



THE ROAD MOVIE IN SEARCH OF MEANING

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SHORTCUTS

INTRODUCTION: A ROAD MAP FOR THE ROAD MOVIE

Two men on motorcycles cruising the open highway, panoramic vistas expanding around them. An outlaw couple, seen through the windscreen of their open-top convertible, one staring out front with hands clamped to the wheel, the other looking anxiously behind. Or from the reverse angle: the silhouettes of two hot-rodders behind the dashboard, hair trailing in the breeze from the open window, road signs and landscape speeding past their fixed gaze and ours.

All three of these examples are recognisably from the genre we have come to identify as the road movie. If the first does not instantly call to mind any number of moments in *Easy Rider* (1969), the chances are you have not seen it yet. We might recognise the second from somewhere near the end of *Thelma and Louise* (1991), while the third is a recurring shot from *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971). Saying these are typical images of the road movie, though, begs the question what it is at all that identifies these films as 'road movies'. To say simply that we know a road movie when we see one, as the beginning of this book has in fact invited you to do, suggests a very circular logic in the way we identify and discuss genre.

At the same time, it is important to work out what it is that instantly suggests 'road movie' to our eyes and ears when we watch a film, or conjure up moving images such as the ones described above. But just as importantly, we need to ask what is the point of identifying and naming

such a thing. If we are going to explore the road movie as a genre, in other words, we need to work out not just what a road movie is, but what it – and the generic terminology around it – actually *does*.

This might sound heavy going for a type of movie which, as the examples above suggest, is frequently viewed and experienced in terms of speed, excitement and freedom. David Laderman's *Driving Visions* (2002), one of the first full-length academic works on the genre, opens with a scattering of words and phrases road movies call to mind: 'rebellion ... the unfamiliar ... the thrill of the unknown ... subversion' (2002: 1–2); the road itself, the author continues, symbolises 'the movement of desire ... the lure of both freedom and destiny' (2002: 3). All this may be true, but if we stop at this point (and, needless to say, *Driving Visions* does not) we leave most of our questions unanswered. What is it, for example, that enables us to take one particular film as a road movie in the first place? And what subsequently binds a set of particular films within this generic framework?

What is more, once we can start to say what a road movie is, we then need to ask where it came from. What specific factors meant that at a given time, and not at any other, the road movie came into being as a genre? What do audiences get out of the road movie, and why is the time and place in which genres emerge revealing in this instance? And rather than just acknowledge that the road movie promises the lure of freedom or the unknown, how do we understand the *need* that the genre taps into – and equally, how does the road movie as a film genre gratify this need?

Distinguishing the road genre

From one perspective we obviously do recognise a road movie when we see one, but what we are really describing here is the way we place certain films within certain frameworks of understanding, often based on our knowledge of other films. In an influential essay, Rick Altman (1984) outlines what he calls the 'semantic/syntactic approach' to film genre. Altman's essay was important in moving away from the study of genre as a largely taxonomic and ahistorical one: in other words, a study that limited itself to identifying, listing and describing a corpus of genre films – the western, the musical, the thriller, and so on – without necessarily asking where such genres come from and why. Or why, indeed, certain genres have come and gone, and (as is arguably the case with the road movie)

come back again in a different form. Central to Altman's argument is the idea that genres can both stabilise and mutate around semantic elements (the 'stuff' of a genre, its key motifs) and syntactic ones (essentially, the structure of narrative – from *syntax*, the order through which language makes grammatical sense – and the meanings or values expressed through this structure). We understand and identify genre according to the points of synchronisation between these two areas. A film with driving in it may intermittently look like a road movie, but we only recognise it as such if the film's syntax supports it. *Drive* (2010) begins with some of the most thrilling driving sequences I have seen on film, sequences that owe a lot to the famous car chases in films like *Bullitt* (1968) and *The French Connection* (1971); just as *Collateral* (2004) takes place largely in a car. But it is hard to call *Drive* or *Collateral* road movies, not so much because they remain within Los Angeles, but because other semantic and syntactic elements adhere more closely to the expectations of the crime film, the detective film or the thriller.

Thelma and Louise is similarly structured around a crime-and-pursuit narrative, though in this case the important thing is to identify the other distinctive choices Ridley Scott's film makes in its story and setting. Here, the road and the mobility and freedom it offers are seen as a constituent part of the outlaws' flight from the forces of authority – and in *Thelma and Louise*'s specific case, from male-dominated cultural norms. We might identify this film as a road movie because we recognise in it the significance of the road and the car, of extended vehicular flight and what it means for the protagonists in the film. Unsurprisingly, central to many writers' and critics' conceptions of the road movie is this prominence of the road itself to the film's narrative development. The road in the road movie is never just a background: it is typically both the motivation for the narrative to happen, and also the place that allows things to occur. Instead of being just a transitional space between A and B, it is this space itself between A and B that becomes the focus of the road movie.

As I have hinted here, we also begin to identify genre when we can situate one film's elements alongside and within a corpus of other similar films. We might most obviously recognise the motorbike allusion as one from *Easy Rider*, but it could equally be from *Wild Hogs* (2007); similarly, the outlaw couple is a familiar figure in films such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Badlands* (1973), *True Romance* (1993) or *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and

we might just as easily identify the hot-rodding point-of-view shot in a film such as *The Cannonball Run* (1981). We can rightly argue that anyone who watches and enjoys a genre film specifically for its generic character (not here in the pejorative sense of 'formulaic', but in terms of it being 'of a genre') is engaging in genre criticism, because they are recognising how a particular type of film (the meaning of the French word *genre*) exists beyond one individual film. This opens up its own further areas of interest to the genre analyst, because it asks us to consider when and why the identification with specific film types comes along at given moments, and indeed why they might persist well beyond the original run of certain films.

Studying a genre like the road movie therefore asks us to consider when, how and why we came up with a concept such as 'the road movie' to begin with. In the case, say, of *Easy Rider*, it was not as if its makers suddenly decided to invent the road movie; but somewhere along the way a consensus of opinion has seen this film in particular as a defining moment in the development of the road movie as a genre. The genre critic's task is to understand the industrial, economic, political and cultural circumstances that, at particular junctures of history, produced particular film genres, and to consider the developments of these genres through different contexts. This book aims to do just this for the road movie.

In search of origins

One of the paradoxes of genre films is that they can only become genre films once enough films have been produced to generate such a description. As Altman (1999) would go on to elaborate, analysing genre is as much about what we call its discursive qualities: the ways, in other words, in which the genre has been talked about, evaluated and promoted. But Altman also notes the role of reception – what he describes as the 'pragmatic' aspect, literally how a genre is 'used' by its audiences and critics – in shaping genre. To say that a road movie is a road movie because we call it one may sound flimsy as theory, but there is some truth in it. Or more precisely, when enough people – film critics, fans, academics – start to call something by a certain name, that name sticks. It is interesting, for instance, how often film historians discuss works like *It Happened One Night* (1934) or *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) as 'precursors' of the road movie (see for example Costanzo 2014: 304–9), as well as European *auteur* films

like *Wild Strawberries* (1957) and *La strada* (1954)* (see Laderman 2002: 248–55) when in many respects they show all the hallmarks we have come to recognise in the genre (and I will be discussing the first two of these films accordingly). The point here, though, is that they were not identified at the time as road movies, because the term did not exist: we retrospectively identify in these films aspects of the road movie as it would come to be, and even see their influence on later films, while also recognising these qualities were not always the most significant ones for audiences of the time. *It Happened One Night*, in the context of 1934, was a comedy adventure pairing up two of Hollywood's biggest stars. *Wild Strawberries*, meanwhile, though quite prototypical of the road genre in its story of a car journey through southern Sweden, was and is still mainly viewed in the context of Ingmar Bergman's directorial work and themes.

Equally, many of the very earliest films feature travel: the ability to show other places, and the movement through them, was in fact one of the selling points of the cinema in its first few decades. But even if some of these films share characteristics with later road movies, no one at the time of their production understood them in such terms. By contrast, critics invariably see films like *Easy Rider*, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Two-Lane Blacktop* as road movies because of the concentration of films around this time depicting narratives of road travel, discovery and rebellion.

This organic approach to reading genre rejects the problematic idea that genres were somehow handed down ready-made from on high (or more precisely, from Hollywood movie producers), apparently to give the public 'what they want' without asking them first. This is not to say that the economic logic of Hollywood does not play a part in the development of the road movie: as we will consider, the emergence of the American road movie at the end of the 1960s owed plenty to old-school commercial opportunism and business acumen, as much as it did to any broader cultural and political factors. And yet, transformations in filmmaking are themselves a reflection of cultural change; what is more, when a series of films comes to be identified and embraced by filmmakers, audiences and critics alike, this becomes a culturally significant moment in itself, obliging

* Where the English translation of non-English titles is widely used, this is given and used in references to it. In some instances, for example *La strada* and *Y tu mamá también*, I have stuck to the original titles by which the films are commonly known.

us to make sense of the culture that produces them – and above all, what pleasures and meanings the road movie should offer to its audiences both then and now.

Automobility and the kinematic

Exactly what these pleasures and meanings consist of will vary according to context, but what binds all manifestations of the road movie is the idea of *mobility*. As a genre in which people by definition move, this might sound obvious, but it is worth stressing, not only to remind ourselves what it is that makes the road movie distinctive, but what it is that gives it its distinctively *cinematic* quality. It is notable, for example, how often discussions of the road movie's historical origins point to its range of literary predecessors (see Corrigan 1991: 144; Laderman 2002: 6–13; Mills 2006: 18; Costanzo 2014: 301–2). These studies identify the narrative heritage of the genre in texts such as Homer's *Odyssey*, the Exodus and Gospel narratives in *The Bible*; Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*; Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605–1615), James Fenimore Cooper's novels featuring the 'leatherstocking' Natty Bumppo (1823–1827), or Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). There are very few analysts of the genre, meanwhile, who do not identify the importance of post-war American literature, and specifically 'Beat' poetry and prose – foremost amongst these being Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957) – as having a significant impact on what becomes the road movie (Cohan and Hark 1997: 6–7; Laderman 2002: 9–12; Mills 2006: 35–63). It is important to acknowledge how certain films draw on shared, though often quite broad, semantic and syntactic elements common to these various works, especially to the extent that literature from the *Odyssey* to *On the Road* has given shape to the ways we narrate and mythologise our own experience – even if to the rather vague point that *every* story, and life itself, is a 'journey' of sorts. But as the banality of this metaphor suggests, drawing on the canon of past literary texts does not always tell us anything very insightful about the road movie, and may act (though not, happily, in the studies referenced above) as a type of get-out clause that avoids the more challenging task of actually analysing the genre. Moreover, while these literary comparisons highlight the formal parallels and continuities between various texts, they hardly account for their specific effects on readers or audiences: what it

is, say, that makes watching a road movie a very different experience from reading Chaucer.

This is not to say that a study of the road movie is obliged to begin and end with the films. Focusing on what she more broadly calls the 'road story' in American culture, Katie Mills (2006) has argued for the idea of 'the road', with 'the rebel' as its key figure, across a range of products: from poetry and novels, to art works, to film, television and videogames. Mills' emphasis on the road story as one that is both multi-sensory and trans-media is very interesting, touching as it does on the way our appreciation of the road movie combines different elements within the sometimes misleadingly singular concept of 'cinema'. Mills' observation also reminds us that road movies are much more than the exclusively narrative experiences that road comparisons suggest. What's more, when we talk about 'watching' a road movie, we inadequately describe an experience that also involves our sense of hearing in a prominent way – specifically through the musical soundtracks that have become a defining feature of the genre – but also, in a slightly less tangible way, the memory of other senses stimulated by our own recollections of mobility. The road movie is unique as a genre in that its basic form, in terms of the drive, the train ride, or simply the walk, is something we can mostly all replicate in our own lives. Our excitement at the prospect of a road trip or just an outing is the same sense of opportunity and pleasurable movement evoked in many road movies: indeed, the incorporating of music into our own mobility, be it through car sound systems or personal headphones, is in some respects a way of rendering our own everyday experience more cinematic.

The potent, trans-media appeal of mobility and/as cinema is such that we can probably all think of things that evoke road movies while having no specific relation to them at all. For me, Bruce Springsteen's song 'Thunder Road' and Kraftwerk's 'Autobahn' fit into this category; as do Haruki Murakami's novel *Dance Dance Dance* and the videogame *Fallout 3*. I am not sure quite what it is that makes these non-movies 'cinematic', but studying the road *movie* obliges us to consider the specific impact of the cinema as an invention and art form. Once again, looking for literary precursors of the genre is here slightly beside the point, given that the formative event for the emergence of a road movie was the almost simultaneous invention, at the turn of the nineteenth century, of the automobile and the moving-picture camera (see Mills 2006: 17; Costanzo 2014: 303–4). The

Lumière brothers' *cinématographe*, the machine they invented in 1895 both to film and project moving images, literally means 'writer (or recorder) of movement' (from the Greek *kinema*). This *kinetic* fact of cinema, its ability to evoke the 'thrilling sensation of first-hand movement' (Mills 2006: 17), made it a central feature of what Mills calls the twentieth century's fixation with 'automobility'. Early Lumière films such as *Train Entering the Station at La Ciotat* (1895) and *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway* (1897) (the latter using a mounted camera at the back of a departing locomotive), less than a minute long, were hardly narratives at all, but pure expressions of moving vehicles wondrously revived in moving images. As Mills puts it, this 'new culture of rampant motion, and this double dose of mobility – both real and represented – offered new ways of situating and experiencing oneself' (*ibid.*).

What is so perceptive in Mills' reading of the road movie is that these two sides of mobility – actual, real-life mobility and its audio-visual representation – are marked historically by evolutions in the genre. What we see in the emerging road movie is what happens when particular people at a particular time achieve the means of representing themselves on screen (Mills 2006: 26–7). The freedom or otherwise to move – or the *fantasy* of movement in a culture where such mobility is prohibited – are so central to our conceptions of identity that it is perhaps unsurprising that the road movie as a genre should lend itself so perennially to stories of (self-)discovery. Taking a leaf from Mills' study, though applying it here to a more wide-ranging set of global contexts, this book charts the way this most *kinematic* of film genres has been used, via its representation of mobile subjects, as a form of individual expression, as a way of narrating ideas of identity and place, and as a vehicle for exploring our past, our troubled present, and even our uncertain future.

The structure of this book

As I will explore in this book, once the road movie assumes an identifiable shape, in terms of structure, themes and motifs, it becomes adaptable across a range of filmmaking contexts. These contexts inform the structure of this study, moving as they do from North America (Chapter one) to South America (Chapter two), then going on to look at how the road movie has been used by a variety of international filmmakers (Chapter three), and finally,

how it has been taken in new directions in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries (Chapter four). Like any genre, I view the road movie as organic and adaptive, and while I am frequently critical of certain films, I do not make any prescriptive or evaluative judgements about the turn the road movie has taken. Some road movie criticism has lamented what it sees as the demise of the road movie since its 'classic'/'classical' period of the early 1970s. I will not do the same, partly because I do not share these critical opinions about the films in question, but mainly because such judgements effectively place a categorical line before and after the preferred texts, designating what the road movie should and should not be. Such an approach fails to consider the possibilities of evolving meanings and values of the genre across different times and places.

As this suggests, my own approach to the subject is as flexible as the genre itself, and while there are inevitably many films I have had to overlook, I have tried as far as possible to explore the range of the genre in the contexts of global cinema. Beyond the first two chapters, though, where I see the particular narratives of the road movie as highly specific to conceptions of place and history, I have avoided the temptation to do a kind of road movie 'world tour' of different national cinemas. The first reason for this is a practical one. While a study of this type might be welcome, it would require a vastly bigger book than this present one. Any effort on my part to do this here would end up simply listing a set of assumed films without space for any detailed analysis. There is also a theoretical reason, though, related to the fact that the road movie, as a global genre, cannot be so easily tied down to a particular place or national context. This is perhaps a contentious claim, and I do not suggest for a moment that the road movie does not have specific resonances for the various cultures within which it is produced and seen. Yet, as I will explore, the road movie is also strongly tied to the mainly American cinema that produced and produces it. I have consequently focused on films which, whatever their contexts of production, acknowledge the global imaginary of the road movie as part of their form and function. Moreover, and as we will see in chapters three and four, one of the key characteristics of the contemporary road movie is that it is rarely constrained by national borders, either literal or imaginative; to the extent, in fact, that the crossing of these borders, and the national and cultural contexts they contain, becomes the very point of the road movie in the era of globalisation.