I. INTRODUCTION

The screen is a dangerous and wonderful instrument, if a free spirit uses it. It is the superior way of expressing the world of dreams, emotions and instinct.
—Luis Bunuel

This paper is a modest attempt to understand some aspects of American popular culture from a foreigner’s point of view. Its basic aims are: (1) to identify the role of movies, especially American movies, in society at large; (2) to explore the implications and meanings of vigilantism as shown in American movies; and (3) to find out the link between movies and popular thought.

Among the many forms of popular culture, films/movies are clearly a powerful, significant one—a strong arm of the arts that penetrates nearly every corner of the world. As art historian and critic Erwin Panofsky has suggested, their absence from our lives would probably constitute a “social catastrophe.”1 He wrote in *Film Theory and Criticism*: “If all serious lyric poets, composers, painters and sculptors were forced by law to stop their activities, a rather small fraction of the general public would seriously regret it. If the same thing were to happen with the movies the social consequences would be catastrophic.”2 That is probably an overstatement. However, the movies’ power to evoke certain authentic tone of a society and a particular era to a certain degree is beyond doubt. For this reason alone, it will be worthwhile for this author to write on the subject of American movies with an emphasis on vigilantism. In addition to this significance, a personal involvement with movie review and motion picture studio experience give added

2. Ibid.
interest to the author and make it all the more relevant and rewarding.³

American films present a fascinating world of imagination as well as conflict. Significantly and problematically, many American films reveal something of the dreams, desires, displacements and even the issues confronting American society. For example, the fact that *Platoon* won the best film award in the 1987 Oscar Film Festival serves to underscore the trauma of Vietnam War still felt by many Americans. Several noteworthy works on American films deserve our attention, namely, John O’Connor and Martin Jackson’s *American History & American Film*, Robert Sklar’s *Movie-made America*, Andrew Bergman’s *We’re In the Money*, and Garth Jowett’s *Film: The Democratic Art*. They are important clues to understanding the state of American mind. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has observed that “... the film without American contribution is unimaginable. The fact that film has been the most potent vehicle for the American imagination suggests all the more strongly that movies have something to tell us not just about the surfaces but the mysteries of American life.”⁴ American films have been and are still somewhat bound by genre conventions and the star system. Their major thrust has rarely been consciously to illuminate the culture and society, but to mythologise and evade, to provide glamour, escape and vicarious security. The trends and tendencies within the public or the popular mind are as varied as the audience itself—divided by age, social class, ethnicity, sex, etc. Thus, the effort to explore and define how films project the basic assumptions, moods and problems of a society must be difficult, tentative and problematic. However, Hollywood is able to create resonant and suggestive images, characters, dialogue and behavior that both reflect and help shape the audience’s consciousness, granting us some insight into American culture. One of the images is that of the vigilante.

II. VIGILANTISM THROUGH VIOLENCE AND CRIME

An outstanding element of contemporary American movies most pronounced in Hollywood and deplored by many critics is ultra-violence—ultraviolence that is often acquiesced by the majority of the audience. For instance, as pointed out by Bernard Beck in his review, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Strawdog* are “loaded” with violence scenes.⁵

And *Magnum Force*, one of the *Dirty Harry* series, is considered by Paul Zimmerman as having excessive violence.\(^6\) In *Dirty Harry*, Clint Eastwood carries on his murderous rampage, this time killing overzealous policemen rather than plain criminals. Somehow, the distinction between the killer-hero and criminal becomes indistinguishable. Both the killer-hero and the criminal appeal to violence, for different purposes, perhaps. But it is violence-committing either way. In this sense, Hollywood, together with other independent movie-makers, turns out to be the hidden exponent of this fantasized, mystified and rationalized hero. As a dream factory (cf. Powdernaker, 1957), Hollywood has never ceased to create these larger-than-life characters, providing the audience with a unique emotional satisfaction. In this process, the killer-hero is recognized as a vigilante; the relative qualities of a vigilante are known as vigilantism.

In spite of the lack of authenticity of the vigilante, the movie audience’s reception of vigilantism remains cordial and almost unanimous. Crime and violence are simply not viewed as what they are in real life. The movie-goer is looking for a vicarious experience in the dark movie-house, which is otherwise absent in his/her daily life. His supreme law in selecting a particular movie is no other than the pursuit of happiness, which invariably results in the temporary escape from real-life experience. Under the section titled “Crime and Punishers” in *The Astonished Muse*, Reuel Denney gave his reader an important reason why the movie-goer has no difficulty absorbing vigilantism: “The films . . . represent certain scenes and agents with great emphasis and repetition not because they are so frequently found in fact but because they are so frequently absent from the factual world.”\(^7\)

The pleasure-seeking principle is also applied in the gangster films which are often marked by sadism and brutality. In his discussion of the gangster as tragic hero, Robert Warshow maintained that “America, as a social and political organization, is committed to a cheerful view of life. It could not be otherwise. The sense of tragedy is a luxury of aristocratic societies, where the fate of the individual is not conceived of as having a direct and legitimate political importance. . .”.\(^8\) Cheerfulness in America (maintaining a positive social attitude) becomes a burden rather than a source of consolation, as guided by the unstated premises of mass culture. The gangster is presented as a vigilante. His

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fate is connected to success, failure, and death, according to Warshow's analysis:

At bottom, the gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success... The effect of the gangster film is to embody this dilemma in the gangster and resolve it by his death. The dilemma is resolved because it is his death, not ours. We are safe; for the moment... we can choose to fail. 9

This theme is partly evidenced by the treatment of *Godfather*, which will be discussed in next section. However, sometimes the vigilante, as determined by the movie director and the public sentiment of a peculiar period, is above death, and no price is claimed or collected for the violence he does in the name of justice. To the audience, therefore, the problem of crime and punishment is not a moral issue, but an experience of cinematic art.

Violence can be done in the form of vengeance, and thus become a kind of vigilantism, as shown in *Death Wish* (1974). The protagonist of *Death Wish*, a "mild-mannered professional" (played by Charles Bronson), is transformed into a deadly avenger by the savage muggings of his wife and daughter. Instead of seeking out actual culprits the protagonist appoints himself a law officer and goes gunning down all the crooks and delinquents he can find in the subways and on the streets, shooting down one after another, almost casually. As his violent exploits are publicized by the press, the anonymous lone ranger becomes a heroic figure to the Manhattan habitants—so much so that when the police finally establish his identity they can do no more than banish him to a distant city. Apotheosized, he has provided a role-model for would-be snipers, future clansmen, potential terrorists and assassins. This seems to be a scenario reminiscence of the Bernard Goetz case which took place three days before Christmas, 1984. In a dingy, noisy subway in New York, Goetz fired five shots, wounding four black youths who allegedly were about to mug him. Goetz became a vigilante overnight. The story of Goetz hit the raw nerve in the American psyche. Some psychiatrists argued that the prevalence of violent crime made people feel helpless, and that Goetz symbolically accomplished what the ordinary people could not do and were taught not to do. Goetz is seen as striking a blow

9. Ibid., p. 133.
for all of them. *Time* magazine reported:

The panel of 23 New Yorkers (of the grand jury) indicts Goetz only for illegal possession of handguns. Much of the city applauds. So does much of the nation. A Media General-Associated Press poll discloses that 47% of Americans approve of what Goetz did, 36% prudently say that they do not know enough of the details to form a judgement, and only 17% feel that Goetz was wrong in shooting the teenagers.\textsuperscript{10}

Although the Goetz case took an unexpected turn (he was later charged with four counts of attempted murder), the vigilante mentality of the American public was evident.

According to Graeme Newman, vigilantism is not a new product of the 20th century. It has remained in existence in America ever since it emerged from the swamps of South Carolina about 1760 to compensate for the absence of law and order.\textsuperscript{11} Once established, vigilantism grew and flourished by developing its own mystique of rugged individualism. The legitimation of vigilante violence has been constantly displayed/exposed in popular novels and movies. In many cases, the vigilantes were not portrayed as outlaws, “though they were plainly outside the law, nor as vengeance-seeking killers and terrorists, but rather as good citizens taking up arms in the ‘American way’ to serve the cause of justice and civilization. . . Their illegal violence. . . was made to appear not only legitimate but positively high-minded and moral.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{III. VIGILANTE FILMS}

Three major vigilante films will be discussed. They are *Dirty Harry*, *The Godfather*, and *Taxi Driver*.

A. *Dirty Harry* (1971) — Warner Bros.; directed by Don Siegel; leading actor: Clint Eastwood

The genesis of *Dirty Harry* is by way of police melodramas like *The French Connection* and *Bullitt*, which begin to develop the fetish for proficiency as the cop’s major justification. Symbolic of this in both films are elaborate chase sequences in which all thought of right and wrong, good or evil, is unequivocally translated into action: The best man is simply the best driver. Pitted against ruthless mobsters, both *Bullitt* (Steve McQueen) and “Popeye” Doyle (Gene Hackman) in *The French Connection* have to be tough

to prevail, even at the sacrifice of being nice people or adhering to the letter of law. Misunderstood by their superiors and unappreciated by the public they serve, they achieve satisfaction only from their skill and its ultimate vindication. Although both films are highly stylized, they make a show of realism, which means in this case an obsession with gritty details. The cop is depicted as the sole repository of social order. It is a short hop from the existentialism that drives Popeye Doyle to the indignation of Dirty Harry. Because his nemesis, Scorpio (Andy Robinson), is the most vile criminal conceivable, Harry Callahan (Clint Eastwood) becomes the ultimate cop. Scorpio is a sniper, a terrorist, a pervert and a deranged hippie, whose contempt for life is reflected by his nefarious plot to extort money from the City of San Francisco by killing an innocent person a day. Thus, Scorpio’s extremism is no less dramatic than the extremism of Harry, who breaks into Scorpio’s lair without a search warrant, and tortures him to learn the whereabouts of a girl he has buried alive, thus breaking the law himself. The ensuing legal “technic­alities” permit Scorpio, a known killer, to go free, while Harry, the man who brings him to justice at great personal risk, is reprimanded for his transgressions; and Harry is forced to operate outside the law to effect the justice that the society has clearly forgotten how to enforce. As Carlos Clarens points out in Crime Movies, the foundation of Dirty Harry is the classic showdown between Scorpio and Harry, two larger-than-life figures locked into a bloody, sadomasochistic ritual of mutual affirmation. Having directed Eastwood in three previous films, Don Siegel, the veteran of a dozen crime films, orchestrates the familiar and extreme romance between cop and criminal with attention to every existential nuance. After witnessing an hour of Scorpio’s cold fury when, informed that he has violated Scorpio’s rights, he says, “Well, I’m broken off about that man’s rights.” And when Harry finally catches up with and kills Scorpio, the law, no less than the criminal, is the subject of his retribution: He contemptuously tosses his police badge into the ditch where Scorpio’s body has come to rest. As a vigilante film, Dirty Harry is a marvel of cross-purposes and a testament to the confusion and loss of social cohesion that arise out of bitter resistance to the counterculture, as well as resistance to the resistance.

B. The Godfather (1972)—a Paramount film

The Godfather was directed by the then young Francis Ford Coppola, who was of Italian descent. The film was produced by Paramount. The Godfather premiered on March 15, 1972. By far it has been the eighth largest earning film in the history of the cinema. Now, more than a decade after its initial release, The Godfather is, as Vincent
Canby contended, “one of the most brutal and moving chronicles of American life ever designed within the limits of popular entertainment.” In fact, for their consummate precision, scale and sheer ambitiousness, the two Godfather films (I & II) form a colossus of American cinema in the seventies. In the most perceptive review of the film, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. pinpointed the theme of *The Godfather*:

*The film shrewdly touches contemporary nerves. Our Society is pervaded by a conviction of powerlessness. *The Godfather* makes it possible for all of us, in the darkness of the movie house, to become powerful. It plays upon our inner fantasies, not only on the criminal inside each of us but on our secret admiration for men who get what they want, whose propositions no one dares turn down.*

A tapestry of family, ambition and dynastic capitalism set against the backdrop of America in the first half of this century, Coppola’s epic makes the temporal leaps—from late-nineteenth-century Italy (Sicily) to the arrivals of immigrants at Ellis Island, life in New York’s little Italy in the 1910s and 1920s, Batista’s corrupt Cuba of the fifties and Las Vegas of the early sixties—that produced, as Gerald Mast wrote, “a political conversation between the simple hopes of the past and the complex corruption of the present.” A gangster film, *The Godfather* expands on the genre and realizes its allegorical potential by providing a social context for the insularity and aggression of the crime family, relating its activities to a nation’s history, and by integrating fully the lingo of the vendetta killing with the argot of the corporate boardroom. Like Patton, *The Godfather* lures the viewer into its fiction with the heroic qualities of the protagonists. The men of the Corleone family—Vito, Michael and Sonny—share great strength of character and an admirable and well-honed instinct for survival, as well as an intuition for the criminal arts. Outside the law, they conform to their own strict code of tradition, patronage and honor. The Corleones constitute an exaggerated replica of an existing “system” or bureaucracy: business. Though their interests are illegal, there is consistency to their policies.

*The Godfather* is in fact Hollywood’s requiem for the American Dream. For young Vito Corleone (Robert De Niro), whose parents and brother have been murdered by the Sicilian Mafia, immigration to America represents a traditional passage from persecution to freedom and opportunity. Vito comes to manhood in the Italian precincts of New York’s Lower East Side, marries and has a son. Employed as a clerk in a grocery store, he gradual-

ly becomes aware of the powerful Don Fanucci (Gastone Moschin), a Black Hand grandee who has a finger in almost every commercial and criminal enterprise in the neighborhood. Vito loses his job when the Don "requests" that the store's proprietor find a job for a nephew. The shopkeeper cannot afford another employee, so he must let Vito go. Vito finds that he is constantly thwarted by the Don wherever he goes. Displaying the verve, independence and dramatic flair which will characterize the Corleones' ritualistic killings, Vito stalks Fanucci from the rooftops and assassinates him in a tenement hallway while the neighborhood noisily celebrates a religious feast day—the Festival of San Gennaro—in the streets below. Vito's act is the first example of the code of survival which could sustain the Corleone dynasty: that the proper and best response to ruthlessness is a more extreme ruthlessness. In subsequent scenes, we observe an upwardly mobile Vito Corleone, who is on his way to assuming Don Fanucci's place in the community, though he will bring to the role—the file suggests—more intelligence, humility, empathy for the underdog and sense of obligation to family and community.

Ironically, the trajectory of the Corleones in America is measured by traditional ceremonies of faith—weddings, religious festivals, baptisms, funeral services, communions—to better justapose their cynicism with their faith in God. The Corleones justify their criminal activity as an extension of faithfulness to the interests of the family. The family is sacred. Michael introduces a third object of faith when he enlists in the Marines at the outbreak of WWI, contrary to his family's wishes: faith in America. With cinematic élan, the film intercuts religious ceremonies or celebrations with sobering scenes of "business as usual"—whether it is the Godfather taking time from his daughter's wedding to hear a man's plea for revenge for his disfigured daughter, or the famous sequence of cuts from a cathedral baptism to vignettes of a multiple gangster execution. It is a signal motif of the film and expresses a central conflict: the shutting away of Christian ethics in the name of power, revenge or greed, even though the crimes are purportedly carried out to ensure the wellbeing of the family. At the time of Michael's return to the family at the end of the War, a relative peace exists among the New York crime families, and the Corleonese' life appears to be sedate and prosperous; but just when the Corleones are threatened and a war erupts, their hypocrisy is exposed and the family begins to unravel. The impulsive and headstrong Sonny Corleone (James Caan) is fingered for assassination by his own brother-in-law Carlo (Gianni Russo). Carlo is, in turn, ordered killed by Michael, thus initiating an estrangement between Michael and his sister Connie, and leading eventually to confrontation between Michael and his wife Kay. He lies to her
and she asks to be forgiven for having doubted him—but then, in Part I’s famous scene, the door to Michael’s office is gently shut in her face as subordinates surround Michael, kiss his hand and address him for the first time as Don Corleone.

After his son’s death by assassination, even Vito must admit that Sonny “was not a very good don, may he rest in peace.” And it seems that the deepest qualities of human fallibility are lodged in the person of Fredo. John Gazale gives one of the film’s finest performances as the black sheep of the Corleones. He will serve the family business, but his indiscretions and bumbling disloyalty will prove a continuing irritation to brother Michael. Connie, excluded from the family business because of her sex, cannot save it; even the original Godfather, Vito Corleone, were his health to permit his return to work following an assassination attempt, evinces by his unwillingness to get involved in narcotics trafficking—what the younger Corleones perceive as the coming thing—a reluctance to take the steps necessary to maintain Corleone supremacy. It is Michael, the youngest son, who is the true heir to his father’s dynamic character, ingenuity, wisdom and common sense. The Dartmouth-educated Michael personifies the way American can combine a sophisticated, systematized corruption with the cardinal ideals of the American Dream as represented by Vito. Michael—the son most removed from the family business and least expected to take part in it—must progress, like his father before him, from a state of relative innocence to a position of great power as “an administrator of crime”: Godfather. Michael enlists in the Marines at the outbreak of WWII; immediately following the war, at Connie’s wedding to Carlo, he can still confide to girlfriend Kay Adams: “This is my family, Kay, not me.” But an assassination attempt against his father places new demands on the younger Corleones, forcing Michael to recognize his deep feelings of obligation to the family. When Michael arrives to pay his respects at the hospital where the Godfather lies recovering from the wounds, he is horrified to discover that his father is being set up for a second attempt on his life. His quick thinking enables him to defuse the attempt; in doing so, he runs up against a corrupt cop, Captain McClusky (Sterling Hayden), who punches him in the face. When shortly after, the rival gangster responsible for the attempts on his father’s life, Sollozzo (Al Lettieri), sends an offer to the Corleone compound to meet with a family representative, it is Michael who courageously offers to kill both Sollozzo and McClusky. Here Michael demonstrates his grasp of the potential sophistication of Corleone power: He points out that since the cop is corrupt, and the Corleones control particular newspapermen, they will be able not only to kill the police captain but also to sully his reputation so badly afterward that no revenge will be sought.
He knows the game well.

On his return from Sicily to New York, Michael seeks out Kay Adams and proposes marriage. Rightfully suspicious, she weakly questions him about his role in the family business. His father, Michael claims, is no different from other powerful men—presidents and senators. "You're being naive," Kay says, "Presidents and senators don't have men killed." He replies: "Now look who's being naive." Kay embodies the WASP values and wholesomeness to which the Corleones aspire: her blindness is the blindness of her class. Their eventual marital crisis recapitulates the film's dialectic, which pits self-interest against human values; when Kay reveals that a "miscarriage" of their third child is really an abortion, she damages Michael in a way none of mobster enemies could: the act denies his notion of family, humanity, and authority.

The Michael-Kay relationship serves The Godfather's demystification of American dream as it progresses from innocence to mutual disavowal to ultimate disillusionment and confrontation. And as Michael orders the assassination of an enemy over the objection of underlings who complain the man is too well protected, he says: "If history has taught us anything, it's that you can kill anyone." Here the film makes allusions, both subtle and overt, to the sobering crises of the sixties, and specifically to what has been suggested as the most sinister subterfuge of the era: the suspected link between the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Mafia's involvement in Cuba and the Bay of Pigs. At the film's end, with Kay gone and Fredo and Sonny dead, Michael is found in the film's closing shot ruminating wistfully alone, a prisoner in his own fortress-like compound in Nevada. Michael Corleone is the Godfather. Corrupted by the enormous power, he is at once the ruthless, bold vigilante, having multi-dimensional influences. But he cannot change his lot. The vengeance/vindication must land on himself.

C. Taxi Driver (1976)—a Columbia film

Taxi Driver was a labor of love on the part of Hollywood's most glittering young talents. Robert De Niro had just won an Oscar for his part in Godfather II; director Martin Scorsese, then thirty-two, had finally scored at box office with Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1975). By the mid-seventies, the counterculture was largely disintegrated, as such films as American Graffiti, Joe and Billy Jack attest. Popular films must always trade in shared, communal values, but to a sizable segment of the population, communal values has become difficult to discern. Taxi Driver arrived when the film industry was at a loss of confidence save violence. It was with cruel and inevitable symbolism that the Vietnam veteran became a psyche in so many movies of late seventies (Deerhunter in-
cluded). It was, Vietnam, after all, that made America into what it had become by the mid-seventies, and nobody was more “contaminated” by Vietnam than the veterans. Just as he shouldered the burden of fighting the war, so he had to shoulder its aftermath. Travis Bickel is the prototypical movie vet: “In ways we can only imagine the horror of the war lingers.” He has lost contact with other human being, he does not hear them quite properly, and his own speaking rhythms are missing. He is edgy, he can’t sleep. He takes a job as a taxi driver on the night shift. In the film’s opening image, Travis’s bright yellow taxi slowly emerges from a column of smoke. And then we see the world, through the taxi windshield, distorted by raindrops and the slap of the windshield wiper, ever shifting as he glides past scene after scene of gaudy street life. Travis is anonymous, and his passengers act as they would if he were not there. Every night, he writes in his diary, he has to wipe the blood and cum from the back seat of the cab. One night, a passenger (played by Scorsese) hires him to stop on the street beneath the window of an apartment where his wife is having sex with another man, while he describes how he is going to kill her. Watch out! A vigilante is in the making. Gradually, Travis’s sense of alienation is exacerbated. He spies a blond goddesss, Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), at work in the “Palantine for President” campaign headquarters, and coaxes a date out of her by talking to her about something he knows well: loneliness. She is fascinated by his intensity, and then his ineptitude asserts itself and he takes her to porno film. Rejected by Betsy, Travis fixates on a 12-year-old prostitute, Iris (Jodie Foster), who is as put off by his alarm at her lifestyle as Betsy is by his seediness. Travis just can’t get it right, and his desperation mounts. He turns to an older cabby, Wizard (Peter Boyle), for help; he tells Wizard that he doesn’t know what he is going to do, a veiled threat, but there is nothing Wizard can tell him, and when Travis drives off in his taxi, he leaves his last link with human society. He arms himself to the gills, undergoes a bizarre program of self-discipline. He’s shaved his hair into a Mohawk, which draws the attention of the Secret Service—so his rage readily shifts to a less guarded target, Iris’s pimp, Sport (Harvey Keitel). The implication is that Travis would have been a notorious political assassin rather than a civic hero who rescues a child prostitute from her exploiters. The parallels between Betsy and Iris, Palantine and Sport, are a bit pat—and it is not only Travis who dementedly concludes that Palantine is as corrupt as a pimp; his sloganeering is as vacuous as that of the presidential candidate in Nashville, who escapes an assassin’s bullet in much the same way. However, in the aftermath of Travis’s bloodbath, Taxi Driver’s meaning seems clear: Chaos results from the cessation of rational discourse; violence is the language
of the chaotic society. The emergence of a vigilante (as in Taxi Driver's case) is an extreme example of social malice, of confusion of values. The vigilante's intent is to achieve regeneration through violence.

**IV. SUMMARY**

As long as there are social injustice and unfulfilled dreams, vigilantism in American movies will continue to be welcomed by the audience. Popular as he may be, the vigilante in movies has no name. He could be James Bond or Patton or Harry. He obliterates coherent politics. Resorting to violence, the vigilante undercuts the very social order he purports to defend; his cause is automatically lost and his universe deprived of consistent values. The contradiction of killing to end killing imposes a burden on the vigilante that can only be overcome at the expense of his humanity. The vigilante must become a superhuman, a fantasy figure whose charm is his efficacy, his ability to get things done by hook or by crook, his skill as a detective, a fighter, a trouble-shooter, a Godfather. In essence, his presence is more symptomatic of decay and chaos than a remedy for them.

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