

THE ROAD MOVIE BOOK

Edited by
Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark



London and New York

INTRODUCTION

Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark

The mating of the road and the movies is as enduring as any of Hollywood's famous couples, and seemingly just as inevitable. The road has always been a persistent theme of American culture. Its significance, embedded in both popular mythology and social history, goes back to the nation's frontier ethos, but was transformed by the technological intersection of motion pictures and the automobile in the twentieth century. When Jean Baudrillard equates American culture with "space, speed, cinema, technology" (100) he could just as well be describing the characteristic features of a road movie. Forging a travel narrative out of a particular conjunction of plot and setting that sets the liberation of the road against the oppression of hegemonic norms, road movies project American Western mythology onto the landscape traversed and bound by the nation's highways: "The road defines the space between town and country. It is an empty expanse, a *tabula rasa*, the last true frontier" (Dargis: 16). The 1969 ad campaign for *Easy Rider* exclaimed, "A man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere," and this much-remembered sentiment condenses what is typically taken for granted as the ideological project of a road movie, regardless of what travel narrative it specifically recounts.

The ongoing popularity of the road for motion picture audiences in the United States owes much to its obvious potential for romanticizing alienation as well as for problematizing the uniform identity of the nation's culture:

Road movies are too cool to address seriously socio-political issues. Instead, they express the fury and suffering at the extremities of civilised life, and give their restless protagonists the false hope of a one-way ticket to nowhere . . . road movies are cowed in lurking menace, spontaneous mayhem and dead-end fatalism, never more than few roadstops away from abject lawlessness and haphazard bloodletting . . . road movies have always been songs of the doomed, warnings that once you enter the open hinterlands between cities, you're on your own.

(Atkinson: 16)

INTRODUCTION

But much more significant is that a road movie provides a ready space for exploration of the tensions and crises of the historical moment during which it is produced. Key moments in the history of the road movie tend to come in periods of upheaval and dislocation, such as the Great Depression, or in periods whose dominant ideologies generate fantasies of escape and opposition, as in the late 1960s. Likewise, the three major cycles of outlaw-rebel road films – the subgenre that provokes the sentimental existentialism in the above quotation – have occurred in eras where the culture is reevaluating a just-closed period of national unity focused on positive, work-ethic goals: the *film noir* aftermath of the war (*Detour*, *They Live by Night*); the late 1960s challenge to the corporate conformism and anti-Communism of the Eisenhower era and the deepening involvement in Vietnam throughout the subsequent decade (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*); and, most recently, in the early 1990s as the Reagan era's renewed offensive against the Communists lost its primary target and the masculinist heroics of the Gulf War gave way to closer scrutiny (*My Own Private Idaho*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Natural Born Killers*).

From the old studio system to the new Hollywood in short, the American road movie has measured the continuity of the US film industry throughout its various economic incarnations. The road movie is, in this regard, like the musical or the Western, a Hollywood genre that catches peculiarly American dreams, tensions, and anxieties, even when imported by the motion picture industries of other nations. However, despite the obvious popularity and significance of the road movie throughout the history of American cinema, there has not yet been much sustained inquiry into what precisely qualifies a film as a road movie, how the genre relates to the social and cultural history of the United States, or how its inflection alters when carried over to a non-American landscape such as Australia. As Timothy Corrigan has observed, "As a film genre, road movies are frequently bypassed by some of the best studies of genre" (143).

According to Corrigan, "the road movie is very much a postwar phenomenon" (143), and it finds its generic coherence, he explains, in the coalescence of four related features that connect the genre to the history of postwar US culture. A road narrative, first of all, responds to the breakdown of the family unit, "that Oedipal centerpiece of classical narrative" (145), and so witnesses the resulting destabilization of male subjectivity and masculine empowerment. Second, "in the road movie events act upon the characters: the historical world is always too much of a context, and objects along the road are usually menacing and materially assertive" (145). Third, the road protagonist readily identifies with the means of mechanized transportation, the automobile or motorcycle, which "becomes the only promise of self in a culture of mechanical reproduction" (146), to the point where it even becomes "transformed into a human or spiritual reality" (145). And fourth, as "a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the

INTRODUCTION

absence of women" (143), the road movie promotes a male escapist fantasy linking masculinity to technology and defining the road as a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately contained by the responsibilities of domesticity: home life, marriage, employment.

Corrigan's account of the road movie makes only partial sense of its generic continuity, however, which stretches back before the war to the 1930s. "Road movies are," as he observes, "by definition, movies about cars, trucks, motorcycles, or some other motoring self-descendant of the nineteenth-century train" (144). The significance of technology in the road movie, differentiating its quest narratives and wandering protagonists from those of the Western, has as much to do with representing modernity, its historical achievements as well as its social problems, as it does with reiterating masculinist fantasies of escape and liberation. One early shot in *Easy Rider*, which places Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper in the background, fixing the flat tire on the former's motorcycle, while a rancher shoes his horse in the foreground, vividly captures how the genre repeatedly does not oppose so much as bring together the modernity of transportation on the twentieth-century road and the traditions still historically present in the settings that the road crosses.

The informing relation of modernity and tradition has repeatedly organized road narratives on film, leading David Laderman to conclude in a recent article that the genre is defined by its repeated positioning of conservative values and rebellious desires in an often uncomfortable, even depoliticized dialectic. As a result, the road movie genre has repeatedly worked, first, to set in opposition two contrasting myths central to American ideology, that of individualism and that of populism, and second, to use the road to imagine the nation's culture, that space between the western desert and the eastern seaboard, either as a utopian fantasy of homogeneity and national coherence, or as a dystopic nightmare of social difference and reactionary politics. The ad campaign for *Easy Rider* may confirm Wyatt's (Fonda) conclusion in the film that "We blew it," but these two travelers do find "America," even if it is not the one they initially set out in search of. As lawyer George Hanson (Jack Nicholson) concludes, when explaining why the two bikers represent so great a threat to the Southern rednecks who ultimately destroy them, it all has to do with the freedom they represent on their bikes. "Talking about it and being it, that's two different things," he comments. "I mean it's hard to be free, when you're bought and sold in the marketplace."

The irony here is that, while the bikers' being on the road testifies to their apparent freedom, visualized further in their counter-culture appearance and behavior, they themselves represent an incoherent conjunction of modernity and tradition (after all, the American flag is emblazoned on Wyatt's helmet and bike). More to the point, a plastic tube hidden inside the gas tank of Wyatt's bike is the evidence of this pair's own containment by the marketplace of US capital.

INTRODUCTION



Plate 1.1 *Easy Rider*. Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda go in search of America and discover that “We blew it.”

The tubing conceals the bankroll earned in the drug deal that opens the film, and Billy (Hopper) sees this money as their ticket to freedom, by which he means the same kind of economic security that drives corporate America on the two coasts that bound their road. Billy thus cannot understand why Wyatt thinks they “blew it”: “We’ve done it. We’re rich, Wyatt. Yeah, man. Yeah. . . . We’ll retire in Florida now, mister. We’re rich, man. . . . That’s what it’s all about, man. I mean, like you know, and then you do it for the big money, man, and then you’re free. Dig?” As the film depicts it, though, what prevents these easy riders from achieving their counter-culture version of the American dream is the redneck Southern culture that they have to pass through on their quest for freedom, and this makes the road menacing once they leave the utopian promise of the desert and the hippie commune housed there. The dystopic view of America from the road they go on to travel, which sets the liberation of that desert wilderness against the oppression of the redneck culture beyond it, causing Wyatt to realize “we blew it,” has dominated road movies since the release of *Easy Rider*, which, Lee Hill rightly asserts, “almost single-handedly created the road movie as a vital post-60s genre” (72).

The impact of *Easy Rider* is undeniable and important to any understanding of the genre, but it has also obscured the road movie’s own history. Although the

INTRODUCTION

road has always functioned in movies as an alternative space where isolation from the mainstream permits various transformative experiences, the majority of road films made before the 1960s more successfully imagined an ultimate reintegration of road travelers into the dominant culture. Certain perpetual wanderers of the 1930s, most famously Tom Joad (Henry Fonda) in *The Grapes of Wrath*, might emerge in the genre, and other such defiers of the law might perish at the hands of an unforgiving society, as in the outlaw couple (Fonda and Sylvia Sydney) in *You Only Live Once*, but such cases were the exception rather than the rule. More paradigmatic of the “classic” road film is *It Happened One Night*, the big Academy Award winner of 1934. Its female protagonist, Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) flees the oppression of her wealthy class background, and she finds her liberation in the “normality” of the people she meets on the road, most notably her unexpected companion, newsman Peter Warne (Clark Gable). The significance of their coupling is condensed when he teaches her how to dunk doughnuts: “Forty million dollars and you don’t know how to dunk,” he observes with scorn. “I’d change places with a plumber’s daughter any day,” she replies; and moments later, when her father’s detectives come into their motel room to question them, she pretends that she is such common “folk,” which allows her to escape their



Plate 1.2 Gable and Colbert: the heterosexual couple on the road in *It Happened One Night*.

INTRODUCTION

scrutiny. Ellie's road trip results in a change of character, which her father notices upon her return, allowing her to appreciate Peter's worth in contrast to her gigolo-husband, because it assimilates her to the culture that her wealth has isolated her from. Furthermore, while on the road she can be stripped of her luggage and money, subjected to chance meetings and detours, threatened with starvation and homelessness, and ultimately dependent on the hospitality and good will of strangers like Warne, but the precariousness of her situation still does not make the road a place of potential menace or danger.

Ultimately, the road traveled from Florida to New York State in *It Happened One Night* is a utopian space rather like the desert in *Easy Rider*, and it defines both the setting and agenda of road movies throughout the studio era. As Barbara Ching and Rita Barnard observe about this film: "The basic premise and source of laughter . . . is that all experience is mediated or filtered by class. This uncomfortably radical insight, however, is sanitized by the standard comic narrative, and finally distilled into the trite message that the rich are unlucky because they are sealed off from real people, real experience, and real community. However, the force of this ideological containment is balanced by the film presentation of communal experience," as evoked by Ellie's travels, as when she joins in a singalong on the bus (54). Romance and the reestablishment of a democratic consensus dominate the road in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood films such as *Love on the Run*, *Fugitive Lovers*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Saboteur*, and *Without Reservations*, just as they do in the Frank Capra comedy.

The famous and influential example of *It Happened One Night* should remind us that Corrigan's account of the road movie, which emphasizes its "distinctly existential air" and the corresponding centrality of "male buddies, usually a pair whose questing will only be distracted or, at best, complemented by the women who intrude from time to time" (144), takes for granted a crucial paradigm shift in the genre that occurred in the decades following the Second World War, when the road and the road movie were both mediated by the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* in 1957. A recounting of journeys that occurred a decade prior to this date, the novel in fact chronicles a rethinking of the road myth that the cultural marginality of Kerouac's protagonists would later codify even before the release of *Easy Rider* in 1969.

The novel's famous pair of road buddies, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, epitomize the road's prior and future connotations. Sal is in many ways a contrast to Dean, particularly in his middle-class origins and family safety nets; his long-suffering aunt is always bailing him out monetarily. He is the college boy who looks not only to live life on the road but to use it as raw material for his books. In an oft-cited example he envisions a trip that will promise to end just in time for him to return for the beginning of the next semester at school. Sal's adventures, moreover, resemble those in pre-1950s road films, where the

INTRODUCTION

unpredictability and chance occurrences of the road mean that getting to one's destination depends upon the kindness – and motor vehicles – of others. Most of Sal's road journeys without Dean combine hitch-hiking and bus trips. At one point Kerouac even cites a 1940s road film as an analogue of his adventure. Sal observes of the bus trip to Los Angeles where he meets the Mexican girl Terry: "In the gray, dirty dawn, like the dawn when Joel McCrea met Veronica Lake in a diner, in the picture *Sullivan's Travels*, she slept in my life" (82).

Sal's companion, Dean Moriarty, on the other hand, is an ex-convict and juvenile delinquent, whose drunken father is the never-realized goal of all his frantic motion. It is with Dean that the union of man and automobile becomes an integral part of the myth of the road. As Michael Herr (who has completed a screenplay of the novel for director Francis Ford Coppola) comments, Dean, like his real life alter-ego, Neal Cassady, "was like the Demon Driver. The guy could drive with his eyes closed. He just was born to drive." "It's Dean," Herr also comments, "who's the money character. He's the guy with the real juice" (Porter: 22). When Warner Bros. attempted to adapt the novel for the screen in the late 1950s, that unfiled screenplay ended, unlike the novel, with Dean dying in a car crash "because he has to be chastised for his excessive sensibility" (14).

In *On the Road* Dean barrels both east and west in a 1949 Hudson and later takes a late 1930s Chevy on the climactic trip to Mexico. The pairing of the wild Dean with the more cerebral Sal is what announces the shift in thinking about America through the trope of the road and its future significance for postwar car culture. When, on his first trip west, Sal and his road-pal Eddie are offered the chance to take over one of two cars that a Montana cowboy needs driven home from Nebraska, Eddie is the one who takes the wheel, because urban easterner Sal doesn't even have a driver's license. By contrast, Dean's skills as a wild, speeding, yet masterful driver are celebrated throughout the novel, uncannily mirroring Hollywood's own personification of the liberation that speed represents, James Dean, who did, of course, die in a blazing car crash just like the one Warners wanted for the end of *On the Road*. Indeed, for Corrigan, Hollywood's speeding Dean is the quintessential road figure (though he did not make a road movie) and a prefiguration of Kerouac's Dean. Corrigan sees the image of James Dean haunting the genre's investment in masculinist fantasy: initially as symbolized by the imagery of the traveling pair's transcendental relation to their automobile, later by the "commodification of the image [itself] as vehicle," which eventually causes the road pair to lose "that James Dean-like innocence and [embrace], with increasing abandon, its own definition as material image" (148).

In redefining the road protagonist as marginal and unassimilable by mainstream culture, Kerouac's novel significantly reconfigured the road "personnel." Prior to *On the Road*, road movie protagonists were either heterosexual couples, as in *It Happened One Night*, *You Only Live Once*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *They Live by Night*, and *The*

Long, Long Trailer, or whole communities of displaced persons, as in *Wild Boys of the Road*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or *Three Faces West*. After Kerouac, such pairs or groups of travelers were eclipsed by the male buddy pair. Here, too, *On the Road* appears to look forward as well as backward. For, although the shift in the gender of a traveling couple from a heterosexual pair to male buddies was clearly prompted by *On the Road*, ironically enough, Dean and Sal, even when Dean owns the car, are rarely alone. Various male friends and female lovers, or ride sharers from the travel bureaus, are usually passengers as well. Even the final expedition to Mexico, which reads most like a road movie script, brings mutual friend Stan Shepard along for the ride. That buddy-road movies of the late 1960s and 1970s so often center on two guys in a car or on bikes owes as much to the peripatetic Buz and Tod driving together in their Corvette on a seemingly endless road in the 1960s television series *Route 66* as to Kerouac. Previously male buddy teams had taken to the road primarily in comedies, most famously the Hope-Crosby *Road to* series. Post-Kerouac buddy-road movies take the male couple more seriously, while simultaneously problematizing it.

The couple is a dominant configuration in road movies just as it is in Hollywood movies in general. A road movie relies upon the couple for rather practical reasons of story-telling. Two people in the front seat of a vehicle make for easy classical framing and keep the dialogue going. The confined space of the car, the shared lodgings, booths in diners, and often hardship and desperation build intimacy and plot conflict quickly. While the Production Code was in effect, and before the sexual revolution happened, this intimacy created a sexual tension whose relief would have to be endlessly deferred. Road movies of the studio era thus frequently trace the spatial contours of a heterosexual courtship and its postponed consummation, most famously in *It Happened One Night* with its "Walls of Jericho" conceit for respecting the virtue of the couple while putting them in the same bedroom. Another Claudette Colbert road film, *Family Honeymoon*, well summarizes this convention while revealing, too, how the postwar domestic ideology of the late 1940s had already begun to pressure it. In this film, Colbert and her second husband, Fred MacMurray, end up having to take her three children along with them on their cross-country honeymoon, and the family, ironically enough, is what repeatedly thwarts the couple's efforts to consummate their union, which finally occurs only after they leave the road and return home.

The deferral of sexual intimacy in road films of the 1930s and 1940s allows for a closure that integrates the populist values of the road with the dominant culture through the trope of sexual consummation. By the 1970s, however, audiences would be more skeptical that a man and a woman who found passion on the road wouldn't simply act on it. And without the deferral of consummation much of the power of road intimacy and, eventually, the ameliorating closure enacted through consummation evaporated. Thereafter, heterosexual road movies had to derive

their frisson instead from implicating the couple's sexual union in a wider tapestry of violence which became just another version of their relationship. Fireworks, sexual and ballistic, replaced romance, and the heterosexual couple became united through their criminality, like Bonnie and Clyde (Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway) or Mickey and Mallory (Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis) in *Natural Born Killers*. The closures of such films are, as a corollary, also much more resistant to the liberation of the road, unable to imagine any form of synthesizing integration of individual freedom and the social order, of technology's movement and domesticity's stasis. With the couple's turn to outlawry, getting off the road is tantamount to going to jail if not worse, not to the marriage bed. Bonnie and Clyde's exultant "We rob banks!" is meant to signal the title characters' solidarity with those poor people whom Depression-era mortgage lenders have foreclosed upon. Yet when one robs banks and keeps the money instead of working to shut them down or destroy them, the politics get a little muddied, to say the least, and the outlaw couple's transgression necessitates their exclusion from the social order except as figures of mass-culture folklore: the poem about their exploits that Bonnie has published in the newspapers gives the couple their fame as figures of lore and, significantly enough, excites Clyde to the point where he overcomes his impotence and can consummate his relationship with Bonnie for the first time, a literal climax almost immediately followed by their execution. A similar if more blatant ambiguity surrounds Oliver Stone's pair of road criminals and media heroes, Mickey and Mallory, ironically pointed out by the seamless transformation of this outlaw couple into RV-driving family vacationers in the coda to *Natural Born Killers*.

Even more common than the transformation of romantic couples into outlaw lovers, at least until after the direct influence of *Easy Rider* had run its course, was the woman's removal from the road trip altogether. At the beginning of the decade 1969 to 1979, the tension between two men on the move, cut off from any emotional ties except to each other, could provide the same intimacy-without-sexual-union previously found in heterosexual screwball romances of the 1930s and 1940s, because the mainstream audience hardly expected two men to sleep with each other. While Corrigan sees the buddy-road movie as the archetype of the genre, generally speaking, it in fact had a relatively brief period of dominance. Many got made in the 1970s, Robin Wood reports, but in the early 1980s they had "virtually disappeared" (229). This is not to say that buddy-cops and other workplace sidekicks were not still in evidence, but the male buddy with whom a man travels, eats, and shares a room in the intimacy of the road quickly became a problematic figure. In buddy movies, as Wood notes, "the emotional center, the emotional charge, is in the male/male relationship, which is patently what the films are about" (228). By the end of the decade, partly through the increasing visibility of the gay liberation movement, and partly through the lessons

INTRODUCTION

taught by 1970s buddy movies themselves, audiences could no longer as easily ignore the possibilities that the intimacy of a same-sex road couple suggests, since such a queer subtext was by then widely acknowledged by the popular press, even when it was diegetically insisted to be “impossible.”

Along with the United States’ recentering of its economy from the east to the Sunbelt states, the increasingly problematic status of the buddy couple may help to explain the turn of road movies in the 1980s from existential narratives of rebellion to comedy and farce, usually set in the rural Southwest or South. Redneck chase farces like *Smokey and the Bandit* and its sequels persisted in the *Cannonball Run* films in 1981 and 1984. Willie Nelson chronicled the life of a touring country singer in *Honeysuckle Rose*, soon re-titled *On the Road Again* after the hit song on its soundtrack. Clint Eastwood, partial to the road genre from the *Outlaw Josey Wales* to *A Perfect World*, also played a country singer in the sentimental Depression-era film *Honkytonk Man* as well as the impresario of a traveling show in *Bronco Billy*. Other major studio road movies were played for broad laughs (*Bustin’ Loose*, *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*, the *National Lampoon Vacation* series) or romance (*Back Roads*, *The Sure Thing*). Though there was a smattering of low-budget outlaw chase films like *Eddie Macon’s Run* and *Running Hot*, from the late 1970s until the early 1990s the most interesting road films were being made outside mainstream Hollywood. Germany’s Wim Wenders, who would name his production company Road Movies, pondered the genre’s essential Americanness through European eyes in his powerful series of films that includes *Kings of the Road*, *Alice in the Cities*, *The American Friend*, *Paris, Texas*, and *Until the End of the World*. Other notable European road films of these years are *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, *Landscape in the Mist*, and *Vagabond*, while at the same time the *Mad Max* films made their mark in Australia. The European road sensibility also influenced the road movies that independent film-maker Jim Jarmusch began making in the US in the mid-1980s.

The release of *Thelma and Louise* in 1991, significantly the same year in which Corrigan’s chapter on the road movie genre appeared in his book *A Cinema Without Walls*, marked an important turning point in the popular and academic reception of the road film. Like the male protagonist who finds himself unexpectedly on the road with a fugitive or criminal in 1980s buddy films, Thelma (Geena Davis) discovers that she is more adept at being an outlaw than a housewife. Her skill is evident from the time she robs the convenience store to make up for inadvertently causing the theft of Louise’s (Susan Sarandon) bankroll to the way she takes charge of the highway patrolman who stops them. “I know it’s crazy,” Thelma observes. “But I just feel like I got a knack for this shit.” For all the disastrous violence that forever changes the lives of these two women, their road trip turns out to realize the temporary liberation from their oppressive, dissatisfying normality that they seek when they start out on their vacation. “Whatever happens,” Thelma tells Louise as the police close in on them, “I’m glad I came with you.”

INTRODUCTION

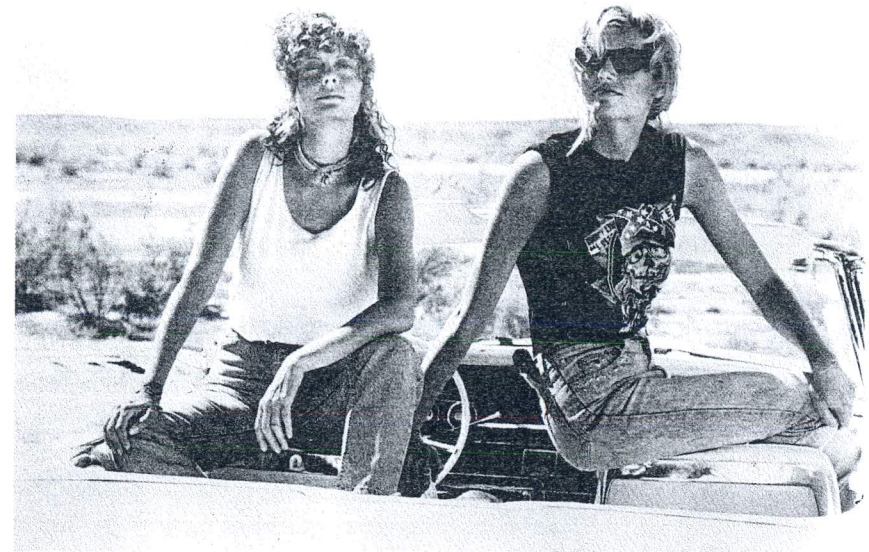


Plate 1.3 Women and cars: Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon in *Thelma and Louise*.

In many respects, *Thelma and Louise* performs on film the same critique of the road movie genre that Corrigan offers. Its female couple, who replace the male buddies or heterosexual lovers of earlier road movies, react to the failure of patriarchy to support their desires, just as they register the dynamic interaction of character and its road setting, identify their fantasies with their means of escape (Louise’s green Thunderbird convertible) and, most of all, interrogate and, to some critics, overturn the masculinist bias of the road. The critical controversy surrounding *Thelma and Louise* as soon as it was released testifies to its impact in recodifying the genre (which, as *Los Angeles Times* critic Kenneth Turan commented, recounts “the classic American way of finding out who you were and what you were about”), in identifying the genre’s complex history (see the critical perspectives on the film gathered together by *Film Quarterly* in “The Many Faces of *Thelma and Louise*”), and in generating a backlash to its feminist appropriation of the masculinist road fantasy, which the *Times*’s other film critics more disparagingly called a “high-toned ‘Smokey and the Bandit’ with a downbeat ending and a woman at the wheel” (Benson), and “a sort of post-feminist howl” (Rainer). As Sharon Willis points out, though, such dismissals of the film’s female-revenge set-pieces (such as the immolation of the truck driver’s rig) “recognize the fantasmatic drive of the film’s pyrotechnic spectacle only to shut it down immediately in order to fixate on a stable, if imaginary, antagonism between men’s anxieties and women’s vicarious pleasures” (122). The apprehension that, as

another *Times* writer put it, after seeing the film, “the women of America [will be moved] into flinging off their aprons, stowing the hubby’s .38 in the diaper bag, pumping premium into the Country Squire and careening down the blue-line highways toward riot and mayhem, leaving behind a trail of dead men” (Morrison) ignores the basic fact that *Thelma and Louise* is, finally, “a story about women and cars” (Willis: 125), which draws its fantasy of road life from the television series *Route 66*. “Our cars and the roads we drive on are one of the few arenas where it is acceptable, and even anodyne, to act out aggression” (126). As Willis points out, this has always been accepted as a truism for men on the road, which is not to say that it does not determine the relation of women to their cars as well.

Not surprisingly, *Thelma and Louise* galvanized critical attention on the road movie as an identifiable Hollywood product and revived the genre, which by this point, Corrigan was arguing, had reached a point of traveling “in a culture where images of history now only recycle themselves. Now the representations that once secured a place are neurotically cut loose of any referent but themselves” (152). After *Thelma and Louise*, Hollywood films began to recognize again the increasing hospitality of the road to the marginalized and alienated – not only women (*Leaving Normal*), but also gays (*My Own Private Idaho*, *The Living End*, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*), lesbians (*Boys on the Side*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*), and people of color (*Get on the Bus*, *Fled*, *Powwow Highway*) – and to renew the road’s historical currency. “The law is some tricky shit, isn’t it?” *Thelma* rhetorically asks after Louise explains why their explanation of self-defense will not excuse their criminality. Simply put, the road movie throughout its history has been wrestling with this question, and it continues to do so.

The essays in *The Road Movie Book* look at the genre from as many different perspectives as road movies themselves look at the consequences of adhering to or opposing laws, of freeing oneself from or seeking to rejoin the wider community. Using both historical and theoretical methodologies, they find the genre a productive ground for exploring issues of nationhood, economics, sexuality, gender, class, and race.

The first section, “Mapping Boundaries,” sketches certain broad thematic and ideological tropes of the genre. Bennet Schaber delineates the discovery of “the people” as the true destination of mainstream Hollywood and European road classics of the 1930s and early 1940s and then cites as a significant generic transformation the ensuing impossibility of this project in postwar cinema. Shari Roberts uses the films of Clint Eastwood to explore the essential masculinity inscribed into road space, particularly as the road movie genre takes over the ideological burden of its close relation, the Western. Following these wide-ranging pieces, Ian Leong, Mike Sell, and Kelly Thomas turn to a historical

discussion of the relationship between sexuality, consumer capitalism, and style in three classic outlaw couple films: *Gun Crazy*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Natural Born Killers*. Corey Creekmur finds, in the mixture of fame and infamy, a surprising link between the careers of outlaw couples in such road movies as these and those of touring entertainers in musicals.

The next section of the book, “American Roads,” further historicizes the issues raised by the volume’s first group of essays, tracing the continual reinvention of the genre in Hollywood cinema from the early 1940s to the end of the 1980s. Steven Cohan examines the utopian association of the road and home, as achieved through the mediation of show business culture, in films of the 1940s and 1950s. Mark Alvey next studies the cultural, political, and industrial factors that combined to make the television series *Route 66* the emblematic road narrative between *On the Road* and *Easy Rider*; and Julian Stringer follows a parallel, but more culturally repressed, road also being traveled in the 1960s by Russ Meyer’s low-budget, exploitation biker movies. Barbara Klinger then reconsiders the landmark impact of the release of *Easy Rider* by examining its complex placement in competing discourses of counter-culture politics and American nationalism. Finally, Ina Rae Hark charts the displacement of buddy-road movies from mainstream Hollywood at the end of the 1970s and their subsequent revival in the late 1980s as a Hollywood strategy for recuperating patriarchal capitalism from the yuppie excesses that had tarnished it during that “high-flying” decade.

The concluding section, “Alternative Routes,” concentrates on road films that depart from the American landscape or that travel on its cultural margins. Angelo Restivo shows how the new Italian national highway system of the late 1950s and early 1960s broke down regional differences and created a new national subject. Delia Falconer next turns our attention from a European road to another nation with a powerful road mythology, examining how the *Mad Max* trilogy offered a means of renegotiating the economic connections between Australia’s nationhood and its spatial history in the 1980s. Looking at the Australian road a decade later, Pamela Robertson explores the intersections of nationalist, sexual, and racial politics as organized through the trope of “home” in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Following somewhat similar terrain at the sexual margins of the American road, Sharon Willis analyzes the spectatorial position of fantasmic community, and its corresponding effacement of race and transgressive sexualities, in *To Wong Foo* and *Boys on the Side*. The next two essays then turn to the independent gay cinema movement of the 1990s, with Katie Mills and Robert Lang finding, in *The Living End* and *My Own Private Idaho*, respectively, a more genuinely alternative space for the representation of homosexual desire. Finally, Stuart Aitken and Christopher Lee Lukinbeal close the volume with an examination of the ways that masculinity is – and is not – liberated through the space and scale of the road movie’s cultural geography.

INTRODUCTION

As these final essays point out, the 1990s have once again revealed the endless permutations and combinations available on the road for the cinematic imagination. Even mainstream road films with heterosexual protagonists have changed markedly during this decade. The outlaw-couple film productively reinvented itself through the lens of postmodernism (*Wild at Heart*, *Kalifornia*, *True Romance*, *Natural Born Killers*). And, just when the buddy movie might seem to have exhausted its resources, late-1996 releases in the US feature a man–elephant buddy pair (*Larger than Life*) and feuding former presidents (*My Fellow Americans*), as well as a more familiar coupling of mismatched road men (*Good Luck*). The essays in *The Road Movie Book* remind us just how varied and adaptable the genre has always been and, we hope, will prevent in the future the ahistorical pronouncements that have too often underestimated the genre in the act of describing it.

Syracuse, New York
Columbia, South Carolina
December, 1996

Works Cited

- Atkinson, Michael. "Crossing the Frontiers." *Sight and Sound* 1 (1994): 14–18.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *America*, trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 1988.
- Benson, Shelia. "True or False: Thelma and Louise Just Good Ol' Boys?" *Los Angeles Times* (May 13, 1991), Home Edition: F-1+. *Los Angeles Times Online*. August 9, 1996.
- Ching, Barbara and Barnard, Rita. "From Screwballs to Cheeseballs: Comic Narrative and Ideology in Capra and Reiner." *New Orleans Review* 17.3 (1990): 52–9.
- Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.
- Dargis, Manohla. "Roads to Freedom." *Sight and Sound* 3 (1991): 14–18.
- Hill, Lee. *Easy Rider*. London: BFI, 1996.
- Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 1957.
- Laderman, David. "What a Trip: The Road Film and American Culture." *Journal of Film and Video* 48.1–2 (1996): 41–57.
- "The Many Faces of Thelma and Louise." *Film Quarterly* 45.2 (1991–2): 20–31.
- Morrison, Patt. "Perspective on the Sexes; Get a Grip, Guys: This is Fantasy." *Los Angeles Times* (July 22, 1991), Home Edition: B5+. *Los Angeles Times Online*. August 9, 1996.
- Porter, Mark. "Michael Herr on Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*." *Video Eyeball* 2.2 (1995): 14–15, 22.
- Rainer, Peter. "True or False: Thelma and Louise Just Good Ol' Boys?" *Los Angeles Times*, (May 31, 1991), Home Edition: F-1+. *Los Angeles Times Online*. August 9, 1996.
- Turan, Peter. "Smooth Ride For 'Thelma & Louise.'" *Los Angeles Times* (May 24, 1991), Home Edition: F-1+. *Los Angeles Times Online*. 1996.
- Willis, Sharon. "Hardware and Hardbodies: What Do Women Want? A Reading of *Thelma and Louise*." *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins. New York: Routledge, 1993. 120–8.
- Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.