

FADE IN:

EXT. STREET - DAY

Long traveling shot along a busy six lane commercial strip. The roadside is lined with gas stations and fast food. The steady DRONE of the traffic is interrupted by an occasional car HONK or SIREN. The shot ends on a 50's streamlined stainless railroad diner, fallen into pathetic disrepair.

INT. DINER

A long counter splits the diner in two: On the customer side, padded stools, an aisle and a few two-seater booths along the wall. Behind the counter, an old COOK in a gray baseball cap wraps a sandwich to go. The customer, a telephone REPAIRMAN, waits leaning on the stool closest the cash register, reading a tabloid and smoking a cigarette.

Farther down the counter, a large, sad looking WAITRESS shuffles back and forth, running water, stirring something.

At the last stool sits an average GUY IN A PLAID SHIRT sitting in front of a empty coffee cup, staring at the wall.

ANGLE ON SCREEN DOOR as it opens and a young MAN enters, crosses to one of the booths. The door SLAMS behind him.

COUNTER

The repairman drops a couple of coins on the counter and leaves with his paper sack. The door SLAMS behind him.

WIDER ON COUNTER

The waitress squeezes through the break in the counter, a menu in hand.

BOOTH - MAN'S POV

The waitress comes up to the booth, tiny menu under her fat arm.

WAITRESS

Menu?

BOOTH

MAN

No. Let me have a cheeseburger deluxe,
medium. French fries well done.

WAITRESS

To drink?

MAN

Uh... Coca-cola.

WAITRESS

(pivoting toward the cook)
Cheese deluxe half-way, burn the fries!

WIDER OF COUNTER

The waitress returns to the counter and, grabbing a glass, heads for the soda fountain. The skinny old cook, seeing her coming, must flatten himself against the grill to allow her bulk to get by.

BOOTH

The man watches the waitress going for his coke.

MAN

Can I have a glass of water and save the
coke for the burger?

COUNTER

The waitress shoots him a look, sets down the glass, and writes his new request on her green pad.

BOOTH

The man looks around till something gets his attention.

MAN'S POV

The cook flops a frozen patty on the grill. PAN to the waitress negotiating towards the water tap on the fountain. PAN along the back wall of the diner, the greasy coffee urns steaming, the cold box with its cream pies and cantaloupe halves.

PAN along the shelf with the mini boxes of cereal: the Corn Flakes, the Rice Crispies, the Product 19, whatever that is.

BOOTH - CU OF MAN'S FACE

He cocks his eye at the strange name of the cereal and shrugs.

MAN'S POV - CU OF CEREAL BOX

From the Product 19, the PAN continues to the Cocoa Crispies and the Fruit Loops, widens to a blue and yellow poster demonstrating the Heimlich Maneuver.

BOOTH

He turns to the table jukebox and flips the cards.

MAN'S POV

Bobby Darin singles, the Carpenters, stuff like that on the juke box. ZOOM IN on Mack the Knife.

BOOTH

The man reaches into his pocket for a quarter, can't find any change. Anyway, someone has turned on All-News-All-The-Time which BLARES from a radio behind the counter.

The man pulls a sugar packet out of the cup and reads about some early President of the United States.

MAN'S POV - CU OF SUGAR PACKETS

One reads "Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves." Another says "George Washington - the Father of our country."

BOOTH

Man shakes his head and smiles. He takes one of the packets of sugar substitute and reads the ingredients. His eyes widen.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. MAD SCIENTIST'S LABORATORY

Black and white stock footage of a mad scientist mixing smoking ingredients into a bubbling flask, a hunchbacked assistant hovering by.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH

Smiling, the man stuffs the sugar packets back in the cup. He looks up at cook at the grill.

MAN'S POV - THE GRILL

Above the grill are the specials of the day, magic marked on shirt cardboards in a child-like scrawl. PAN across them. One says "Pepper Stake 2.95." Another is "French Freies 1.00."

BOOTH - CU OF MAN

MAN
(sounds it out to himself)
...free eyes....

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BACK ROOM OF DINER - LATE ONE NIGHT

The old cook huddles over the sign he is making, a dim light hangs overhead a pile of shirt cardboards next to him. He clutches a magic marker in his fist and scratches out "French freies," forming letters one by one like a child drawing a backwards "e."

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH - DAY

The man in the booth is grinning at his imagination.

COUNTER

The cook still huddles over the grill. PAN to the waitress who is working the soda fountain.

BOOTH

The man watches the waitress.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. A TENEMENT APARTMENT - DAWN

It's the waitress's apartment, lonely and cold, sparsely furnished. The waitress has just gotten out of bed, wearing an immense nightdress. She picks up her wrinkled uniform from a chair in the corner and begins to lift off the nightdress...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH - DAY

CU of the man, his eyes glazed with the image in his mind. His reverie is interrupted by the PLUNK of the water glass on the table.

WIDER OF THE BOOTH

The waitress has deposited the water glass and is on her way back to the counter.

THE GRILL

The burger SIZZLES underneath a foil-wrapped trowel, frying past rare to medium, on it's way to medium-well.

BOOTH

The man scans the diner.

MAN'S POV

PAN of the cash register, the screen door, the pay phone, the shot coming to rest on the window sill on which the man arm rests. ZOOM in on the wood grain in the sash. The sound of CHAIN SAWS as we

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE FOREST - DAY

A logging operation. A huge tree falls over with a CRASH. MONTAGE of other activities: tree trunks being pulled away by chains to a clearing, loaded onto trucks which pull away down mountain roads.

INT. LUMBER MILL

Great saws slice logs into boards, spewing NOISE and dust. Planks are bundled and trucked away from the mill at the other end. The sound of HAMMERING is heard.

EXT. CONSTRUCTION SITE

A team of men work on a structure which will be a diner by the side of a six lane commercial strip. One worker frames out a window opening along an outer wall.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. DINER

The man is in his booth, lost in thought. The cook cooks. The waitress slowly wipes the counter. The radio DRONES on about car bombs in Lebanon and homelessness in the cities.

TIGHTER OF BOOTH

The man lifts the water glass and looks at the diner through it's refraction. His face is distorted by the glass, ZOOM IN to his huge eye staring out of the bottom of the glass.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A MOUNTAIN STREAM - DAY

A beautiful, clear, fresh stream of water cascading down a luscious slope, through a field of yellow lilies. A waterfall, rapid rushing through a pristine wilderness.

CUT TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH

The man is entranced with his vision. He holds up the water as if to drink. He stops. His smile fades.

CUT TO:

EXT. AN URBAN RIVER

Documentary type footage about water pollution in America. A filthy urban river oozes by, slime coated and brackish, factories smoking on a distant bank, pipes pouring sludge into the black water. A dead fish floats by.

CUT TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH

The man has taken the water glass from his lips and places it on the table. After a beat, he chuckles to himself, shakes his head.

THE GRILL

The burger cooks. The cook pulls out an enriched white bun and tosses it on the grill.

BOOTH

The man glances around the diner, a worried expression on his face.

MAN'S POV

PAN around the rest of the diner...the cigarette machine, the coat hooks on the wall, the empty stools along the counter, coming to rest on the last stool, where the GUY IN PLAID is stirring another lump into his third cup. ZOOM IN on the spoon.

BOOTH

CU of man watching spoon swirling.

CUT TO:

EXT. COFFEE PLANTATION - DAY

MONTAGE of a third world coffee plantation, black WORKERS sweating mightily in the brutal sun, overseers lashing them into a faster pace, CHILDREN wearing rags and hungry faces plucking the ripe beans off the trees...

CUT TO:

INT. DINER COUNTER

The guy in plaid sets down his spoon and sips.

BOOTH

The man watches the guy in plaid, spellbound.

CUT TO:

EXT. A SUBURBAN BACKYARD - DAY

Tattered home movies of a BOY riding a bicycle. It's the boy who will grow up to be the guy in plaid, the boy is wearing the same plaid shirt. He's shaky, just learned to ride. He falls in the driveway. The movie camera comes running over but the person holding it doesn't seem to be helping right away. Instead, the home movie-maker pans some other MEN and BOYS, brothers, cousins perhaps, who laugh at the crying boy in plaid.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. DINER

Nothing's happening here. The man is watching the guy in plaid, the cook and waitress doing their work. The radio spits baseball scores.

BOOTH

The man reaches in his shirt pocket for a box or Marlboros. He pulls a cigarette half out of the pack.

CUT TO:

EXT. TOBACCO FIELDS - DAY

The thrashing of tobacco leaves, MEN with yellow teeth whacking away with machete-like knives.

CUT TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH

The man brusquely pushes the cigarette back in the pack. He is visibly agitated. He rises, steps toward the counter.

MAN

(to the WAITRESS)

The bathroom?

WAITRESS

(pointing)

Keep it clean.

MAN

You ever stop to wonder how everything in this place conspired to get here all at once?

WAITRESS

Past the ice machine on the left.

He turns and hurries to the bathroom.

BATHROOM

The man closes the door behind him. It's tiny; a chipped porcelain bowl with a coat hangar holding the seat up. He runs cold water and splashes some on his face. He hesitantly looks up in the mirror. He sees only his face, pale but normal. He talks to himself in the mirror.

MAN

You ok? Yeah, you're fine.

He stares at himself, as if waiting for some kind of transformation. He looks away, and then back at the mirror. No change.

MAN (CONT'D)

Who gives a good goddam where the coffee comes from.

He pulls out a smoke, lights it and takes a couple of drags.

BOOTH

CU of table where lunch is served on an oval plate: a blackened burger patty on a bun, orange fluorescent cheese food sagging over the sides. A slice of white lettuce and pale, pink and green tomato. The mealy french fries are underdone.

MAN (O.S.)

...free-eyes...

WIDER OF BOOTH

The man sits at the booth. He considers the plate before him. Slowly his eyes widen.

THE PLATE

CU of the french fries.

CUT TO:

BEHIND THE COUNTER

CU of the cook's hand reaching into a large plastic bag of frozen french fries, lifting the handful over to the deep fryer, the icy potato strips disappearing into the brown grease with a HISS.

INT. A FACTORY - DAY

Cut french fries leaving a giant dicing machine. Working backwards along the machine, whole potatoes are seen emerging from a scrubbing bath as they enter the dicer. MACHINE SOUNDS roar.

EXT. POTATO FARM - DAY

CU of a furrow in which potatoes lie in the dirt. WIDEN out to see the tractor that has dug the furrow pulling away.

CUT TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH

CU of the hamburger bun on the plate.

CUT TO:

INT. BAKERY

MONTAGE of bakery scenes, real and imaginary, from documentary footage of giant commercial ovens to an animation of the ginger bread nightmare of Hansel and Gretel.

EXT. WHEAT FIELDS - DAY

Fields of wheat blowing in the wind.

CUT TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH

CU of the tomatoes on the plate, hard and unripe.

CUT TO:

EXT. TRUCK FARM - DAY

Tomato farming scenes, trucks piled high with red fruit. Fuzzy tomato plants rising time-elapsed toward the sun.

ANIMATION

Tomato humor, ripe fruits splattering on the sides of cartoon characters' heads.

CUT TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH

CU of the hardening American cheese wrapped around the gray meat.

CUT TO:

BLANK SCREEN

CUT TO:

THE PLATE

CU of the cheese again.

CUT TO:

BLANK SCREEN

CUT TO:

BOOTH

CU of man, his eyes wide like Keir Dullea in the space pod.

MAN

Where the fuck does American cheese come from!?!?

He looks back down at the plate.

CU of burger, dry and overcooked, grease stains on the bun.

CUT TO:

ANIMATION

A few seconds of an Elsie the Cow commercial.

INT. SLAUGHTERHOUSE

MONTAGE of the gruesome business of making cows into beef, blood and guts, cow carcasses inching by, hung from travelers on the ceiling, dripping blood.

INT. SUPERMARKET

Rows of neatly cellophaned ground beef, sterile and pink.

CUT TO:

INT. DINER - LATE ONE NIGHT

With greasy hands, the cook molds patties from a pile of beef on table. He tosses the patties onto a tray on the filthy floor. The SCREAM of the man is heard.

CUT TO:

INT. DINER BOOTH - PRESENT

CU of the man's face, stunned, his breath in short gasps. WIDEN to reveal his left hand clutching a fork, his right holding onto the table. His plate is untouched, the beef and cheese congealing into a solid mass. He reaches for the tumble of coke and picks it up.

MAN

Coca-cola?.....oh, God....

He sets down the glass as if it had suddenly turned hot. He rises uncertainly, fumbling in his pocket for sunglasses.

WIDER OF DINER

Nothing's changed, except the cook, waitress and guy in plaid are all staring at the man. The waitress keeps her distance as she leaves the check on his booth table and backs away.

COOK

You all right, buddy?

The man doesn't hear. He slowly picks up the check as if in a trance.

INSERT - CU OF CHECK

A 40's style check. It reads "Hamburger 40¢, Coke 5¢.....45¢"

MAN (O.S.)

45 cents! At least it's cheap.

WIDER OF DINER

WAITRESS

That's \$6.95. Somethin' wrong with your eyesight?

The man looks back at the check and sees she's right. He fishes out a ten from his pocket.

MAN

I'm....sorry....

He drops the bill on the table and rushes for the door.

EXT. DINER - DAY

The door to the parking lot swings open and the man staggers out. He's breathing heavily. He begins to calm down as he starts up the busy avenue, his steps becoming more assured. He almost smiles to himself.

MAN

(to himself)

Last time I eat in that dump.

Haughtily, he stops and turns, like Lot before he got salted, to look back at the diner. CU of his face as he removes his dark glasses.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET SCENE - THE 1950'S - DAY

A busy street with traffic, an American Graffiti scene, a diner by the side of a two lane road, the same diner, in fact, that the man had just come out of, but now brand spanking new, shiny and busy, blond girls with pony tails rushing around inside taking orders and delivering burgers.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - THE PRESENT

CU of the man's face as he blinks his eyes.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET SCENE - THE 1890'S - DAY

The "same" scene, but in the nineteenth century. Horses and buggies now trot up a dirt street, a porched saloon with swinging doors where the diner had been, men in tall hats, women in frilly dresses coming out of the place.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - THE PRESENT

ECU of the man's face, watching, the busy avenue of the present behind him.

CUT TO:

EXT. A FIELD - DAY

An empty field, a wilderness, a small path leads away from the man where the street had been.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - THE PRESENT

ECU of his face, eyes wide and unnerved. He turns around, the way he was heading away from the diner. The sounds of CAR HORNS and TRAFFIC.

WIDER OF THE STREET

The man is standing on the side of the multi-lane commercial strip.

TIGHTER ON HIS FACE

He turns back again to face the diner.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE FIELD

The wilderness is still there, green and inviting, clean and quiet. The sound of BIRDS and a gentle breeze.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - THE PRESENT

ECU of the man's eyes. They look back and forth, from the field to the busy street behind him.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE FIELD

The man stands at the edge of the wilderness and slowly starts to walk toward it. The sounds of the TRAFFIC recede. He begins to pick up pace gradually, until he is running, dancing among the wildflowers, insanely exhilarated. Then there is a CAR HONK growing louder and louder, a SCREECH of tires and a THUD.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - THE PRESENT

Traffic has stopped. PEOPLE are getting out of their cars to see. A car had hit the man who had run blindly across the street. The driver of the car runs to the man's motionless body, the front bumper just inches from the corpse on the pavement. ZOOM IN to CU of the bumper sticker, "BE HERE NOW."

FADE TO BLACK