

## Retrieving the Lost Self: *The Greening of America*, *Easy Rider* and the Politics of Countercultural Whiteness

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ABSTRACT: The transition from the 1960s to the 1970s saw the birth of two significant countercultural artifacts: Charles Reich's bestseller *The Greening of America* (1970) and Dennis Hopper's surprising box office success *Easy Rider* (1969). This article argues that Reich's analysis of a "loss of self" in the US helped to construct a specific countercultural subjectivity and thereby set the stage for new affective imaginings of white masculinity. In doing so, it seeks to embed the often triumphant narrative of New Hollywood cinema within a history of whiteness and discourses about subjecthood that continue to shape today's cultural and political landscape.

KEYWORDS: Counterculture; 1960s; Subjectivity; Whiteness; Hollywood; Film History

### Introduction

"When the white man discovers his servitude, we will see a real explosion in America." This line stems not from a white supremacist pamphlet but from liberal law professor Charles Reich's countercultural classic *The Greening of America* (1970). In his ambitious analysis of American society amid the turmoil of the 1960s, Reich articulated the hope that a younger generation's "new consciousness" would solve what he interpreted as a spiritual crisis that permeated American society at mid-century. At the core of this crisis Reich identifies a "loss of self," a development in which the "individual is systematically stripped off his creativity, his heritage, his dreams, and his personal uniqueness, in order to style him into a productive unit for a mass, technological society" (7-8). This loss of self is often cast in a language that pits emotions and affective values against oppressive social forces, diagnosing what I will call an affective deficit throughout this article: "Instinct, feeling, and spontaneity are repressed by overwhelming forces" (8). Reich's analysis of American society and selfhood is steeped in a rhetoric of self-liberation—a countercultural project that claimed the "self" as a privileged site of political change. The universalist aspiration of this project—as well as Reich's tentative allusions to race and black subjects in *The Greening of America*—suggest, however, that the countercultural notion of self-liberation rested on a racialized logic and reproduced an unacknowledged white default at its core.

In this article, I want to examine this logic, embedding the (racial) politics of Reich's discourse within the historical formation of the 1950s and 1960s, in which liberal and conservative intellectuals diagnosed a spiritual 'identity crisis' within mainstream American culture. I argue that particularly interventions within the field of existential psychology and the New Left helped to translate this crisis discourse into a specific ideal of countercultural subjectivity

during the 1960s, propagating values such as spontaneity, authenticity and emotional expressivity. I use the term “countercultural” here to describe a set of discourses and practices related to these values and commonly attributed to the counterculture as such.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, even if my two primary sources during this article—Charles Reich’s *The Greening of America* and the film *Easy Rider*—both make their own arguments *about* the historical counterculture, I use them primarily as expressions *of* countercultural discourse. As such, they shaped rather than merely reflected the politics of countercultural subjects during the time of their emergence, the cultural memory of what constituted the historical counterculture, as well as ongoing subjectivities, discourses, and practices indebted to this history.

Hence, I suggest broadening the term “countercultural” beyond its reference to a (sub-)cultural movement of the 1960s to name a specific identity structure built around an emphatic rejection of dominant cultural forces that were allegedly interfering with the authentic expression of a core self. I will further argue that countercultural subjectivity, as an idea rooted less in political analysis than in a strict opposition between the self and the social, excludes those whose identity is interpreted as a social identity to begin with and for whom being at odds with the dominant culture is not merely a question of consciousness. As Grace Elizabeth Hale has shown in her study *A Nation of Outsiders*, the politically vague project of self-liberation in the 1960s was particularly attractive for white leftists as they were more distant from material forms of oppression. As I will illustrate in the following, this dynamic makes it necessary to understand countercultural subjectivity as a specifically white subject position, as *countercultural whiteness*. It is an identity structure that continues to exercise cultural authority in the present political formation.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this article, I suggest that countercultural whiteness emerged from the image of a self-in-crisis, transformed white masculinity in the face of social and cultural challenges, and was disseminated by new aesthetic regimes such as the cinema of the New Hollywood. In the first section, I will use *The Greening of America* as an entry point into the relation between psychological concepts and political rhetoric in the 1960s as well as into the racialized logic

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<sup>1</sup> I do not intend to make historical claims about the counterculture as a subculture or the politics of a specific group of individuals during the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, I focus on what Doug Rossinow has called the “countercultural turn” of the New Left and its implications. As Rossinow summarizes his argument: “In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the new left came to view itself as a part of the larger ‘counterculture’ and as a counterculture in itself” (*The Politics of Authenticity* 247). When countercultural discourses and practices spread throughout American society—primarily creating and transforming white middle-class values such as authenticity and creativity—they became more independent from their original context (See Frank 1998, Heath/Potter 2004 and Binkley 2004 for different dimensions of this history).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Knadler uses the term “countercultural whiteness” in discussing James Baldwin’s 1962 essay on Norman Mailer “The White Boy Looks at the Black Boy” (xxiii). While my usage of the term is similar to Knadler’s, and while I will suggest below that Mailer was indeed a central figure in the emergence of countercultural whiteness, I want to argue for a broader use of the concept that does not exhaust itself with the counterculture of the 1960s. I thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing me toward Knadler’s work.

that permeated the crisis discourse of the “loss of self.” The interpenetration of psychological and countercultural language is key to the latter’s relation to whiteness, as allegedly universal concepts of selfhood helped to conceal socioeconomic and racial differences between political subjects. In the second part, I discuss the 1969 film *Easy Rider* and its reception to examine how the cinema of the New Hollywood engendered new imaginings of white masculinity that responded to this discourse and its diagnosis of an affective deficit.<sup>3</sup> In a final section, I will broaden the scope to consider the implications of this type of analysis for the New Hollywood in general. A period in American film history that is still valued as singular and exceptionally creative in both academic and journalistic accounts,<sup>4</sup> the New Hollywood is rarely considered in terms of its racial politics and its historical function.

## Something to Save: *The Greening of America*, the Lost Self, and the Privilege of Identity Crisis

### “Faith in His Potential”: The Psychological Terrain of Countercultural Discourse

Charles Reich’s *The Greening of America* quickly became a widely discussed best-seller after its release in 1970 and remains one of the most significant countercultural publications of the period. At the time of its release, Reich was a law professor at Yale who, throughout the 1960s, had written several influential articles on the relation between law and government before witnessing the beginnings of the student movement at close range while teaching in Berkeley (Citron 399). Reinvigorated by what he perceived as a new generation of students completely at odds with dominant values, Reich set out to write a more ambitious book, a book that would not limit itself to interventions into the practice and theory of law but serve as a cultural critique of American society at large.

In *The Greening of America*, a text whose first draft was published in *The New Yorker* and only then became a massive success as a Random House publication, Reich frames his analysis as a response to an alarming crisis in American society, a crisis marked both by material circumstances—“disorder,” “war,” “poverty,” and “the destruction of environment”—and problems he describes in a more spiritual vocabulary: “powerlessness,” “absence of community,” and a “loss of self” (4-8). As an underlying dynamic of this crisis, Reich identifies a clash between three different types of the American mind. Whereas “Consciousness I” marks

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<sup>3</sup> I use the notion of “affective deficit” not as a theoretical concept here but to summarize a variety of social diagnoses made by cultural critics and psychologists in the 1950s and 1960s lamenting the lack of emotionality, authenticity, and spontaneity. This historical interest in postwar discourses about the emotional and affective dimensions of human experience is also the main reason why I will refrain from any systematic application of affect theory and the many productive concepts it has engendered. I will return to this problem field in the last section of the article.

<sup>4</sup> A 2019 edited volume on the New Hollywood is titled *When the Movies Mattered* (Kirshner/Lewis 2019); a recent retrospective column in *Variety* celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Bonnie and Clyde* opens with the line: “Fifty years ago today, American movies were born again” (Gleiberman).

the “traditional outlook of the American farmer, small businessman, and worker who is trying to get ahead” and “Consciousness II” represents the dominant midcentury “values of an organizational society,” “Consciousness III” is the mindset of “the new generation,” a generation that would, in Reich’s prediction, become the medium of the “Coming American Revolution” (16).

In Reich’s outlook, “Consciousness III” is first and foremost the willful rejection of “Consciousness II” and the organized society that lies at its foundation. In line with a popular strand of cultural critique that peaked in the 1950s with bestsellers such as David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) or William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956), Reich indicts the US as a conformist society that presses the self into pre-designed forms and privileges social obligations over individual freedom, supported by an artificial mass culture in which “the genuine is replaced by the simulated” (193). In Reich’s critique, which echoes Riesman’s famous diagnosis of the ‘other-directedness’ of the postwar American character<sup>5</sup>, the “Consciousness II man [...] adopts, as his *personal* values, the structure of standards and rewards set by his occupation or organization” and thus becomes a “projectile, ready to be set in motion by outside energies” (77). The subject of Consciousness III, on the other hand, abstains from using a radar, as here, “the individual self is the only true reality. [...] The commandment is: be true to oneself” (242). Reich’s description of Consciousness III is probably one of the most ambitious and explicit attempts to describe countercultural subjectivity during the period in which the counterculture was most visible. His book also demonstrates how New Left discourse made use of the shifting meaning of abstract philosophical notions and emergent psychological terms. In the following, I will discuss four of these notions and terms: the problem of alienation, the notion of a human potential, the search for authenticity, and the metaphor of role-playing.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman, together with his co-authors Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, distinguishes three social types of the American personality. While the “tradition-directed” type is linked to pre-modern forms of life and the strict following of rules, the “inner-directed” person relies primarily on their inner radar. The “other-directed” type, which the authors find to be the dominant type after the 1940s, looks primarily for the approval of others. Cultural historians of the 1950s have interpreted *The Lonely Crowd*, as well as Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, as reactions to the white middle-class move to the suburbs, the shift in male employment from blue-collar to white-collar work and the growing anxiety over the threat of conformity. Erik Dussere has summarized this genre of cultural critique as “attempts to understand a particular kind of man, identified as white-collar, middle-class, living in the suburbs and commuting to the city, conformist, consumerist—and disaffected” (81). See also Ehrenreich 1983, Gilbert 2005.

<sup>6</sup> All of these terms resonated with a new language of ‘identity’ and ‘identity crisis.’ The notion of identity emerged first in psychologist Erik Erikson’s *Childhood and Society* (1950) but immediately spread into the American vernacular. As Elizabeth Lunbeck remarks, “the word *identity*, and that to which it referred—the ideal of a robustly conceived and fully realized self—were soon everywhere,” and by the 1960s it had become a “taken-for-granted dimension of personhood that categorized a person simultaneously as unique and as part of a group” (224-25). For practical purposes and to avoid confusions with more recent debates on ‘identity politics,’ I refrain from analyzing the notion of identity as a separate concept, rather interpreting its emergence as a historical condition for the interpenetration between psychological and political discourse.

Reich's work is part of an intellectual lineage that can be traced back not only to debates about conformity in the 1950s but at least to the 1940s and theories of fascism and authoritarianism, the diagnosis of a "loss of self" echoing studies such as Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941). In the 1960s, an emergent student movement around Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), owing much of its fervor and urgency to the civil rights movement but looking to white academics for intellectual inspiration, resumed this trajectory and gave it a countercultural spin. As students on campuses all over the country discussed Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, published in 1964, C. Wright Mills had already become the "oracle of the New Left," articulating a "broader, more psychological idea of alienation and the sources of oppression that led to political change" (Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders* 178). As Doug Rossinow argues, "[p]ossibly no word was used more frequently in discussions of political discontent in the United States" during the 1950s and 1960s than the word alienation (2). The crucial slippage, in which the Marxist meaning of alienation was displaced by a more existentialist interpretation, allowed the term to serve as a stand-in for a general state of unfreedom, and to permeate the rhetoric of the New Left.<sup>7</sup> In 1964, campus activist Gregory Calvert announced that every revolutionary movement is born out of the "perception of the contradictions between human potentiality and oppressive actuality" (13).

Calvert's allusion to a "human potential," in turn, suggests how New Left discourse in the early 1960s rested on the shifting terrain of postwar psychological discourse. Of particular significance for the New Left and the counterculture were the Gestalt Therapy Movement and humanist psychology, identified primarily with therapists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. These approaches, which offered themselves as an alternative "third way" to both Freudian psychoanalysis and scientific behaviorism, increasingly turned their gaze away from the "pathological" to the "normal" subject. Maslow announced in his 1962 *Toward a Psychology of Being*, "what we call 'normal' in psychology is really a psychopathology of the average" (15). The slippage from "normal" to "average" illustrates a broader shift in psychological discourse that exchanged an ideal of adjustment for a notion of potentially endless personal growth. In the same year as Maslow published his book, SDS proclaimed in its founding manifesto, the Port Huron Statement, that they did not want to "deify man," they merely had "faith in his potential."

In another of the Port Huron Statement's most well-known lines, SDS announced that the "goal of man and society" was "human independence," which meant to find "a meaning in life that is personally authentic." As another core trope that traveled between psychology and the

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<sup>7</sup> For general discussions of the influence of existentialism on psychological and political discourses in postwar America, see Cotkin 2005, Dinerstein 2017, pp. 122–162, and Rossinow 1998, pp. 53–84. Eva Illouz embeds this shift in the meaning of alienation within a larger transformation towards an "emotional capitalism": "When Marx's 'alienation' was appropriated—and distorted—by popular culture, it was mostly for its emotional implications: modernity and capitalism were alienating in the sense that they created a form of emotional numbness which separated people from one another, from their community, and from their own deep selves" (1).

white student movement, the search for authenticity was endowed with the hope of overcoming alienation. Rossinow goes so far to argue that the “new left was less an outgrowth of a continuous history of radical politics in the United States than the evanescent leftist branch of a search for authenticity in industrial American life” (345). In *Toward a Psychology of Being* Maslow suggests that the notion of the “authentic person” implies that such a person “resists enculturation,” becoming “a little more a member of his species and a little less a member of his local group” (11).<sup>8</sup> *The Greening of America* echoes this stark opposition between singular personhood and the belonging to a social group. In the book, Reich measures a person’s “uptightness,” a term signaling inauthenticity, by “how much of society a person carries around within himself” (158). Both Maslow and Reich thus construct zero-sum games between the self and the social, measuring an individual’s authenticity by the absence of social markers and cultural traces and thereby creating a key tenet of countercultural subjectivity. This logic was at the heart of discourses on selfhood in postwar America, a logic disguised in universal rhetoric that nevertheless was charged with racialized meaning. Proposing self-liberation as a conscious and uncompromising opposition to culture and society excludes subjects whose desire to become “a member of the species” is more than a question of fulfilling a human potential through authenticity.

The metaphor of role-playing in *The Greening of America* is a case in point. According to Reich, society coerces the individual into “role-playing games,” a dangerous situation in which the “individual’s own ‘true’ self, if still alive, must watch helplessly while the role-self lives, enjoys, and relates to others” (152). This framework leaves no space for those subjectivities in need of adopting different roles to survive in the face of political machines that endanger not only their psychological integrity but their existence. “A Negro learns to gauge precisely what reaction the alien person facing him desires, and he produces it with disarming artlessness,” James Baldwin had written in 1948 (*Notes of a Native Son* 56). Translated into Reichian terms, the “Negro” that Baldwin describes is indeed a “projectile ready to be set in motion by outside energies.” However, it is not “organized society’s” false Consciousness II that makes him vulnerable to outside manipulation but the rules of a social structure founded on white supremacy.

Alienation, human potential, authenticity, and the liberation of the self from role-playing: All these notions were omnipresent in postwar psychological discourses and started successful political careers in the 1960s. Their conceptual vagueness and apparent universality were

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<sup>8</sup> This journey of the concept of authenticity from humanist psychology to politics is epitomized by two publications: In 1965, therapist J.F.T. Bugental published *The Search for Authenticity: An Existential-Analytic Approach to Psychotherapy*, in which he uses the term authenticity to “characterize both an [sic] hypothesized ultimate state of atonement with the cosmos and the immense continuum leading toward that ultimate ideal” (32). Five years later, political scientist Marshall Berman published *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*, describing the “politics of authenticity” as the “dream of an ideal community in which individuality will not be subsumed and sacrificed, but fully developed and expressed” (xvii).

attractive primarily for white middle-class student activists who lacked actual experiences of socioeconomic and racial oppression. Furthermore, these ideas all seemed to promise a potential closing of the affective deficit diagnosed by psychologists and political commentators alike. Hale merges these two dimensions of the new emphasis on self-liberation astutely, arguing: “Being alike on the inside, as people who shared emotions and the need for self-expression, could replace being alike on the outside, as people who shared a history of oppression and isolation” (*The Romance of Rebellion* 68).

Thus, the history of the psychological vocabulary in which countercultural discourse is heavily invested in—with Reich’s “lost self”-diagnosis as an illustrative example—is integral for understanding the relation of this discourse to questions of race. The “lost self” expected to adopt a new consciousness was not an empty vessel that could potentially contain anything, it was a crisis discourse that produced normative white masculinity as the subject of this crisis and its imaginary overcoming. Reich’s explicit allusions to race, to which I will now turn my attention, further illustrate this racialized dynamic.

### **Examples of Sensuality and Political Struggle: Race in *The Greening of America***

If black subjects appear in *The Greening of America*, they are cast either, psychologically, as an inspirational source for the new consciousness or, politically, as models to emulate in a struggle for universal liberation. In what seems to be a mere rephrasing of Norman Mailer’s argument in the infamous 1957 essay “The White Negro,” Reich writes that “[blacks] were left out of the Corporate State, and thus they had to have a culture and life-style in opposition to the State” so that their “way of life seemed more earthy, more sensual than that of whites” (239).<sup>9</sup> In his study of the history of minstrelsy, Eric Lott interprets the function of this idea as an opening “to view the culture of the dispossessed while simultaneously refusing the social legitimacy of its members, a truly American combination of acknowledgment and expropriation” (50). It is this racialized logic of the discourse of identity crisis in midcentury America that Reich reproduces when he uses ‘blacks’ as a resource for Consciousness III. For David Barber, this constitutes the racialized dimension of the 1960s discourse on authenticity as a political goal: “If white youth queued after authenticity in the 1960s, they did so because black social struggles brought the lie of whiteness out into the open for them” (8). As I argue throughout this article, this “lie of whiteness” was experienced primarily as an affective deficit, a deficit whose repair rested on the psychological appropriation of marginalized subjectivities.

Another series of references to African Americans run through *The Greening of America*: Reich suggests to use black liberation struggles as a model to imitate for whites. Mark Greif, in his

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<sup>9</sup> In “The White Negro,” Norman Mailer identified a survivalist instinct in African Americans rooted in racial oppression. He makes a case for the devastating impact of racism on blacks only to essentialize this impact as the “existential synapses of the Negro,” a hard-wired quality he still hoped could be absorbed by “white hipsters” (Mailer). Lauren Michele Jackson has recently used the underlying logic of Mailer’s essay, in which “the hipster yearns to live dangerously so that he [...] may rewire his instincts, afore dulled by the gray monotony of white American life” (77) as a starting point for her book on cultural appropriation.

history of the midcentury discourse of the “crisis of man,” examines how in the late 1960s, at the same historical moment as African American activists ever more loudly called for black liberation and a separation from the white student movement, white activists started to argue that “they, too, were [...] excluded, on other bases, from the ‘universal’ dominant community,” a move that in some ways encouraged “a shift away from antiracism to more amorphous personal opposition” (274). Within this logic, Yippie icon Abbie Hoffman could state in his widely read *Revolution for the Hell of It*: “A fifteen-year-old kid who takes off from middle-class American life is an escaped slave crossing the Mason-Dixon line” (74). These investments in “comparable victimization” (Greif 277) are crucial to the function of countercultural whiteness as they allow white subjectivity to occupy the position of the oppressed self and to gain the cultural resources underlying fantasies of liberation.<sup>10</sup> In this thinking, African Americans “represent ‘the very principle of emancipation,’ as opposed to any actual emancipation that might have threatened established relations of production” (Szalay 26).

This dynamic is essential when considering the extract from *The Greening of America* quoted at the beginning of this article, which in its full context reads:

When the white man discovers his servitude, we will see a real explosion in America. Black rage, black pride, black militancy, give us some idea what it will be like. But with whites, the self-deception has been greater, and perhaps that will make the truth all the more infuriating (Reich 317).

By suggesting that the whole of American society is living in a state of unfreedom, with African Americans only the first to realize and resist this state, Reich conflates the struggle for political rights and to end racial oppression with the countercultural politics of self-liberation. In this displacement, ‘servitude’ and ‘self-deception’ take over the function of the broadened meaning of alienation discussed in the last section. Racism as an institution and white supremacy as its ideological base vanish behind an allegedly homogeneous system that beleaguers the ‘self’. This system functions as the negative foil on which the countercultural subject constructs its sense of identity and inspires all kinds of liberation fantasies while relegating crucial differences to the sidelines.

In his 1961 *Esquire* piece “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” James Baldwin insisted on these crucial differences that progressive and radical white intellectuals often concealed. Addressing Norman Mailer explicitly, Baldwin writes: “I think he still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose” (102). Later in the same essay, Baldwin exposes what Knadler describes as the “white male insistence on his historical privilege of innocence” (xxiv), arguing that “to become a Negro man” one indeed “had to make oneself up as one went along” but in the “not-at-all-metaphorical teeth of the world’s

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<sup>10</sup> In the 1960s, this is only the latest chapter in a long history of the usage of slavery as a metaphor to claim a status of unfreedom for white subjects. See Dorsey 2010 for a study of this usage within the context of the American Revolution.

determination to destroy you” (105). White men, on the other hand, believe “the world is theirs and [...], albeit unconsciously, expect the world to help them in the achievement of their identity” (105). Baldwin’s intervention into one of the most explicit articulations of countercultural whiteness not only questions the metaphorical extension of oppression discussed above but also emphasizes the extent to which identity discourse in the 1960s, while claiming the “loss of self,” was actually aimed at saving something. To speak of spiritual alienation, of an untapped human potential that was buried deep inside, or of the necessity to stop the role-playing games society forced onto the self, meant to exclude nonwhite subjectivities from a discourse of identity crisis by not granting them the status of having a spiritual problem at all. Furthermore, in framing his discussion of Mailer as a reflection on male friendship leading into a broader discussion of the relation between black and white *men*, Baldwin stresses the gendered dimension that Mailer left implicit: the extent to which countercultural whiteness is primarily a masculine project.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the battle for positions in an imaginary war between “human potentiality and oppressive actuality” (13) that Gregory Calvert had announced in 1964, was in full flow in the late 1960s. It might have been less a political war for actual positions on the battleground than a cultural struggle for the “symbolic power to be reaped from occupying the social and discursive position of subject-in-crisis” (Robinson 9). In the following, I want to suggest that the cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s provided visual representations that facilitated the reaping of this symbolic power. Therefore, I will embed *Easy Rider* and its reception into the problem field outlined above, to examine both how discourses of selfhood and the countercultural community played out in this particular film and how this might illustrate the strategies by which a new aesthetic regime endowed countercultural whiteness with cultural authority.

## **“What the hell is wrong with freedom?” *Easy Rider*, Countercultural Subjectivity and New Hollywood’s Whiteness**

### **Long Hair and Black Skin: *Easy Rider*’s Community of Outsiders**

While Reich and others ruminated on the crisis of the self and American society during the 1960s, actor Dennis Hopper saw American filmmaking in a crisis of its own. In a text written in 1965 but not published until after the success of *Easy Rider*, Hopper asked his compatriots in

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<sup>11</sup> For mostly strategic purposes, I have focused so far on the racial dimension of the discourse of the “loss of self,” a dimension that is naturally intertwined with gender difference. One year after the publication of “The White Negro,” Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. published his essay “The Crisis in Masculinity,” making explicit the hitherto mostly unacknowledged male bias within postwar identity discourse. I will further delve into the combination of the gendered and racialized dimensions of countercultural whiteness in the next section. However, it is equally important to note how white women were implicated in the project of countercultural whiteness. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and the white middle-class feminism it inspired relied heavily on the same rhetoric of alienation, authenticity and human potential I have identified with 1950s cultural critique and its discourse of spiritual crisis.

the film industry to follow the example of European art cinema: “Can we fill the movie-gap? And take back our invention? And surpass the Europeans? Yes, when that Individual comes to town. Remember him? The Individual? Well, then, when it’s his turn.” (11)

The figure of ‘the individual’ also looms large in a key scene of *Easy Rider*, which tracks the journey of two white hippie men—Billy and Wyatt, played by Hopper himself and Peter Fonda—through the American South. After George Hanson, an alcoholic lawyer whom they have met while spending a night in prison, joins them on their journey, the three have an ugly encounter in a smalltown restaurant. The locals, identified as ‘rednecks’ in many reviews of the film, meet them with hostile glances and disgusted comments. Later on, smoking marijuana at a bonfire, George suggests that the reason for this hostility is that Billy and Wyatt “represent freedom” to these people. “What the hell is wrong with freedom? That’s what it’s all about,” a baffled Billy protests, provoking George to start a speech on freedom that closes with a crucial distinction: “Oh yeah, they are gonna talk to you and talk to you and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it’s gonna scare ‘em.” In this monologue, George posits the false consciousness of subjects who buy into the myth of individual freedom against subjects who are actually free. Being a free individual, in this logic, follows from a conscious decision to liberate one’s self, to become a countercultural subject that visibly embodies the opposition to the dominant culture.

The restaurant scene preceding George’s bonfire speech imagines an answer to the question of what a free individual looks like—and those who are scared of him. After the three have entered the restaurant and George has pointed his hippie friends to the fact that “we’re in the establishment now,” *Easy Rider* clarifies what this establishment is all about. The locals meet the newcomers with hostile glances and disgusted comments, and the scene starkly contrasts the outcast protagonists, their outfit, style, and their loose and sluggish movements with the tight bodies and grim faces of the townspeople. “I’d guess we put her in the women’s cell,” says the sheriff, referring to long-haired Billy, and a trucker sitting next to him responds: “I’d say we put them in a cage and charge a little admission to see ‘em.” These comments are only the beginning of an extended verbal dehumanization of the outsiders, which culminates in one man’s observation: “Most jails were built for humanity and that won’t quite qualify.” *Easy Rider* thus uses the confrontation between ‘rednecks’ and ‘hippies’ to sketch the former as racist, sexist, and homophobic bigots while the dehumanization of the hippies rests on an emasculation. Billie’s long hair and the locals’ reaction to it allows its protagonists (and the film’s primarily young, white audience) to invest in what Knadler has analyzed as a white-hipster celebration of a “queering of identities—a fantasy of open-ended, nonnormative performativity” (xxv) while at the same time retaining the cultural authority their position as heterosexual men grants them. Within the restaurant scene, this authority is secured by

repeated cuts to a group of giggling female teenagers who are very much attracted to the hippie men.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, the talk of the town symbolically merges the hippies with oppressed social groups, constructing a community of outsiders across color lines. After the locals have called the hippies “gorillas” and considered throwing them into the women’s cell, someone refers to the strangers as “white,” provoking the protest of another guest: “White? Then you’re colorblind.” By casting the townspeople’s hatred towards the three bikers in racially coded language, *Easy Rider* links the latter’s countercultural difference not only to a new type of hippie masculinity but also to racial difference. As argued above, this was a common discursive strategy in the late 1960s when the racism experienced by African Americans in the United States became metonymically stretched to encompass the system’s oppression against all those who imagined themselves in opposition to it. White student activists, as Rossinow puts it, achieved a “confidence in their own political agency and in the social character of personal alienation” (207). This confidence allowed countercultural films such as *Easy Rider* to invest in the fantasy of a cross-racial community of outsiders without the need to feature a single black character in the whole film.

The emergence of Wyatt and Billie as “free individuals” thus rests on a rhetorical rejection of both hegemonic masculinity and whiteness. The restaurant scene simultaneously relegates racism to the working-class Southerners while making its hippie protagonists part of a community of outsiders whose exclusion might rest on racial identity *or* their visible performance of freedom, signified most starkly by Billie’s long hair.<sup>13</sup> Hair, though, serves as a marker of freedom in a way that blackness never can, which again points to the crucial difference between the willful rejection of a norm and the structural exclusion from it. After all, had Wyatt and Billie been black, the locals would not have been afraid of their freedom but their blackness. *Easy Rider* thus strips countercultural whiteness of any suspicion of racism by assigning this racism to an “establishment” culture that the counterculture is at odds with. Countercultural whiteness, then, is produced by a self-induced exclusion from dominant white society, which is embodied in *Easy Rider* by the locals and their white supremacist ideals. This double-move makes it possible to produce a countercultural subjectivity that enters the scene in the guise of the ‘free individual,’ is white by default, and acquitted in advance of reproducing white supremacy.

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<sup>12</sup> In his study of countercultural masculinity, Tim Hodgdon has emphasized that “prior to feminist assertions of gender as a political arrangement, informed opinion held that masculinity and femininity formed part of the bedrock of human nature” (xxx), and thus even hippie groups in the 1960s could rely on a stable notion of sexual difference that allowed for the performance of new types of masculinity and the “queering of identities” without threatening the gendered order.

<sup>13</sup> *Easy Rider* director Dennis Hopper himself evoked this analogy when years later he explained his ideas behind the film: “What I want to say with *Easy Rider* is, ‘Don’t be scared, go and try to change America, but if you’re gonna wear a badge, whether it’s long hair or black skin, learn to protect yourselves” (Burke 17)

### A Truly Unique Individual: The Affective Politics of Countercultural Whiteness

While *Easy Rider* thus serves as an illustration of how countercultural discourse produces its ideal self, it also exemplifies how this self is charged affectively, how it is produced as an aesthetic object to which a white audience can passionately attach its own desires of identification. To look at this affective dimension of countercultural whiteness, I shift the focus of the analysis away from the long-haired “free individuals” at the film’s center to the character of George Hanson. Even some contemporary reviewers understood and critiqued Billie and Wyatt as clichés, while almost everyone praised Hanson as the film’s true protagonist. The *LA Times*’ Charles Champlin called Jack Nicholson’s performance as Hanson “one of the consummate pieces of screen acting,” praising the actor for having “engendered an individual who will haunt all of us who have seen the picture” (16). For Roger Ebert, writing for the *Chicago Sun Times*, only with the “brilliant character” of George, “magnificently played by Jack Nicholson, [...] the movie starts to work.”

As an alcoholic lawyer failing to live up to the expectations of his father, George Hanson might be identified as a victim of what Reich describes as Consciousness II’s tremendous concern with “one another’s comparative status” and “what the organization defines as standards of individual success” (76-77). When he joins Wyatt and Billie on their journey, Hanson thus instigates the process that Reich was calling for: the adoption of a new consciousness. In a second *LA Times* review of the film, Kevin Thomas not only reiterates Hanson’s uniqueness as a film character but also suggests his function within the film’s discourse of individual freedom:

To watch this fellow appear on the screen is to discover a *truly unique individual*, a man of infinite, raffish, aristocratic charm and an acute sensibility that, stratified by status and environment, has become self-destructive. He is *ripe for liberation* by free spirits Fonda and Hopper (C1, emphases added).

George Hanson, then, can be understood as more than a film character. In contrast to Wyatt and Billie, who are mere specimens of Consciousness III, he signifies America’s “lost self” torn between different types of consciousness. He is Reich’s “individual [...] systematically stripped off his creativity, his heritage, his dreams, and his personal uniqueness” (7-8), embodying less an ideal of the liberated self than the self-in-crisis and thus a privileged subject of the countercultural project of self-liberation. Conjoining *Easy Rider*’s cast of characters with Charles Reich’s taxonomy of consciousness and its racial undercurrents, Hanson emerges as an embodiment of countercultural whiteness—a stand-in for the white majority that Reich invites to follow the example of black liberation and to adopt the young generation’s new consciousness.

In his 1996 *Modern Classics* companion on the film, Lee Hill critiques the politics of *Easy Rider* for not explicitly talking about race and integrating African American characters into the narrative, lamenting a “missed opportunity to expand the film’s critique of the American Dream” (54). However, embedding the film within a transformation of white masculinity suggests that *Easy Rider*’s “critique of the American Dream” is less limited in its scope than in

its form. George Hanson's whiteness is what makes it possible for reviewers to understand him both as the embodiment of the unique human subject and to connect the film's message to the countercultural project of self-liberation. At the heart of this project are two dynamics I have outlined in the last section with reference to Charles Reich's *The Greening of America*: the culturalization of politics via its appropriation of psychological concepts and the racial undercurrents of identity discourse. Following Toni Morrison's call to "avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject" (90), the central issue with *Easy Rider* might not be the absence of black characters but the universalization of an image of subjecthood, liberation, and politics that concealed and reproduced the white default at its core. This insight engenders not only a new perspective on single films such as *Easy Rider* but on the whole cultural formation of which it is part of. In the last section, I will therefore turn to the implications of my analysis for the study of the cinema of the so-called New Hollywood—a cinema still championed as a singularly creative period within American film history.

### **Beyond Cinematic Exceptionalism: New Hollywood's Truth-Affects**

*Easy Rider* became a surprising success at the box office and was widely understood as the translation of a new countercultural sensibility into cinematic images—actor and director Buck Henry once called it the "automatic handwriting of the counterculture" (qtd. in Biskind 75). It also still stands as one of the prime achievements of the New Hollywood era, a transitional period within American film history provoked by the financial crisis of the studio system and inaugurated by the success of 1967 films *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate*. Already during *Easy Rider*'s time of release, film critics perceived the film as part of this resurgence of American cinema, an image that was also constructed by the filmmakers themselves. On the set of his next film, which would become the financial disaster *The Last Movie* (1971), Hopper told *LIFE Magazine* in 1970: "We're a new kind of human being. [...] We're taking on more freedom and more risk. In a spiritual way, we may be the most creative generation in the last 19 centuries" (Darrach 59). Self-descriptions like these were reproduced in later publications about the era. In 1998, Peter Biskind characterized the cinema of New Hollywood as the last creative period in American filmmaking, "the last time Hollywood produced a body of risky, high-quality work" (17). While scholarship has been increasingly critical towards this triumphant narrative, a language of nostalgia, appreciation, and exceptionalism still permeates many studies of the New Hollywood.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the introduction to the recent edited volume *When the Movies Mattered*, in which Jonathan Kirshner and Jon Lewis state: "[W]e have, for sure, lost the vitality, the originality, the film culture of this golden age. With the end of the New Hollywood cinema—that is, the American cinema of 1967 through 1976—came the beginning of another New Hollywood, one in which huge corporations merging and entering into synergistic relationships that made them bigger than ever held sway, and formulaic blockbuster films cross-marketed across the many formants and venues of the new entertainment marketplace became the industry's dominant mode. The decade of terrific filmmaking attended to here was, alas, too good to last" (16-17).

Part of the New Hollywood narrative was the American translation of French auteur theory, which suggested that the director was the single creative authority behind a film, an idea that only in the late 1960s started to become dominant in American discourse on film, influencing not only filmmakers and critics but also producers and studio bosses. “There’s only one place where American films are today,” United Artists president David Picker told *Newsweek* in 1970, “and that’s in the heads of the people who are making them” (Zimmerman 42). This idea was in line with the rhetoric of 1960s psychology and its championing of creativity. In *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Abraham Maslow identifies as a “great artist” those persons who were “able to bring together clashing colors, forms that fight each other, dissonances of all kinds, into a unity,” (131) an ideal of art that informed the reception of the New Hollywood in the late 1960s. In a similar vein, Steven Kanfer explained in a *Time* cover story in 1967 that *Bonnie and Clyde*’s most valuable quality was the “new freedom of its style, expressed not so much by camera trickery as by its yoking of disparate elements into a coherent artistic whole—the creation of unity from incongruity” (55). Authenticity in this understanding was not tied to any outside referent, it was uniqueness as such, the curation of different elements into a singular whole that could then be appreciated as a work of art.<sup>15</sup>

Apart from the increasing significance of this ideology of “auteurism” and a new appreciation of film as art, the New Hollywood also signaled an “affective turn” in cinema discourse as films were increasingly understood not only as the expression of a creative mind but also as visceral experiences. Pauline Kael, arguably the most important film critic of the New Hollywood period, underscored her passionate defense of *Bonnie and Clyde* by privileging the force of undirected affect over the authority of a transparent meaning: “Audiences at ‘Bonnie and Clyde’ are not given a simple, secure basis for identification; they are made to feel but are not told how to feel” (5). To contextualize New Hollywood, then, does not only mean coming to terms with its gender and race politics but also to examine its role in the (pre-)history of the affective turn in cultural studies—and how these two histories are connected. In claiming an “autonomy of affect,” affect theory in its most radical form tends to pit affect and representation against each other with the same fervor as the self and the social were pitted against each other in a midcentury discourse on subjectivity. In relegating affect to a realm of freedom and outside power structures, it tends to ignore that, as Clare Hemmings summarizes interventions by Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde, “some bodies are captured and held by affect’s structured precision” (561).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz has recently examined the history and politics of this ideal of singularity in his book *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten* (2017, english forthcoming)—focusing on its role in constructing a cultural class divide in Western societies while not engaging systematically with questions of race.

<sup>16</sup> Naturally, affect theory is a vast field of research with a wide array of different approaches to the concept. Almost from its beginning, though, affect theory’s project has received a fair amount of critique, part of which was its alleged ignorance of questions of power and ideology. My critique on some of its expressions rests primarily on interventions by Hemmings 2005, Leys 2011, Brinkema 2014, Wetherell 2015. Their critique has targeted a concept of affect that can be identified with the notion of an “autonomy of affect” that stems from

The cinema of New Hollywood was entangled with countercultural whiteness in two ways: by helping to close down the affective deficit diagnosed in postwar culture and by providing representations of countercultural subjectivity. New Hollywood's whiteness, then, is not only a question of racial identities of various filmmakers—most studies of the period mention at least in bypassing that almost all of those directors identified with the canon of New Hollywood are white men. Instead, the aesthetic regime of the New Hollywood cinema inherits a countercultural discourse in which the “free individual” was defined not as in line with but against cultural forces. If the “loss of self”-discourse produced, in the Foucauldian sense, specific “truth effects” that helped to instigate a search for new meanings of white masculinity, then New Hollywood delivered what could be called the respective truth-affects, engendering passionate attachments concurring to these new forms of white masculinity. Thinking of countercultural whiteness as a specific form of *affective subjectivity* might be a way to engage with changing relations between subjectivity and affect instead of pitting them against each other.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, tethering these films to discourses on subjecthood and the racial logics at its core allows understanding the cinema of New Hollywood as part of the ‘white cultural imagination,’ to adopt Paul Gormley’s amplification of Toni Morrison’s concept (30). This white cultural imagination is not a fixed structure but a shifting terrain, in which the countercultural reconfiguration of white subjectivity was but one crucial moment. Furthermore, as Gormley argues, this white cultural imagination “is always a result of a reaction to the agency of black popular culture” (31). As the example of Charles Reich shows, the white countercultural imagination did not only invest in fantasies of black culture but also reacted to the increasing visibility of black struggles, reinterpreting the emergence of black liberation as a model for universal emancipation from an oppressive status quo. This genealogy of countercultural whiteness is integral to the success story of an emergent hegemonic white masculinity that reproduced the image of a self beleaguered by social forces. Its cinematic embodiments still loom large in the popular imaginary: from George Hanson in *Easy Rider* and Bobby Dupea in *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) to Randle Patrick McMurphy in *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), Howard Beale in *Network* (1976), or Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976).<sup>18</sup>

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the philosophical lineage of Baruch de Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze. Brian Massumi has introduced this idea most prominently in his book *Parables for the Virtual*, in which he states: “Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect” (35). Clare Hemmings notes a problem for those theorists who oppose affect to ideology, in that they “cannot fail to be aware of the myriad ways that affect manifests precisely not as difference, but as a central mechanism of social production in the most glaring ways” (550-551).

<sup>17</sup> For a programmatic suggestion to think affect and subjectivity together, see Lara et al. 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Most recently, Joaquin Phoenix actualized this subject position in *Joker*, a film that consciously harks back to the aesthetics of the New Hollywood and is very much invested in the affective dissonances between mainstream culture and a countercultural white masculinity at odds with it.

## Conclusion

I discussed *The Greening of America* and *Easy Rider* in conjunction with each other, focusing mainly on the interplay between a language around human subjectivity that penetrated both psychological and New Left discourses and the racial politics that loomed behind it. As discussed above, white intellectuals invested heavily, as they did in earlier historical periods, in black culture for closing the affective deficit they diagnosed in American society, continuing a tradition in which the consumption of blackness helps to “solve the alienations and identity problems of European Americans” (Lipsitz 162). Discussing the function of post-sixties cultural ideals such as authenticity, creativity, and spontaneity in today’s society means to also come to terms with this legacy. Not only are subject ideals and cultural values always articulated to social divisions such as race, class, and gender, these divisions are at work in the moment of their emergence and shape the ways in which identity and subjectivity are discussed in public discourse as in the humanities. An understanding of the relationship between whiteness and the emergence of countercultural subjectivity is particularly important as countercultural values are widely understood to have been influential in the transformation of the white middle-class and the development of the neoliberal or post-Fordist order.<sup>19</sup>

I aimed at a similar intervention in addressing the period of the New Hollywood cinema, arguing that its whiteness is not only a question of the racial identity of its principal agents. Rather, it is implicated in an aestheticization of countercultural subjectivity, which offered itself as a solution to the affective deficit diagnosed by Charles Reich and others in the 1950s and 1960s. Adopting Sally Robinson’s advice that what is too often thought of as a “singular, pitched battle between the white man and his various others” is actually a question of “how normativity [...] shifts in response to the changing social, political, and cultural terrain,” (4) I propose to understand the emergence of countercultural subjectivity and its manifestation in new cultural forms as a moment within the transformation of hegemonic whiteness. Hughey uses the concept of hegemonic whiteness to highlight “patterned sets of expectations, obligations, and accountabilities that govern the racial identity performances of whites across varying material resources, professed attitudes, and political sensibilities” (213). The examples of *The Greening of America* and *Easy Rider* illustrate a shift in these patterns, as a specific poetics of whiteness emerged out of a discourse that universalized white subjectivity through the diagnosis of crisis, demonstrating how the unmarkedness that is sometimes taken for granted as a theoretical premise of whiteness is actively (re)produced within specific historical formations.

If, as Hughey notes, “[a]ll racialized individuals are compelled to adhere to culturally valorized mythologies taught in social interaction, and which over time are accepted as *a priori* reality,” (214) then countercultural whiteness might be such a mythology, one fed by the search for

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<sup>19</sup> See Frank 1998 or Boltanski and Chiapello 2007 for prominent examples of this diagnosis.

authenticity and vitality, rooted in a binary opposition between the self and social forces, and charged affectively by performative enactments of this opposition. Adopting a perspective that merges the history of racialized subjectivity with cultural forms such as the New Hollywood might also serve to complement and complicate political analyses of contemporary US society that diagnose an increasing polarization, a phenomenon often traced back to the late 1960s and the beginning of the culture wars. *Easy Rider*, however, often remembered as a classic manifestation of the progressive counterculture, unified left and right as well as it polarized them. In fact, young conservatives argued fiercely among themselves over the value and meaning of the film. Harvey Hakuri, chair of the conservative Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) division in Stanford, celebrated *Easy Rider* as it dealt with “the quest for freedom from societal restraints, the task of finding one’s self and difficulty of being an individual in an indifferent or hostile atmosphere” (qtd. in Klatch 152).

Countercultural whiteness was and is able to bridge divides often understood as diametrically opposed to each other. Given the ambiguity and ideological polyvalence of an anti-establishment imaginary circled around the idea of a self beleaguered by social and cultural forces, it might not be surprising that this subject position had no trouble switching its political prefix from left to right during the last decades. In its most general form, a countercultural politics rests on a “claim to both authenticity and radicalism,” as a counterculture is “by definition, both marginal and oppositional” (Rossinow 251). In the current cultural environment, in which reactionary forces succeed in framing the dominant culture as a liberal consensus that champions diversity, countercultural whiteness might ultimately have turned from a subject position of concealed privilege to an openly racist one. With this article, I thus hope to contribute to and encourage an exploration of the politics of race, subjectivity, and its affective ties that does not take political attitudes such as conservative, radical, or progressive for granted but interrogates actual politics identified with these attitudes. This seems to be increasingly relevant at a historical juncture when the “white man’s discovery of his servitude” has once again become part of an openly white supremacist rallying cry.

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