

T1297

NC 0020745 4



M0058006NC

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

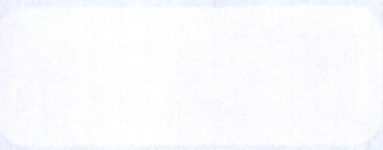
FINE ART PAINTING

THE GENRE OF THE WESTERN:
RESERVOIR DOGS AND THE WILD BUNCH

by ANTONY MCKIVER

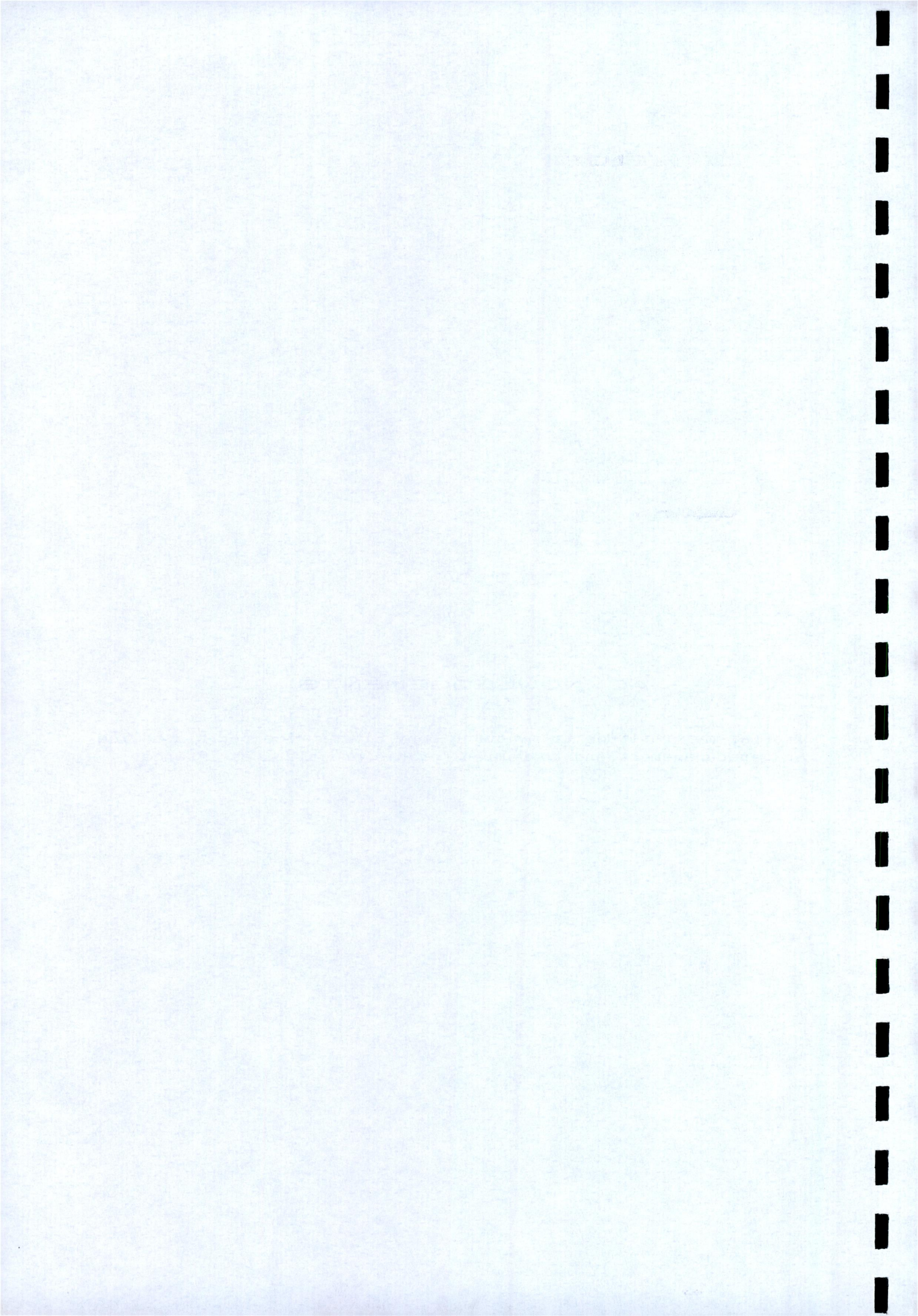
Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and
Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of B.A. Fine
Art Painting

1994



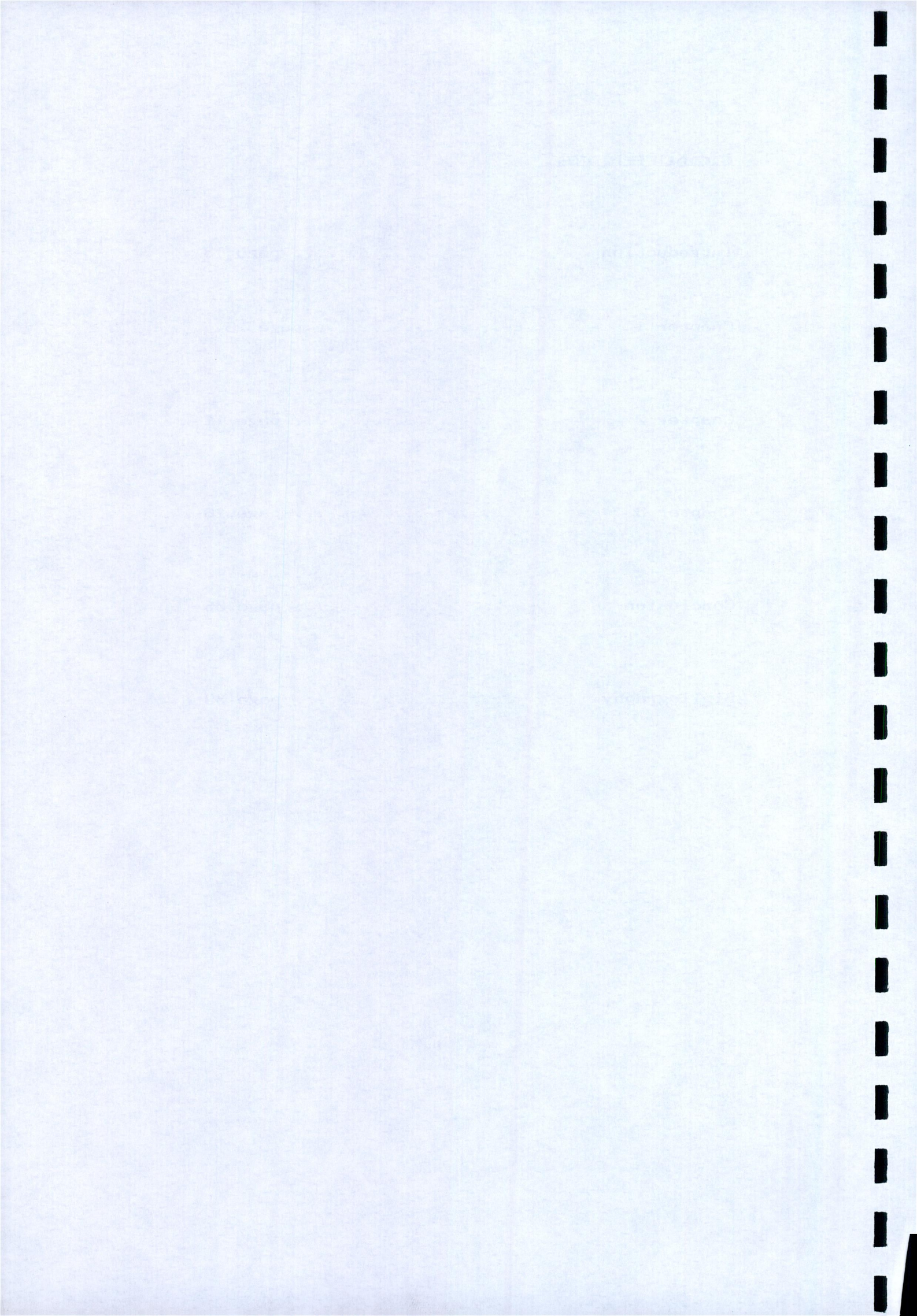
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I offer my gratitude to my tutor Tony Fitzmaurice for his advice and encouragement and to Damien for his practical assistance.

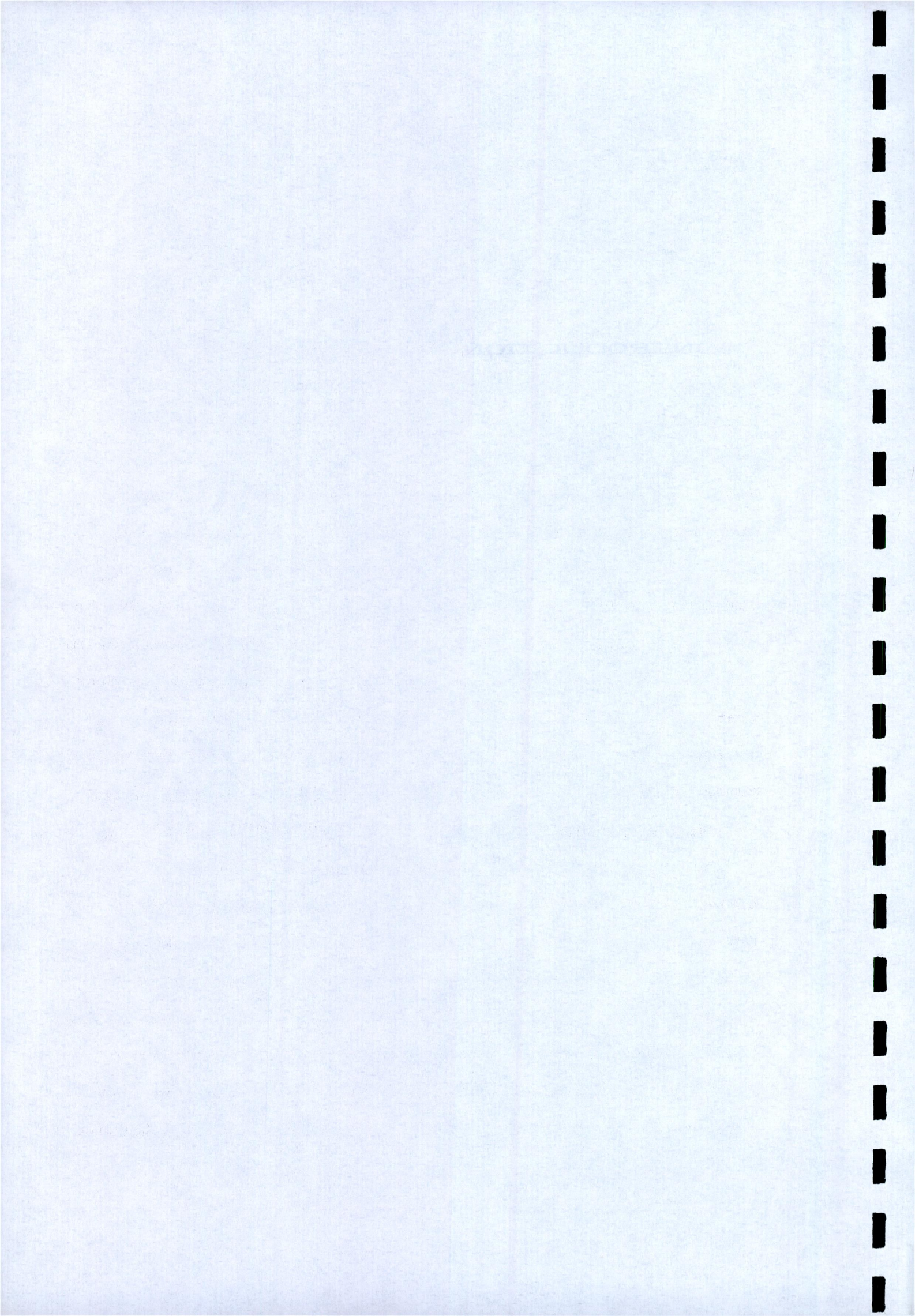


CONTENTS

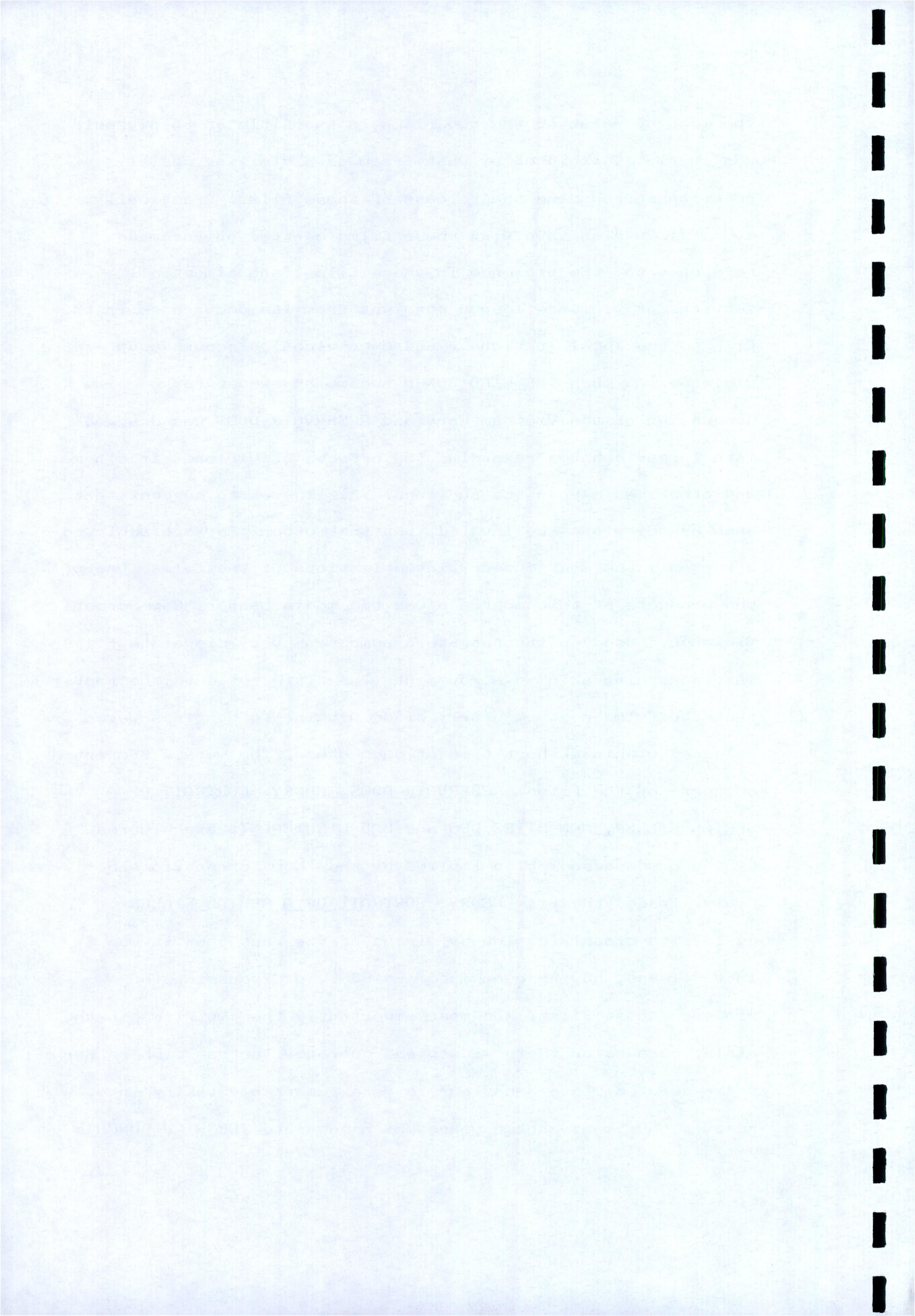
Introduction	.....	page 3
Chapter 1	.....	page 6
Chapter 2	.....	page 11
Chapter 3	.....	page 16
Conclusion	.....	page 35
Bibliography	.....	page 39



INTRODUCTION

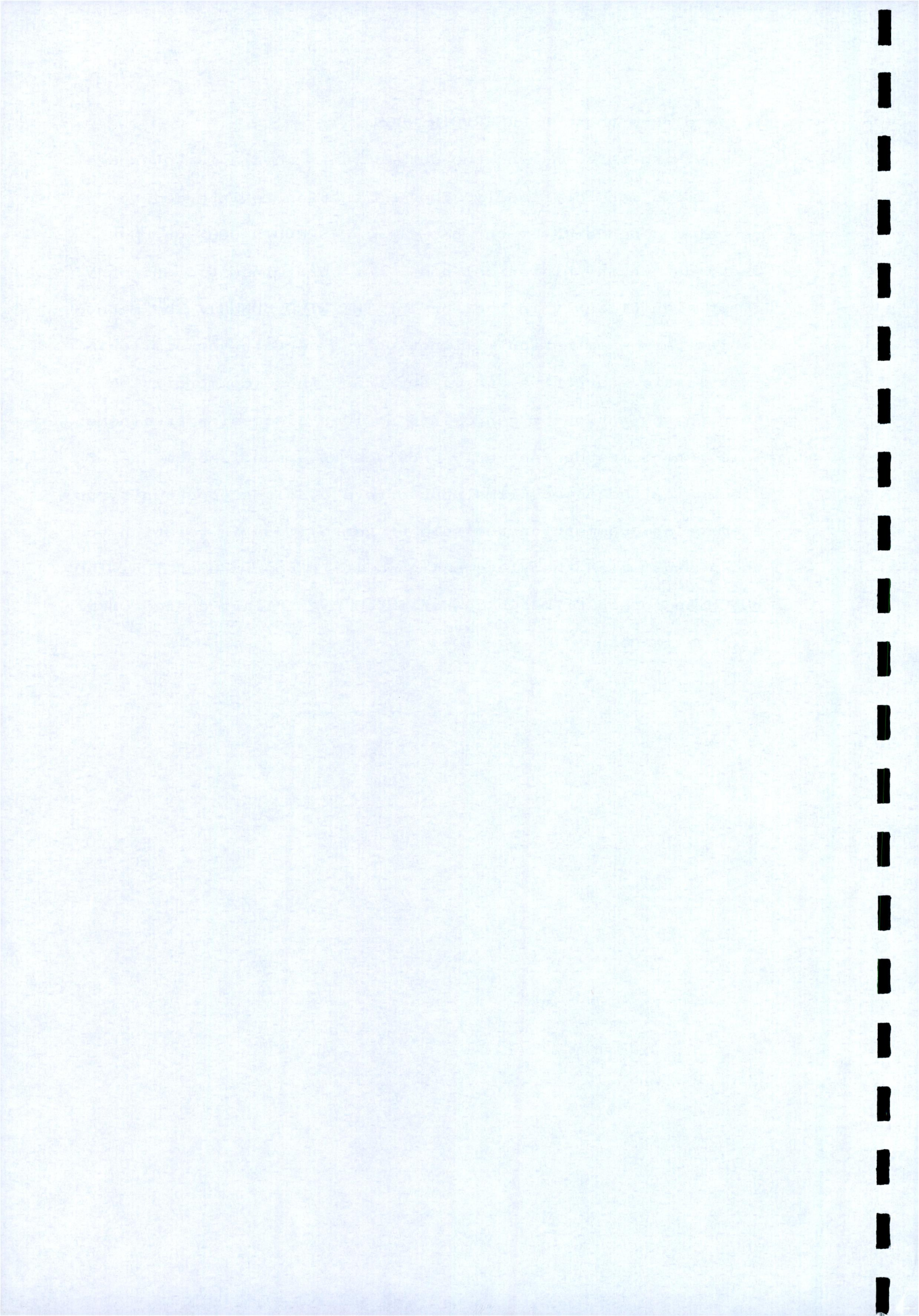


The idea of relating the two films in the title of this thesis was initially prompted by what I saw as a similiar social reaction surrounding the release of these films. Practically every discussion involving these films centred on, or made reference to, the violence in these films, and almost all mentions of violence leaped straight from its occurrence in the film to the local, national, and even global discourses on violence. As such THE WILD BUNCH became an excuse for a discussion of the Vietnam War, and RESERVOIR DOGS was dragged into larger debates regarding the effects of violence in cinema and other media upon the audience. This is not to suggest that such associations are invalid, but that often they are achieved after only the most cursory investigations of the films. One of the products of this approach was the media banner "New Screen Violence," used to incorporate a number of very disparate films into something akin to a movement. The title reflects the fact that the films most regularly cited within its confines were released within a short time of each other. The very different concerns of the films, RESERVOIR DOGS, HENRY: PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER, MAN BITES DOG and BAD LIEUTENANT, are blurred by the crude association implied by the "New Screen Violence" title. Indeed the film HENRY: PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER defies its classification by virtue of the fact that it was a late release, having been made in 1986. In discussions of violence these films, and most importantly the two films in the title, because of their widespread currency, act as ciphers for those debates. This behaviour is more remarkable taking into account the twenty-three years which separate THE WILD BUNCH's

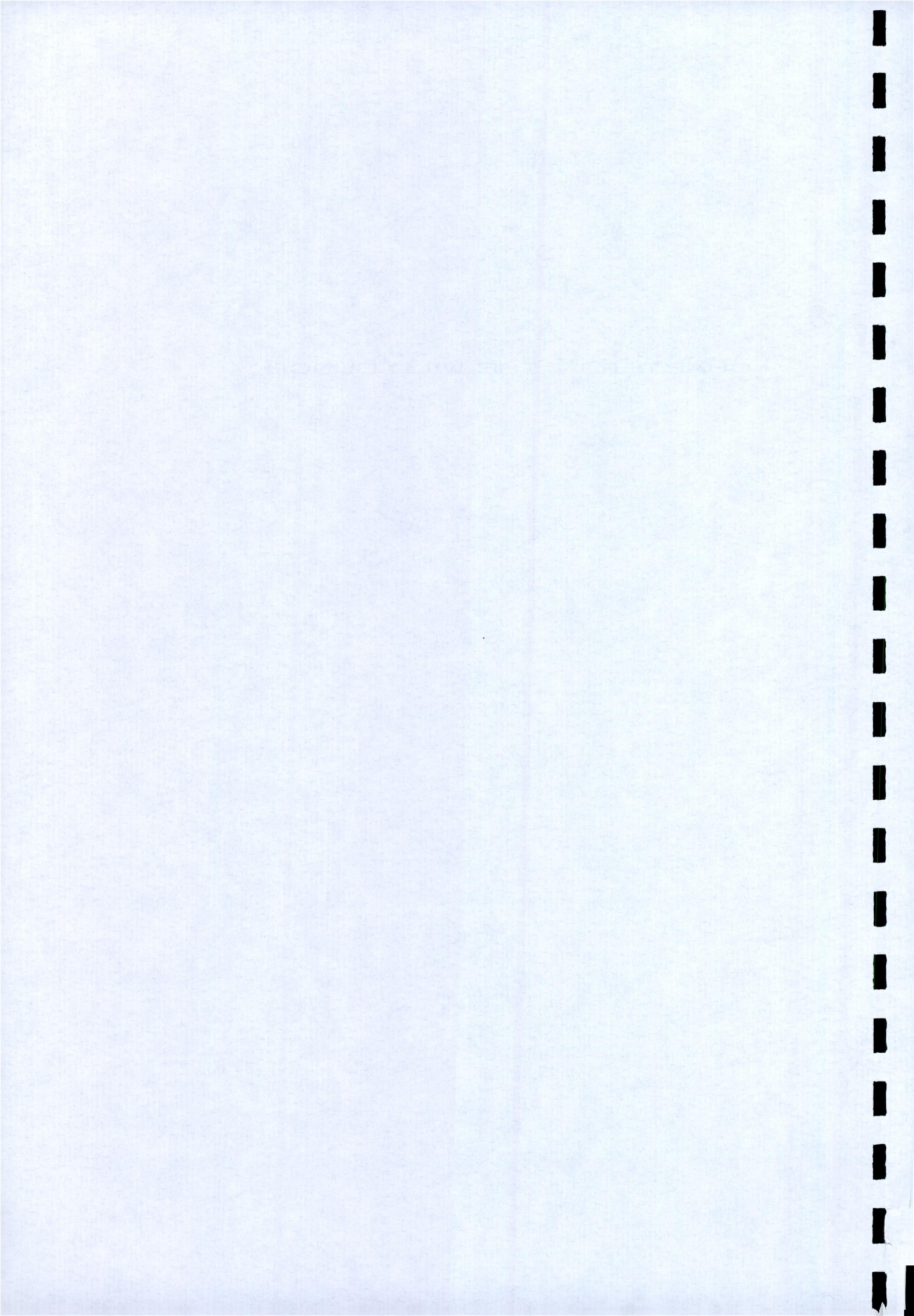


release from that of RESERVOIR DOGS.

With this in mind the duty of this thesis is to engage both films more critically. The examination is intended to reveal a dependence by the new film, RESERVOIR DOGS on the past, not on any historical past, but on a cinematic ancestry (most significantly in the form of THE WILD BUNCH). The method behind this examination will not only ascertain the similarities (stylistic, narrative etc.) but trace those commonalities through the notion of genre into a wider discussion of cinema. This generic method not only provides an established means of discussing these two films, but offers also the opportunity to examine and comment on the role of genre today in relation to the status which theorists assigned it in the wake of THE WILD BUNCH and other films which reflected significant change within various genres.

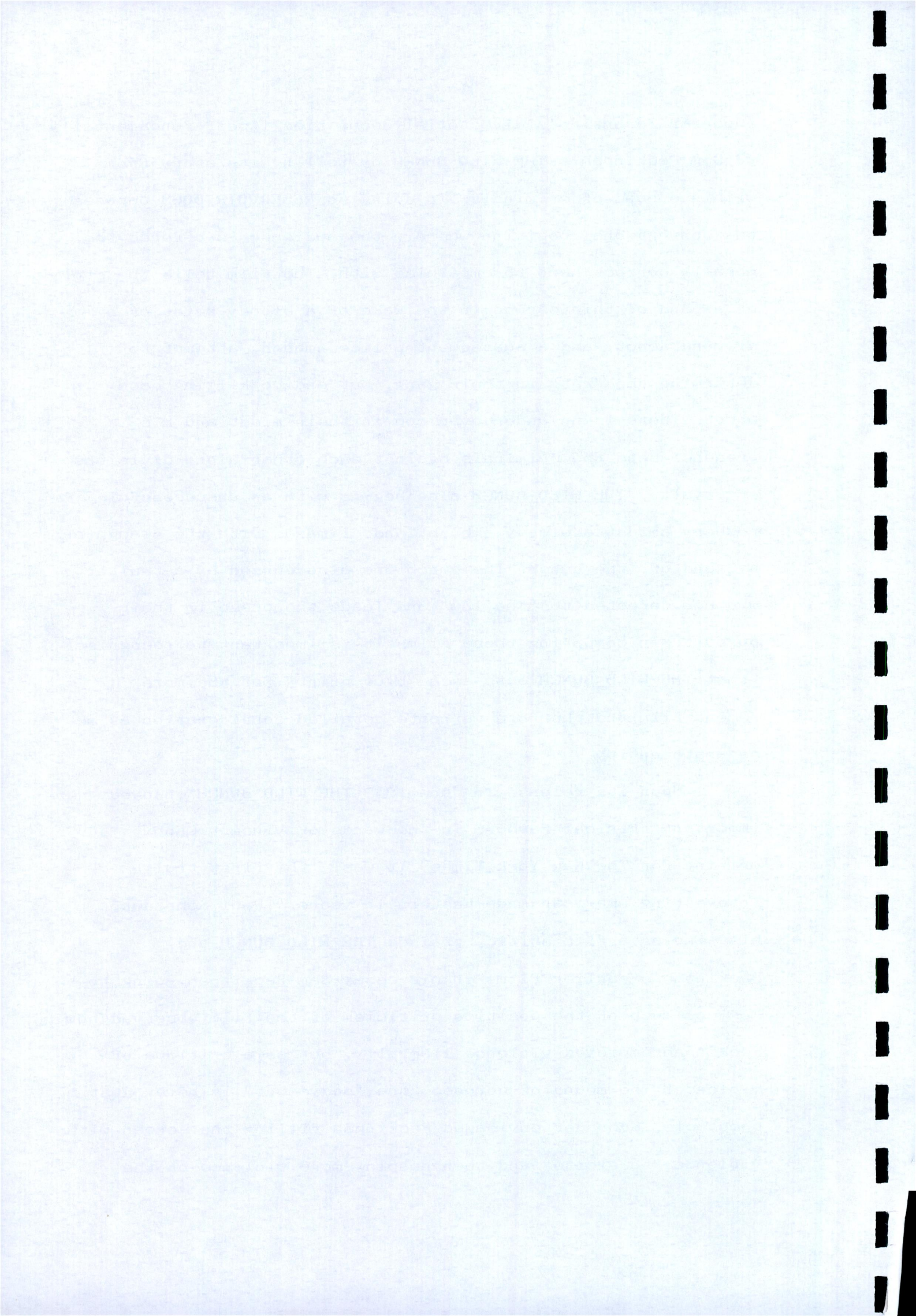


CHAPTER 1 THE WILD BUNCH



Quentin Tarantino's directorial debut ties itself fundamentally to Sam Peckinpah's THE WILD BUNCH by telling its story from within a band of criminals. In doing so RESERVOIR DOGS opposes the conventional position wherein the audience is offered the morally correct hero to empathise with. The film tells the story of a band of thieves who in the wake of a bloody heist of a diamond depot, and a subsequent police ambush, attempt to determine the "rat" in their gang, but end up killing each other. There is an undercover cop in their midst and his presence sets the criminals against each other along divisions of loyalty. THE WILD BUNCH also begins with an unsuccessful robbery amidst a bloody ambush, and climaxes with the slaughter by, and of, the bunch. The bunch are also cursed by a traitor who has defected to "the law" and leads the posse in their pursuit. In comparing these films it is important to recognise that THE WILD BUNCH acts as a "blue-print" for the more recent film and therefore warrants detailed consideration as a separate entity.

Upon its release in June 1969 THE WILD BUNCH enjoyed important critical favour. In the words of Vincent Canby, writing for The New York Times, it was, "the first truly interesting American-made Western in years." Paul Schrader, in his time as a film critic, praised THE WILD BUNCH and Peckinpah's earlier films in his essay Sam Peckinpah going to Mexico. Much of the positive criticism of the film observed how Peckinpah employed violence liberally, but as a critique of violence. The mound of corpses, the "bodycount" is never just a spectacle. Schrader envisaged Peckinpah filling the screen with violence "to excite" and then heaping more violence on the



viewer "to comment on the excitement." (Schrader, 1990, p. 73)

Thus in Films and Filming THE WILD BUNCH is offered as "one of the most moral films ever made." Sam Peckinpah has said,

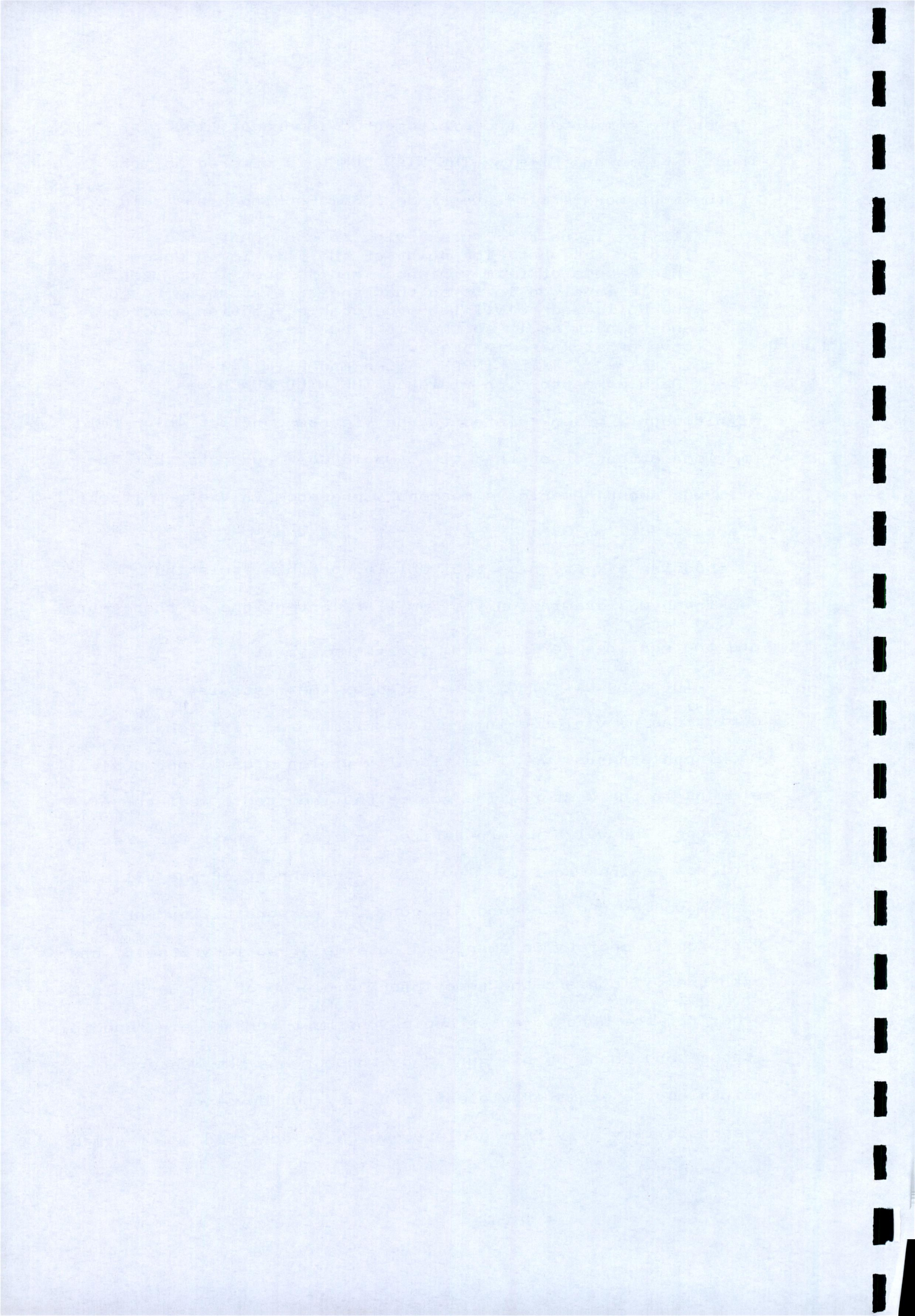
Killing is no fun. I was trying to show what it's like to get shot. The point of the film is to take this facade of film violence, and to open it up, get people involved in it so that they are starting to go in the Hollywood-television predictable reaction syndrome, and then twist it so that it's no fun anymore, just a wave of sickness in the gut.

(PECKINPAH, Films And Filming)

As a commentary on violence THE WILD BUNCH was, significantly often related to the Vietnam conflict which held American attention at that time. David Cook suggests that the film was about "America's mercenary presence in Vietnam itself." (Cook , 1981, p. 631)

In choosing a Western as the vehicle for this "twisting" Peckinpah was drawing on the familiar conventions of that genre, and the meanings derived from their employment.

The sensibilities represented by the restraint in depictions of violence in previous films are criticised by Peckinpah's narrative. Traditionally violence was a paradoxical element in the Western. The gun is the inevitable mediator of disputes. The villains are defined as such by their recourse to violence against society. Invariably the threat of the villain is removed by the hero and his gun. The responsibility for violence in society is displaced outside of society itself, and onto the villain and the reactionary violence of the hero. In order for the hero to enter society he must forsake his "special status" and "hang up his guns." By these means the Western maintains the drama of violent conflict, but devolves responsibility away from society, which is depicted as disarmed and peaceful.

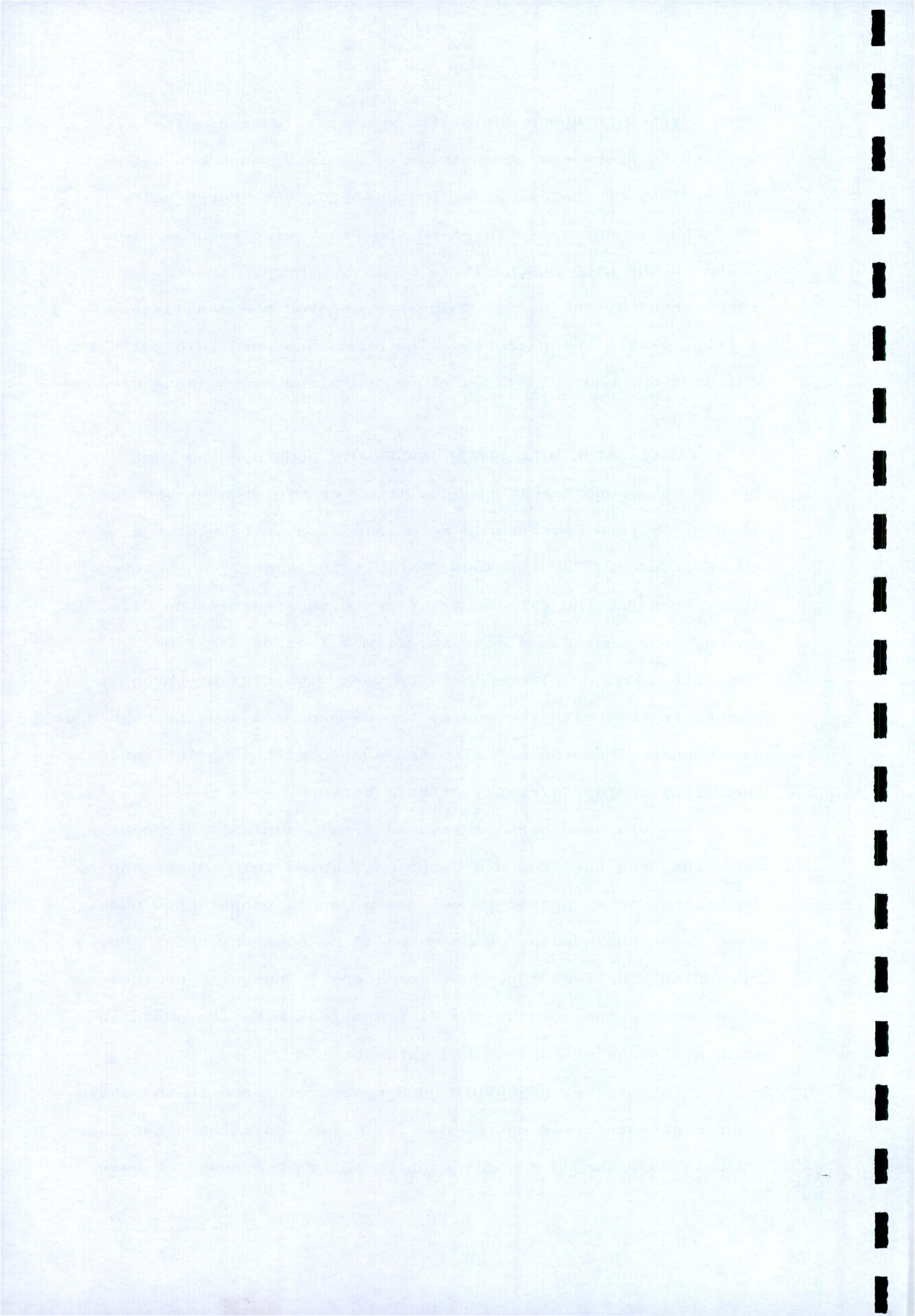


THE WILD BUNCH defies the classical Western plot's ability to place the gun outside of society. What constituted the society of the classical plot, the decent church going citizens, is what is offered as the first victims of violent death in THE WILD BUNCH. It is society, through the law represented by the posse, which perpetrates the most savage killing within the narrative. The bunch are paralleled with the children who sadistically torture scorpions as the gang prepare to strike.

Unlike THE WILD BUNCH, RESERVOIR DOGS does not set out to make more "real" the qualities of violence on the screen. It divides from Peckinpah's film in caricaturing violence as a cue for comedy. The infamous "ear-slicing scene," so beloved by those accusing the film-maker of gratuitousness in the film, is in fact the best example of the film's lack of any real brutality. As "Mr Blonde" sets to work with his cut-throat razor, in time with the music, the camera pans away to rest upon the wounded "Mr Orange." Like the audience, the movie itself is unwilling to look directly at this torture.

The violence here is invoked from a comical perspective. "Mr Pink, the fag" (as Joe Cabot calls him) talks about having "a red hot poker shoved up our asses, and I wanna' know whos name is on the handle." When asked if he shot any "real people" "Mr White" replies, "No, just some cops." The build up in the three man "stand off" at the film's climax hits its punchline when all three men shoot, and get shot.

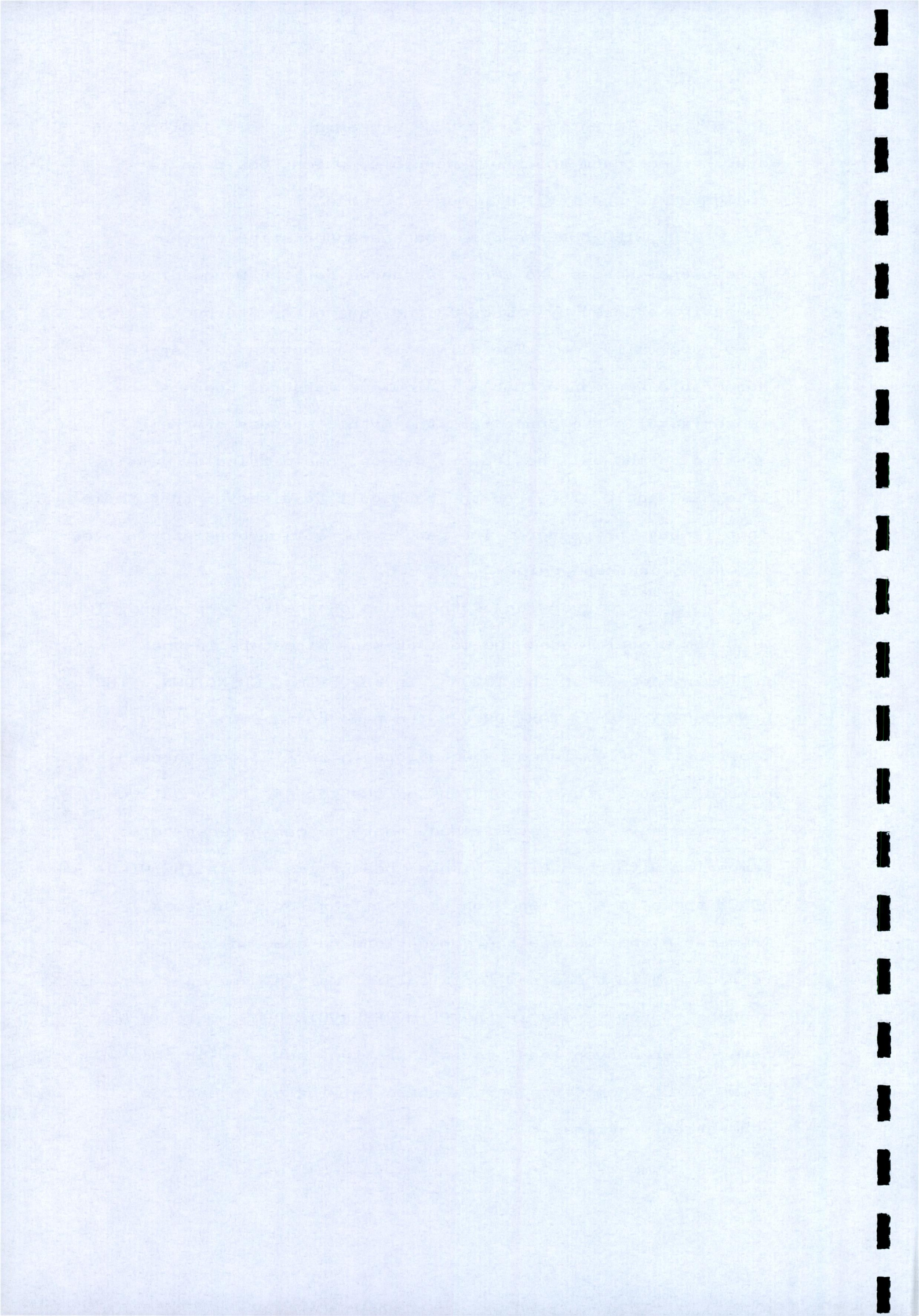
In this way RESERVOIR DOGS treats violence in the style that most mainstream movies do. It is implied moreso than shown in this case and as such it cannot really be accused of being



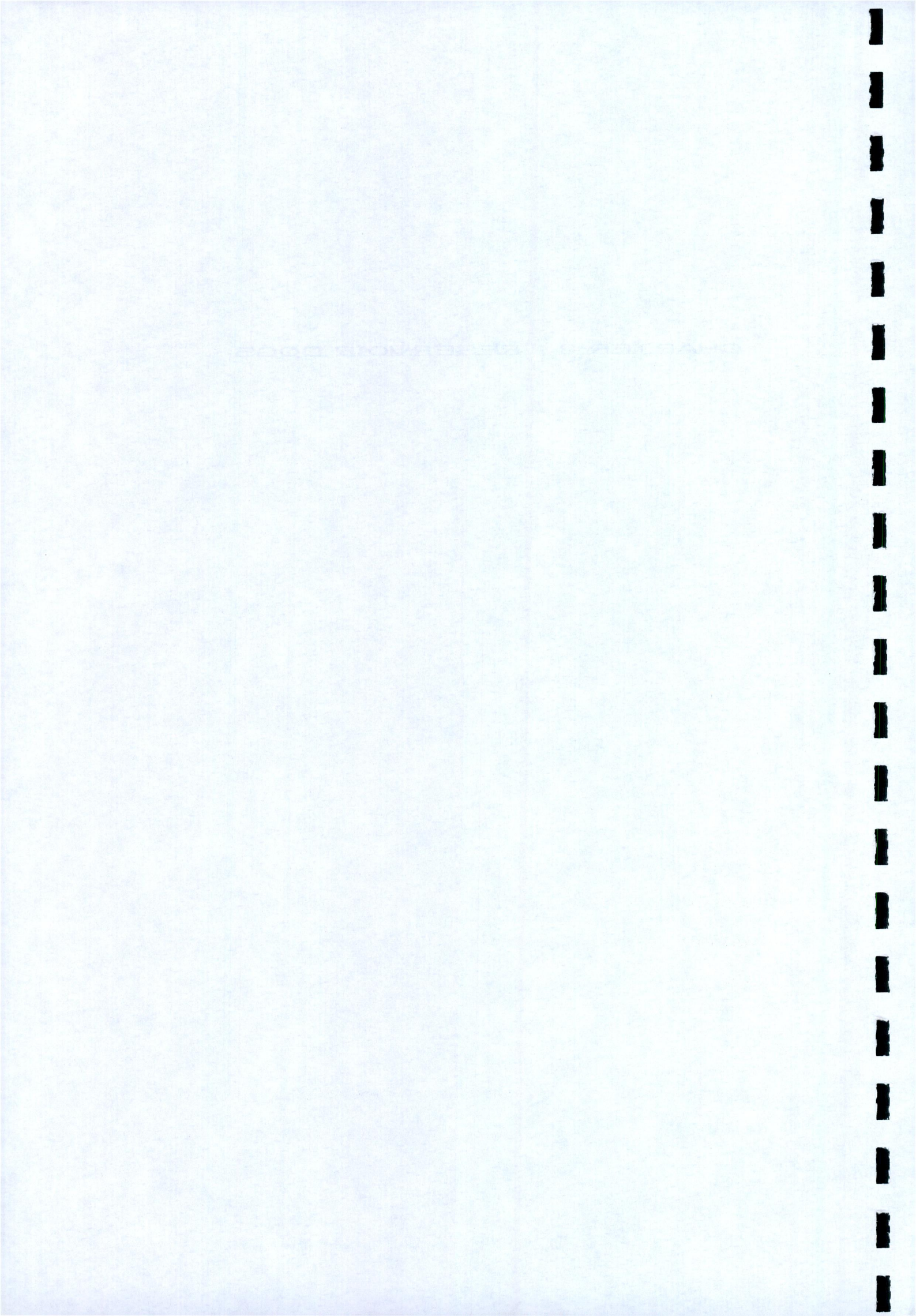
gratuitous. Tarantino is just as squeamish as his audience in drawing back from the truly horrible, which Peckinpah is dedicated to showing, with moral purpose.

THE WILD BUNCH oppose the characteristics of the traditional heroes. No mercy is spared for the wounded, and the directive offered by Bishop as the gang enter Starbuck is "If they move, kill 'em." The climactic shootout is less an honourable vengeance than a ridiculous masscre. Even in the lesser details the Bunch lack the mythic prowess of their generic forebears. The leader, Bishop, has difficulty getting into his saddle. They rob the bank only to discover that their loot is bags of washers. The gang's recreation consists in over indulgent drunken orgies.

In its perversion of the codes of the Western genre, THE WILD BUNCH anticipates the work of many directors in the following decade of the 1970's. In the films, CHINATOWN, THE LONG GOODBYE, and TAXI DRIVER (to name but a few) a challenging of audience expectations is carried out through the manipulation of the conventions of the genres. It is only when the rules have been established, that one can be seen to be tampering with them. Thus within these films, as in THE WILD BUNCH there is a reliance on the familiar. So it becomes inevitable that we see the conventions re-enacted and reprocessed in these new "critical" films. This re-enactment is brought to new levels in the film RESERVOIR DOGS, which draws not only on conventional movie narrative, but also on those films which themselves were seen as relying on an earlier generation of films.



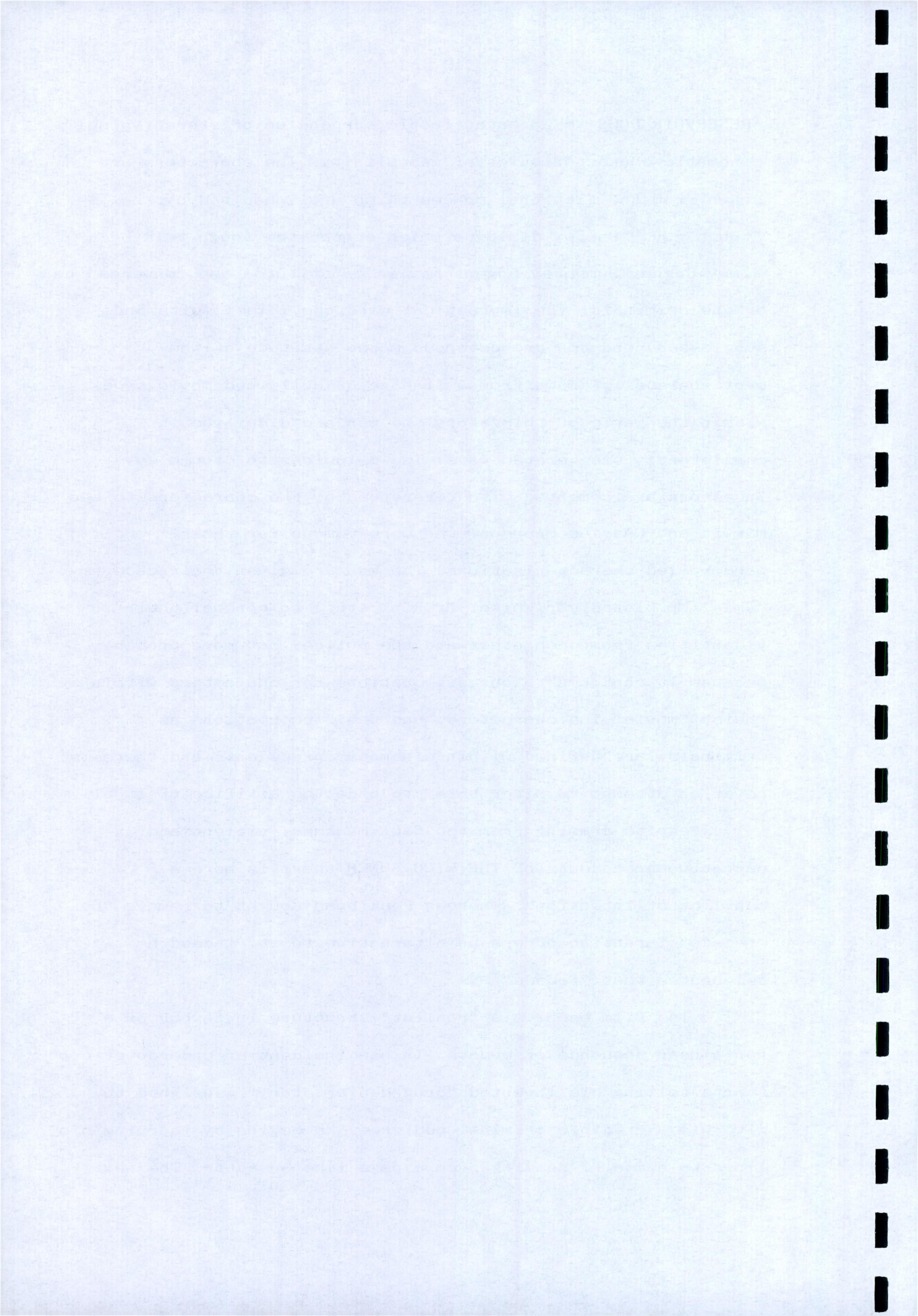
CHAPTER 2 RESERVOIR DOGS



RESERVOIR DOGS is an enthusiastic compendium of stereotypical cinematic characteristics of masculinity. The characters are drawn from the fictional spaces which are inhabited by the "tough guy." Snappy dialogue which echoes the tough talk of Jimmy Cagney/Humphrey Bogart movies constitutes the conversation of the criminals. The impractical wardrobe (black suits and sunglasses) and the preposterous macho attitude of the protagonists is drawn from a lineage of Hollywood movie types. Within the world of this story the men are displayed in consistently exaggerated ways. The allusions to "tough guy" ancestors are cemented with references by the characters to Lee Marvin and Charles Bronson, who were famous for their hard-boiled characterisations. The men are given their code names (Mr Blonde, Mr White, Mr Pink etc.) to conceal their identities from each other and the police, but more probably because it conforms to our expectations for characters within a "heist" movie. The characters, and their occupations as criminals, are defined within cinematic precedents and there is never an attempt to alter this, to hide the artifice of it all.

Despite drawing from the foul-mouthed, violent and narrative precedents of THE WILD BUNCH there is here a conflict of intentions. Whereas Peckinpah sought to remove the "facade" Tarantino offers no alternative to it, indeed he celebrates that "facade".

The film eschews a "realist" structure in favour of a non-linear sequence of events. In one incident an undercover cop starts telling his invented "drug dealer story", designed to give him a credible criminal pedigree. He begins by learning his lines to himself, reading from a page like an actor. The next



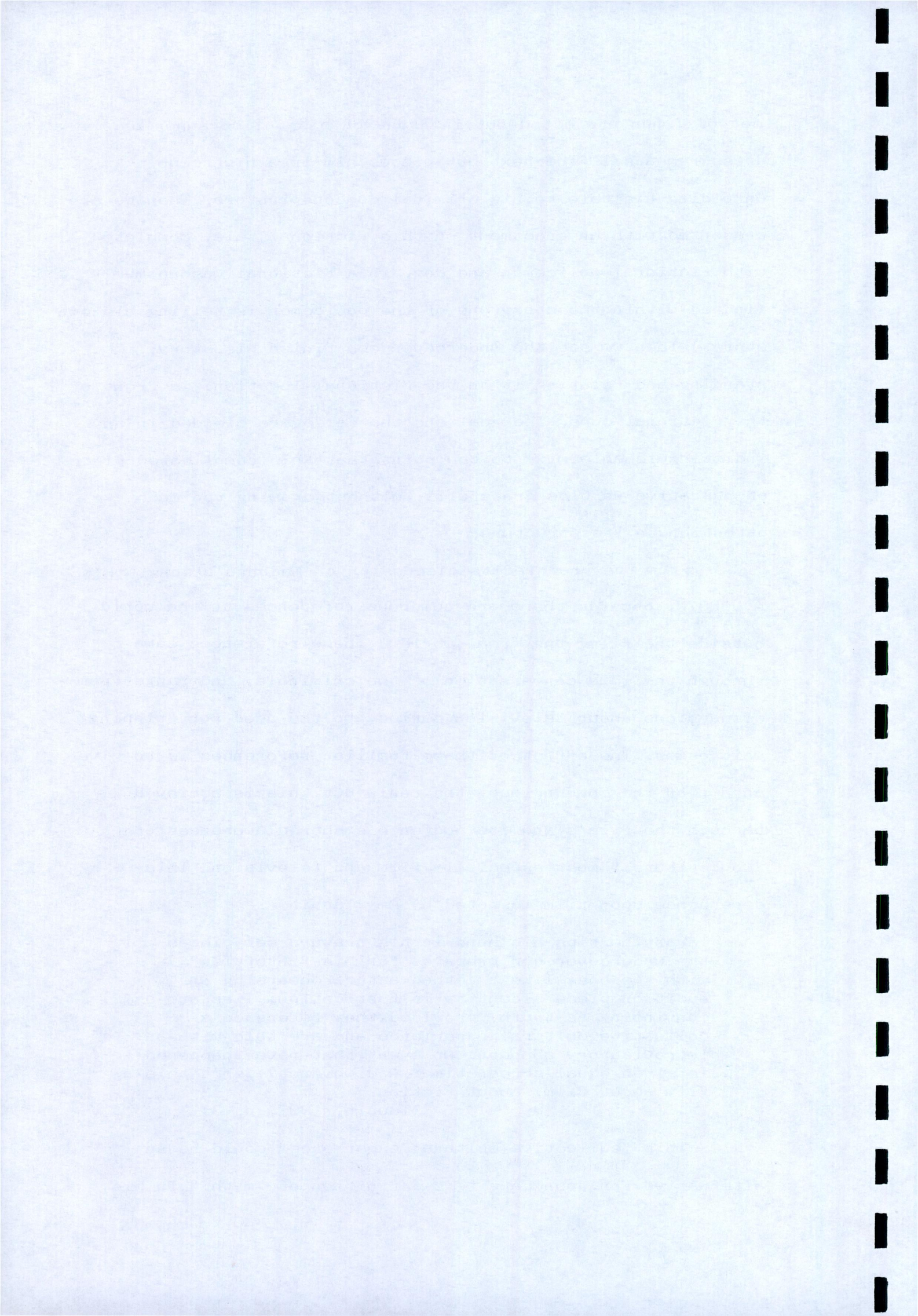
set of lines are acted out in front of his police superior, as a dress rehearsal. The next cut places him in a nightclub unfolding his tale to his criminal co-conspirators. Then we are presented with an enactment of this fictional tale, complete with fictional policemen and dog, in a fictional washroom. (Indeed within the story one of the policemen is telling his own story.) Then we see the undercover cop finish his story, standing and relating it in the fictional location, in front of the fictional cops. The real and the false are blended in an indistinguishable mix, to the point that this complicated piece of narrative unfolds gracefully, without drawing too much attention to its structure.

From the pre-credits discussion of Madonna's song, LIKE A VIRGIN, onwards there are numerous references to the world outside the film, the "real world." These references come through the idle conversation of the criminals, and range from discussions about television series, to the need for "tipping" waitresses. The effect of these familiar references is to give an air of the commonplace, the real. But this is achieved through the film's and its audience's shared awareness of "Pop-culture," most especially film and television. This dependence upon film is noted by Amy Taubin,

Tarantino tips his hand in his bravura set pieces. the undercover cop prepares for his "interview" with the boss like a method actor rehearsing an audition piece. Identity is fabrication; lies are as convincing as truth, provided they reference a collective cultural experience and are told with an improvisatory abandon. An event that never happened is given equal screen time. And why not? Isn't this a film about film, about fiction.

(Taubin, 1992, p. 3)

This "collective cultural experience" could be an alternative for John Cawelti's definition of "myth." In his



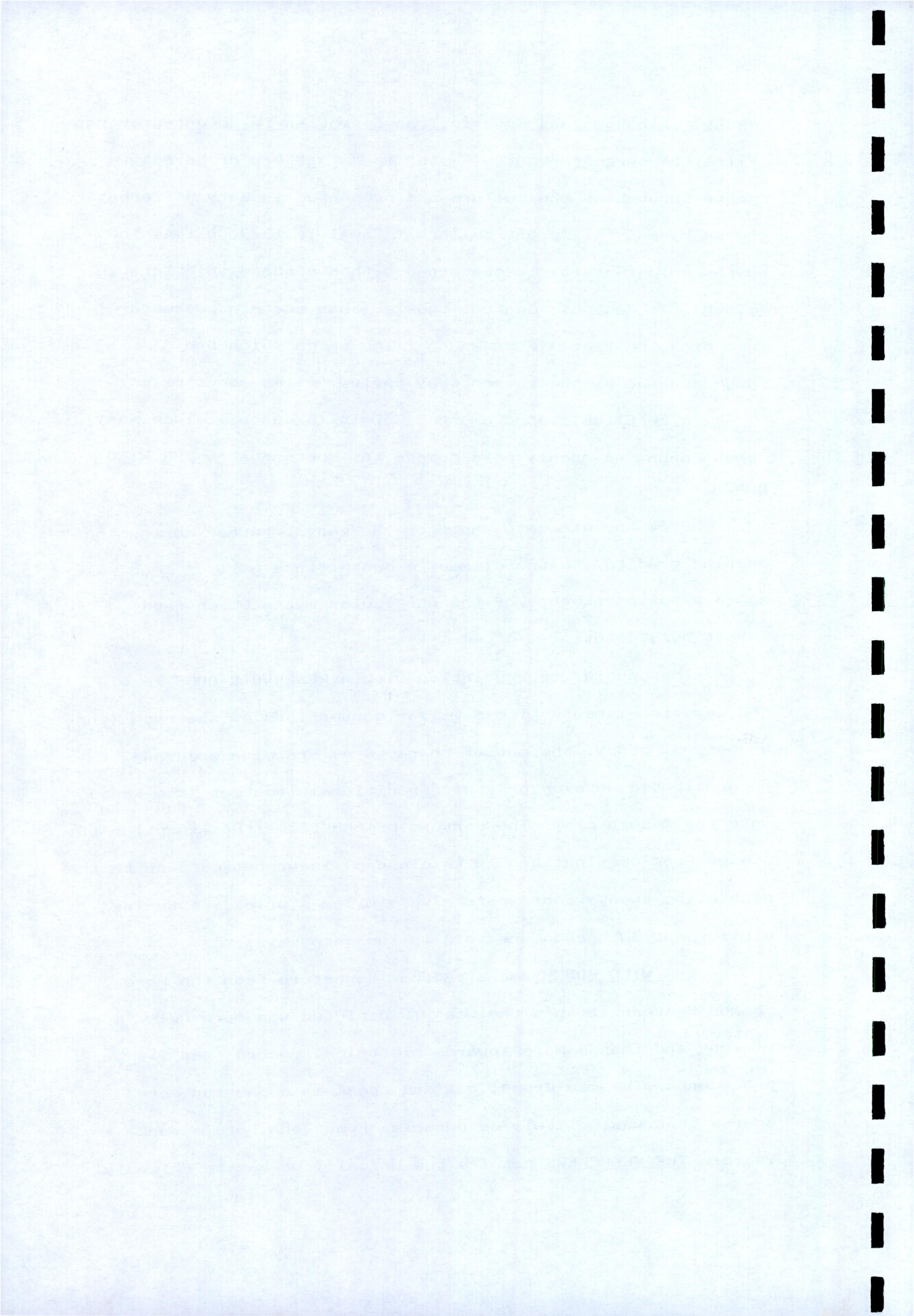
essay, Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films, he suggests that a "myth" is "a pattern of narrative known throughout the culture and presented in many different forms by many different tellers." (Cawelti, 1979, p.184) The myths which Cawelti is concerned with are those told through cinema. In fact his central thesis (that certain genres are reaching their end) focuses on films which which are pre-occupied by the genres they employ, films about films.

The films listed amongst Cawelti's canon include many that Tarantino openly pays homage to, most notably THE WILD BUNCH.

From the staccato shots of the gang together during the opening credits, to the climactic death "in a hail of lead" we get a detailed picture of the particular myths which feed Tarantino's debut.

The crucial appropriation within RESERVOIR DOGS is via the generic elements. The familiar conventions of the myth (the archetypal story, the set of characters) are plundered and reconstituted outside of their traditional location (the West) into the modern city. The content of the film (the execution of a plot from opening through to closure) is unchanged despite the separating twenty four years. Two similar stories, featuring similar outlaw heroes are told in The same way.

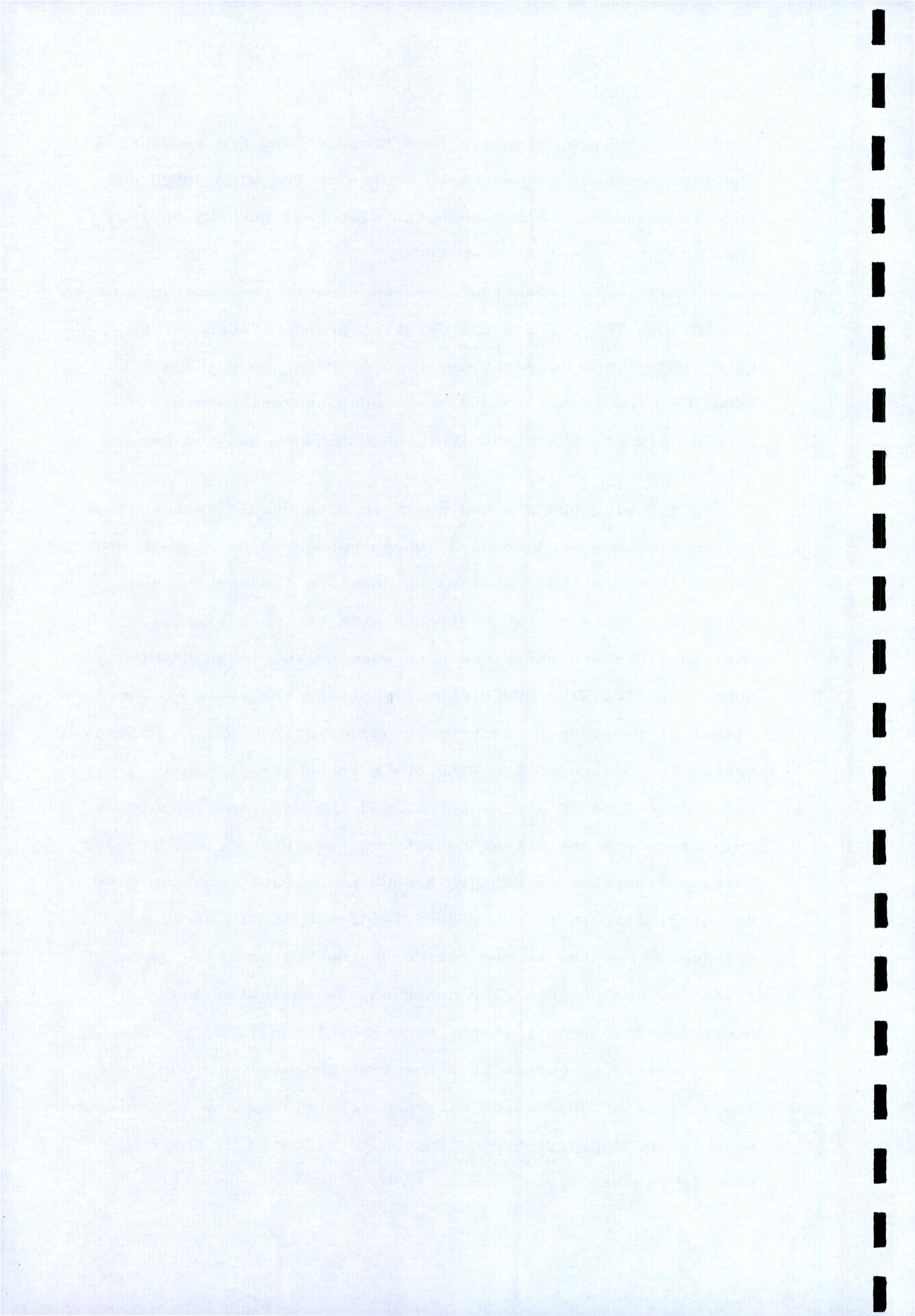
THE WILD BUNCH was a radical departure from the more common Western in that the West it depicted was more ugly, more violent and leaned more towards historical record than its precedents. The men dress, eat and speak in a fashion more coarse than was politely acceptable. Even John Ford's dark Western THE SEARCHERS retains the unreal (but camera friendly)



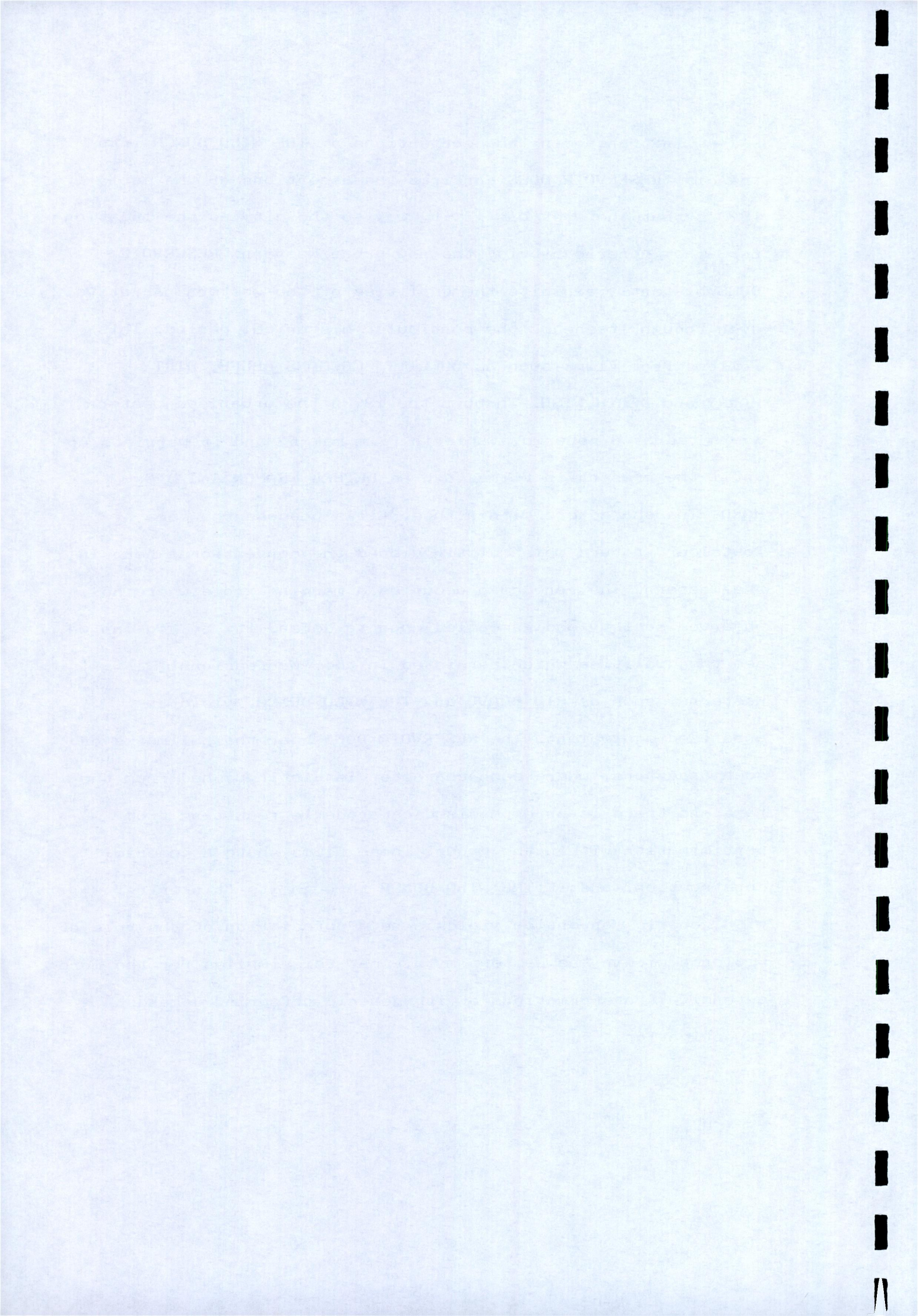
production design, with its fake "injuns" and pretty costumes. The impoverished and weathered design of THE WILD BUNCH owes more to Sergio Leone's "Spaghetti Western," DOLLARS trilogy than the studio excesses of SHANE.

Similarly Tarantino's crooks inhabit the "everyday world" of America. There isn't the palatial grandeur seen in THE GODFATHER or the decadent artifice of Brian de Palma's SCARFACE. The locations and the "look" are deliberately common; diners, the nightclub, the warehouse and the car interiors.

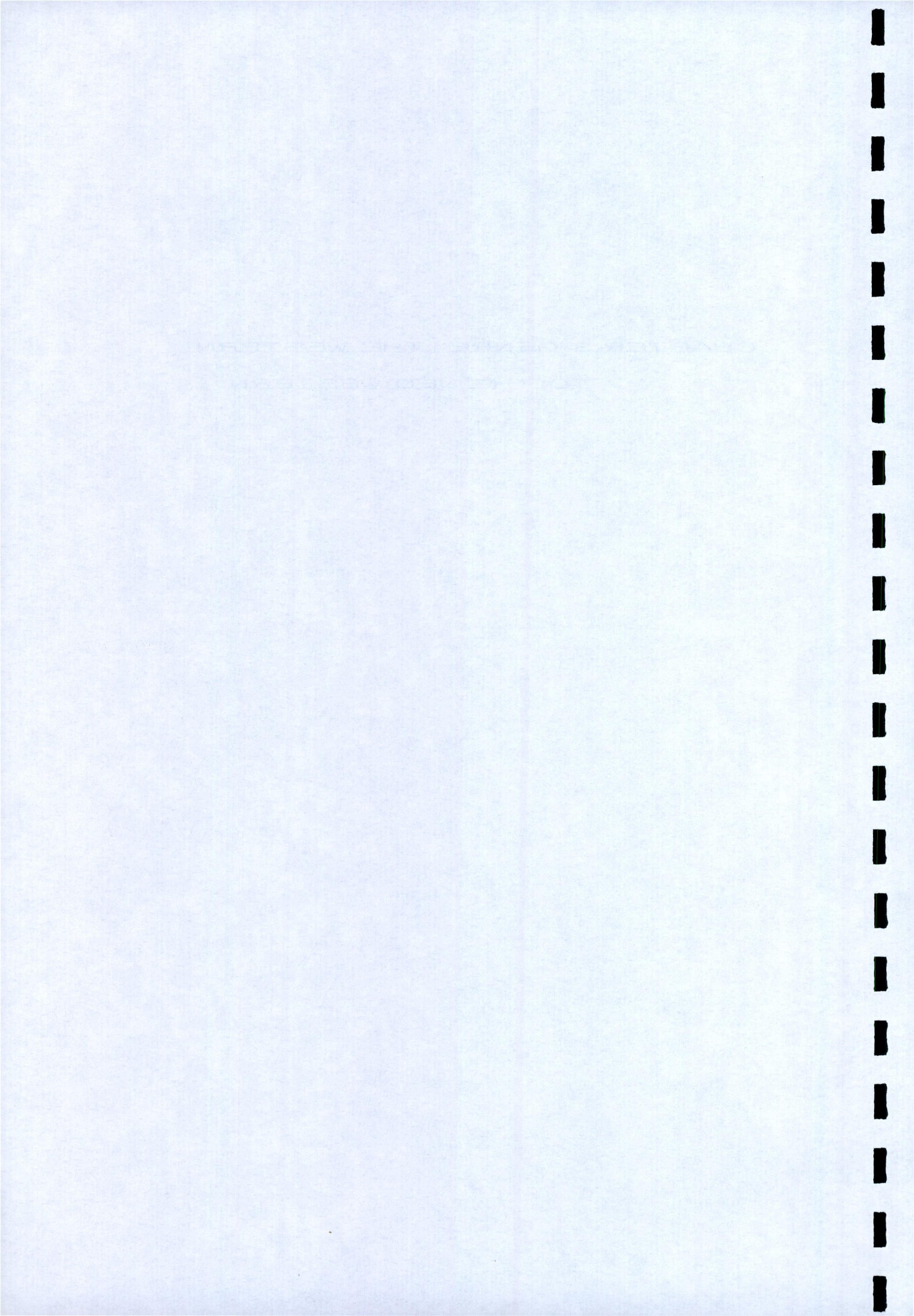
THE WILD BUNCH's design is no more "real" than that of its more common predecessors, which tended to be elegant and clean. It earns its "realism" by opposing the conventional style. Its crude design contrasts with the more typical, sanitised Western where the hero wore white. In RESERVOIR DOGS, like THE WILD BUNCH, the terrain of the story is the classical landscape, constructed and existing only in cinematic terms. The Mexico of THE WILD BUNCH is the traditional criminal refuge of all Westerns, and the Mexicans inhabiting this landscape are either bandits or revolutionaries, if not both. Los Angeles in RESERVOIR DOGS is not just another city, but crucially, it is the modern landscape of violence, as mythical a setting as the Mexico of the Western. The sense of "city" evoked in this film draws on the anxieties and stereotypes of recent years, from racial tensions, to the proliferation of guns within American society. All our impressions of the modern city are reconfirmed or, as Robin Wood puts it in Ideology, Genre, Auteur, "validated by their generic familiarity." (Wood, 1986, p. 65)



In transposing the conventions of THE WILD BUNCH into the city RESERVOIR DOGS confirms the assertions of the early 1970's that the West was giving way to the city as the location for a new generic hybrid, the new urban Western. RESERVOIR DOGS blatantly exhibits the qualities of the Western narrative, even though it sheds the particular historical period. This follows from films such as BULLITT, COOGANS BLUFF, DIRTY HARRY and DEATH WISH. Through the 1970s the urbanised western dominated as a generic staple in film-making and it persists up until the present in films such as LETHAL WEAPON and DIE HARD. The characters within these films possess the same "outsider" nature which distinguished the conventional hero in the Western. The lone hero occupies a marginal role where he observes society and is called upon to defend it. So too can we see the qualities which persisted in the "professional" Westerns, such as RIO BRAVO and THE WILD BUNCH, yield an urbanised equivalent. The RESERVOIR DOGS bear the hallmarks of such ancestors, where each character is distinguished from the next and there is an emphasised camaraderie resulting from participation within the group. These films share a generic construction, and if THE WILD BUNCH through its "tinkering" with generic convention yields a new appreciation of the role of violence within the Western myth, what this implies for the more extensive transformations of its generic offspring demands investigation.



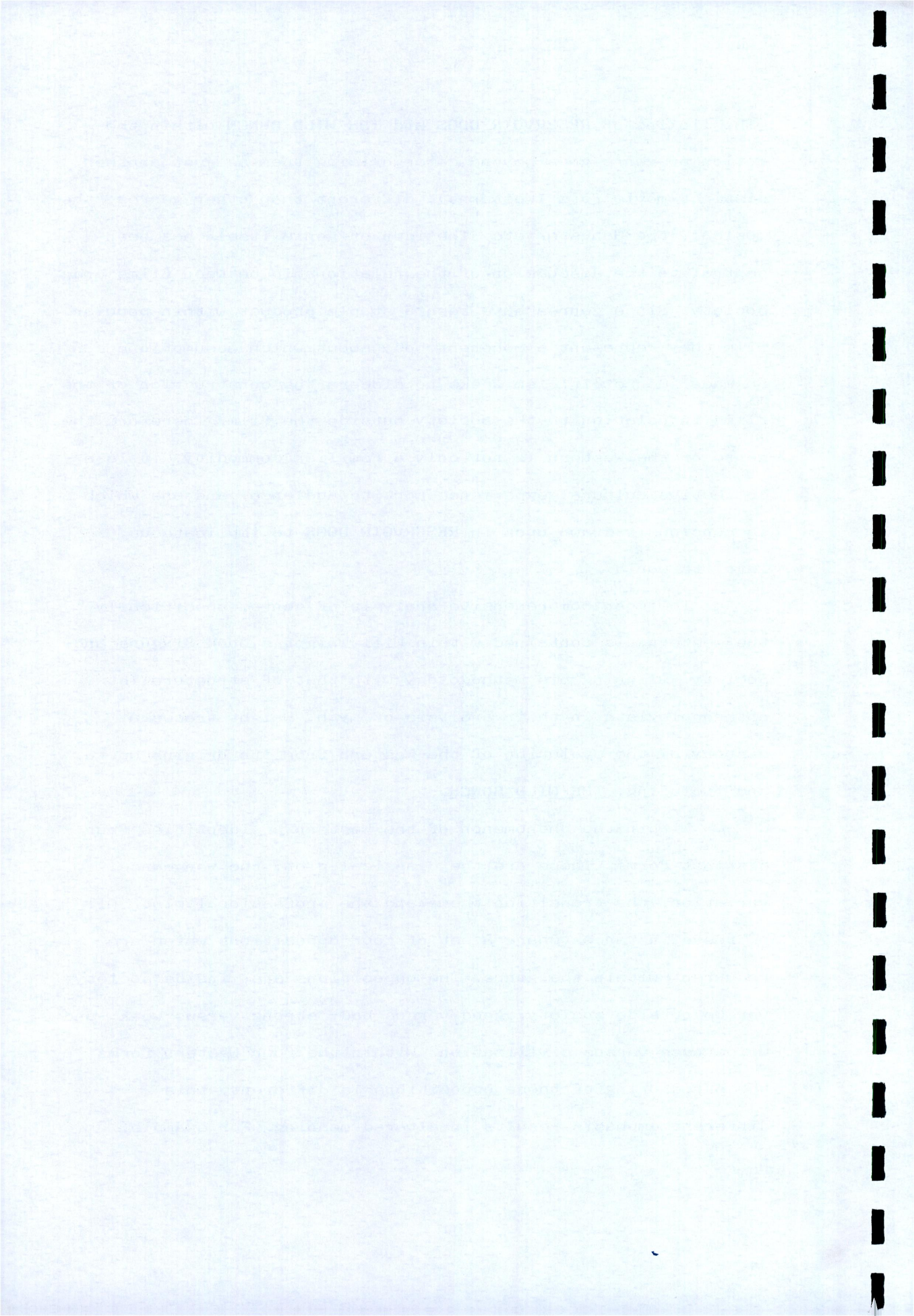
CHAPTER 3 GENRE: THE WESTERN
TO THE NEO-WESTERN



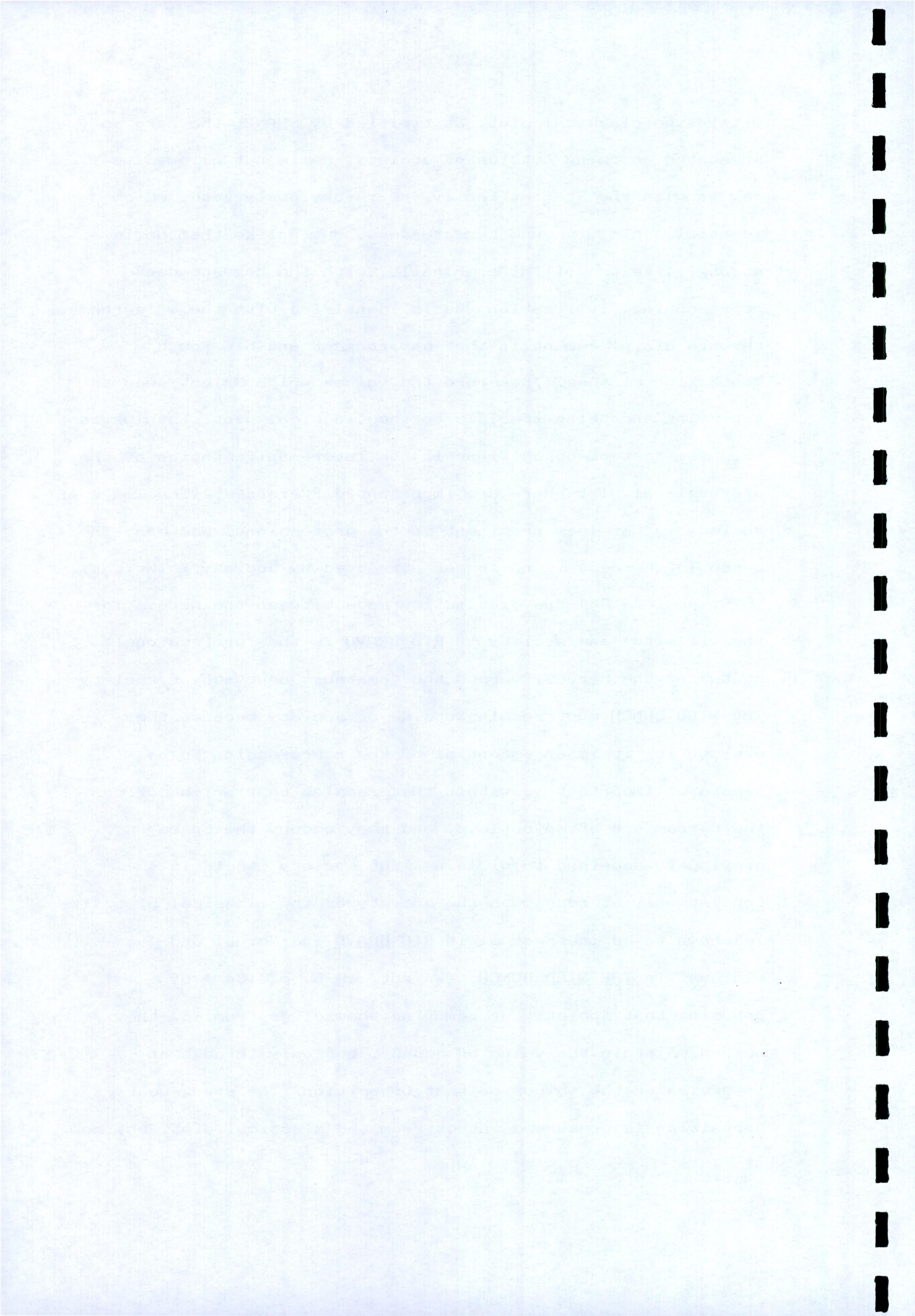
The linking of RESERVOIR DOGS and THE WILD BUNCH within the notion of genre goes beyond categorising them as just another distinct movie form (Westerns), different than other genres, the Musical, the Gangster etc. The idea of genre itself has been central to the discussion of the relationship between films and society. Since genres have been a staple product within popular film they represent a coherent body about which assumptions can be made. Genre criticism seeks to discern the construction of the films in relation to the society outside the film. Therefore the genre of the Western is not only a familiar commodity, it is a collective cultural experience for its audience, and one which is consciously drawn upon in RESERVOIR DOGS to implicate us into its world.

The most comprehensive analysis of genre, specifically the Western, is contained within Will Wright's book Sixguns and Society. Aligning his methodology with that of structuralist anthropologists in their analysis of myth, Wright traces a history of the evolution of the Western from its origins up to, and including, THE WILD BUNCH.

Within the phenomenon of the Western he identifies four distinct forms. These are the classical plot, the vengeance variation, the transition theme and the professional plot. All of these instances share a set of four oppositions which are recurrent within the genre. The oppositions are; inside society versus outside society; good versus bad; strong versus weak; and wilderness versus civilization. Within the four Western forms the structuring of these oppositions is different, this different emphasis results in altered meaning. For example,



within the classical plot, as typified by SHANE, the hero is presented as being outside of society. He is not allowed to remain with the Starret family. He is obviously good, which identifies him with the homesteaders, but unlike them he is strong, like the villains. Finally, with the homesteaders representing civilization, he is identified with the wilderness, through his placement in that environment and his rough "buckskin" clothes. These are the values which Wright sees as typifying and being specific to the classical plot. When we see this same set of oppositions in the later manifestation of the professional plot there are important differences. "The image of society is far less prominent in the professional Western. The hero (or heroes) is no longer attracted by society." (Wright, 1975, pp 164-184) One distinction made between the heroes (or the villains) and society in RIO BRAVO is the "professional" status of the heroes, versus the "amateur" approach of society. THE WILD BUNCH must remain outside of society because they prey on it. It is an essential of their profession to be separate. Importantly, within the examples that Wright offers, the heroes are often outlaws, and they occupy the space previously ascribed to villains. But society itself is consistently at odds with the society of the classical plot. It is shown to be ineffectual in RIO BRAVO and "cruel and vicious" in THE WILD BUNCH. (Wright, 1975, p. 184) By opposing that society, or removing themselves from it, the heroes maintain the value of "good", but only through an inversion of the values of that opposition. The strong/weak opposition is preserved intact from the classical plot, but now

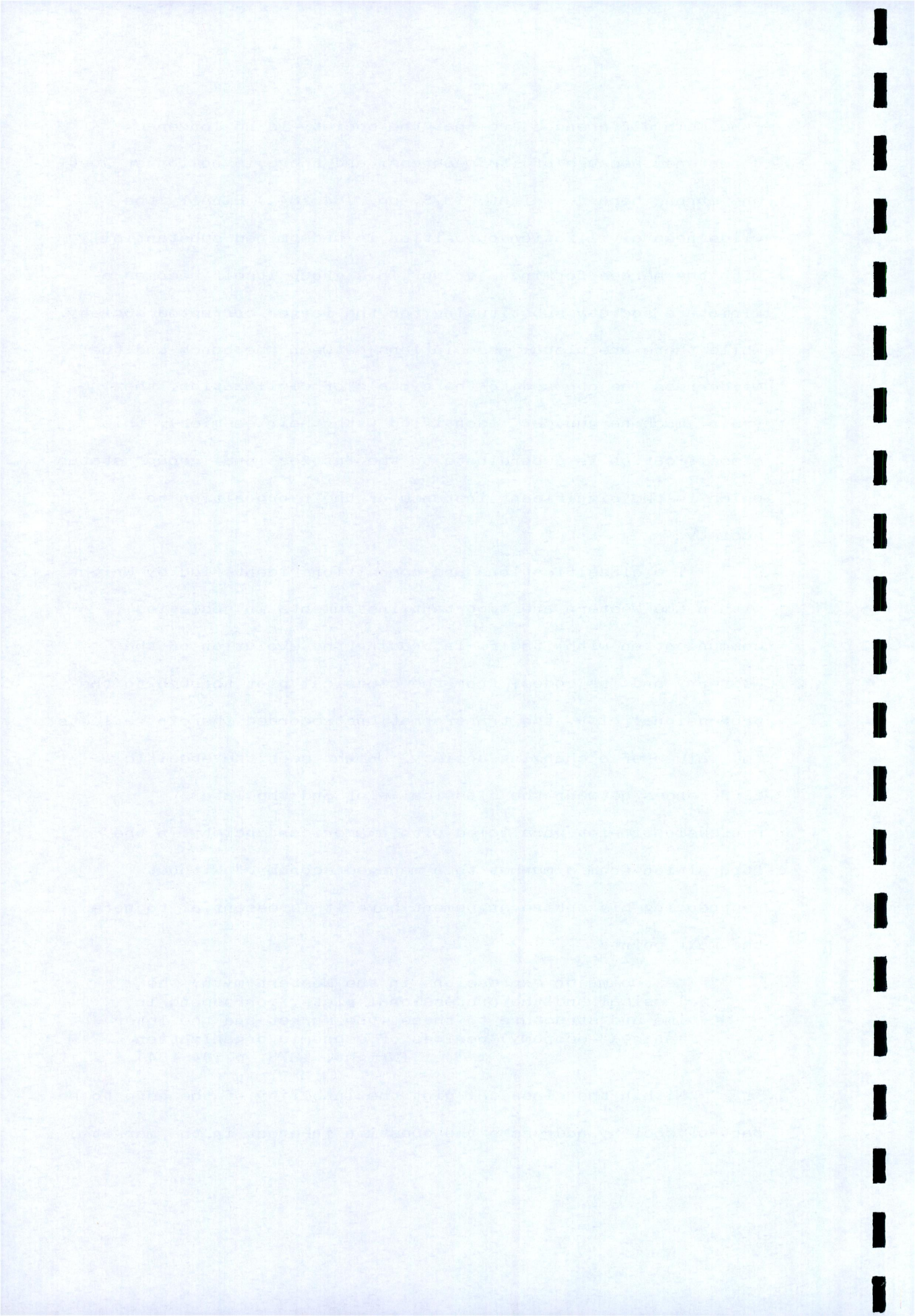


"the main differences are that the society is no longer threatened because of its weakness, and there is no longer just one strong hero." (Wright, 1975, pp. 164-184) Finally the wilderness/civilization opposition is undermined substantially with the heroes forming a group. This group itself becomes a miniature society substituting for the larger corrupted society. While there are visual associations between the bunch and the wilderness (as opposed to the symbols of civilization, the train, machine gun, car, identified with their enemies), this classification is subordinate to the "professional group" status which is the significant instance of their opposition to society.

The classifications and oppositions identified by Wright within the Western are important instruments in societies communication with itself. In tracing the evolution of the Western, and its codes, from the classical plot through to the professional plot, the transformations recorded therein reflects the values of a changing society. Wright sees the specific differences between the classical plot and the later professional plot paralleled within American society in the "transition from a market to a managed economy." Without reproducing his entire argument here it is essential to note the main points.

The two major expressions in the Western myth, the classical and the professional plots, correspond in time and structure to these (the market and the later "managed" economy) periods of economic organization.
(Wright, 1975, p.164-184)

Within the classical plot the inability of the hero to be part of society addresses the question inherent in the market

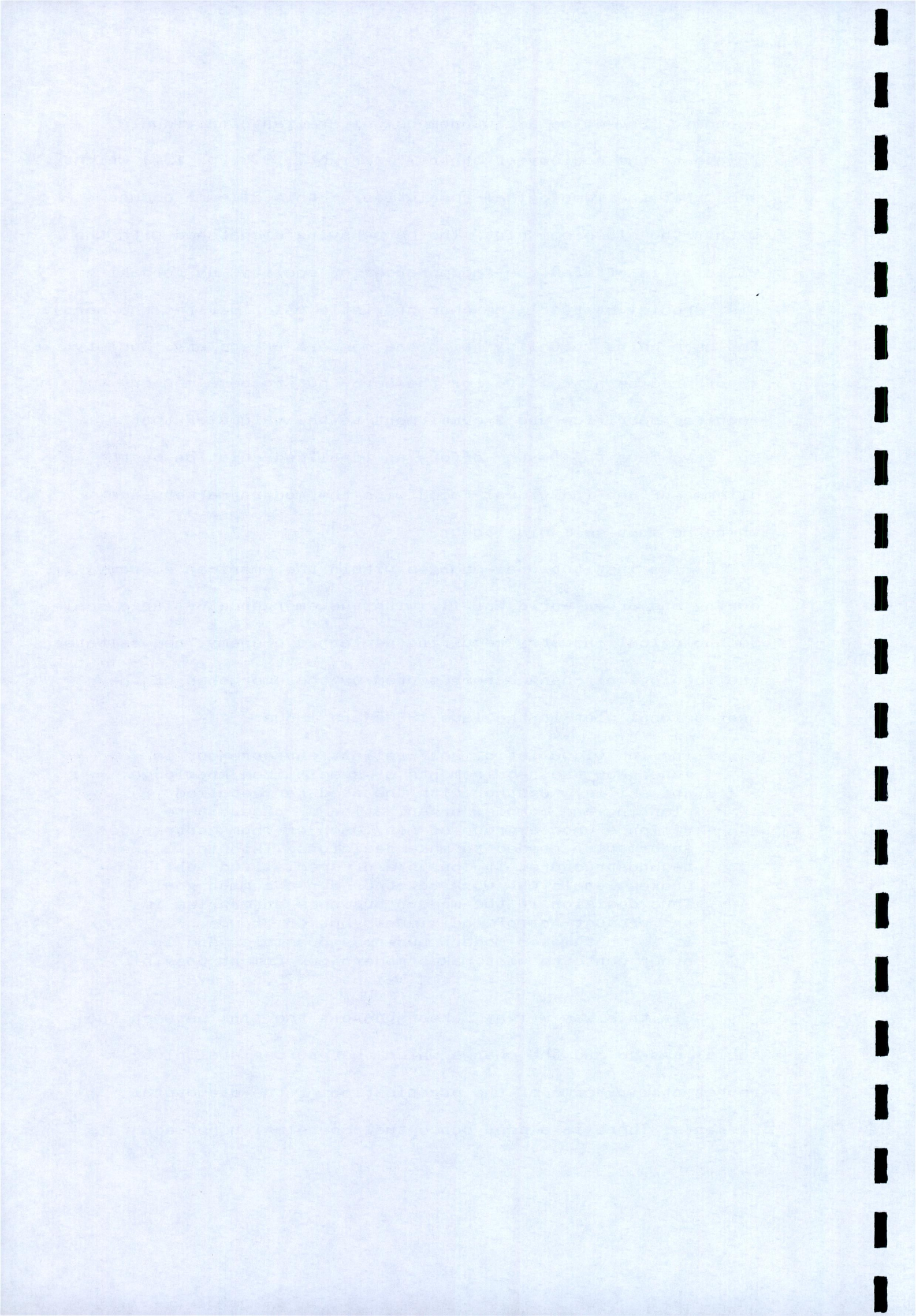


economy, "How do we as autonomous self-reliant individuals relate to the society of others?" (Wright, 1975, p. 137) Wright sees that the ideological resolution of this dilemma occurs within the classical plot. The hero having dispatched with the villains is offered the "acceptance" of society. By forsaking his "special status" (the characteristic which defined the hero) the hero gains "equality" with the members of society. Society is offered as attractive for the hero, but to be a member requires sacrifice and a commitment to the values of that society. Thus the "myth" offers an idealised solution to the dilemma of the individual faced with the modern marketplace where he must sell his labour.

The institutional changes within the American economy during and after World War II, with the emergence of large scale technological industry requiring a planned economy, necessitates the ideological changes represented by the emergence of the professional plot in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The individualistic, self-reliant entrepreneur is gone. Now the requirements of specialized knowledge and skills, together with the need for detailed planning and complex organization... necessitate reliance upon a group of men, each of whom contributes information needed to make decisions. This is... the technostructure. It consists of specialized men, professionals who work together for a common goal. Thus decision in the modern business enterprise is the product not of individuals but of groups.... It is what makes modern business possible, and in other contexts what makes modern government possible.
(Wright, 1975, p. 178)

In this way Wright makes apparent the link between the social change and the change which the professional plot represents in terms of the organisation of the structural elements. "There is a deep conceptual correlation between this



narrative structure (the professional plot) and the ideological requirements of modern industrial society." (Wright, 1975, p184)

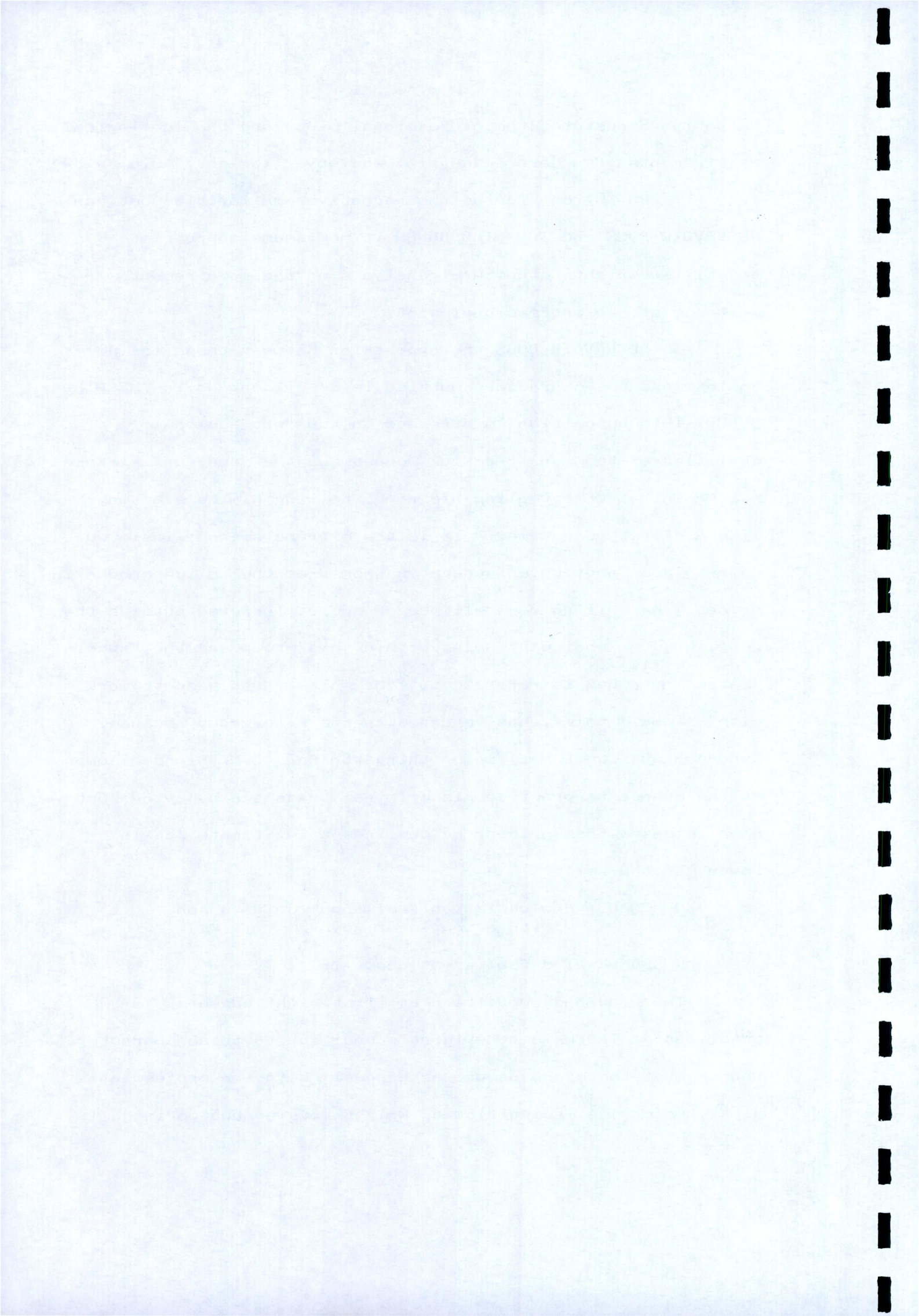
Having considered the narrative similarities between RESERVOIR DOGS and THE WILD BUNCH it now seems appropriate to utilise Wrights structural analysis on the more recent instance of the professional plot.

In RESERVOIR DOGS the opposition between those inside society and the characters outside is as evident as in THE WILD BUNCH. This opposition is stressed in the "professional" qualities of the men. "Mr Pink" chastises the "amateur" mistake by "Mr White" of revealing his name, telling him he's acting like a "first year thief." It is the extreme secrecy insisted upon by Joe Cabot which seperates them from the failed crooks in prison. There is no real glimpse of society offered outside the gang, but the choice of being within this group and the "special status" attached is referred to. "Mr White", who used to work with a female thief, has returned to the male group because, "you can push that man, woman thing too far." "Mr Blonde" jumps at the chance to practice his criminal trade again having just been released from prison. He declines a legitimate job in favour of the heist.

JOE CABOT How would you feel about doin' a job
with a couple of guys?

MR BLONDE I'd feel great about it.

The good/bad opposition at first sight appears problematic. There is no evident opposition to these character, who we must therefore assume as heroes. As in the professional plot society is insignificant. Wright however has defined



alternative means by which the hero can be seen as representing good.

In the professional plot, the essential individuality of this character is denied almost as strongly as it is affirmed in the classical story. The good/bad distinction now depends solely on sympathy, not on commitment to social values. The good guys are the ones who are pleasant, friendly and attractive, and we identify with them. The bad guys are mean and unpleasant. But both are typically professionals. Neither has any special commitment to making the world safe for churches, schools, or any of the things that separated good people from bad people in the classical plot.

(Wright, 1975, p. 182)

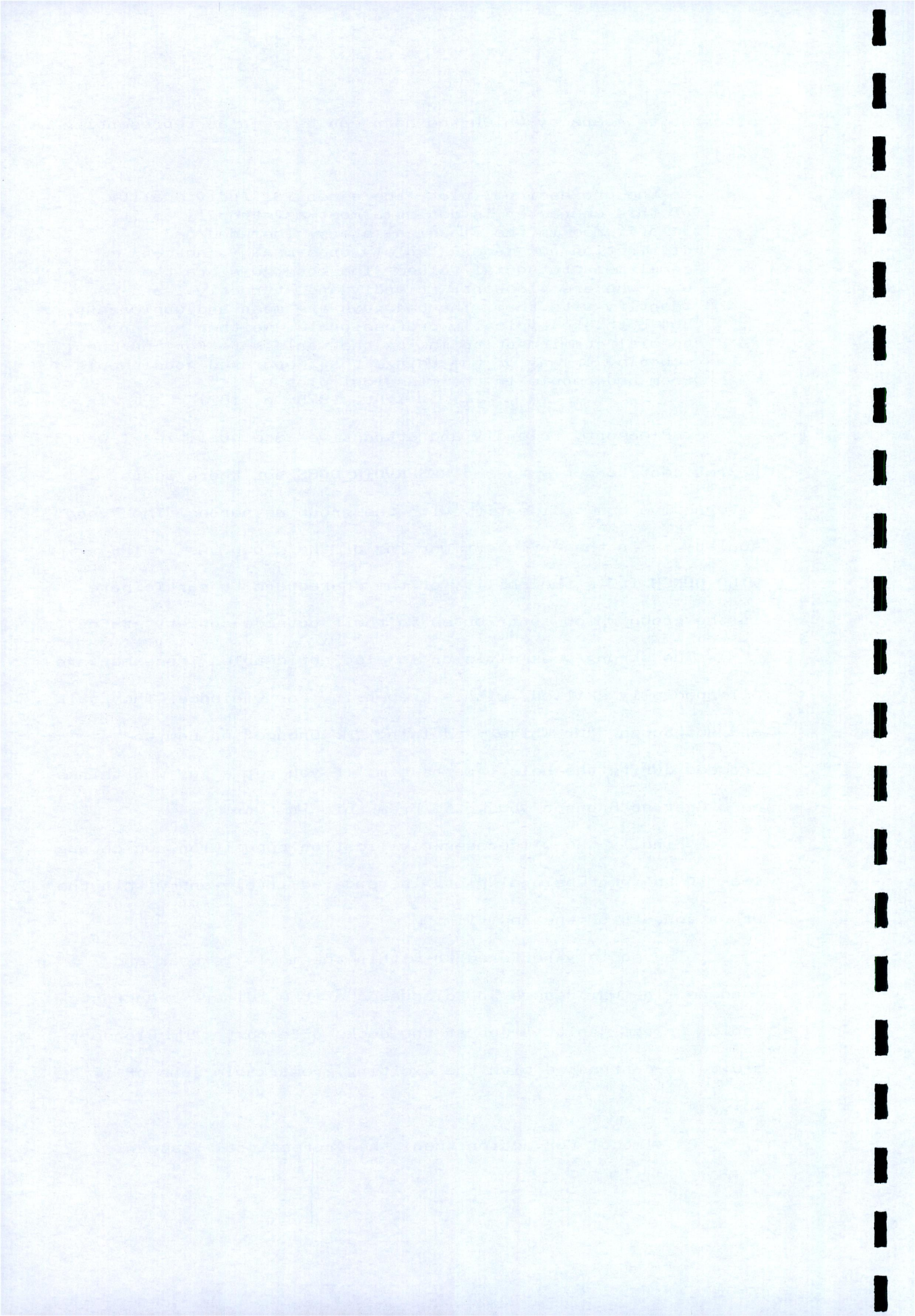
"Pleasant, friendly and attractive" are qualities I would be reticent to apply to the RESERVOIR DOGS but there is no alternative but to identify with the group as heroes. The "good" quality is in the efficient working of the group. As in THE WILD BUNCH it is the ability of the characters to participate in the group which contributes to their outside-society status.

The strong/weak division is also noticeable. These men are all specially skilled, with a propensity for violence. They talk and act tough. "Mr White", advising "Mr Orange" on how to proceed during the heist, warns him, "If you get a guy who thinks he's Charles Bronson you gotta break him in two."

Finally the wilderness/civilization opposition, which was weak in the professional plot, is rendered irrelevant within the urban context of the new film.

The society referred to within the movie is weak and mundane. The waitresses job discussed at the "diner" breakfast table, or the "shitty" job at the docks offered to "Mr Blonde", are to be contrasted with the exciting, remarkable jobs of thieves.

As a model for action then, the professional Western



directs the individual to reject social values and involvement for the sake of companionship and technical power. By joining the group and accepting the values of technical proficiency, the individual shows himself to be superior to the petty, dull, weak people in ordinary society.

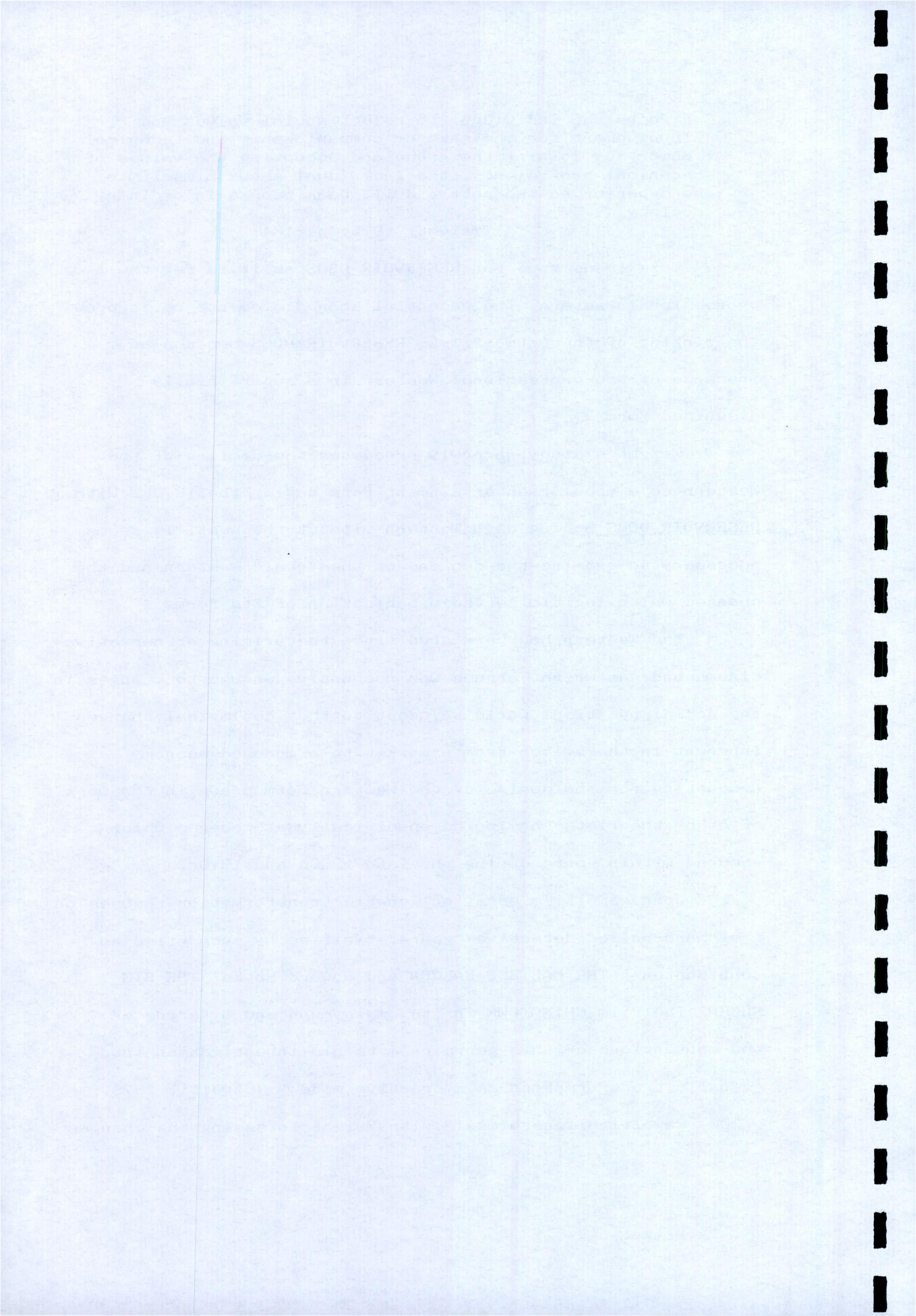
(Wright, 1975, p. 184)

This is as true for RESERVOIR DOGS as it is for the professional Western. The essential shared elements re-inforce the linking of these two films. RESERVOIR DOGS becomes an instance of the professional Western in a superficially disguised form.

Wright's study narrowly preceeded the decline of the Western as a popular entertainment form during the 1970s. With RESERVOIR DOGS acting as a Western without the west, it seems necessary to examine the decline of the "real" Western and the changes which legitimise the urbanisation of its forms.

The Western had persisted since the origins of narrative cinema and, as Wright argues was responsive enough to changes in the social political world to adapt to the ideological changes inherent in the switch from a market to a managed economy. Accounting for the demise of the Western form draws in the work of other theorists who looked specifically at changes which occurred within genre during the late 1960s and 1970s.

John Cawelti's essay on generic transformation focuses on the "hard-boiled detective" genre, typified by such films as John Huston's THE MALTESE FALCON and Howard Hawks' THE BIG SLEEP. The film CHINATOWN in its employment and altering of the conventions of this genre prompts his investigation into "generic transformation as a creative mode." (Cawelti, 1979, p.200) Cawelti aligns himself with Wright in seeing the changes



within genre as responses to social change.

The present significance of generic transformation... reflects the feeling that not only the traditional genres, but the cultural myths they once embodied are no longer fully adequate to the imaginative needs of our time.

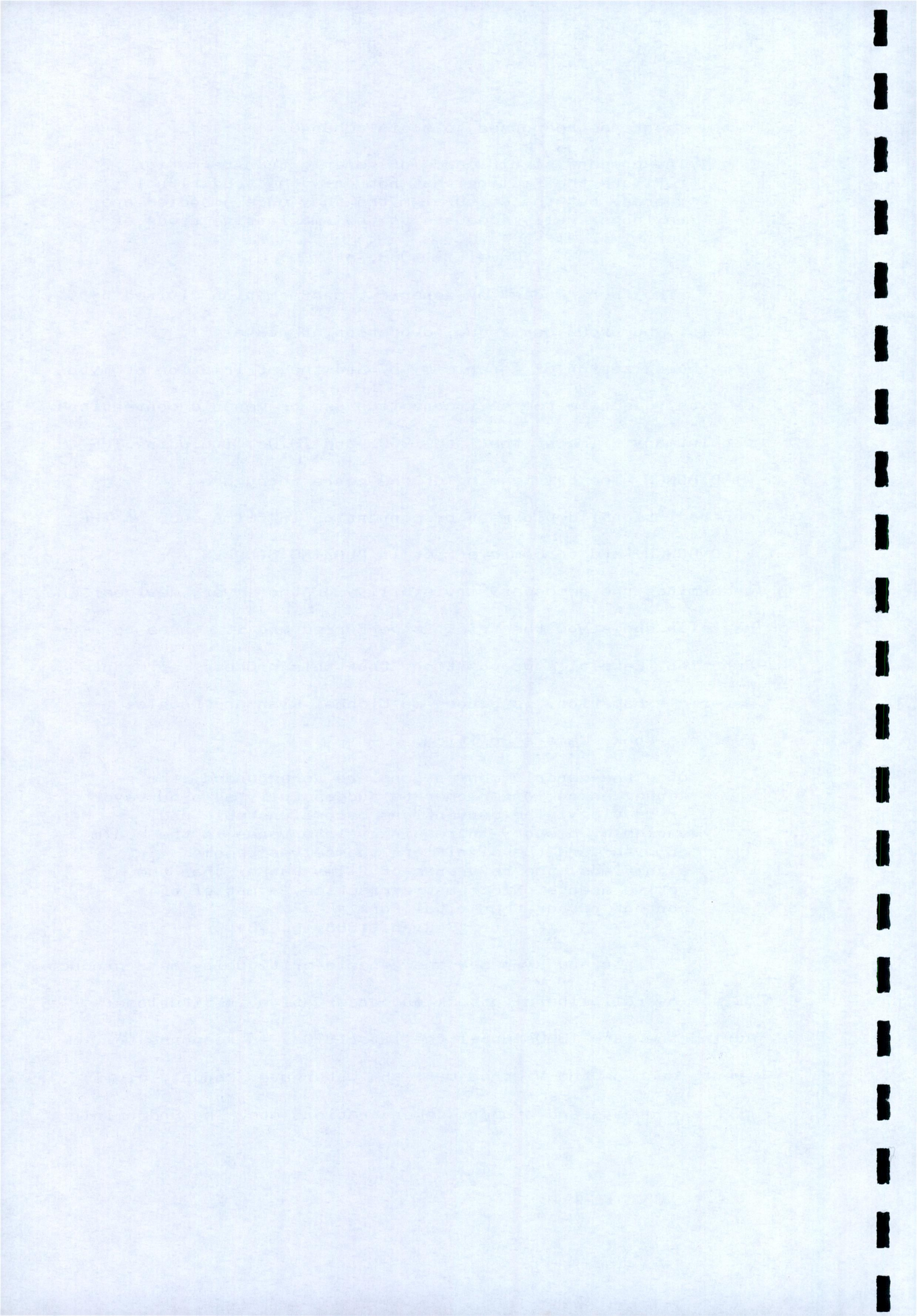
(Cawelti, 1986, p. 200)

The four "modes" of generic transformation divined by Cawelti, humorous burlesque, evocation of nostalgia, demythologization of generic myth, and the affirmation of myth as myth, describe the self-conscious use of generic conventions within many films of the late 1960s and 1970s, including THE WILD BUNCH. The critiqueing of the genre through a contradictional deployment of convention in films such as THE WILD BUNCH, and to comic effect in BLAZING SADDLES, undermines the necessary invisibility of those very devices. The magician shows how the trick is performed and it ceases to function. Cawelti's proposition, that this process represents generic exhaustion, is echoed in Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellners book, Camera Politica.

Once the generic conventions are foregounded, the genre can no longer operate successfully as a purveyor of ideology. The conventions become unstable and variable; history increasingly intervenes in the realm of myth: and the signifiers themselves become signifieds, the referents of films rather than the active agents of cinematic practice, a matter of content rather than vital form

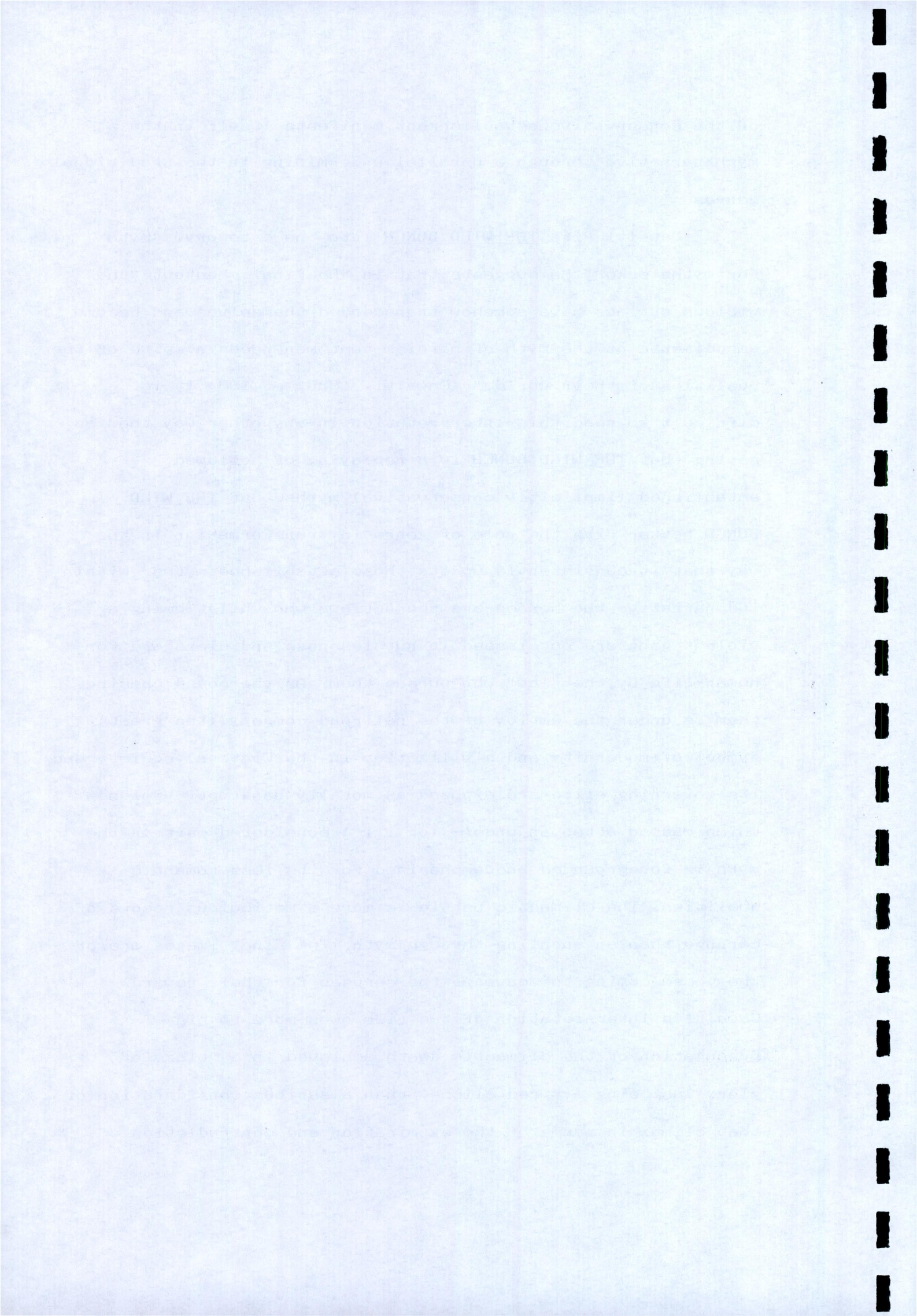
(Kellner & Ryan, 1988, p. 78)

Kellner and Ryan see the generic critiqueing as a product of the overall liberal attack on conservative institutions, during the late 1960s until the late 1970s, in response to events such as the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal, civil rights protests and student demonstrations etc. The undermining



of the conservative establishment manifests itself in the myth/narrative through a parallel undermining in the traditional genres.

Cawelti fits THE WILD BUNCH into the category, "myth for myths sake." He suggests that in the final shootout "the vicious outlaws have somehow transcended themselves and become embodiments of the myth of heroism that men need in spite of the realities of their world." (Cawelti, 1986, p. 199) It is difficult to read this interpretation in any other way than as saying that THE WILD BUNCH is a replaying of hollowed, established (implicitly conservative) myths. But THE WILD BUNCH better fits the role of genre in transformation in the way that it consistently upsets those established myths. Within its narrative the heroes are the outlaws who whilst being a violent gang are outclassed in ruthlessness and disregard for human life by the "law" who pursue them. As the posse chasing them is under the employ of the railroad company (the great symbol of modernity and civilization in the Western) society and its governing elite are exposed as morally bankrupt. Violence which was so often an under- (or ill-) considered part of the myth is foregrounded and emphasised for its less romantic qualities. The climactic battle is more a meticulous record of carnage than an ennobling through myth. The final images are of the posse coming to scavenge the corpses for their reward. Cawelti's interpretation of the film owes more to his presumption of the climactic death achieved in a "blaze of glory" as being a tired cliché, than a serious consideration of that climax in terms of the examination and contradiction of

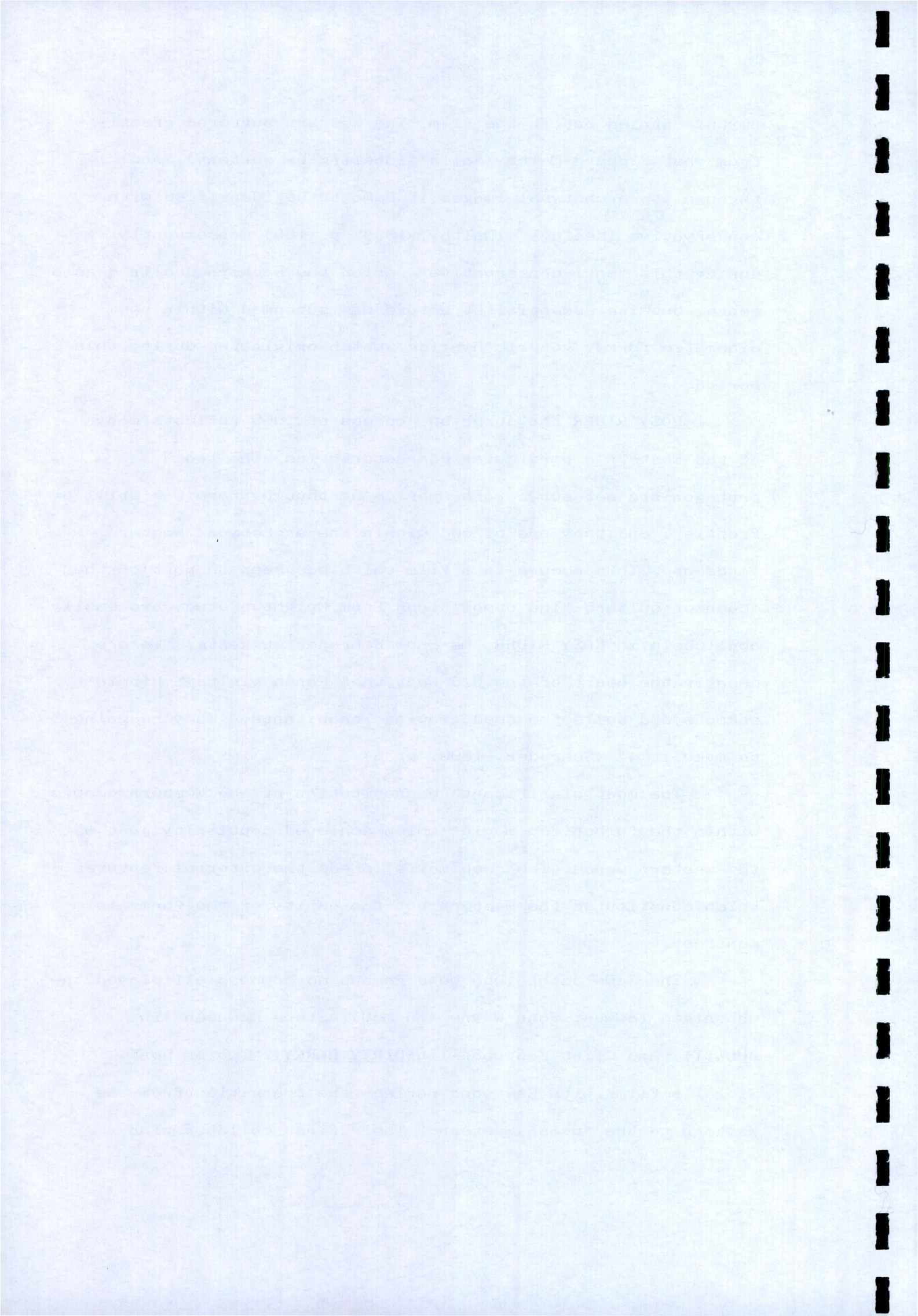


"myth" carried out in the film. The Western suffered greatly from what Richard Maltby calls "labeling by content", and through its archetypal images it came to be identified with conservative ideology. (Maltby, 1983, p. 185) Consequently during this "anti-conservative" period the Western declined as a genre, but its essential structure was subsumed within new cinematic forms, generic hybrids, which originated during this period.

EASY RIDER the surprise success of 1969 reflects many of the Western's particular characteristics. The two protagonists set out across America as though there was still a frontier, and they are placed within the archetypal Western landscape. This occurs in a film which was seen as part of the "counter-culture." The oppositions from Wright's study are easily applicable in EASY RIDER. As Paul Schrader suggests, "We are deep in the heart of the Old West when Fonda visits a hippie commune and tells the seed-growing inhabitants, 'They're going to make it.'" (Schrader, 1990, p.36)

The most significant reconstitution of the Western occurs within the "urban cop movie" which achieved popularity just as the Western waned. The "cop movie" sheds the external features which constituted the Western but the parity of the forms is manifest.

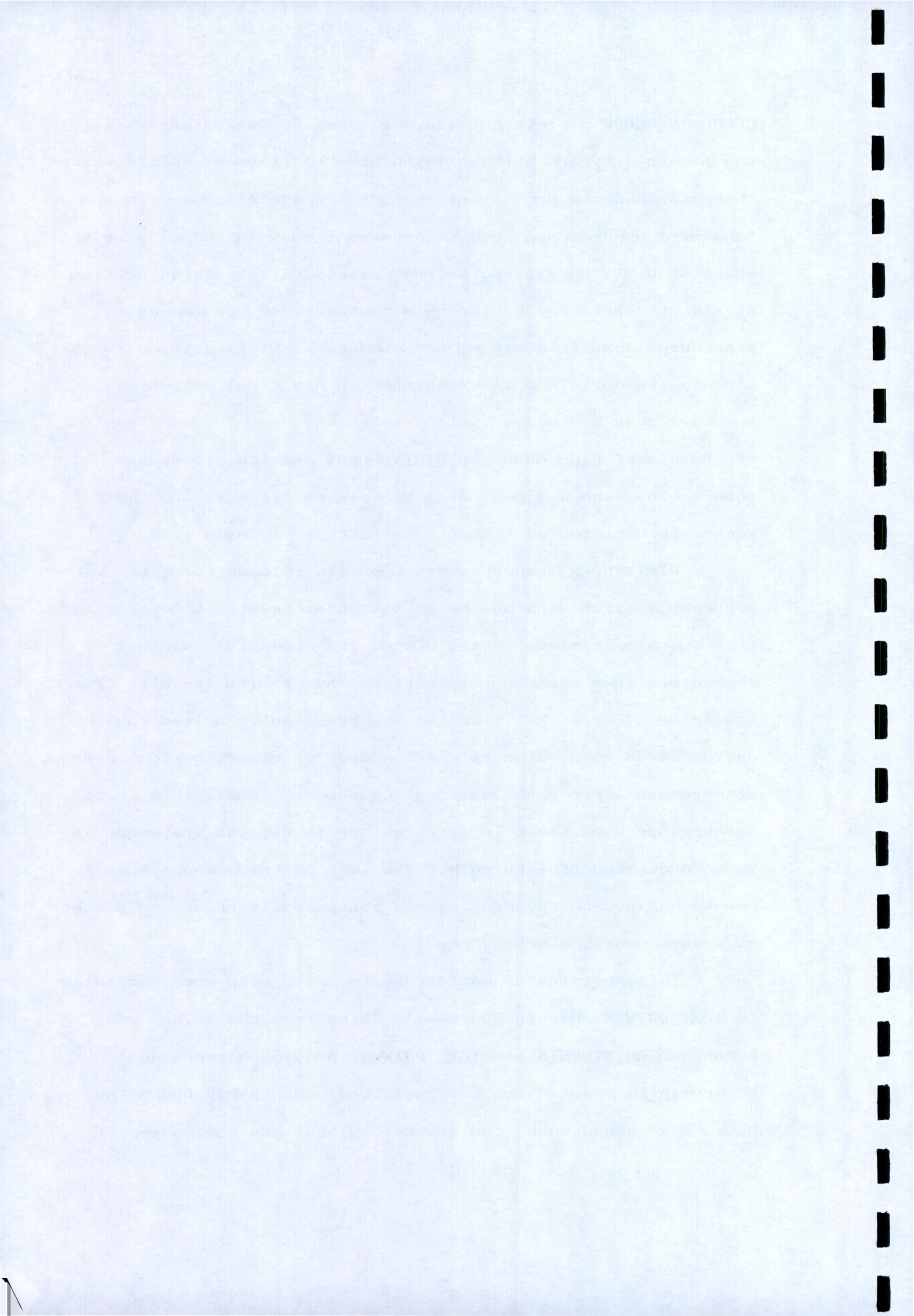
The same actors who were famous as cowboys all played the urbanised lawman: John Wayne (in McQ), Steve McQueen (in BULLIT), and Clint Eastwood (in DIRTY HARRY). Two of Don Siegel's films with Eastwood reflect the transition from the Western to the "urban Western." Their first collaboration,



COOGAN'S BLUFF depicts the (cowboy) sheriff Coogan arriving in the modern city and bringing with him the "lawman" skills which characterised the archetypal sheriff. In their later film the "sheriff" becomes assigned to permanent duty in the city in the shape of DIRTY HARRY, protecting society whilst operating from an almost "outlaw" position. His contempt for beauracratc procedure identifies him as the "maverick" willing to do "what a man's gotta do." This is underlined in his final action of throwing away his badge, which replicates Gary Cooper's action at the end of HIGH NOON. In DIRTY HARRY and its clones the lone cowboy, who was beginning to seem obselete in the "Wild West", is depicted as the only antidote to today's ills.

DIRTY HARRY was attacked upon its release for its apparently right-wing stance on law enforcement. It left itself open to this critique having placed its essentialy Western characters in a contemporary setting and drawing its plot from the actual "Zodiac killings" in San Francisco. Pauline Kael called it "a deeply immoral movie" and "an almost perfect piece of propaganda for para-legal police power." (Kael, 1975, p.385) Rather than view the film as a deliberate fascist statement it is more constructive to relate the ideological message she reacts against to the problematic contextualising of the Western structure upon the urban "now."

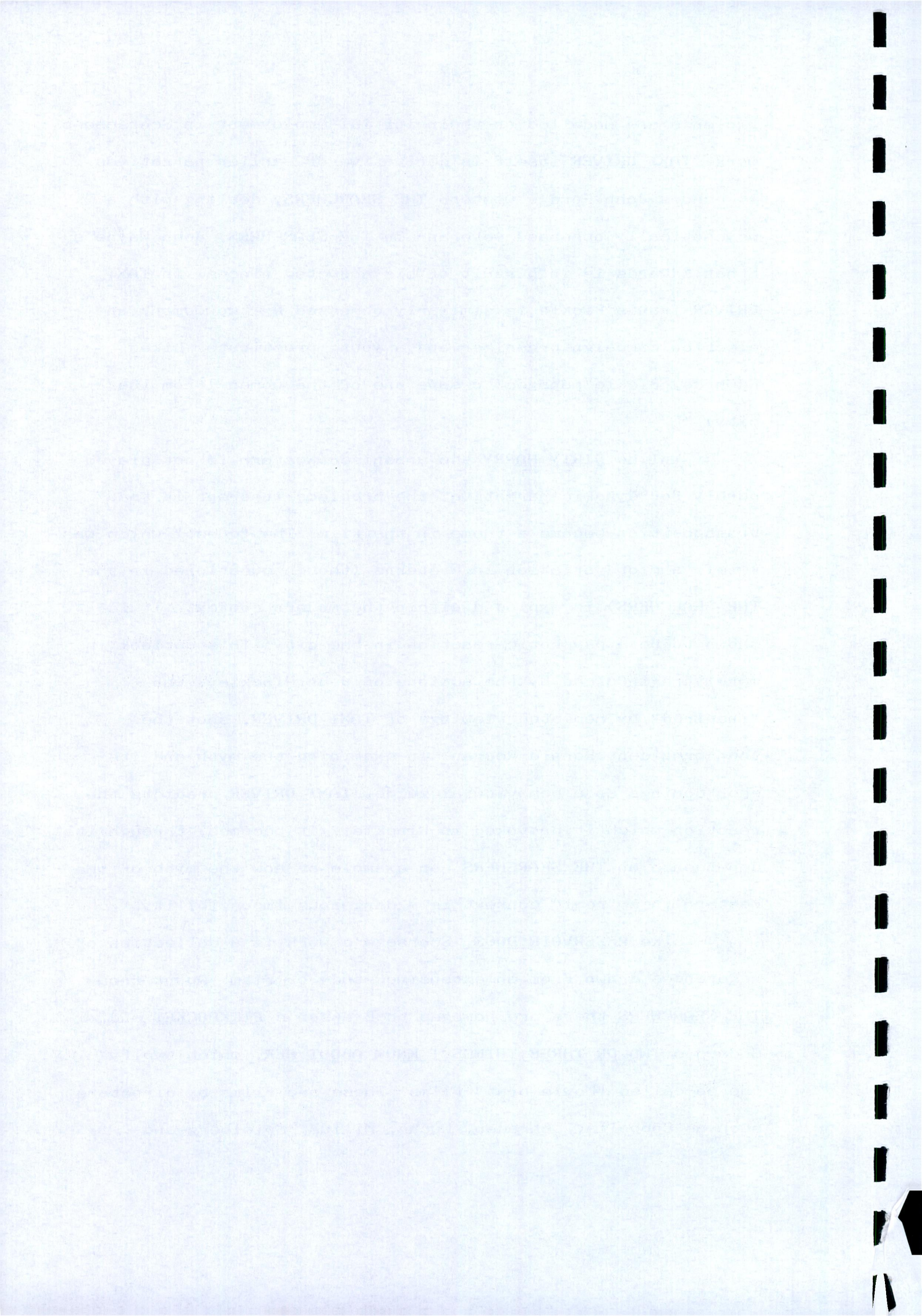
This splicing of movie form is dealt with more carefully in TAXI DRIVER. Martin Scorsese's films from the 1970s, most notably MEAN STREETS and TAXI DRIVER, provide a great deal of stylistic inspiration for Tarantino's RESERVOIR DOGS. The "juke-box" soundtrack, the gritty dialogue and the scenes of



violence are modelled on their initial employment in Scorsese's work. TAXI DRIVER itself is derivative of earlier narratives. It echoes John Ford's western THE SEARCHERS, dealing with a psychotically obsessed veteran. In THE SEARCHERS, John Wayne's Ethan Edwards is in pursuit of his abducted nieces. In TAXI DRIVER Travis Bickle is similarly obsessed by two women, an election campaign organiser and a young prostitute. Like Edwards, Bickle manages to save one of the women (from the city).

Unlike DIRTY HARRY the urbanised Western is not played purely for dynamic narrative, the problems inherent in that transposition become a theme in the film. The "quest" which was merely a plot variation in Westerns (though questioned in the THE SEARCHERS) is exploded within the modern context. It is shown to be a psychotic reaction in the city. This outlook is merely re-inforced by the actions of John Hinckley, who "inspired" by repeated viewings of TAXI DRIVER, shot the then-president Ronald Reagan. In examining the myth and its shortcomings as a behavioural guide, TAXI DRIVER predicts the reaction which it provoked in Hinckley. It becomes, through its dependence on THE SEARCHERS, an example of how the myth of the Western in a "real" context is a dangerous impossibility.

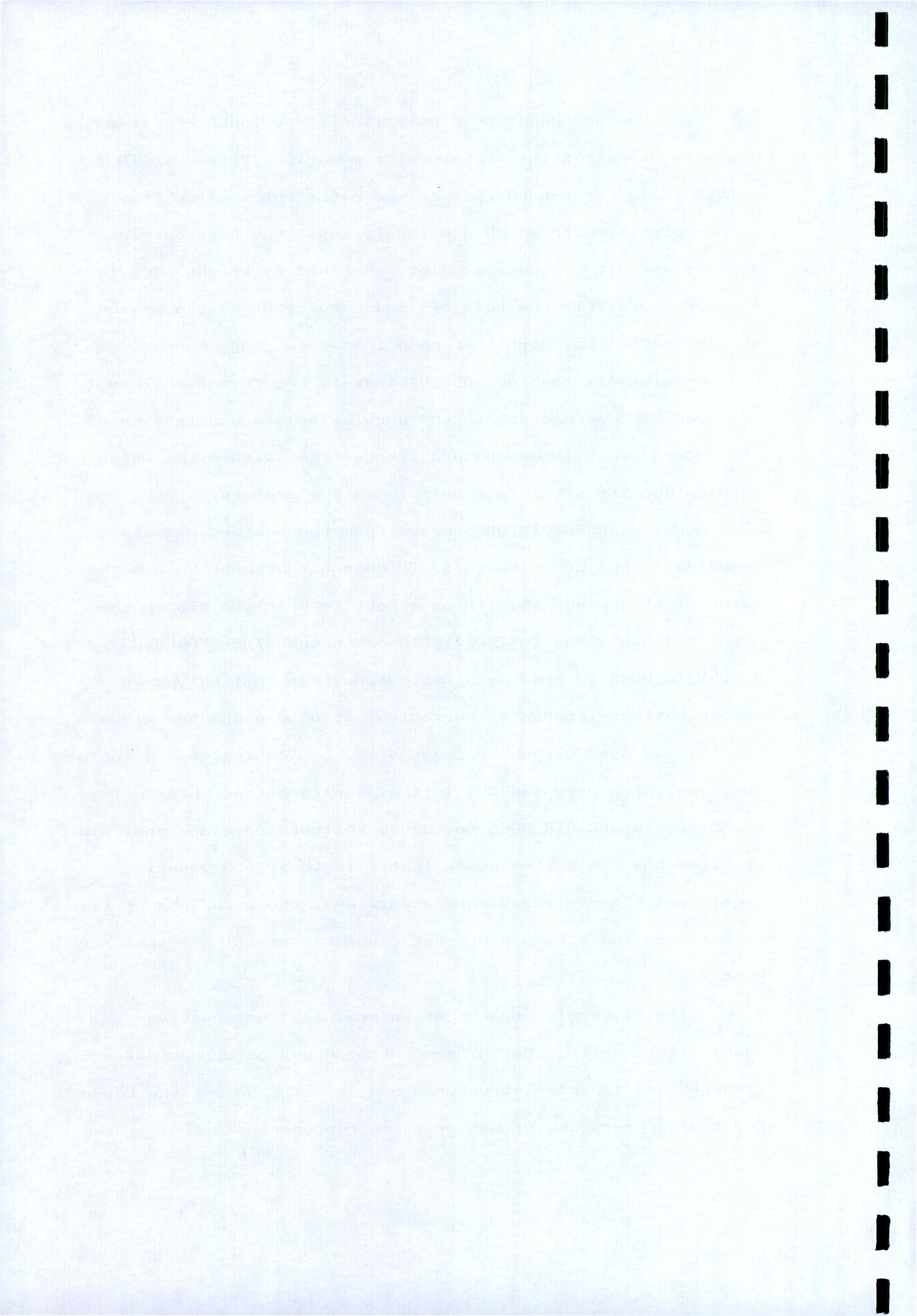
Like RESERVOIR DOGS, Scorsese's work is a collection of references drawn from an extensive study of film. Apart from THE SEARCHERS there are homages to Bresson's PICKPOCKET and Godard's TWO OR THREE THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER, which typify the so-called "Movie brat" films. These are films by directors such as Coppolla, Schrader, Lucas, Milius, Spielberg and



Scorsese, who are eager to display their knowledge of cinema by echoing or recreating instances from earlier films. In TAXI DRIVER these references reflect the myths which allow Travis to perceive himself as "God's lonely man," the hero outside society as in the classical plot described by Wright. Travis' attempt to fulfill the role of lone hero results in a crazed attack, reflecting countless headlines about lone gunmen indiscriminately lashing out. Ultimately the formal devices employed by Scorsese are in the service of his examination of the modern urban landscape and its conflict with myths which people identify with, in Travis' case the Western.

While RESERVOIR DOGS draws from the Western and its descendant (the urban Western) it does not attempt to use the material it appropriates in an effort to critique either the myth or society (as TAXI DRIVER does through THE SEARCHERS). RESERVOIR DOGS is even more meticulous than TAXI DRIVER in incorporating elements of narrative, structure and technique, but this is done without reference to the ideologies and social concerns which provoked the initial deployment of this technique. RESERVOIR DOGS validates Kellner and Ryans analysis of films that thematise genre itself in that "the generic signifiers, themselves become signifieds, the referents of film rather than the active agents of cinematic practice." (Kellner & Ryan, 1988, p. 78)

The "liberal" project of undermining conservative institutions during the 1970s questioned genres without offering alternatives to those structures and in doing so set the scene for the re-emergence of conservative representations.



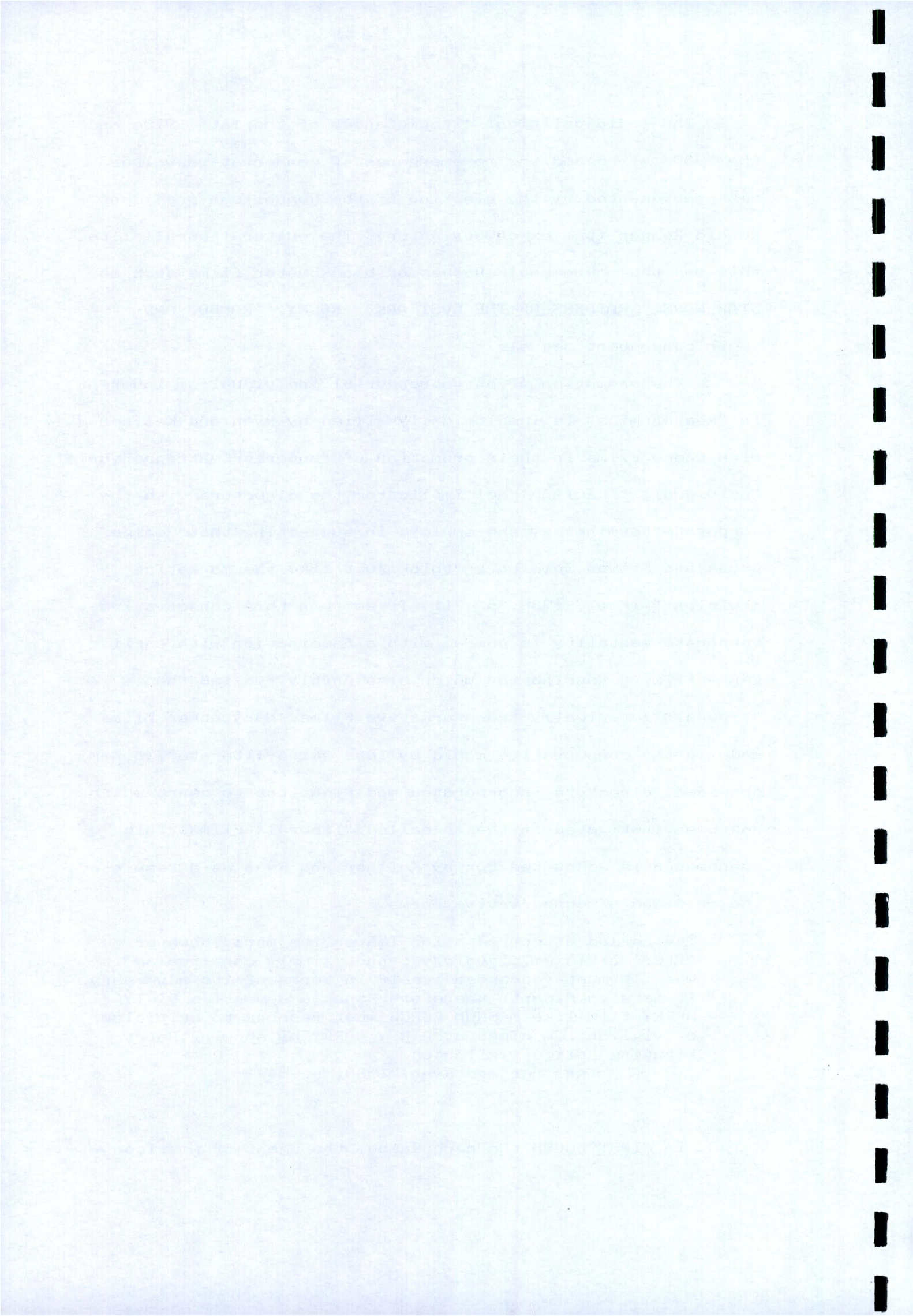
The socio-political circumstances of the late 1970s and the 1980s witnessed the re-emergence of conservative values, best represented by the election of the Republican president, Ronald Reagan (the ex-cowboy actor). The cultural parallel to this was the phenomenal success of blockbuster films such as STAR WARS, RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK, ROCKY, RAMBO, AND their consequent sequels.

The promotion of entrepreneurial individualism inherent in "Reaganomics" is ideologically allied by Ryan and Kellner with these films in their promotion of "superior entrepreneurial individuals." Pauline Kael implicates the directors with the corporate terminology she employs in suggesting that George Lucas and Steven Spielberg "think just like the marketing division." (Kael, 1986, p. 211) If so then this conservative, corporate mentality is paired with a fascination with earlier genre film, a fascination which also partly fuelled the "liberal" generically transformative films. Many other films made in the conservative mould by less "cine-literate" (cinema obsessed) directors incorporated modifications to genre which had been instigated in the so-called "liberal" films. This phenomenon is accounted for by Kellner and Ryan as a result of the critique of conservative forms.

The period of contestation leaves its mark, however. After criticism, ideology cannot simply continue as it was. It must recompose itself in terms of its adversary. It is significant, therefore, that a seventies DIRTY HARRY film like MAGNUM FORCE must respond to criticism of vigilantism aimed at DIRTY HARRY by showing Harry fighting police vigilantes.

(Kellner and Ryan, 1988, p. 84)

Thus in FIRST BLOOD the hero Rambo, the agent of American



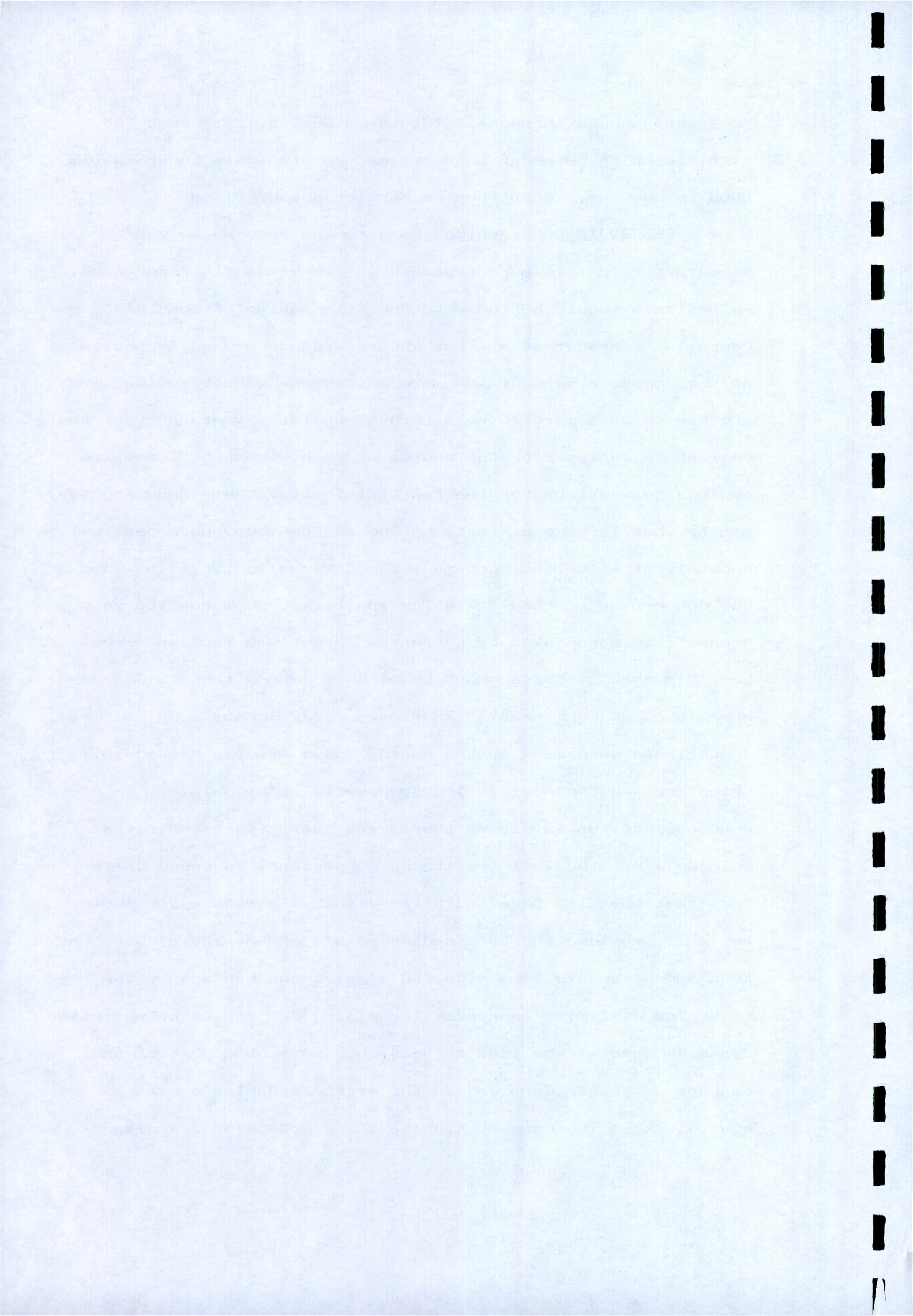
imperialism, is offered as a "victim" of the Vietnam war. He is a soldier who did his job overseas, but is unable to deal with life in the wake of the war. In the 1970s this would have been the basis for a critique of the government which sent him off to war and which leaves him disenfranchised upon his return, but this issue is avoided in favour of a one ^{-man} guerilla war scenario and in the end it is the fatherly military figure who mediates peace. This is compounded in the sequel RAMBO where the "victim" gets to play out his revenge on the "agressors", The Vietnamese, in a sense refighting and winning the war.

In the "buddy-buddy cop movies" of the late 1980s, such as LETHAL WEAPON, SAIGON and RUNNING SCARED, the incorporation of "liberal" concerns is more gracefully accomplished. In these films there are black and white partnerships fostered around a mutual respect, which are keyed to audience sensitivities with regards rascism in depictions. One useful function of this trend, as interpreted by some critics, is that (in addition to placating race concerns) it manages to deflect otherwise potential homosexual pairings, by maintaining a permanent seperation between the two men.

Films such as THELMA AND LOUISE, THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS and ALIENS have been welcomed as developments in terms of women's roles. But arguably, the only significant change which unites these films is the depiction of armed women, euphemistically referred to as "empowerment." These modifications, within what are essentially conservative films during the course of the 1980s, have been received as

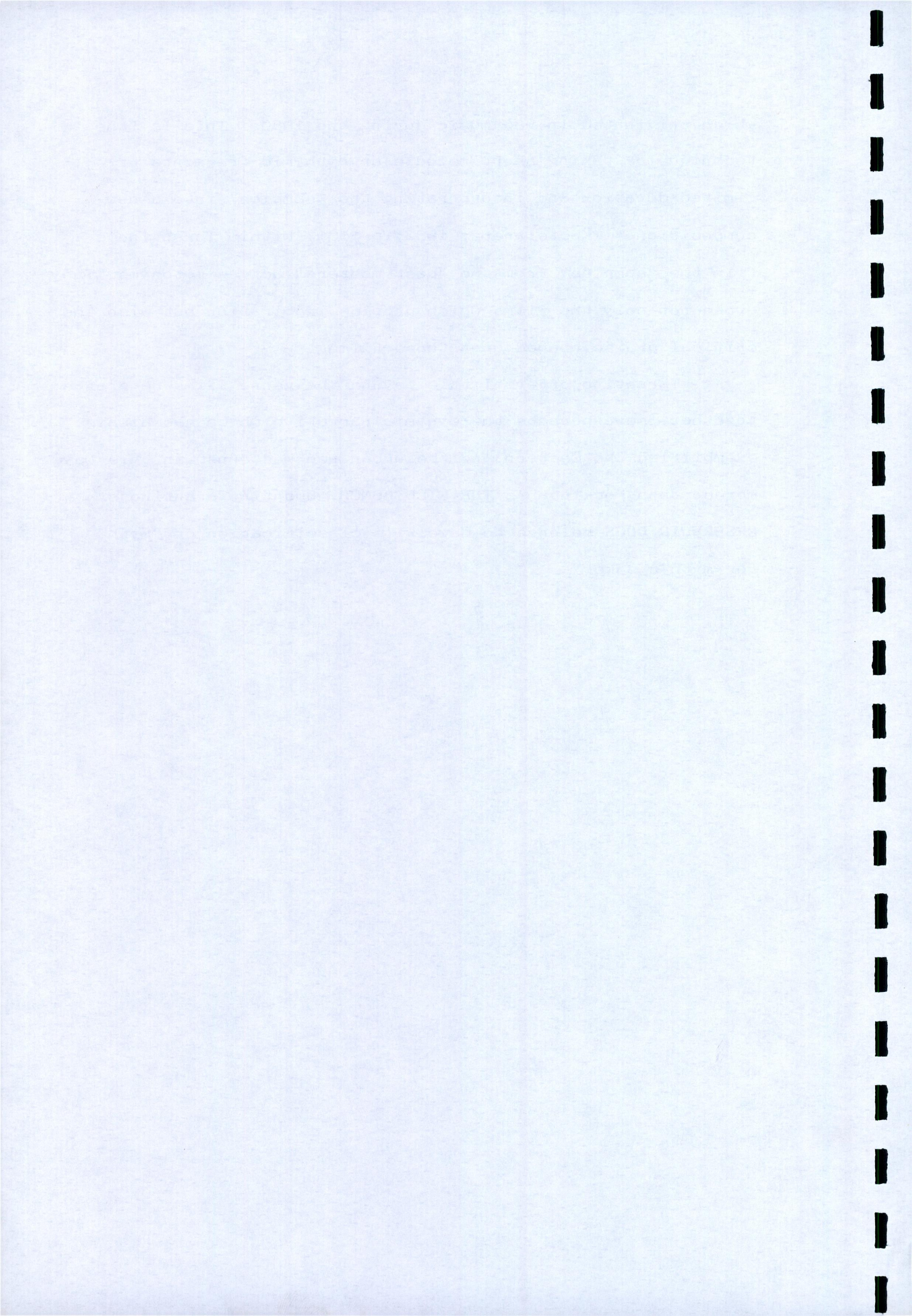
"mainstream breakthroughs." (Glover, 1992, p. 235) What is significant in terms of these films' relationship to RESERVOIR DOGS is how they learn from an earlier set of films.

RESERVOIR DOGS, which its director sees as a "genre based art film", is more explicit in its cinematic references, as befits a "would-be" heir to the film-making of Scorsese, Coppolla, Schrader et al. But the references are as mechanical as the accommodations of the more mainstream recent movies. They are played to a more "cine-literate" audience where part of the delight is in spotting the source of each vignette. Tarantino employs conventions for their artificiality, their "movie"-ness, making what Terence Rafferty called a "homemade pharmaceutical cocktail of allusions, pop music, and visual jolts." The lack of any concern other than "twisting the form", as Tarantino says himself, is noted also by Rafferty. "Sometimes you can almost hear him shout encouragement to himself. 'Who's the new Scorsese? Who's the new Peckinpah?'" (Rafferty, 1992,) Many such comparisons were made in the overall wave of critical acclaim which greeted the movie. (Its success is undeniable, it continues to run in cinema nearly one year after its initial release.) But the logic for these comparisons is based on the fact that the directors and films cited in exalting the movie not only provided the form and structure of the movie, but that form and structure were also the significant content of the film. The stylistic appropriation played for laughs or narrative dynamism denotes the idea of pastiche, so much a part of the concept of "postmodernism" in the arts. Tarantino's film is equivalent in its construction to the practice of "sampling"

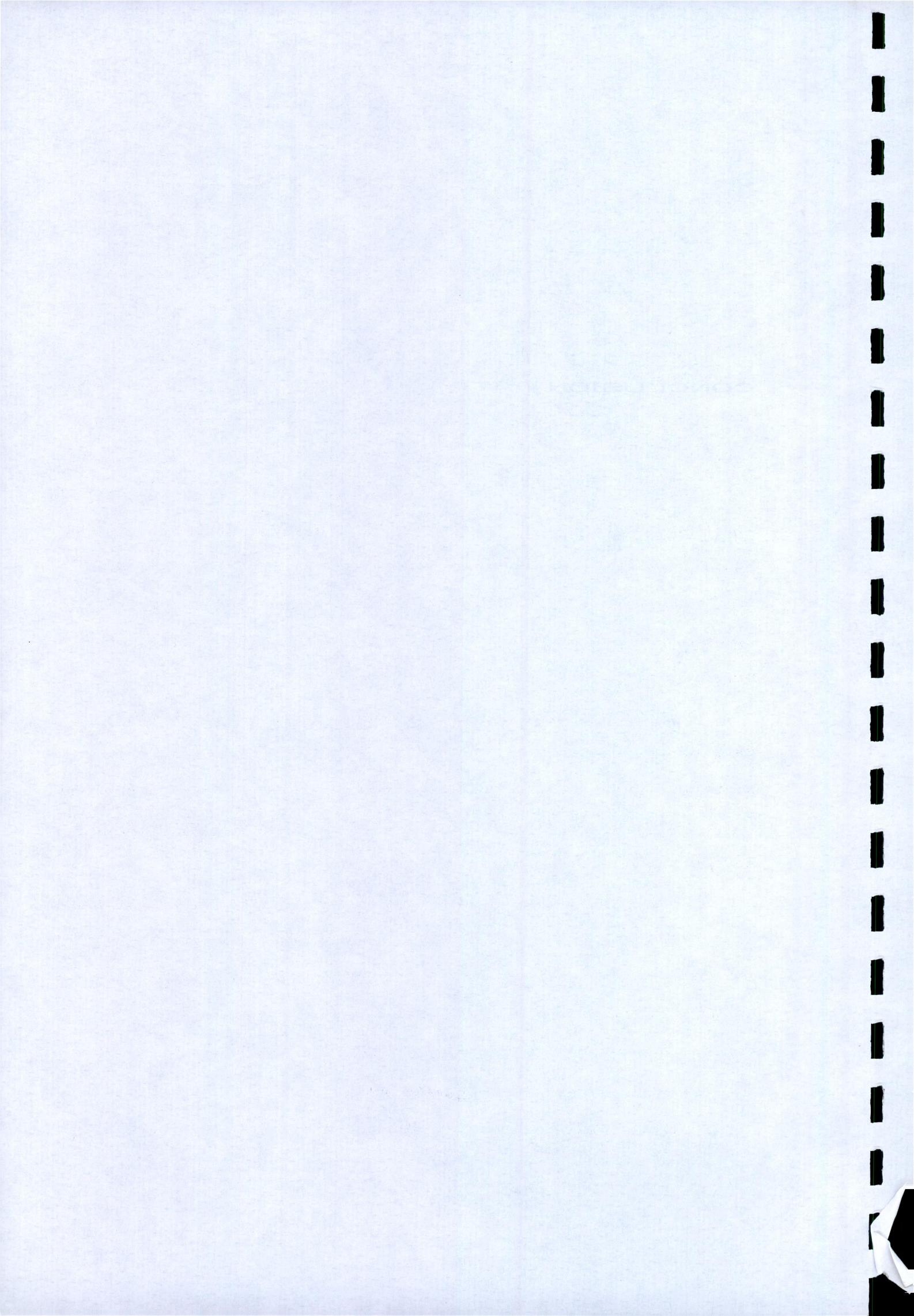


which originated in rap music during the 1980s. This is "the technique of taking short melodic or rhythmic fragments of limited duration and incorporating the 'samples' into a new composition." (Kostelanetz, 1993, p. 191) Within Tarantino's film the "samples" from the "past-masters" act as metonyms. They evoke not only the films which provide inspiration but also the critical praise heaped upon those films.

Tarantino offers little beyond the genre films he grafts together, save perhaps the dynamic narrative which has always exemplified the Western and the urban neo-Westerns. In this way, more so than Peckinpah's THE WILD BUNCH, Quentin Tarantino's RESERVOIR DOGS belongs to Cawelti's classification of "myth for myth's sake."



CONCLUSION

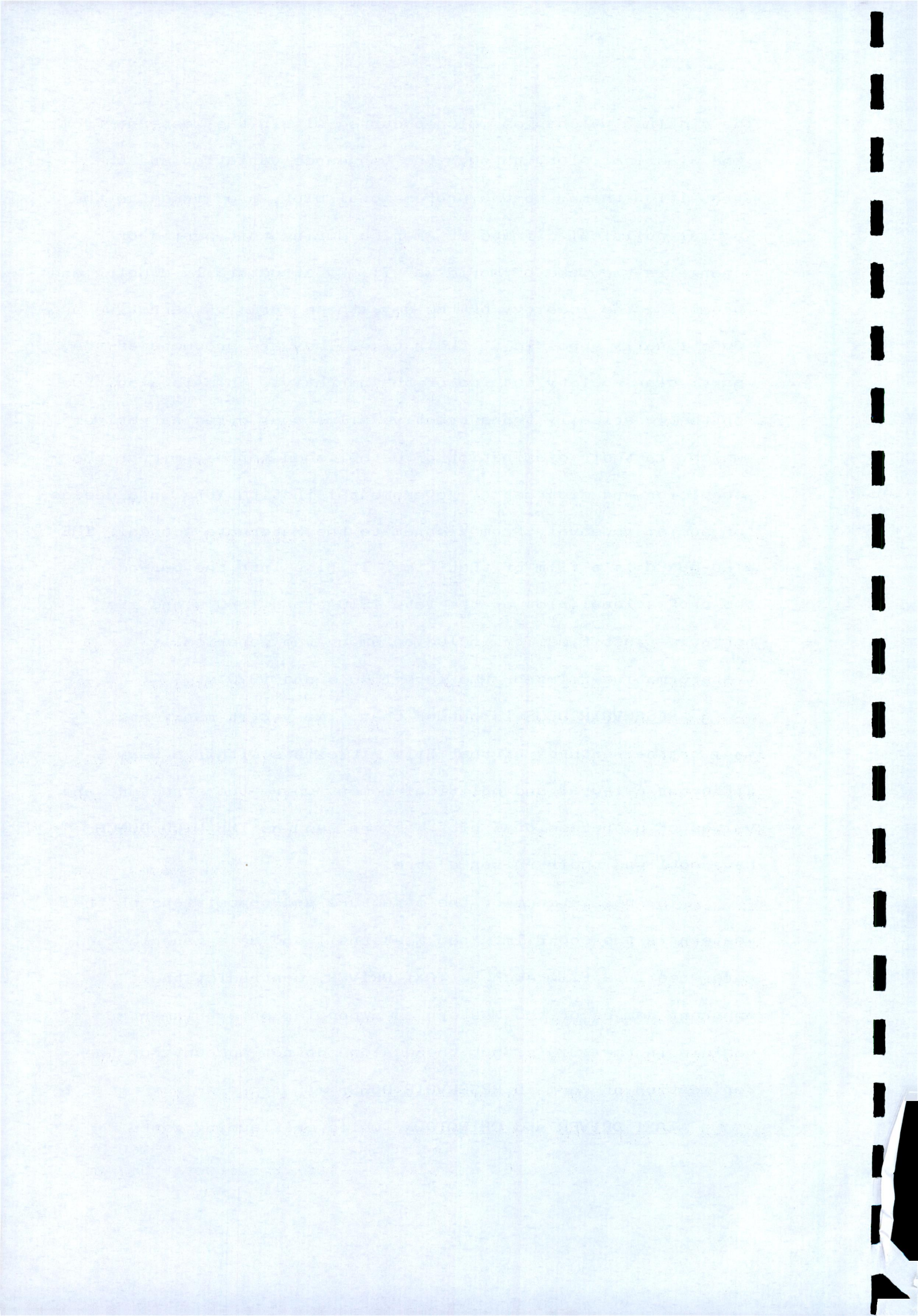


The distinctive changes which occurred within the Western, from the classical plot, through the vengeance variation and the transition theme, to the professional plot, are linked to the social/political climate of America during that period of change in the wake of World War II. By structurally echoing and promoting the ideology of the day, these forms of narrative are functionally specific to their time. They are products of the particular society outside of the narrative. This is also true of the generically transformative films that offer narratives which, in their examination of established genres, mirror the suspicion and distrust of governmental institutions in a decade of social upheaval, from Vietnam to the Watergate scandal. THE WILD BUNCH is a film of that time. It fits into the period of the professional plot of the late 1950's and 1960's and its narrative justifies its inclusion among the generically transformative films of the late 1960's and 1970's.

RESERVOIR DOGS is not of that time yet it manifests many of the features of that film. It exists within a very different cultural and political moment where the structure and values of a professional plot Western such as THE WILD BUNCH have outlived their raison d'etre.

The persistence of the structure and oppositions of the Western in the cop film, "neo-Westerns", and as a generic reference in a film such as TAXI DRIVER, contradict the apparent demise of the Western as a popular entertainment vehicle in the 1970's. But these alone do not account for the replication of form in RESERVOIR DOGS.

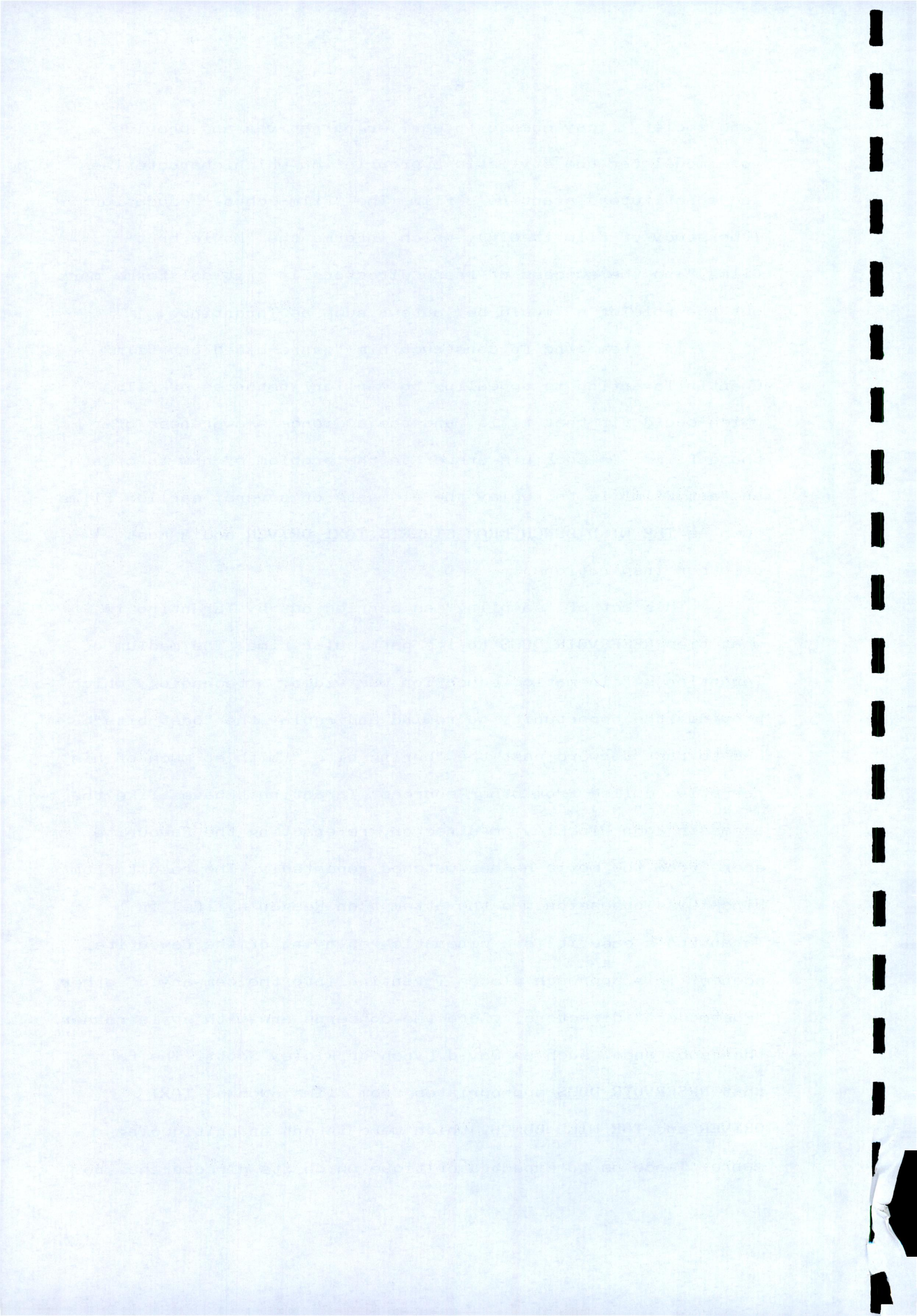
TAXI DRIVER and CHINATOWN, while critiquing genre



(and society), pay homage to earlier narratives and provide a role model for the stylistic appropriation which characterises and constitutes Tarantino's film. The "film-school" education (the study of film itself), which informs the "Movie-brat" films, and the success of these directors in critical terms mark out the role of a "would-be" auteur such as Tarantino.

In attempting to construct his "genre-based art film" Quentin Tarantino is appealing to earlier instances of films which could fit that title, and the audience's awareness of those films. As such his answer to the problem of how to create an "art film" is to replay the elements of several earlier films such as THE WILD BUNCH, MEAN STREETS, TAXI DRIVER and a host of other inspirations.

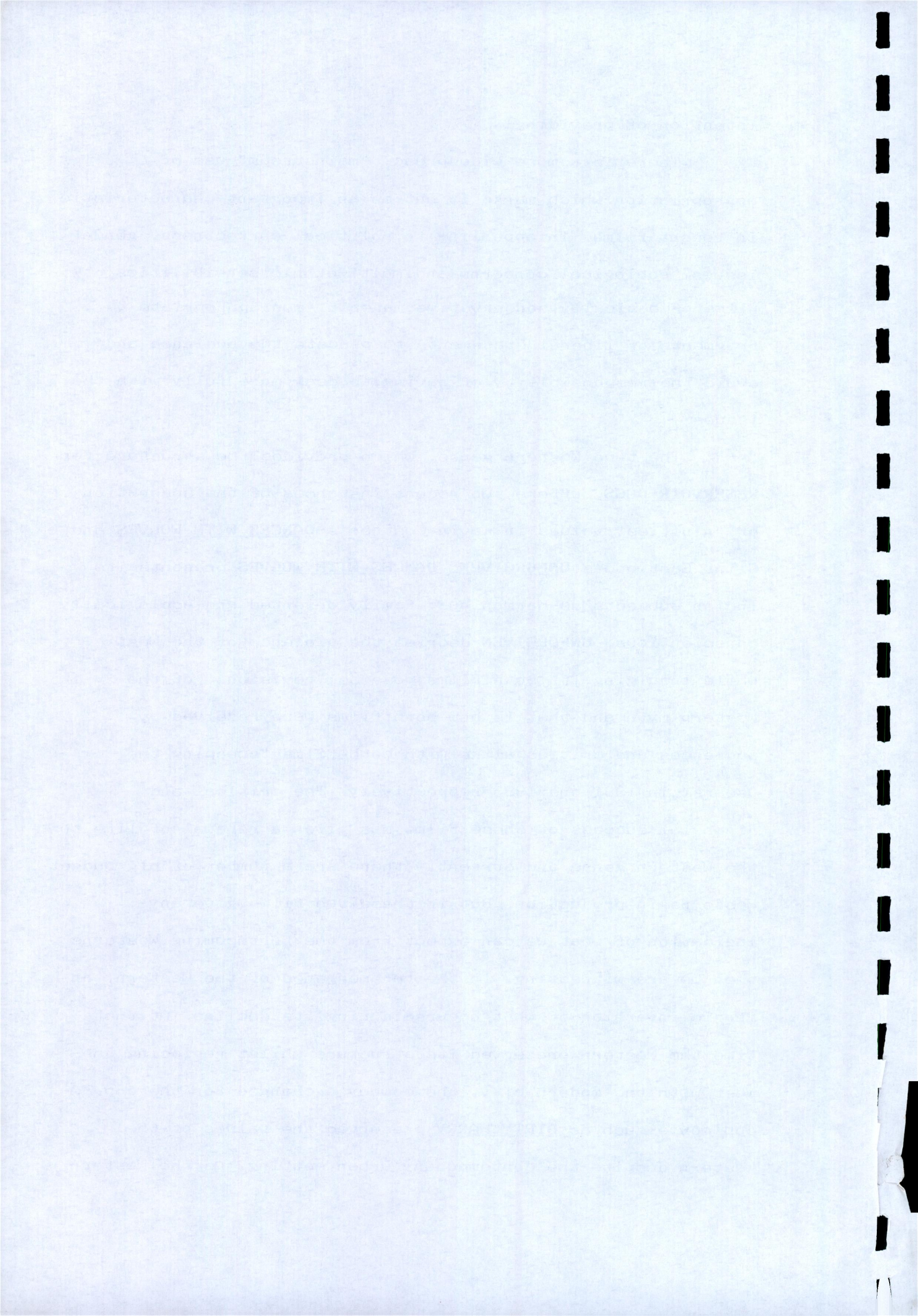
This act of "sampling" as carried out by Tarantino is what ties RESERVOIR DOGS to its particular time. The medium of Tarantino's "cinematic" education was video, a technology which provides the opportunity to rewind and replay the "best bits" and to fast forward past the "boring bits." With so much of his narrative culled from other sources, Tarantino behaves like the assassin John Hinckley as director, re-enacting the favourite scene from the movie he has watched repeatedly. The result from Hinckley's obsession was the attempt on Reagan's life. In Tarantino's case it is a cinematic replaying of the favourite scenes. This approach places Tarantino into the company of other "Postmodern" directors, where the concerns are with style rather than substance, such as David Lynch or Ridley Scott. The fact that RESERVOIR DOGS appropriates from films such as TAXI DRIVER and THE WILD BUNCH, which were intent on critiquing genre, leads us to expect a critique which its director has no



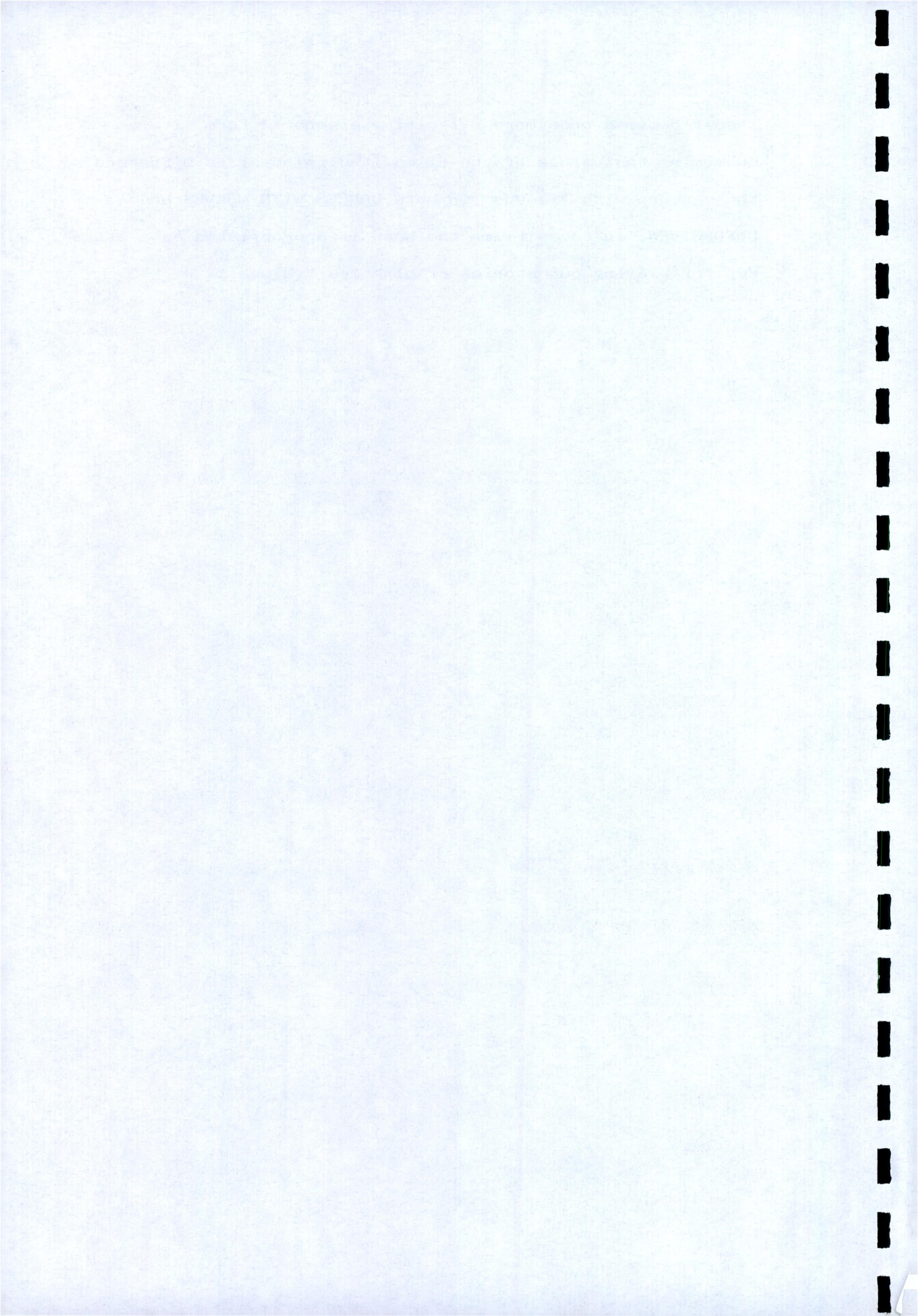
intention of providing.

There is a more widespread, "mainstream" use of appropriation which marks it out as an important characteristic in recent films. In appealing to political correctness, gender issues, ecological concerns and multi-ethnic sensibilities, films of basically conservative material can appropriate fragments of liberal statements to placate the audience and avoid the responsibility of having to deal more fully with the issues.

The true Western genre, which provides the structure for RESERVOIR DOGS, offers two recent instances of the absorption of "nineties" values in Kevin Costner's DANCES WITH WOLVES and Clint Eastwood's UNFORGIVEN. DANCES WITH WOLVES presents its Indian subjects as harmonious, family oriented and ecologically conscientious. UNFORGIVEN decries the violence of the West while indulging it. Both films pose as "revisions" of the Western myth and that is how both films were received by audiences and critics alike with both films "sweeping the Oscars" in 1991 and 1993 respectively. The critical and financial success of these films has given a renewal of life to the Western genre and currently there are a number of big budget Westerns in production. But if these two films give any indication of what we can expect from the forthcoming Westerns then we are witnessing, in the re-emergence of the Western, an ironic inversion of what occurred during its decline. At that time the Western preserved its structure whilst replacing the West with the modern city, the cowboy exchanged for the cop. A cop movie such as DIRTY HARRY preserved the values of the Western despite the contemporary urban setting. As the Western

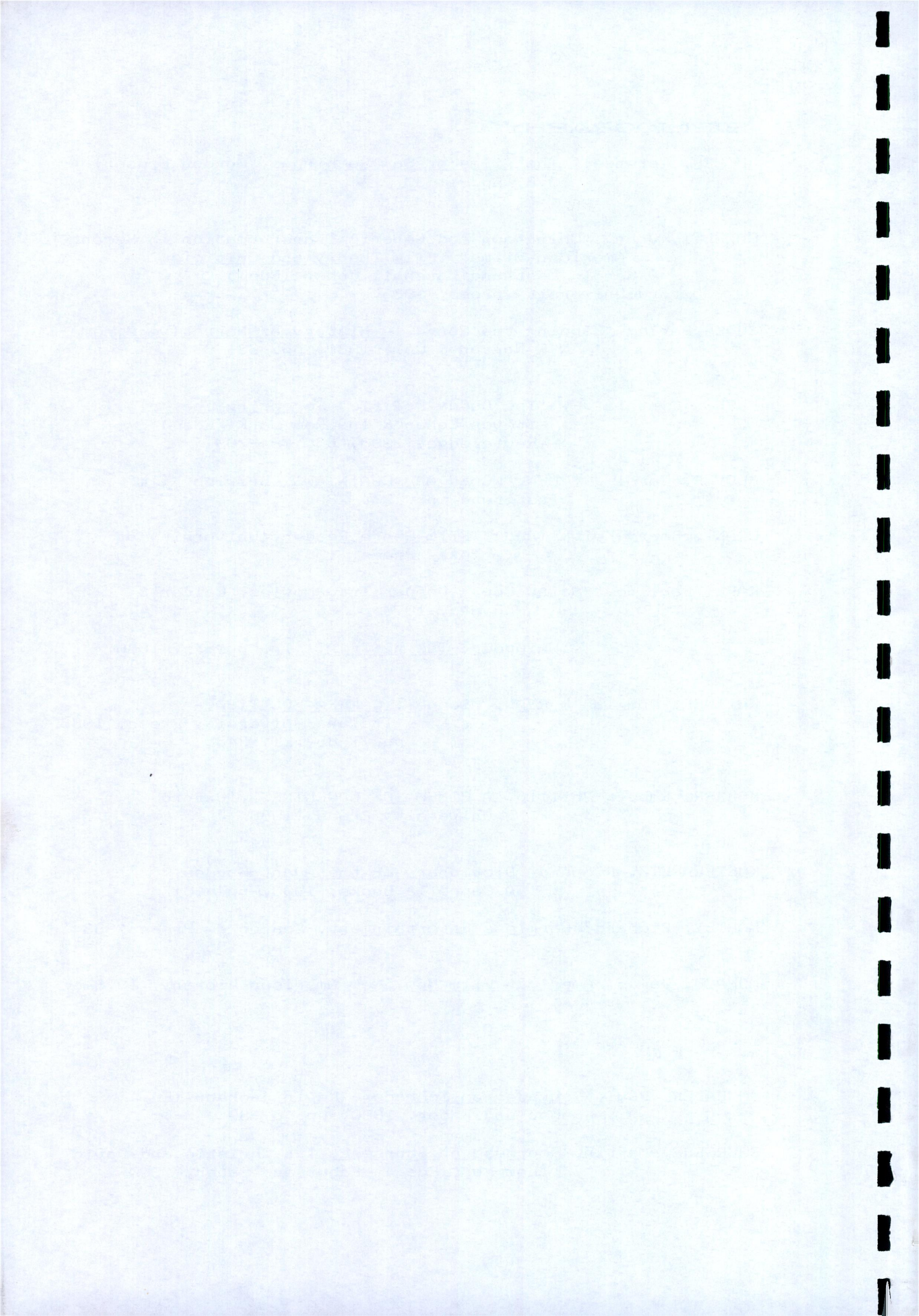


itself becomes once more a legitimate generic form it is subsuming the values of the films it displaces, as witnessed by the concern with "issues" in both DANCES WITH WOLVES and UNFORGIVEN. In these films the West is appropriated as a stage set for playing out stories of nineties "values."



BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BUTLER, Terence, The films of Sam Peckinpah, Gordon Fraser, 1979, pp. 11-33
- CAWELTI, John, "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films", Film Theory and Criticism Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (Eds.), Oxford University press, 1985
- COOK, David, "Zapping the Cong", A History of Narrative Cinema W.W Norton & Co., 1981, pp. 631-633
- FUCHS, Cynthia J., "The Buddy Politic" Screening The Male, Steven Cohan & Ina Rae Hark (Eds.) Routedledge, 1993, pp. 194-209
- GLOVER, Carol J., MEN, WOMEN AND CHAINSAWS, British Film Institute pp. 234-235
- GRANT, Barry Keith (Ed.), Film Genre Reader, University of Texas Press, 1986
- KAEL, Pauline, "Saint Cop", Deeper Into Movies, Calder & Boyars, 1975 p.385
- _____ "Whipped", Taking It All In, Boyars, 1986
- KELLNER, Douglas & RYAN, Michael, CAMERA POLITICA, Indiana University Press, 1988 pp.77-85, 217-243
- KOLKER, Robert Phillip, A CINEMA OF LONELINESS, Oxford University Press, 1988
- KOSTELANETZ, Richard, Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes, A Cappella Books, 1993, pp. 191
- MALTBY, Richard, Harmless Entertainment, Scarecrow Press 1983 pp. 185
- MONACO, James, American Film Now, New American Library, 1979
- SCHRADER, Paul, Schrader on Schrader, Kevin Jackson (Ed.) Faber and Faber, 1990, pp. 67-80
- SCORSESE, Martin, Scorsese on Scorsese, Ian Christie and David Thompson (Eds.), Faber and Faber, 1990

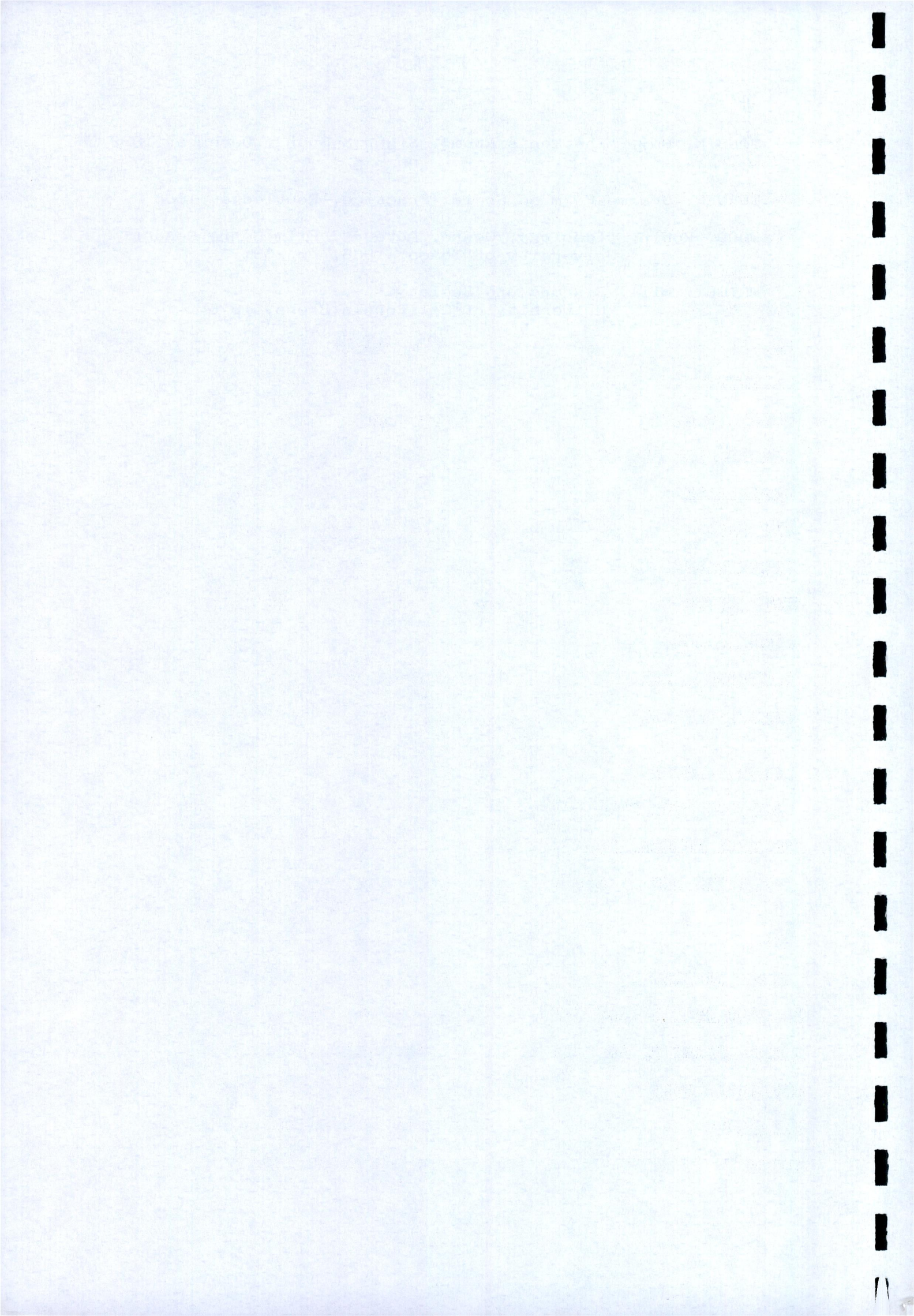


TAUBIN, Amy, "The Men's Room", Sight & Sound, December 1992
pp 3-8

TURNER, Graeme Film as Social Practice, Routledge, 1988

WOOD, Robin, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur", Film Genre Reader
University of Texas, 1986, pp. 59-73

WRIGHT, Will, Sixguns and Society,
University of California Press, 1975



FILMS

ALIENS, dir. James Cameron, 1986

BAD LIEUTENANT dir. Abel Ferrera, 1992

BIG SLEEP, THE dir. Howard Hawks, 1946

BLAZING SADDLES dir. Mel Brooks, 1974

BULLITT dir. Peter Yates, 1968

CHINATOWN dir. Roman Polanski, 1974

COOGAN'S BLUFF dir. Don Siegel, 1968

DANCES WITH WOLVES dir. Kevin Costner, 1991

DEATH WISH dir. Michael Winner, 1974

DIE HARD dir. John McTiernan, 1988

DIRTY HARRY dir. Don Siegel, 1971

EASY RIDER dir. Denis Hopper, 1969

FIRST BLOOD dir. Ted Kotcheff, 1982

GODFATHER, THE dir. Francis Coppolla, 1972

HENRY: PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER dir. John McNaughton, 1986

LETHAL WEAPON dir. Richard Donner, 1987

LONG GOODBYE, THE dir. Robert Altman, 1973

MALTESE FALCON, THE dir. John Huston, 1941

MAN BITES DOG dirs. R. Belvaux, A Bonzel,
B. Poelvoorde, 1992

McQ dir. John Sturges, 1974

MEAN STREETS dir. Martin Scorsese, 1973

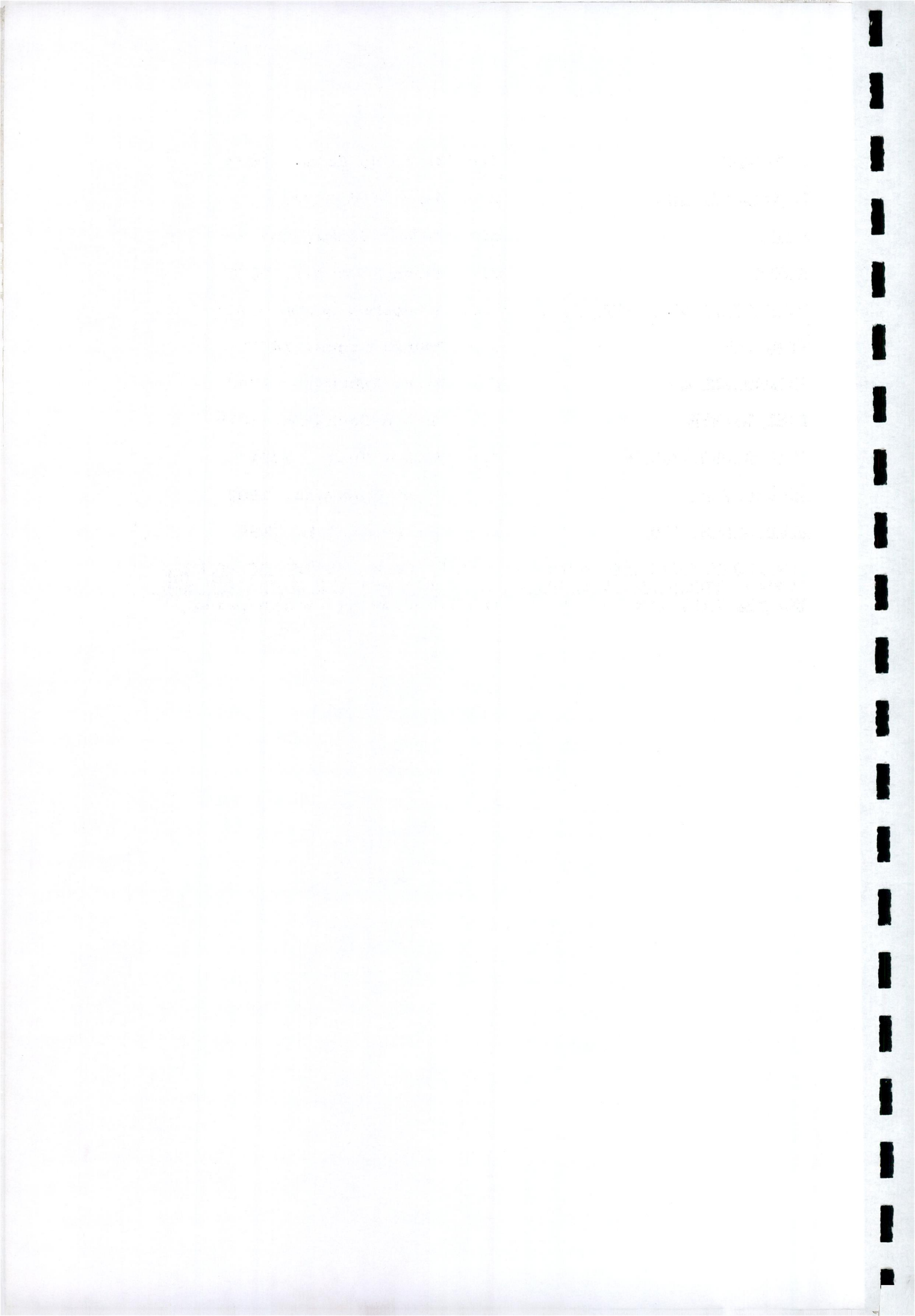
RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK dir. Steven Spielberg, 1981

RAMBO: FIRST BLOOD PART II dir. George Cosmatos, 1985

RESERVOIR DOGS dir. Quentin Tarantino, 1992

RIO BRAVO dir. Howard Hawks, 1959

ROCKY dir. John Avildsen, 1976



<u>SCARFACE</u>	dir. Brian de Palma, 1983
<u>SEARCHERS, THE</u>	dir. John Ford, 1956
<u>SHAFT</u>	dir. Gordon Parks, 1971
<u>SHANE</u>	dir. George Stevens, 1953
<u>SILENCE OF THE LAMBS, THE</u>	dir. Johnathan Demme, 1991
<u>STAR WARS</u>	dir. George Lucas, 1977
<u>SUDDEN IMPACT</u>	dir. Clint Eastwood, 1983
<u>TAXI DRIVER</u>	dir. Martin Scorsese, 1976
<u>THELMA AND LOUISE</u>	dir. Ridley Scott, 1991
<u>UNFORGIVEN</u>	dir. Clint Eastwood, 1992
<u>WILD BUNCH, THE</u>	dir. Sam Peckinpah, 1969

"DOLLARS TRILOGY" refers to the films A FISTFUL OF DOLLARS (1964), FOR A FEW DOLLARS MORE (1965) and THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY (1967), which were directed by Sergio Leone_

