not, and she has, essentially, exchanged one form of oppression for another.

Unlike Friedan, Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970) sees that systemic change is needed. For Millet, one can be aware of the ways a patriarchal social system functions so that it can be better navigated, but systemic change that redefines notions of masculine and feminine does not come

from engaging with such a system. For Millet, “patriarchy as an institution is a social constant so deeply entrenched as to run through all other political, social and economic forms, whether of caste or class, feudality or bureaucracy” (25). Mary, however, only seems to recognize that she can act outside of patriarchal demands in the moments before the trio crashes into the train. As Larry and Deke celebrate their escape, Mary states, “You know what? I think I’m ready to unload” (Hough 01:30:55). She has, as Larry asked her to do, “hollered,” but he does not hear. Mary’s desire to leave Larry and Deke, in the moments before her death, demonstrates that she recognizes her own agency and her value beyond that given by Larry or conferred by broader society.

Mary’s position in the film, her near absent goals, her realizations mark the broad and complex ground the film covers. While Larry and Deke reflect the New Hollywood rejection of the American Dream, the outrage of being fooled or taken advantage of, Mary seemingly reflects the impossibility of any dreaming.

5. Conclusion

That Larry’s efforts accomplish only his own death, and that of Mary and Deke, is both tragic and redemptive. On the very fringe of the success he desired, Larry is killed, but not punished by a moralistic world or authority, but by the absurd and indifferent world. Larry and Deke were verifiably happy in their final moments. Larry says, “We made it, Deke [laughs]. We’re in the Daytona now, mister [laughing]” (01:30:10-16). And Deke, warmly patting Larry on the back, concurs, “We’re in the money, mister” (Hough 01:30:16). Their struggle, unlike that of Sisyphus, is distinguished by its finiteness. Their acts, while self-serving, conflicted, destructive, and potentially traumatizing, are also acts of determined agents. For the viewer, the struggle is noble, even if born of ignoble deeds. And in this, Larry and Deke take their seats in a pantheon of such figures from the era who struggled but succumbed to unscrupulous agents, existing as they do on a broad spectrum but who represent, in different and varied ways, a recognition that one can rebel against an indifferent or hostile world, be destroyed, and still be something other than compliant.

In the opening scenes of the film, the camera drifts over a vast landscape of undulating fields of yellowed grass, shadowed by a few clouds in a blue sky. There is no car and no sense of the fast-paced action to come. The song, *Time (Is Such a Funny Thing)*, a ballad seemingly lamenting the

loss of time to connect and maintain a romantic relationship, plays in full. Initially, it predicts that the film will be something of a love story akin to *The Sugarland Express*. It is at the film's conclusion that it becomes evident the song sets a thematic tone for the film. It is not a romantic love song but a lament. Camus argues that for the absurd figure, "there is no higher destiny or at least there is but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable" (119), and that is physical death. The song identifies the finite time in which the trio exists, the impossibility of reclaiming it, and that there would likely be no satisfactory ending.

Time is such
A funny thing
You turn around,
It's gone...
I had a chance
But I never had the time
Time
Where did you run to?
I always thought
That we were friends. (Hough 00:00:28-00:01:12)

Larry took all the risks because he realized the tyranny of time and its limits and thus sought a sort of metamorphosis, one that was, ultimately, impossible, and unrealistic. Yet, the drive, the scorn, pushed him hurtling forward, unconcerned with the risk of death, his own or that of others. For Mary, the song is more poignant. Her desire to leave Larry and Deke comes too late. In the final scene of the film, with a focus on the burning Charger, the song returns.

Time
You know I trusted you
We came so close
But you slipped
Right through my hands. (Hough 01:32:12-26)

The fissures in Mary's sense of herself and her place in the world had only begun to open.

Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry ultimately moves away from a morality play, one where the trio is punished for their turpitude so as to remind the viewer that a lack of moral goodness is likely to be fatal. The crash concludes that the world is indifferent to Larry and Mary and their needs and desires. Their deaths come not through confrontation with agents of the state to demonstrate the relative power of the state, as in *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, or *Thunder Road*, or because of powerful and corrupt business/political interests, such as in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* and *Chinatown*, but through a careless collision, one that marks the film with absurdism. Yet, reading from Camus' perspective, one must imagine Larry, Mary, and Deke happy. The film's ongoing popularity likewise suggests the ending does not diminish its thematic drive; rather, it argues that rebellion, in and of itself, is noble. For the viewer, Larry, Deke, and Mary are like Sisyphus – they reject the American Dream, they stop waiting for the dream to come true, and “the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart” (119) despite its impossibility.

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