"Man Turns His Back On His Family": Domestic Precarity and Fragile Masculinity in The Indian Runner and "Highway Patrolman"

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Abstract

This paper examines Sean Penn's film *The Indian Runner* in relation to the song he adapted it from, Bruce Springsteen's "Highway Patrolman." The film's plot closely follows the narrative of the song while greatly fleshing out the backstories of the central characters, brothers Joe and Frank Roberts, and adding in several other plot elements that help to allow the film to build to the dramatic climax that is lifted from the song's final verse. But what these various elements also do, beyond "flesh[ing] out the narrative spine provided by Springsteen's song," as Jeff Smith puts it in *Film Art*, is shed light on the film's dominant. From the film's first scene, it is evident that the film's environment is one in which masculinity is fragile and is constantly at risk of destroying both itself and the very foundation of domesticity. While "Highway Patrolman" is an effective under-six-minute morality play about family and ethical dilemmas when it comes to loved ones, in this paper I argue that *The Indian Runner*'s dominant is ultimately the deconstruction of the classic morality play via the inclusion of scenes and stylistic elements that consistently show both the detrimental impact of the main characters' damaged masculine identities on themselves and their families. In doing so, I examine the film's three structural levels -- stylistic, narrative, and thematic -- concluding that the film's use of defamiliarization on the first two levels allows the themes to be communicated in ways that both honor and transcend its inspiration.

As the legend goes, on January 3, 1982, Bruce Springsteen situated himself inside a bedroom in a ranch house he was renting in Colts Neck,

New Jersey, with a TEAC 144 four-track recorder, a Gibson J-200 acoustic guitar, and a handful of other instruments, and recorded the series of songs that would end up comprising his sixth studio album and first solo acoustic album, *Nebraska*. In his autobiography *Born to Run*, Springsteen describes the experience of recording these songs as "an unknowing meditation on my childhood and its mysteries…I was after a feeling, a tone that felt like the world I'd known and still carried inside me. The remnants of that world were still only ten minutes and ten miles from where I was living."[1] Warren Zanes further described these songs in his book *Deliver Me from Nowhere*, saying that they directly mirrored Springsteen's troubled and depressed mental state in the early 1980s, reflecting his overall "ambivalence about the world he came into and came from." One notable example of this is "the tension between familial allegiance and the law that underpins 'Highway Patrolman,'" a song that in many ways forms the centerpiece of the album.[2]

The song's lyrics tell the story of a man named Joe Roberts, a "highway patrolman" in a fictional town near the Ohio-Michigan border, who has a criminal brother named Frank. Despite constantly being alerted to his brother's violent criminal activity, Joe still finds himself bailing Frank out of trouble rather than allowing him to face consequences for his actions out of a "fraternal protectiveness" that culminates in him allowing Frank to escape over the Canadian border rather than arrest him for brutally beating a man in a bar.[3] Many of the other lyrics are rich with detail and historical significance, with allusions to Frank's service in the Army from 1965 to 1968

[1] Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.
[2] Zanes, Warren. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska*. New York: Crown, 2023.
[3] Rauch, Alan. "Bruce Springsteen and the dramatic monologue." *American Studies* 29, no. 1 (1988): 29-49.

(naturally coinciding with the Vietnam War, not mentioned by name in the song), Joe having gotten a farm deferment before an agricultural recession drove him to become a highway patrolman, and both Joe and Frank being romantically attracted to Joe's wife, Maria. Despite initially describing "Highway Patrolman" as "coming up short" in a note to his manager Jon Landau, Springsteen "would later rank the song and recording as one of his very best, exactly as it was,"[4] and his biographer Dave Marsh would call it "*Nebraska*'s finest story," with the protagonist Joe Roberts being "Springsteen's most fully and lovingly drawn character and the performance is as beautiful as it is exhausted."[5] Springsteen himself is careful to note in *Born to Run* that both "Highway Patrolman" and the next track in the album's sequence, "State Trooper," "were recorded only once each," something that ultimately comes across in the raw, cathartic nature of these songs even in the context of the album as a whole.[6]

Among those who also deeply responded to "Highway Patrolman" was actor Sean Penn. Around the same time Springsteen recorded the songs that would make up *Nebraska*, Penn was dating Springsteen's younger sister, Pam. As Penn would later tell his biographer Richard T. Kelly, he heard a demo of *Nebraska* before it came out, and later told Springsteen while drunk that he wanted to make a film out of "Highway Patrolman" someday.[7] While Springsteen failed to take him seriously at the time, the song's story continued to stick with Penn and, about eight years later, he made his directorial debut with a film called *The Indian Runner*, which

[4] Zanes, Warren. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska*. New York: Crown, 2023.
[5] Marsh, Dave. *Bruce Springsteen: Two Hearts, the Story*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2004.
[6] Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.
[7] Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.

acknowledges the Springsteen song's inspiration in its opening credits. The film's plot closely follows the narrative of the song while greatly fleshing out the backstories of Joe and Frank, showing how the "good brother/bad brother" dichotomy of "Highway Patrolman" ultimately damages both of them, and adding several other plot elements that help the film build to the dramatic climax, lifted almost directly from the song's final verse.

But what these various elements also do, beyond just "flesh[ing] out the narrative spine provided by Springsteen's song,"[8] as Jeff Smith puts it in *Film Art*, is shed light on the film's "dominant." As defined by Kristin Thompson, "the dominant is a formal principle that controls the work at every level, from the local to the global, foregrounding some devices and subordinating others."[9] When viewing *The Indian Runner*, it is easy to see certain traits that make it distinctive. Deane Williams, at the beginning of his chapter on *The Indian Runner* in his book *The Cinema of Sean Penn*, quickly identifies several of these, dubbing them "a host of figures—Bruce Springsteen, Harry Crews, the Johnstown Flood, Peter Nabokov's *Indian Running*, Dennis Hopper, Charles Bronson, Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, the Method —[assembled] to facilitate a narrative concerned with the ways in which places and times condition individuals."[10] And this connects directly with the list that Springsteen provides in *Born to Run*, where he says that his "family, [Bob] Dylan, Woody [Guthrie], Hank [Williams], the American gothic short stories of Flannery O'Connor, the noir novels of James M. Cain,

[8] Bordwell, David., Thompson, Kristin., Smith, Jeff. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill LLC, 2023.
[9] Thompson, Kristin. "Boredom on the Beach: Triviality and Humor in *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 89-109. Princeton University Press, 1988.
[10] Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

the quiet violence of the films of Terrence Malick and the decayed fable of director Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* all guided my imagination" during the writing and recording of the *Nebraska* album.[11]

However, when focusing on the film's formal aesthetics, the aesthetic elements within the film that make up its form and style, a clearer picture comes into play. From the film's very first scene, in which Joe shoots and kills a young man in self-defense only to feel tremendous guilt that is amplified later when the man's parents take their grief and anger out on him, it is evident that the film's environment is one in which masculinity is fragile and is constantly at risk of destroying both itself and the very foundation of domesticity. Indeed, Springsteen's "Highway Patrolman" is a deeply effective under-six-minute morality play about family and ethical dilemmas when it comes to loved ones, highlighted by the aforementioned "good brother/bad brother" dynamic of Joe and Frank. In contrast, *The Indian Runner*'s dominant is ultimately the deconstruction of the classic morality play (i.e., the breaking down of the sort of story used to teach moral/ethical lessons) via the inclusion of scenes and stylistic elements that consistently show the detrimental impact of Joe and Frank's fraternal dynamic on themselves and their families, and thereby illustrate a deeper connection with the broader life and works of Springsteen regarding both masculinity and domesticity.

Using Kristin Thompson's neoformalist analytical model from the "Boredom on the Beach" chapter of her book *Breaking the Glass Armor* as an outline, one in which she analyzes a film's formal aesthetics on three structural levels, I will likewise examine the three structural levels of *The Indian Runner*—stylistic (the level pertaining to the film's visual and

[11] Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

cinematic style), narrative (the level pertaining to the film's plot), and thematic (pertaining to the film's themes). In doing so, I will look primarily at the film's use of defamiliarization (i.e., the process by which a work of art presents a familiar object as strange or unfamiliar), which, as Thompson notes, is crucial for this form of analysis because it focuses on how the film "seeks to prolong and roughen our experience—to induce us to concentrate on the processes of perception and cognition in and of themselves, rather than for some practical end."[12] And particularly in comparison to other competing models of critical film analysis, Thompson's model will help foreground what is central to the film's deconstructive practices, as well as highlight the means by which the film is formally complex in ways that are deeply effective without drawing particular attention to itself

I. The Stylistic Level

From the opening prologue of *The Indian Runner*, a dark, almost sinister stylistic template is set. While Joe provides the opening narration explaining the process by which Native American hunters trap and kill deer, the film shows a series of slow-motion, fuzzy moving images visually illustrating this process one by one, with moments of black in between and heartbeats accentuating the transitions. While this exact sort of editing pattern will not be repeated in the rest of the film, what this prologue does immediately establish is the film's common pattern of defamiliarization. Here, Penn takes a situation commonly portrayed in films set in the American heartland—that of a hunter killing a deer—and breaks it down to present a fragmented depiction of it that fully emphasizes the violence of

[12] Thompson, Kristin. "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 3–46. Princeton University Press, 1988.

the practice, whereas most other films are timid when it comes to the kill shot. This is a perfect example of what Kristin Thompson refers to as a "roughened form," which "encompasses all types of devices and relations among devices that would tend to make perception and understanding less easy."[13] Color is mostly absent from the scene with the exception of the brown skin of the deer and the Native America hunter's coat and, most importantly, the deer's blood after it is killed by the hunter. The scene as a whole is lit in such a way that the overall features of the deer and the hunter are obscured in silhouette, with even the face of the hunter never clearly seen. And the fragmented nature of the sequence construction also helps to imply a ritualistic nature to this violence, something that will become much more significant when looking at the thematic structural level later.

Following the prologue and subsequent opening credits, more of the film's stylistic tendencies start to come into play and, as Deane Williams notes, "the place of *The Indian Runner* is evoked."[14] But even in the process of evoking the film's place, Penn still uses defamiliarization tactics that force the audience to see a common location in a way that fits the sinister, unforgiving milieu that will come to define the rest of the film. He does this in this first post-opening credits scene via three establishing shots, the first being a close-up of snow-covered wheat, followed by a shot of a dirt road stretching toward a white light in the distance and another close-up of a barbed-wire fence. By not revealing the precise location at this juncture and instead focusing on the cold, harsh nature of the surrounding environment,

[13] Thompson, Kristin. "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 3–46. Princeton University Press, 1988.
[14] Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Penn is able to establish what Williams refers to as "an unspecified mid-west America…that is prefigured by the titles which tell us that it was 'inspired by the song Highway Patrolman by Bruce Springsteen…provid[ing] an immediate intertext with [Springsteen's] 1982 album *Nebraska*."[15] And indeed, the cold, bleak nature of Penn's cinematography in these opening shots is more than a little evocative of the *Nebraska* album itself and even the album's cover, which is a black-and-white photograph from the front seat of a car driving down a two-lane rural highway. As well, the choice to immediately emphasize elements of this landscape such as snow-covered wheat and a barbed-wire fence, provokes instant feelings of decay and isolation that likewise match the feelings that Springsteen captures on *Nebraska* and "Highway Patrolman," both in the characters as well as the sparse acoustic arrangements and vocals.

Much more concrete elements of the stylistic level come into play here once the protagonist, Joe, is formally introduced to the audience. The very manner in which he is introduced, via the sudden arrival of his police car chasing a young man down a rural two-lane highway, establishes him as one with the location, as the chase he is engaged in is intercut with other establishing shots, including of a snow-covered farmland complete with a windmill, a church with its steeple stretched high into the sky, and a factory with smoke billowing out of its smokestack. His job, as a police officer in rural Nebraska with the Cass County Sheriff's Office, is routinely emphasized in a visual way throughout the film, an authority figure as ingrained an institution in this town as its farms, churches, and factories. As well, editing the sequence in this manner serves as another form of

[15] Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

defamiliarization, as it places equal emphasis on the surrounding rural environments as it does on the car chase, a method that can be disorienting to the spectator and in this case conditions them to view the location as equally important to the action happening on screen, especially since this car chase is not really causally significant. While it doesn't necessarily serve as a "delay," a film editing/storytelling technique that can either compress nor expand time, it does, in a certain sense, serve as what Thompson refers to as "impeding material" in how it distracts from the main action, "drawing our attention…and thus complicating our sense of the narrative."[16]

However, Penn quickly uses formal stylistic devices to also emphasize the film's deep-rooted focus on violence and fragile masculinity, the classical dimension of Penn's narration, and in this way, he is doing what Thompson describes as making these "stylistic devices…subservient to the narrative line through through-going compositional motivation."[17] As the car Joe is chasing screeches to a halt and Joe subsequently slams on his brakes, the scene goes into slow motion. The slow motion persists as the two men exit their cars, and the young man Joe is chasing draws his gun, repeatedly firing at Joe while running away from him. Eventually, Joe draws a shotgun and shoots the man directly in the chest, blood visibly bursting from him as he falls to the ground dead, the slow motion only stopping as the camera zooms in on a mortified Joe staring at the man. This particular use of slow motion, as well as match-on-action editing (i.e., a film editing technique that cuts from one shot to the next while the subject of

[16] Thompson, Kristin. "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 3–46. Princeton University Press, 1988.
[17] Thompson, Kristin. "Neoformalist Film Analysis: One Approach, Many Methods." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 3–46. Princeton University Press, 1988.

said shot is in motion), to accentuate violence will be used again in the film's climactic car chase between Joe and Frank, in a way that provides a strong parallel with the opening sequence while also subverting the spectator's expectations given Joe's ultimate decision at the end of the film.

But what this shot also establishes that ends up being a key stylistic motif is Joe's isolation. This situates the film in much of the same mindset that Springsteen himself was in when writing "Highway Patrolman" and the rest of the *Nebraska* album. As Warren Zanes writes regarding Springsteen's isolation at that time, "From that point forward Springsteen would never again be in a band the way he'd been in one for *The River*. He was not someone's boyfriend, didn't even belong in his own neighborhood. He was alone and in *Nebraska*."[18] Starting from when the camera zooms in on Joe after he has shot and killed this young man, Penn evokes a similar isolation to the one Springsteen experienced, frequently depicting Joe alone in the camera frame when he is outside of a domestic situation. This is particularly pronounced when he faces the parents of the young man he killed in self-defense, as he is shown sitting alone at his desk while the man's mother tearfully calls him a murderer and his father bursts into an angry rendition of the folk song "John Henry" (a song that, coincidentally, would be covered by Springsteen with his "Seeger Sessions Band" fifteen years after this film's release). As opposed to the imposing, authoritative presence Joe had when shooting the young man in self-defense, here he is framed in a way that effectively strips him of power and authority. Even when he goes back home to his wife, Maria, and discusses what happened with her, Penn still frames him in such a way that communicates this

[18] Zanes, Warren. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska*. New York: Crown, 2023.

isolation. In fact, it is only after Frank surprises Joe and Maria in their home eight minutes into the film that Penn slowly begins to frame Joe alongside others in a communal context. But this stylistic device will continue to come back at various points throughout the narrative to further illustrate Joe's own fragile masculinity.

And especially once Frank firmly enters into the story, Penn begins to develop other defamiliarizing stylistic devices that carry the film through to its end, the most crucial being that of the titular "Indian runner." While the "legend of the Indian runner" is first explained in the aforementioned prologue, it is not until Penn begins showing "the ghost-like American Indian figure…that drifts past [Frank] at several intervals in the film" that it firmly solidifies itself as a stylistic device subservient to both the narrative and thematic lines throughout the film.[19] In each case, Penn uses a combination of eerie sound design evoking different sounds such as howling winds or banging drums, as well as careful editing, to emphasize this figure's haunting nature to Frank, most notably at the film's end when a vision of the man running across the road causes Frank to stop dead in his tracks while being chased by Joe. And, as will be discussed later, the way this specific sequence is edited and filmed is in direct parallel to the film's opening sequence, particularly in terms of the use of match-on-action editing, which is a key way that both sequences are able to engage in defamiliarization.

II. The Narrative Level

[19] Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

As Thompson in writes in her "Boredom on the Beach" chapter, in contrast to the film she was writing about (Jacques Tati's *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*), "a typical Hollywood-style film would have a clear-cut pattern of narrative development; this pattern might involve a changing relationship among characters, as in a love story…"[20] And while *The Indian Runner* is not a love story in any classical sense, the central narrative pattern is based on the changing fraternal dynamic between Joe and Frank, and how this damages both of them. This changing dynamic, and the damage it ultimately inflicts, is something that Penn's changes to the story of "Highway Patrolman" come to highlight, and these changes seem to create a tension between Springsteen's original and Penn's adaptation. More specifically, while the narrative of "Highway Patrolman" centers on Joe's dilemma over how to handle his dual roles as law enforcement officer and brother, this narrative of *The Indian Runner* is even more internal, being based on Joe "becom[ing] haunted by the possibility that he and his brother are doomed to be temperamental opposites—that they have nothing in common but blood."[21]

Following the prologue and opening sequence, which mainly seek to establish the film's central thematic elements and certain stylistic devices, *The Indian Runner*'s narrative can be roughly divided into six main narrative developments that form the structure of the overall story:

> Frank's character is introduced, sneaking into Joe and Maria's house after returning early from his tour in Vietnam.

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[20] Thompson, Kristin. "Boredom on the Beach: Triviality and Humor in *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*." In *Breaking the Glass Armor*, 89-109. Princeton University Press, 1988.
[21] Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.

1. Following Frank's overnight stay with Joe and Maria and his brief car ride with Joe the following morning, Frank hops a freight train out of town, leaving Joe to relay the brief visit to their parents.
2. Joe learns that Frank has been imprisoned in Columbus, Ohio, for assaulting his girlfriend and will be released soon, so he decides to go and formally begin working toward his goal of "try[ing] and get close to him again" despite the obvious reservations of Maria and what he knows deep down will be Frank's own stubbornness toward anyone trying to help him.
3. Frank comes back to town after the suicide of his and Joe's father, bringing his girlfriend Dorothy with him, resulting in him and Joe growing closer again.
4. Frank and Dorothy conceive a child and get married while Frank works in construction.
5. While Dorothy is in labor giving birth to their child, Frank gets violently drunk and beats a bartender to death, which results in Joe chasing him down to the state line before allowing him to go.

While Frank's presence is the initial destabilizing force in this story and the main driver of the film's structure, it is Joe who still serves as the protagonist and narrator. The main sequence that opens the film after the credits, in which Joe shoots and kills a young man in self-defense while telling the audience via voiceover that he didn't believe his own justification for doing what he did, is a crucial narrative event even if it exists outside of the central narrative structure due to its severe implications for Joe's overall well-being by the time Frank arrives. As

Richard T. Kelly puts it, this incident leaves Joe "physically and mentally discomfited," which further helps to make his reunion with Frank "less than [he] had hoped."[22] This is even noticeable when Frank first sneaks into the house unbeknownst to Joe and Maria. Maria, thinking that someone has broken in, grabs the gun from the nightstand and sneaks downstairs, only to discover Frank. The fact that Maria, and not Joe, is taking charge in this scene as the protector of the house and family is a significant narrative detail in showing the weakened masculine state that Joe has been left in after the earlier tragedy, a state that he will ultimately never fully recover from in this film.

The voiceover narration Joe provides throughout the film also serves as an important narrative anchor for the story. Not only does the voiceover function as "a gesture that provides an equivalent to the song ["Highway Patrolman"]'s first-person perspective,"[23] it also serves as a crucial form of building connection with Joe as a protagonist through his revelation of both backstory and internal commentary throughout the film. In particular, the exact lines of voiceover that are heard after Joe shoots the young man in self-defense at the beginning speak volumes as to the fragile state of Joe's overall masculinity. His voiceover then tells the spectator shortly afterward that he had not seen Frank since he lost the family farm in 1965, a crucial piece of backstory that speaks to broader unfulfilled masculine desires that linger throughout the rest of the film. This piece becomes even more poignant when Joe's voiceover tells the spectator later that "I used to know my brother like I used to know I'd always be a farmer, but drifting off on the train that day was a stranger."

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[22] Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.
[23] Bordwell, David., Thompson, Kristin., Smith, Jeff. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill LLC, 2023.

The above line, in conjunction with the scene of Frank abruptly ending his visit home, does two crucial things. First, it deepens Joe's relationship with Frank by showing a change in his view of him. While in "Highway Patrolman," Springsteen's lyrics indicate that "it's been the same comedown" with Joe and Frank ever since their respective childhoods, this line shows that Joe's brotherly perspective of Frank has changed with this singular visit home. He always knew that Frank was the town hellraiser and troublemaker, but their respective experiences in law enforcement and the military have still changed them. And secondly, this line shows how Joe's familial and masculine dreams and ideals have always been interconnected to his own identity, and with both of these vanishing before his eyes, Joe is experiencing nothing short of an identity crisis, one that defines the narrative as seen through his eyes going forward in this film. And in many ways, this serves as yet another reflection of Springsteen's mindset at the time of writing "Highway Patrolman," when, in his own words, he "was simply a guy who was rarely comfortable in his own skin, whatever skin that might be. The idea of home itself, like much else, filled me with distrust and a bucket load of grief. I'd long convinced myself…almost…that homes were for everybody else."[24] As fundamentally different as Joe and Frank are, neither feels comfortable in their own skin or homes, both in *The Indian Runner* and in "Highway Patrolman."

Likewise, the deaths of Joe and Frank's mother and father within the film's first hour are vital in setting the stage for the unraveling of the family structure that will become a centerpiece of the film's final hour. Even when Frank decides to hop a freight train and leave town instead of seeing his parents, an early warning sign of what he will later do during the film's

[24] Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

climax, he still ultimately reaches out to his father during his imprisonment in Columbus, an act that both serves as a catalyst for Joe actively pursuing his goal of trying to get close to him and reinforces the overarching importance of the family structure. However, once both parents are dead and Joe and Frank are left to carry on the family name, the very foundation of domesticity is suddenly on incredibly shaky ground, and a relatively brief exercise in Frank becoming a family man prodded by Joe eventually proves not enough to be able to sustain it, even as both Maria and Dorothy continually serve as guiding lights for the hope of its sustainability.

Maria, in particular, is important when looking at the film's narrative in regard to the precarity of the family structure. Other than the aforementioned scene when she takes charge of grabbing the gun to protect her husband and son from a potential home invasion, she is also seen as a matriarchal leader in several other ways. When she is first introduced, she is seen grabbing a bottle of Johnnie Walker along with two glasses and pouring drinks for Joe and herself, taking control of her house while her husband sits in his guilt and shame. The spectator never even sees Maria's face until she is pouring the first glass, with the cinematography and editing, emphasizing the ritual of what she is doing, in yet another form of defamiliarization. Throughout the film, she is seen taking charge in a variety of ways, whether it is bringing in household income by tutoring other Mexican immigrants in English or taking care of Dorothy in addition to her own son after Dorothy and Frank's move into town. But her role in sustaining the family structure reaches its apex in the film's climax, when she is the sole family member present at the birth of Dorothy's son, acting as midwife while Joe and Frank are in the midst of a car chase to the state line. And while Maria does have a significant symbolic presence in "Highway Patrolman," with Heather Stur specifically arguing that she

represents "the importance of women to the Vietnam War narrative,"[25] here she takes on an even greater significance as the familial savior in the absence of men to uphold the family structure (and even her name and Latina heritage allow for Springsteen-esque biblical parallels given the name Maria being a variation on Mary, the mother of Jesus and patron saint of Mexico).

And, of course, it is in the film's aforementioned climax where the true implications of the narrative fully come to light. The editing structure of the opening sequence described earlier is mirrored but also expanded in this final sequence, as Penn intercuts Joe and Frank's car chase with Dorothy giving birth to her and Frank's son with support from Maria. Not only does this juxtaposition illustrate the natural endpoint of Frank's broken masculinity and the collapse of the family structure, but it also, as Jeff Smith puts it, "alter[s] alter the meaning of Springsteen's original [song]. While the song's lyric about a man who turns his back on his family seems to affirm Joe's allegiance to his brother, it implicitly condemns Frank, who at the end…abandons his wife and child."[26] And by this simple alternation in the narrative of the story, Penn is able to take a song that Springsteen himself would introduce in concert as being about "family and duty, and how, sometimes, it's hard to know what the right thing to do is with the ones that you love,"[27] and transform it into an even more complex cinematic narrative.

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[25] Stur, Heather. "Finding Meaning in Manhood after the War: Gender and the Warrior Myth in Springsteen's Vietnam War Songs." In *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream*, 111-122. Routledge, 2016.
[26] Bordwell, David., Thompson, Kristin., Smith, Jeff. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill LLC, 2023.
[27] Springsteen, Bruce. "Highway Patrolman," recorded August 20, 1984, track 6 on *08/20/1984, Brendan Byrne Arena, East Rutherford, NJ*, live.brucespringsteen.net, mp3.

III. The Thematic Level

Upon *The Indian Runner*'s theatrical release, film critic Roger Ebert was quick to note a thematic insight in the film that could also be said about "Highway Patrolman," that being the presence of its creator in both Joe and Frank. While recognizing that the film was inspired by Springsteen's song, Ebert speculates that "maybe it was also inspired, in part, by the two sides of Sean Penn's own character: here, in one person, is not only the media caricature of a hothead who gets in public shoving matches, but also the young man who is one of the three or four best actors of his generation."[28] This sort of Jekyll and Hyde personality that Ebert ascribes to Penn's character is one that Springsteen ascribed to himself on his 1987 *Tunnel of Love* album track "Two Faces," a retelling of his first marriage to Julianne Phillips in which he "swore to make her happy every day / And how I made her cry / Two faces have I…"[29] Here, Springsteen illustrates one side of him that seeks to serve his wife and make her happy, as well as another side that makes her cry. He expands on this in his autobiography, saying that "Over the years I had come to the realization that there was a part of me, a significant part, that was capable of great carelessness and emotional cruelty, that sought to reap damage and harvest shame," further saying that his "emotionally violent behavior" was "always cowardly and aimed at the women in my life."[30]

And yet, the other side of Springsteen, the one celebrated by feminist scholars such as Gina Barreca in her essay "Springsteen's Women: Tougher

[28] Ebert, Roger. "The Indian Runner." *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 4, 1991.
[29] Springsteen, Bruce. "Two Faces," recorded 1987, track 8 on *Tunnel of Love*, Columbia, mp3.
[30] Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

Than the Rest," is one who routinely centers strong women in his music. As Barreca notes, "the women in Springsteen's songs are feminists. Independent, loving, and courageous, she is nobody's object, property, or plaything."[31] Once Springsteen's public persona as bandleader, political activist and "voice of the people" is factored in, then it is easy to see how, when writing "Highway Patrolman," Springsteen could equally relate to both Joe and Frank, as, like Penn making *The Indian Runner*, Springsteen could see himself both in the volatile and destructive behavior of Frank as well as the caring dutiful leader of Joe. In the years leading up to recording "Highway Patrolman" in 1982, Springsteen drew attention for various things such as pulling his ex-girlfriend Lynn Goldsmith on stage at Madison Square Garden to humiliate her during a fit of rage, but also for becoming more socially conscious, particularly when turning one of his 1981 concerts at the Los Angeles Sports Arena into a benefit for the Vietnam Veterans of America. These two sides of him, in part stemming from what Warren Zanes describes as his "ambivalence about the world he came into and came from," therefore ended up manifesting themselves "in the tension between familial allegiance and the law that underpins "Highway Patrolman."[32] And in many ways, Springsteen's self-consciousness in writing "Highway Patrolman" served as a prelude to both his writing "Two Faces" and the broader *Tunnel of Love* album, as he was putting his inner demons on display for all to see while disguising them in two fictional characters.

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[31] Barreca, Gina. "Springsteen's Women: Tougher Than the Rest." In *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*, 163-169. Rutgers University Press, 2019.
[32] Zanes, Warren. *Deliver Me from Nowhere: The Making of Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska*. New York: Crown, 2023.

And while, as Ebert noted in his review quoted above, Joe and Frank function as stand-ins for Sean Penn as much as they do for Springsteen in *The Indian Runner*, Penn opted for a deeper thematic explanation for his characters' actions in the film. Going back to the film's very beginning with the explanation of "the legend of the Indian Runner" and what the motif symbolizes on a broader scale in the film, particularly since there is nothing in Springsteen's song to motivate this, Penn himself has credited Berkeley anthropology professor Peter Nabokov and his book *Indian Running: Native American History and Tradition* for providing the inspiration for the motif and, ultimately, the title of the film. He specifically explained its thematic significance as representing "our ancestral sins: the criminal past of the settlers in the United States, this hustled land. It inhabits some part of our subconscious, because it got passed on by our fathers, and their fathers, and those before. I viewed that as a sort of shared disease in the culture, and—it's a leap—but I wanted to see if that had anything to do, if not literally then politically, with the damaged spirit of people like Frank."[33] Deane Williams then makes the argument that the film "contains, at its heart, a reflection of the folk traditions of Native American culture only to throw light on the notion of original sin, which functions as the loosest kind of explanation for the actions of Frank."[34]

Another quote in Penn's interview refers back to Springsteen, specifically his song "Nebraska," the title track from the same album as "Highway Patrolman," which tells the story of Charles Starkweather's spree killings and their aftermath from Starkweather's perspective. When asked why he committed his heinous crimes, the last line of the song simply

[33] Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.
[34] Williams, Deane. *The Cinema of Sean Penn: In and Out of Place*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

says, "Sir, I guess there's just a meanness in this world," a statement that ultimately embodies the idea that some people's actions simply do not make logical or rational sense. When Springsteen asked Penn where Frank's anger in the film came from, Penn referred him to that last line on "Nebraska," saying "that was answer enough for me, because I don't think there's always an explanation for these things."[35] All of this being said, there are quite a few thematic threads in the film that further deepen the motif of the "Indian runner" figure beyond Penn's comments and Williams' interpretation.

First, throughout the film, the specter of the Vietnam War lingers in the background, from Joe's voiceover reflecting a letter written by Frank talking about fellow soldiers being disturbed by the bloodshed they had witnessed to Joe and Frank's father's first line about "the boys coming back…coming back real confused." And there is certainly a connection to be made between America's colonizing past on Native land and imperialist present in Vietnam. By the late 1960s, when *The Indian Runner* takes place, the Western film genre was just beginning to make these connections through implicit commentary, most notably in Sam Peckinpah's 1969 film *The Wild Bunch*. This film, a graphically violent revisionist Western depicting a group of aging outlaws fighting against a gang of Mexican revolutionaries, was described by scholar David Cook as being "a mythic allegory of American intervention in Vietnam" where "the victims of this 'heroic' violence are principally civilians caught in the crossfire."[36] In doing this, the film highlights how horrific acts of violence such as the My Lai massacre—in which American soldiers mass murdered hundreds of

[35] Kelly, Richard T. *Sean Penn: His Life and Times*. New York: Canongate U.S., 2004.
[36] Cook, David. *A History of Narrative Film*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996.

women, children, and senior citizens—are a deeply ingrained part of how America as a country has operated since white European colonizers first set foot on the North American continent.

Going back to *The Indian Runner* and Frank's Vietnam experience, it is noteworthy how even for Frank, a violent, unstable man who was known as "the town hellraiser" before going to Vietnam, the sheer horror of the violence he and his fellow soldiers witnessed there was impactful enough that he wrote home about it. And yet, Joe's voiceover is careful enough to emphasize that Frank was complaining that other soldiers were being disturbed by the killing they had seen, not himself. Still, one could certainly interpret those words as Frank talking about himself anyway. And once the motif of the "Indian runner" figure is introduced while Frank is riding in Joe's patrol car, Frank's suppressed guilt and trauma from his Vietnam experience appears to be manifested not in visions of Vietnamese or wounded soldiers, but in something far more symbolic and historical. Much like *The Wild Bunch* used its Western trappings to link America's involvement in the Vietnam War to the genocide that is part of America's policy of Manifest Destiny, *The Indian Runner* uses its titular motif to position Frank's experience in Vietnam within the larger history of American imperialism and destruction across generations.

And while Frank's Vietnam experience is not immediately introduced at the film's opening (it is introduced more than five minutes in via Joe's voiceover), the allusions to it start very early on, particularly when the shooting that begins the film occurs. In this case, the spectator is never offered any background for what the young man Joe is chasing did to warrant being in that position, nor is any explanation offered for why the young man then proceeded to shoot at Joe, which forced Joe to shoot and kill him in self-defense. In some ways, this immediately establishes

parallels to the senselessness and meaninglessness of war, specifically America's involvement in Vietnam. But even more significantly, the frequent comments during the film's first act about the post-traumatic stress of Frank's fellow soldiers in Vietnam seem to be as much about Joe's own guilt and shame from the shooting as they are about the soldiers (perhaps alluding to Springsteen's stated sentiment regarding "the common generational impact of a war that had touched everyone"[37]).

A particular line that Joe quotes from one of Frank's letters, which states "Guys out here expect their hair to stay dry in the rain" (i.e., they expect to stay strong and heroic in the midst of all of the horrific bloodshed happening around them), rings particularly true to Joe's own feelings. The possibility of killing in self-defense (or the defense of others) is a standard part of being in both law enforcement and the military, and doing so often results in officers and soldiers being celebrated as heroes. But for both Joe and certain soldiers serving in Vietnam, having to take part in institutional violence and murder is something they ultimately find to be shameful and traumatizing. And for Joe and Frank specifically, although they deal with their traumatic experiences in different ways, they seem to share an underlying psychology that shuns any sort of heroic complex in favor of passive acknowledgment of their respective roles in perpetrating the systematic cycle of violence that is rooted in America's foundation.

This damaged masculinity further applies to how Frank deals with the loss of his parents. As mentioned earlier, Frank still relies on the general family structure while imprisoned in Columbus by way of sending a letter to his father even after refusing to visit his parents after returning from Vietnam. And yet, the callous and even abusive way he reacts to news of

[37] Springsteen, Bruce. *Born to Run*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016.

his parents' death is noteworthy from a thematic standpoint. When Joe visits Frank in the hotel room he inhabits after his release from prison and mentions their mother's death, Frank coldly replies that he was in jail and that was why he could not attend the funeral. But even more heightened in its nihilism is when the hotel manager tells Frank that he has a call about a family emergency (which is that his father has died by suicide), and Frank simply replies by laughing it off and throwing the hotel manager's shirt over her face. When looking at these moments, it can seem as if Frank's very masculine identity has become so irrevocably separated from any sort of familial structure outside of writing the occasional letter that even the deaths of his mother and father cannot provoke any genuine human emotion.

These moments all build up to perhaps the most thematically rich scene in the film, which takes place at a downtown bar shortly before Frank beats the bartender to death and flees with Joe on his tail. Here, Frank gives an unabashedly nihilistic speech in defense of his choice to get drunk at a bar rather than be with Dorothy while she gives birth to their child. It is no coincidence that Penn chose to have the television behind Frank during this scene play footage from the 1968 Democratic National Convention protests, spurred on against the very war that he fought in and witnessed unimaginable bloodshed in. That some veterans returning from war develop nihilistic outlooks on life is nothing new, and Penn certainly heavily implies that Frank's nihilism existed before he went to Vietnam. Yet, in this scene, Frank seems to not only be speaking for himself, but for a generation of veterans whose trauma and wounded masculinity led them to embrace nihilistic outlooks on life that severed them from religion, friendships, broader society, and even their own families, the same veterans who he wrote earlier expected "their hair to stay dry in the rain."

Meanwhile, Joe's response, after trying to verbally share his love of his family in response to Frank's assertion that he's not satisfied with that being all there is, is to break a glass and cut open his palm to let the blood from it drip on the bar in front of Frank, to communicate that blood—the blood of family—is enough to outweigh the hell that exists in bars and elsewhere in society. This one gesture that Joe makes is not only Penn's most blunt statement of the ultimate message of *The Indian Runner*, but it also sums up the film's entire dominant. Joe understands the importance of the family structure and desperately wants to communicate it to his damaged, nihilistic brother, but in doing so he is inadvertently revealing that his own masculine identity has also been damaged by a different form of self-destructive nihilism. Having allowed himself to be isolated and emasculated both in his job and in his own family, Joe can now equate literally cutting himself to demonstrating the importance of the family structure as a damaged man.

Conclusion

This analysis of *The Indian Runner* would not be complete without acknowledging that Penn does end the film on a slight message of hope for Joe's character that points a way forward from self-destruction. The final scene, which crosscuts between the birth of Frank's son, Joe chasing Frank to the state line, and the Indian runner crossing Frank's path right before he pulls over to the side of the highway, serves to tie the themes of kinship loyalties together, with the return of the Indian runner serving as a final reminder of Frank's suppressed trauma that has helped to drive his actions. And although Joe is not able to save Frank, instead pulling over to the side of the highway and watching him escape over the state line (an ending that directly mirrors the ending of Springsteen's "Highway Patrolman," with

the state line replacing the Canadian border), his final voiceover indicates that Joe is able to go back home with a newfound enjoyment and appreciation for his family life. Perhaps it is because he felt his act of mercy with Frank after their car chase was redemption for his earlier self-defense killing (the parallel editing would certainly point to that), or because his own foreknowledge that Frank was gone for good finally released him of any moral or legal responsibility for Frank. In the latter case especially, the ending of *The Indian Runner* is certainly aligned with the ending of "Highway Patrolman," as the song concludes Joe's arc with him being definitively free of his brother and any moral/ethical dilemma therein.

But what the ending of *The Indian Runner* also provides is a path forward for Joe in a way that likewise frees him from his own form of self-destructive nihilistic masculinity, one that fully provides a counterpoint to Frank's irreparably destructive nature. And this is perhaps most apparent in one of the film's most impactful defamiliarizing events, where Joe hallucinates seeing Frank as a child step out of the car at the end of their car chase moments before he lets him drive across the state line. Although Frank could not be saved from developing a self-destructive nihilistic masculinity and turning his back on his family, Joe can still save himself, and perhaps Frank's son and Joe's son can both try to break that cycle. Penn even makes this idea explicit in the film's final quote from Tagore, which states "Every new child born brings the message that God is not yet discouraged of man." And if that quote does not provide some semblance of hope for both the future of masculinity and the family structure, then nothing does.