

The Dance of *The Misfits*: A Movie Mobile

GERALD O'GRADY

Movies, the most widespread form of art on earth, have willy-nilly created a particular way of seeing life, and their swift transitions, their sudden bringing together of disparate images, their effect of documentation inevitable in photography, their economy of storytelling, and their concentration on mute action have infiltrated the novel and play writing — especially the latter — without being confessed to or, at times, being consciously realized at all.

Arthur Miller

I

In his Author's Note, which is the source of the above passage, Arthur Miller argued that he had written *The Misfits* (1961) in an unfamiliar form, neither novel, play, nor screenplay: "It is a story," he continued, "conceived as a film, and every word is there for the purpose of telling the camera what to see and the actors what they are to say."¹ The changing ratios between seeing and saying in a variety of media were not a new concern for him and hardly could have been. Like other writers born into this first century in which electronic media play a part in shaping our experience of art, Miller's own consciousness as a writer has been partly shaped by what we are only now beginning to behold in our rear-view mirrors as a kaleidoscopic interaction of media forms.

GERALD O'GRADY is a member of the Department of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He is also a visiting associate professor in the Department of Radio/Television/Film at the University of Texas in Austin, a faculty associate in both the Graduate School of the Arts, Columbia University and the New School for Social Research, and a teaching fellow at the Center for Understanding Media in New York. He was formerly Director of the Media Center at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. He contributed "The Preparation of Teachers of Media" to the first film issue of this Journal (July 1969).

¹ Arthur Miller, *The Misfits* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. ix. Page numbers following the quotation of subsequent passages from the cinema-novel version refer to this edition.

In his prefatory remarks to his radio adaptation of Ferenc Molnar's *The Guardsman* (1947), it is clear that Miller had already reflected on and formulated some general principles about viewing and listening, about what happened to "every stage play transferred to the blind eye of radio."² He had realized that the meanings dependent on the audience's view of facial expressions, physical movement and all of the other elements of stagecraft were automatically lost on radio, and that a stage-play's unity of action had to be re-created in a wider variety of physical places for radio because, there, an uninterrupted four-minute scene seemed an eternity.³ He had concluded: "More than any other this play illustrates the similarity of radio to motion-picture technique. In both, the story must never be lost sight of; in both, movement for its own sake is absolutely necessary; in both, economy of language is at a premium."⁴

One can easily speculate that Miller's stagecraft in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) was profoundly influenced by the more than thirty radio plays he had written and the many films he had seen by that time. Another playwright, Bertold Brecht, had said: "For the old forms of communication are not unaffected by the development of new ones, nor do they survive alongside them. The filmgoer develops a different way of reading stories. But the man who writes the stories is a filmgoer too."⁵ In the interaction between the waves of past and present thought churning in the mind of Willy Loman who could not stop his memories of one time and place from flowing into and sometimes wiping out those of another, Miller adapted the quick-moving physical spaces of the radio and film media to the stage.

The seeming paradox that this play, admittedly cinematographic in its structure, failed as a movie drew Miller's written comment in his Introduction to *The Collected Plays* (1957),⁶ but he had already given

² Arthur Miller, "The Guardsman" in H. William Fitelson, ed., *Theatre Guild on the Air* (New York: Rinehart, 1947), p. 67.

³ A good example of swift and multiple changes of place in Miller's radio work is his play *William Ireland's Confession*. See William Kozlenko, ed., *One Hundred Non-Royalty Radio Plays* (New York: Greenberg, 1941), pp. 512-21.

⁴ Fitelson, ed., *Theatre Guild*, p. 68. In 1966, Miller would recall in an interview: "We had twenty-eight and a half minutes to tell a whole story in a radio play, and you had to concentrate on the words because you couldn't see anything. You were playing in a dark closet, in fact. So the economy of words in a good radio play was everything. . . . It's pure voice, pure words. Words and silence; a marvelous medium." Olga Carlisle and Rose Styron, "The Art of the Theatre II: Arthur Miller, An Interview," *Paris Review*, 38 (Summer, 1966), 79.

⁵ John Willett, trans., *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 47.

⁶ *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), pp. 26-27.

an oral explanation on the evening of October 28, 1953 when he participated in "Poetry and Film: A Symposium," arranged for Cinema 16 in New York by Amos Vogel. In illustrating the difference between dramatic and narrative structure in a discussion with film-maker Maya Deren, he introduced the making of the movie of *Death of a Salesman*:

This was a very fascinating problem, and it is right to the point here. On the stage, it seemed perfectly all right to most people that the man should move into his memories which were evoked by the action in the present. I didn't like the script of the movie, and I quarreled very much with it. One would think, offhand, that it would be much easier in a movie to dissolve the present, because the very word dissolve is so natural to the camera and simply throws the man into the past. When the present was dissolved, the meaning of what happened in the past was less. And the reason for it was that, on stage, you had the present with you all the time. We couldn't remove the set. The man had his dreams in relation to the real set that he was standing on, so there was a tension involved. There was, in other words, a reproduction of reality, because when we talk to ourselves on the street, the street is still there, and we can't vanish in thin air. But, in the movie, they made the terrible mistake of evaporating his surroundings, so that he was thrust completely into his dream. And what happened was: It became a narrative.⁷

Miller's distinction between narrative and dramatic is broadly analogous to a distinction between the description of a surface reality and the construction of a deeper reality, and between film as documentary and film as dream. I have quoted his remark about the "effect of documentation inevitable in photography," but on that evening in 1953, the tape of which is the fullest record we have of his views on film, he referred to film as images coming off a machine and told his audience that it "was the closest mechanical or aesthetic device that man has ever made to the structure of the dream."⁸ He has always been troubled by these opposing tendencies in film. During an interview on the set of *The Misfits*, he could tell James Goode: "The movie springs from the way we dream"; but he could also wonder if the inner coherence, emotional and visually logical, which the movie shared with the dream, wouldn't be lost: "It still is a challenge whether all the surfaces, like the crowd here, won't drown the inner contradictions I'm after."⁹ He also

⁷ Amos Vogel, transcriber, "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium" in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 186.

⁸ Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader*, p. 178. In his interview with Carlisle and Styron on playwriting, Miller said: "I think certain techniques, such as the jumping from place to place, although it's as old as Shakespeare, came to us not through Shakespeare, but through the movies, a telegraphic, dream-constructed way of seeing life" (Carlisle and Styron, "The Art of the Theatre II," p. 77).

⁹ James Goode, *The Story of The Misfits* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp. 261, 304.

told Goode that a film or play should have a center, a matrix of meaning, which was connected with the inner preoccupations of the writer: "The only thing worth discussing is the point at which the center is somehow unveiled. The scenery is worthless without the center. The characters are worthless too."¹⁰ While *The Misfits'* cameraman, Russell Metty, could talk about how he would adjust the quality of the picture for realism by getting "blacker blacks, whiter whites, and fewer grays, high contrast, more like a news photograph,"¹¹ Miller was painfully aware that the realism of the camera could easily destroy the power of his own X-ray vision which was meant to lay bare the inner structure. In his Introduction to *The Collected Plays*, he had written:

The movie's tendency is always to wipe out what has gone before, and it is thus in constant danger of transforming the dramatic into narrative. There is no swifter method of telling a "story" but neither is there a more difficult medium in which to keep a pattern of relationships constantly in being.¹²

It was this "pattern of relationships" which was sacred to Miller. The film, even if like the dream in the sense of being composed of visual material and capable of quick movement to different places, might yet fail to be like a dream in the most meaningful sense if its documentary tendencies and linear movement were at the service of mere narrative continuity. Rather than a smooth, one-thing-after-another continuity, a film must have the structure of a superimposition, the very word which Freud used when trying to elucidate the structure of dreams:

The material in the dream thoughts which is packed together for the purpose of constructing a dream situation must, of course, in itself be adaptable for that purpose. There must be one or more *common elements* in all the components. The dream work then proceeds just as Francis Galton did in constructing his family photographs. It superimposes, as it were, the different components upon one another. The common element in them then stands out clearly in the composite picture while contradictory details more or less wipe one another out.¹³

It is this kind of structure which Miller had in mind when he told his symposium audience: "Symbolic action is the point of all organization in the drama as well as in the film."¹⁴ It was Alex North who, when called in to view *The Misfits* before writing the musical score, first noticed that the film seemed to make little impact on him while he was

¹⁰ Goode, *The Story*, p. 234.

¹¹ Goode, *The Story*, p. 60.

¹² *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*, p. 27.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *On Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1952), pp. 43-44.

¹⁴ Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader*, p. 177.

watching it but stimulated him to reflect later on what he had seen. This caused him to compose a score with "a dreamlike quality, made up of electronic motions, designs, patterns."¹⁵ He compared Miller's structure to pointillism, a pattern of dots, and said: "Because of this nervous quality in the picture, because of its unorthodox quality, I have to provide a structure that will sustain and frame, to put the particles in suspension."¹⁶

The description of the film as Miller conceived it as a sort of mobile, as having the structure of a puzzle, the pieces of which again and again just miss fitting together, as placing its characters like a group of dancers in a ballet, sometimes linking arms, sometimes performing solo, but always in motion,¹⁷ is an important perception, and I wish to develop its insight that this is indeed Miller's form by comparing the short story to the cinema-novel version of *The Misfits*, demonstrating that this is the way to unveil its center.

II

Miller's reworkings of his material on the misfits is a characteristic adventure of an art form in an age of alternate media. *The Misfits* began as a short story, later became a shooting-script¹⁸ which gave rise to a film, and yet later appeared in the form of a cinema-novel. During the shooting of the film, Miller was present on the set conferring with the director and others involved in its making, revising the script,¹⁹ and, at the same time, preparing the cinema-novel version for publication.

The short story arose from experiences he had in the spring of 1956 when he was in residence for divorce at Pyramid Lake, fifty miles north-east of Reno, Nevada. He had a chance to observe how three cowboys used a Piper Cub to chase mustangs out of the mountains and then capture them with lassos from a moving truck. On the other end of the rope was a heavy tire which halted the lassoed horse as he dragged it from the bed of the truck. A. J. Liebling had reported on the plight of the mustangs two years earlier in a magazine, and a book by Hope

¹⁵ Goode, *The Story*, p. 319.

¹⁶ Goode, *The Story*, p. 319.

¹⁷ Goode, *The Story*, p. 317 says: "The music had a ballet quality, whether it accompanied the plane chasing the horses down to the dry lake or Monroe dancing beneath a tree on the ranch. This was not surprising, since many of North's previous works had been written for dancers and ballet companies."

¹⁸ Several successive versions of the shooting-script exist among the collection of his manuscripts at the Academic Center Library at the University of Texas in Austin; I shall give a detailed treatment of these manuscripts in a later study.

¹⁹ Goode, *The Story*, p. 217.

Ryden and a long newspaper article by Anthony Ripley has kept the problem before us in 1970.²⁰ The subject of these works was invariably the tracking down and destruction of the remnants of the bands of wild horses which had once filled our western plains. These last misfits, who had outlived their earlier usefulness as plow horses and children's ponies, were now being sold for dog food at six cents a pound. This abrupt end to the romantic freedom of the wild horses and the seemingly carefree existence of the cowboys who caught them moved Miller to use the action as a screen for what would grow into an ever-deepening meditation on the tensions of freedom entangled in our contemporary concepts of family, marriage and friendship, and technological growth.

The short story is set entirely in one locality, "a prehistoric lake bed thirty miles long by seventeen miles wide couched between two mountain ranges . . .,"²¹ and the physical action, the catching of the mustangs with plane, truck and tires, takes place in the twenty-four hours between two dawns. There are only three characters — Gay Langland, Perce Howland, and Guido Racanelli — and each has a certain uneasiness and vaguely smouldering irritation about his situation in today's world. For Guido, the middle-aged flyer, roaring through the mountain air and careening across the lake bed form an attempt to forget an unremitting sense of loss caused by his wife's death in childbirth. For Perce, the twenty-two-year-old rodeo rider, the mustanging is a diversion undertaken with reservations about which he is not very articulate. He has been travelling to local rodeos since he became sixteen and has recently lost the desire to return home. He is now floating and has been living with Gay and his woman, Roslyn, for the past five weeks. For Gay, the forty-six-year-old roper, once divorced and unsure about his current relationship with Roslyn, an Eastern schoolteacher staying in Reno who does not appear, the mustanging is a natural kind of work. He enjoys it and takes pride in it because he is good at it. It has become a habitual way of earning enough money to satisfy his material needs,

²⁰ A. J. Liebling, "A Reporter at Large — The Mustang Buzzers, I and II," *The New Yorker*, 30, 7 (April 3, 1954), 35-53 and 8 (April 10, 1954), 81-91. Part II is reprinted in William Cole, ed., *The Most of A. J. Liebling* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), pp. 293-303. Hope Ryden, *America's Last Wild Horses* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970). Anthony Ripley, "A Devoted Few Strive to Save Wild Horses," *New York Times* (Sunday, November 15, 1970), Section I, pp. 1, 60. Liebling's reports were unknown to Miller.

²¹ Arthur Miller, "The Misfits" in *I Don't Need You Any More: Stories by Arthur Miller* (New York: Viking Press, 1967), p. 93. Page numbers following the quotation of subsequent passages from this short story refer to this edition. The short story was originally published in *Esquire*, 48 (October 1957), 155-66 and it was published together with the cinema-novel in Arthur Miller, *The Misfits* (New York: Dell, 1961), pp. 191-223.

and it enables him to keep his dignity, his sense of himself, and it frees him from a steady job and from too much dependence on Roslyn. And yet he is uneasy:

. . . it was clear to him that he had somehow failed to settle anything for himself; he had put in three days for thirty-five dollars and there would be no way to explain it so it made sense and it would be embarrassing. And yet he knew that it had all been the way it ought to be even if he could never explain it to her or anyone else. [p. 112]

Gay's uneasiness about capturing the five mustangs is expressed by a line which the cowboys repeat to each other again and again: "It's better than wages" (pp. 80, 95, 97); and it is their deepest feelings about the very nature of their work which symbolically relates them to the very misfits they capture.

"Well, it's better than wages."

"Hell, yes. Anything's better than wages."

Gay's eyes crinkled: "You're a real misfit, boy."

"That suits me fine," Perce said. They often had this conversation and Perce savored it. "Better than workin' for some goddam cow outfit buckaroooin' so somebody else can buy gas for his Cadillac."

"Damn right," Gay said.

"Hell, Gay, you are the most misfitted man I ever saw and you done all right."

"I got no complaints," Gay said.

"I don't want nothin' and I don't want to want nothin'."

"That's the way, boy." [p. 95]"

A little later, the title term is applied to Guido as well (p. 95), and finally to the mustangs (p. 106).

A sense of incompleteness shrouds the lives of the three cowboys and their reiterative joke about wages becomes a tell-tale sign that they are unable to transcend it or even come to grips with it. The story's concluding paragraph, a description of the mustangs, becomes a subtle indirect comment on their situation in the world and their psychological state. The stallion starts to walk toward the fields in which he had once grazed but the tire bends his neck to the ground; the colt, who is not tied up, begins to walk for water but returns to the side of his mother.

III

The short story became the third act²³ of the shooting-script, film,

²² The "I don't want nothin'" theme should be related to the title story in Miller's collected short stories; see footnote 21.

²³ During the filming of *The Misfits*, Miller referred to its three parts as acts. See Goode, *The Story*, pp. 109, 178.

and cinema-novel version of *The Misfits* as Miller developed two earlier parts, equally long. In the first, Roslyn, stunned and bewildered, "lost," after her divorce in Reno, is attracted to the quiet stability of Gay Langland and moves with him into Guido's unfinished, abandoned house in the country just outside Reno. In the second, they encounter Perce on their way to the Dayton rodeo, watch as he gets injured while performing, and return once again to Guido's house from which they set out for Act III. This, the mustanging section, has additional elements and some changes, and its new positioning following the other two pieces of Miller's new mosaic transforms its meaning. The single most important change is the presence, in all three acts, of Roslyn who becomes the central piece of the jigsaw puzzle and around whom the three mustangers arrange themselves in various permutations and combinations.

Arthur Miller extended and deepened his themes in this longer version. He made the fragility of the family and its capacity to maim its members a central concern of every part. He used the icon of the automobile in sequence after sequence to clearly point up the potential destructiveness of an industrial society to man's dignity, his freedom, and his work. To oppose these damaging forces with the possibility of survival, he found the figure of dance. It remains to detail how he constructed his mobile around these three fragments.

In his essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man" (1949), Miller had pointed out that the quality which shakes us in great plays "derives from the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in the world."²⁴ In a later essay, "The Family in Modern Drama" (1956), he argued that *Hamlet*, *Oedipus* and *Lear* were "all examining the concept of loss, of man's deprivation of a once-extant state of bliss unjustly shattered—a bliss, a state of equilibrium, which the hero (and his audience) is seeking to reconstruct or to recreate with new, latter-day life materials," and, more important for our understanding of *The Misfits*, he went on to say that "the more or less hidden impulse antedating social alienation, the unsaid premise of the very idea of 'satisfaction,' is the memory of both playwright and audience of an enfolding family. . . ."²⁵

In *The Misfits*, Miller treats the shattering of the family and the

²⁴ Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," *New York Times* (Sunday, February 27, 1949), Section II, p. 1.

²⁵ Arthur Miller, "The Family in Modern Drama," *Atlantic*, 197 (April 1956), 37.

almost paralyzing loss felt by each of its members in a more detailed fashion than in any of his previous works. The references at first seem sporadic, probably because of the telegraphic style of the medium for which he was writing, but, reflected upon, they balance themselves into a perfect mobile. Each of the four main characters suffers the phantom pain of a different limb having been severed from the family body. Guido's pain, familiar from the short story but amplified in this longer version, is for his wife. Perce's is for his father, shot accidentally by a hunter; he suffered complete displacement when his mother remarried a man who then took ownership of the land his father had meant to be his. In an early scene in the bar of Harrah's Club, just after her divorce, Roslyn has wept over missing her mother. In a later scene, after their first morning at Guido's house, Gay tells Roslyn that he misses his children, a pain that we are made to share when he drunkenly pitches to the ground from atop a car while calling out to his children at the Dayton rodeo.

By placing his first act in Reno, "The Divorce Center of the World" (p. 3) and a gambling center, Miller found the perfect setting in which to elaborate his theme of the instability of family relationships. He describes the Reno populace as "strolling with the preoccupied air of the disconnected" (p. 2); a woman with a young baby in her arms, "an uprooted quality in the intense mistrust with which she walks" (p. 2), is shown asking directions to the courthouse where she is later seen with her lawyer. Isabelle, the boardinghouse owner who testifies at Roslyn's divorce, is doing it for the seventy-seventh time. Herself divorced, and later deserted by another man, a one-armed cowboy, she sports a broken arm in this city of broken marriages and one-armed bandits.²⁶ Our first glimpse of Gay finds him saying goodbye to a divorcee from St. Louis at the train station. At Guido's house, Roslyn tells Gay about a so-called happy family: ". . . the wife was actually in the hospital to have the baby and he was calling me up. I mean calling me up. And they're still supposed to be happily married" (p. 37).

Miller's pointillist technique continues in the second act. As the group drives into Dayton, Perce sticks his head out the window to shout "How's your wife" to a man, and then tells those in the car, "Boy, does he hate his wife." In a Dayton bar, an old man watches his grandson who has been abandoned to him,²⁷ and later that evening, behind

²⁶ Everything in *The Misfits* is broken or damaged or incomplete, beginning with Isabelle's clock and ending with Guido's plane.

²⁷ *Zabriskie Point* would later use an Arizona barroom to point up the loneliness and abandonment of America's old and young. A close study of the dialogue

another bar, Perce tells how his girl abandoned him in the hospital when he was knocked unconscious at the last rodeo.

On the lake bed in Act III, the five mustangs — a stallion, two browns, a mare and her colt — become a perfect mirror image for the three cowboys, Roslyn, and the child she has been afraid to have. Miller himself looked on the horses which are captured and then, in a change from the short story, released as “the romantic image of freedom which they [the characters] have left in the hills.”²⁸ His comment about freedom, which is relevant here in relation to the characters’ unrealistic conceptions of marriage, applies as much to their capturing of the horses as to their releasing them, for their views on work are not quite realistic either.

Miller has always been especially interested in the occupations of his characters and the relation of their work to their actions. In one essay, “The Shadow of the Gods” (1958), he wrote:

I read books after I was seventeen but already, for good or ill, I was not patient with every kind of literature. I did not believe, even then, that you could tell about a man without telling about the world he was living in, what he did for a living, what he was like not only at home or in bed but on the job. I remember now reading novels and wondering, What do these people do for a living? When do they work? I remember asking the same questions about the few plays I saw.²⁹

He had always been aware that a larger social structure determined the meaning of any individual’s work within it, and in an essay, “On Social Plays” (1955), had openly confessed his fears that the industrialized society of the twentieth century would be one in which “the person has value as he fits into the pattern of efficiency, and for that alone.”³⁰ Those persons who didn’t, and this is what is relevant to the story which he would begin to write a year later, would be misfits: “Our society — and I am speaking of every industrialized society in the world — is so complex, each person being so specialized an integer, that the moment any individual is dramatically characterized and set forth as a hero, our common sense reduces him to the size of a complainer, a misfit.”³¹

This pressure of an industrializing society to change the nature of a man’s work is treated in *The Misfits* and Miller indicted it through a

and billboards would reveal that Mark’s plane is an analogue to the western cowboy’s horse and that Antonioni is intensifying Miller’s theme of industrialization in an American western setting.

²⁸ Goode, *The Story*, p. 76.

²⁹ Arthur Miller, “The Shadow of the Gods,” *Harper’s Magazine* 217 (August, 1958), 36.

³⁰ Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge: Two One-Act Plays* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. 10.

³¹ Miller, *A View from the Bridge*, p. 8.

moving collage of automobile images. Later in the sixties, we would see a film-maker dream that he was suffocating in an automobile stalled in a traffic jam at the opening of *8½*, witness a technological courtship of loneliness between an airplane and an automobile in *Zabriskie Point*, and view weekend traffic as an image of a bloody apocalypse in Godard's *Weekend*.

The Misfits opens with Guido, whose occupation, unmentioned in the short story, is that of auto mechanic, driving the Reno Garage pickup truck to estimate the damages done to Roslyn's Cadillac, a divorce present from her husband.³² When he later makes his first advances to her, he is drunkenly driving a car, and in the film, the camera closes in on the speedometer, relating his sexual drives to his increasing speed and both of these to his conversation about his work as a bombardier in World War II. When Perce makes his first advances to Roslyn, she is propped on a broken car seat with her back against the wrecked body of an old Chevrolet surrounded by a mound of rusty beer cans behind a Dayton bar. Guido couldn't get to a doctor to save his wife during childbirth because he had a flat tire and no spares. He now uses old tires for his work on the mustangs. In the short story version, as we have seen, Perce says that mustanging is better than working to buy gas for someone else's Cadillac, and in the longer version, after Gay releases the horses, Guido asks him: "Where'll you be? Some gas station, polishing windshields?"³³ Director John Huston told James Goode on the set:

This movie is about a world in change. There was meaning in our lives before World War II, but we have lost meaning now. Now the cowboys ride pickup trucks. . . . Once they sold the wild horses for children's ponies. And now for dog food. This is a dog-eat-horse society.³⁴

But Miller was not solely interested in delineating the pressures of industrialization. He also wanted to cut deeper and to examine his characters' responses to it. Perce's reservations and Gay's uneasiness about the mustanging were both mentioned in the short story, and in the film Roslyn's almost universal compassion for all living things as well as her innocence and naïveté³⁵ force Gay to an open confrontation with the nature of his work, namely, that he is killing, and that the end

³² Goode, *The Story*, p. 43, reports that director John Huston thought that Roslyn's husband, who has a cameo role, was the owner of a Cadillac Agency in Chicago while producer Frank Taylor thought he ran a used-car lot.

³³ Guido, the repair mechanic and aviator, is the character with the least self-knowledge, a point reflected in this bit of dialogue.

³⁴ Goode, *The Story*, p. 45.

³⁵ See the short story, "Please Don't Kill Anything" in *I Don't Need You Any More*, pp. 71-78.

result of his skills, however honorable when the mustangs were used for plowing and ponies, has been rendered destructive by the industrial canning process. At first, he clings to the shreds of an illusionary freedom, telling Roslyn: "I can't run the world any more than you could. I hunt these horses to keep myself free. That's all" (p. 94). But it isn't all, and he finally comes to the bitter decision that if he is to keep his sense of himself, he must give up the job. He shouts into the darkened hills:

"God damn them all! They changed it. Changed it all around. They smeared it all over with blood, turned it into shit and money like everything else. . . . It's just ropin' a dream now." [p. 129]

The last phrase reminds us of a similar line in *Death of a Salesman* and of what the same society did to Willy Loman. Sociologist Paul Blumberg has commented on it:

In *The Misfits*, we find ourselves in the Nevada desert. And here we are shown the alienation, not of the new middle-class salaried worker (as in *Salesman*), not of the small capitalist (as in *All My Sons*), not of the wage worker (as in *A Memory of Two Mondays*) but the alienation of that very symbol of the last holdout of the free and independent spirit in this country, the American cowboy. Here Miller relentlessly examines Biff Loman's dream, the dream of fulfillment and satisfaction away from the bureaucratic white collar hierarchy of the big city. Unhappily, in *The Misfits*, we see that Biff's vision of fulfillment in the wilderness is as mistaken as his father's dream of success in the city.⁸⁶

In contrast to Willy, who believed in the industrial system and was a willing part of it, even in death, Gay, who has refused to join it and yet has discovered that his life is still controlled and undermined by it, has the sanity to recognize his dream for what it is and to save himself from it.

Survival was another theme with which Miller was deeply involved in *The Misfits*. As it was being filmed and he was preparing the final version of the cinema-novel for publication, he was also writing a play, then called *The Survivor*, and later, *After the Fall*. It was set in its central character Quentin's mind, thought and memory, realized in the staging as a "neolithic supple geography in which, like pits and hollows found in lava, the scenes take place."⁸⁷ This psychological setting is an analogue to the prehistoric lake bed of *The Misfits*. Both works clear away everything and provide the characters with a primitive empty

⁸⁶ Paul Blumberg, "Sociology and Social Literature: Work Alienation in the Plays of Arthur Miller," *American Quarterly* Vol. 21, No. 2 (Summer, 1969), 304.

⁸⁷ Arthur Miller, *After the Fall* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 1.

space in which they attempt to radically construct the new human relationships which will enable them to stay alive.

In *The Misfits*, Miller used the metaphor of dance to indicate the possibility of a couple's merging together into a family for the purpose of having a child, a survivor. He changed Roslyn's occupation from teacher to dancer and made her a symbol of life.³⁸ He used the same kind of mobile form with this image as he did with the family and the automobile, and, in one sequence, he deliberately invested it with the quality of dream.

At different stages of the film, Roslyn dances with each of the three mustangers, with Gay and Guido when they first visit the latter's house, and with Perce at the Odeon Bar after the rodeo in Dayton. In addition, each of the character's primary activity is compared to a dance, as when Gay tells her about his roping the mustangs: "This . . . this is how I dance, Roslyn" (p. 94), or when Guido instructs Gay about starting the airplane propeller: "Okay, boy, turn your partner and doe-see-doe!" (p. 97). The key instance, however, is when, in the dark of night, Roslyn "flies into a warm, longing solo dance among the weeds, and coming to a great tree she halts and then embraces it, pressing her face against its trunk" (pp. 31-32). This dance, purposely photographed in dream-like slow motion, is the expression of the longing of two people reaching out for each other. It prepares us for the later action of Act III, when Gay finishes his final desperate combat-dance with the stallion, falling on him in exhaustion and then releasing him, and then turns to Roslyn and drives her down to Reno to dance (p. 100). She had earlier told Gay that she didn't want children by her first husband because "you could touch him but he wasn't there" (p. 7) and "because kids know the difference" (p. 38). And she had fearfully refused Gay's own earlier supplication. But now, as they drive out of the lake bed, she says: "If . . . if we weren't afraid! Gay? And there could be a child. And we could make it brave. One person in the world who would be brave from the beginning! I was scared to last night. But I'm not so much now. Are you?" [p. 132]

When she had come to Harrah's Club after divorcing her husband and, out of a sense of abandonment, displacement, and loneliness, was weeping for her mother, she was first attracted to Gay by noticing his dog. It is the dog who, brought into the mountains for the mustanging, quivers with a prophetic fear for the death of his fellow animals. As the film closes, they drive out of the lake bed by the light of a big star which,

³⁸ See Miller, *The Misfits*, pp. 31, 43, 93-94.

Gay tells her, will "take us right home" (p. 132), and they stop the truck to pick up the dog, named Tom Dooley, an allusion to the presence of a healing and saving force in the world.³⁹ The reference to the star and to the child, "brave from the beginning," round off a series of delicate references to Christmas as a kind of secularized "whole-a-day" reestablishing the relations between child and parents, the wholeness of the family. Gay has told Roslyn that he sends his daughter a dress every Christmas, Perce has promised to telephone his mother at Christmas, and, of course, the misfit colt was once a Christmas gift for children.

IV

The material discussed in the previous section appeared in both the film and the cinema-novel versions of *The Misfits*, and my point of fixing on the spinning images of broken families, cars, and dancing was to demonstrate just how deliberately Miller had energized his movie mobile. He himself realized that his material was always in motion:

It couldn't be a play, that is, my screenplay of *The Misfits*, because one of the elements is a sense of wandering without any elaborate preparation or reason, a sense of wayward motion which is manifestly a movie technique.⁴⁰

That Paul Blumberg experienced this is evident when he refers to Miller's characters as "footloose wandering atoms."⁴¹ In this final section, I want to fasten on two more of Miller's icons, the Indian and sailor — images associated with sailing and sea, and suggest ways in which Miller used them throughout his cinema-novel to sum up those forces forming the central tension of *The Misfits*, stillness (peace) and motion (turbulence). I treat them in this section because both were omitted from the film, the first by the willful decision of the director, and the second, because it could not be transferred to his medium.

There are no Indians in the short story, but in the very first sequence of the cinema-novel, Miller writes that "two Indian young men in dungarees stand on a corner" watching Guido's repair truck pass by: "their faces are like the faces of the blind, which one cannot look at too long" (p. 3). When the group drives into Dayton, which is vibrating with the action and bustle of the rodeo crowd, "Roslyn suddenly turns to watch an Indian standing perfectly still while the crowd pours around him." The Indian is "staring off at something" (p. 58). At the rodeo, a black horse charges toward a fence and the crowd clambers

³⁹ Tom Dooley set up hospitals for children in Laos. See his book, *Dr. Tom Dooley: My Story* (New York: New American Library, 1959).

⁴⁰ Goode, *The Story*, p. 106.

⁴¹ Blumberg, "Sociology and Social Literature," p. 304.

backward but “for a moment the Indian is left in the clear, watching impassively” (p. 65). These Indians, always standing still and yet being able to look beyond the moment—reference is continually made to their viewing—seem to symbolize a deep tranquillity which becomes a commentary on the modern world’s meaningless motion. In the film, the Indian is cut out of every scene but one, and thus symbolizes nothing. James Goode reports the following editing-room conversation between cutter George Tomasini and director John Huston:

Tomasini: “You don’t care about losing the Indian then?”

Huston: “Not at all.”⁴²

It may be that Huston would have been able to realize that the Indian was a point of stillness in the work’s structure if there had been some way that Miller’s matrix of turbulent sea images could have been shown on the screen. But how do you show the people playing slot-machines in Harrah’s “blinking in a sea of chrome” (p. 15), or “a sea of parked cars” (p. 65) at the rodeo, or Roslyn standing “in a sea of helpless misunderstanding” (p. 69)? Here, as when Miller talks about a television set, “its eyes rolling in its head” (p. 59), the spoken or printed medium goes into areas of metaphor not easily accessible to the film-maker. But how do we understand the fullness of the dried-up lake bed’s meaning if we can’t be shown that Guido’s unfinished house is “as terribly alone as a stranded boat” (p. 22)?⁴³ Or how, lacking any visual reference to this entire theme, can we be led to speculate that the Indian’s stillness may meet its match in the motion of the dance, in the figure of Roslyn, who, at the end of the action, asks Gay: “What is there that stays?” and gets from him an answer that calls up the motion of the sea: “Everything I ever see was comin’ or goin’ away. Same as you. . . . Maybe that’s all the peace there is or can be” (p. 131)?

Such questions are answered, I think, by Arthur Miller’s action in reshaping his shooting-script into “an unfamiliar form,” one that moves toward the integration of the dream in that metaphor is a kind of superimposition by verbal image. By then, he had been thinking about the media of sight and sound for nearly fifteen years, and could report his intentions directly:

The Misfits avowedly uses the perspectives of the film in order to create a fiction which might have the peculiar immediacy of image and the reflective possibilities of the written word. [p. x]

⁴² Goode, *The Story*, p. 289.

⁴³ There is a scene in the film which is not included in the cinema-novel. In it, Roslyn and the dog are swimming and then run out of the water to embrace Gay. This is an entirely different symbolic use of water.