

CHAPTER
FIVE

GENRE, GENDER, AND HYSTERIA
The Road Movie in Outer Space



“With regard to many of these photographs, it was History which separated me from them. Is History not simply that time when we were not born? . . . History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it we, we must be excluded from it.”

—ROLAND BARTHES

“Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.”

—BREUER AND FREUD

If hysteria is a body in trouble with language, historical place, and a failure to adequately repress, genre may always have been on the edge of a hysterical history, a shifting marker of history’s troubled relation with the way it represents itself. While genre has always struggled valiantly to accommodate within its formulas the social and cultural contradictions of history as if they were a single story—a western, a musical, a sci-fi film, in that action genre has often appeared strained or uncomfortably aware that any “true,” “real,” or “natural” cultural history persistently remains outside its excessively codified borders, ready to break apart its monolithic stances: the extraordinary ending of *Mildred Pierce* (1945) describes, in its excessiveness, its formulaic impossibility; the fragile, often confused narrative structures of so many films noirs—such as *The Big Sleep* (1946)—refer ultimately to their generic desperation in confronting all the implications of postwar history.

Indeed, the very idea of genre seems to reflect the excess history that it cannot accommodate, since there never could be a film that represents the pure or classical genre that genre criticism and theory seems to need in order to sustain itself. But, especially with the generic pastiches of contemporary movies (the blending of sci-fi, romance, and the western as one film, for instance) and the current critical positions that relentlessly try to use it (thematically more popular than ever in journals and at conferences), genre seems invariably to overdetermine, mimic, repeat, and shuffle its structures so excessively that what is mostly designated is a contemporary history that insists that it cannot be ritualized according to a single transhistorical pattern. The image of genre seems to taunt contemporary reception with its utopian possibilities only to turn those audiences back before its historical impossibilities.

In this sense, road movies have become a primary and incisive marker not only of how contemporary genre reflects the contemporary moment, but, more specifically, of how that crisis of genre is also the cultural and psychoanalytic crisis of gender. As an explicitly desperate genre, the contemporary road movie (and its first cousin, the buddy movie) responds specifically to the recent historical fracturing of the male subject, who has traditionally been the main support of those institutional walls of a dominant cinema. This cultural fracturing has made this subject insist all the more on its representation at the movies while at the same time making that representation impossible. When in a recent comic film, *The Big Picture* (1989), a small-time producer informs an aspiring director that buddy movies are “happening” and urges him to look at a script about Lincoln and Babe Ruth (*Abe and the Babe*), the joke, in all its silliness, is also a serious comment about contemporary generic representations of history and the hysterical but impossible need to stabilize male identities within history.¹

Generic Hysteria

Rarely is there a discussion of genre that does not take into account the historical pressures which lurk behind a particular form or, in Stephen Neale's words, the historical “pressure of genre” on that cultural history. On the one hand, social history informs and troubles most genres: an economic depression and the musicals of

the thirties, the discontent of a female work force and the melodramas of the forties, the Red Menace of McCarthyism and the sci-fi films of the fifties. On the other hand, genre enacts a counter-pressure that Neale describes

in terms of the relations of subjectivity involved; in terms of the structures and practices both of the cinematic institutions as a whole and of that sector known variously as “Hollywood” or as “commercial cinema”; and in terms of the determinants and effects of each of these within and across the social formation and its component areas. (17)

In the majority of cases and in the majority of critical models, it is this second tendency, the power of genre to recuperate, ritualize, and mythologize cultural history (its forms and representations), that has been the key to its stability and security. What has interested most critics about genre is its uncanny ability to reflect and create rituals of social history and thus to intensify a culture's relation to its social histories.²

For me, however, this ability to ritualize has, especially recently, become less the heart of genre and more a side effect produced by assimilating genre's drive to repeat itself into the naturalizing action of narrative. What has increasingly come to complicate film genre as an interpretive category, as well as a production model, is its drive to repeat specific signifying materials, an obsessive drive to repeat in reaction to the *resistance* of cultural history. Normally and classically, of course, narrative regulates this generic drive. The implicit demand to produce or see the same story, the same characters, and same historical referent within a genre movie is offset by the variations inherent in narrative structure (Altman “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach”). Narrative, in this sense, structurally contradicts as it naturalizes the generic impulse, a contradiction that is probably most evident in musicals and sci-fi films, where the key markers of the genre are instances of technology and spectacle that run counter to narrative continuity. If genre has always been a way of organizing stories and expectations for film audiences (Schatz 3–14 and *passim*), it is the overdramatized redundancy in that formulation that, with a large number of contemporary films, now represents the true

nature of genre and distinguishes it from other models of production and interpretation: organizing stories and expectations that are necessarily already organized has developed into a kind of theatrical redundancy, and in the material theatrics of that redundancy are the signs of a compulsive potential perhaps always present in genre but recently its presiding term, pointing towards what Jim Collins formulates (in regard to the Western) as “the diverse consciousness of a heterogeneous culture” (97). While many contemporary narratives—I will argue in the next chapter—engage that historical heterogeneity by refusing narrative motivation and naturalization, contemporary genres often obsessively repeat themselves in order to reflect a history now figured as refusing to become public ritual. In both cases, the standard mechanisms for interpretation and reading are turned back on and point towards the uncontainable historical variety of the audiences employing those mechanisms.

Consider *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), an archetypal genre film about the historical trouble with genre, but one whose narrative naturalizes that trouble (in way that *The Singing Detective* will refuse to do). The central plot—a romance generated by the generic nightmare that Kathy articulates when she claims all Don's movies look the same—is how to naturalize at least two different film genres that threaten to collapse into gibberish before the demands of historical representation and its technologies: the silent swashbuckler films on which Lena and Don build their reputations and the musical itself whose historical adjustments from vaudeville through Busby Berkeley to Stanley Donan and Gene Kelly form the largest part of the film's background.

Yet, there is another way, I think, to regard these self-reflexive maneuvers than as Jane Feuer convincingly does when she describes them through myths of integration and spontaneity (166–168). The other side of what that battle of generic forms points to is the potential hysterical figure that haunts them as they attempt to balance themselves against other historical pressures. With the first genre, the silent swashbuckler, the most revealing image in this regard is the preview of *The Duelling Cavalier*, which goes out of sync, literally out of sync with the historical technologies it struggles to recuperate; the result is the comically “hysterical” shot of Lena speaking with a man's voice and saying “yes” while shaking her head “no.” With the other—the musical—genre, which operates at

the center of *Singin' in the Rain*, the primary theme and work of the film is a successful attempt to naturalize or make “real” (in a strict historical sense) its generic conventions. In the narrative success of that project, however, there appear numerous moments in which the generic conventions of the musical become visibly desperate before the so-called natural or “real” world they work to recover: Kelly's brilliantly choreographed number for the title song, for instance, dances a thin line between an acceptable generic engagement with the reality of the dark and rainy streets (of postwar society?) and pure, compulsive lunacy; the suspicious glance of the policeman who enters at the end of the scene suggests how close the convention comes to a clinical violation of the law and how close Kelly may truly be to Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).

In *Singin' in the Rain* the success of the genre in textually inscribing cultural and historical change is explicitly a function of the film's relation to its audience (Feuer 168–171). From the beginning of the film, the fans that make up the movie audience within the narrative sustain the regenerations of the stars and the re-production of their movies. The renewal and naturalization of the genre depends on the audience's fantasizing as natural (that is, historically appropriate) the genre's conventions: those conventions traditionally must be possessed by an audience as adequately representing their own cultural history. When the distinction between narcissistic fantasies and historical reality becomes unmanageable, hysteria threatens: early in *Singin' in the Rain* a crowd of fans nearly tears Don apart in hoping to retrieve a material relic from the generic star. Yet at the conclusion, this generic aberration is corrected: as Kathy—the “natural” girl who is clearly the emblem of a changing historical audience—flees stage and screen, Don calls on his audience to stop her; she is then returned to that stage through a musical number that reintegrates her into the now renewed and naturalized musical genre. Quite literally, through the drama of Kathy, the audience is able to read itself back into the theatrics of the genre; the film then appropriately cuts to Don and Kathy, surrounded by a sunny natural world, regarding themselves in a billboard advertising *Singin' in the Rain*.

With contemporary genre, however, a naturalized public ritual has been replaced by the performance of denaturalized and appropriated generic conventions. In this case, audiences act out a kind of a cultural crisis as the theatrical repetition of the conventions them-

selves, watching generic formulas again and again and again as the symptoms of their contemporary history. In this contemporary audience's relation to its genres, participating in a generic ritual has less and less to do with socially sharing a public entertainment ritual that integrates a cultural and historical community and more and more to do with participating in fragmented, narcissistic obsessions with pieces of generic conventions that cannot be naturalized across a large narrative community. For this audience, the sacramental ritualizations of genre (Braudy 17–25) become the material props of separate cults trying to return themselves to a place in history.

What interests me here is, to summarize, the central, lurking potential within genre to manifest itself within contemporary society as a symptomatic look at its cultural history, the potential within its repetition compulsion to dramatize its failure to repress and contain. Although a constant threat since the mid-thirties, this failure occurs consistently only in films made in the last twenty years. Recently, that regulating action of narrative has begun to lose its force within a variety of films within the generic tradition (chapter 6); and genre has accordingly begun more and more to dramatize its historical love affair with its own symptoms. Road movies, I will argue, are a genre that crystallize this action more clearly than any other.

I do not, of course, pretend to be clinically precise here; I am not trying to present film history and texts as patients on the couch of film theory. I am using the notion of hysteria as a way of getting at certain, often-overlooked implications within contemporary film genres, implications that directly involve the actions of representation and its trouble with a referent. For these purposes the presiding symptoms of hysteria in this context are: a failure to repress, which leads to obsessive repetition; and a crisis in representation whose excessive theatricality attempts to simultaneously accept and reject the signs of a given world, to claim at once its narcissism and a release into a symbolic reality.³ In short, I am using this notion of hysteria partly as a metaphor that can locate extreme psychoanalytic and formal demands next to their inevitable social and historical inadequacies, a conjunction that, according to the metaphor, produces excessive theatricality and symptomatic repetition. My notion of generic hysteria here is similar to Jacques Derrida's sense of the madness of genre: "'Do,' 'Do not' says genre, the word 'genre,' the figure the voice, or the law of genre" (56). For Derrida, the law of

genre is a law based in "excess, the law of participating without membership, of contamination" (81, 63).

Generic hysteria is a historical body in trouble with its representation of itself and its historical place. Indeed, if one wants an instant emblem of it, remark toward the end of *Paris, Texas* (1984) the large mural on the wall of a building in which the face of Nastassia Kinski inhabits the icon of the Statue of Liberty; or recall the Travis of *Taxi Driver* (1976), the mohawked Indian from Vietnam, trying to network romantically in a yuppie culture. Separately, each describes one history and culture madly trying not to fit into but to hide behind the representations of another history and culture. What I like about both these twisted road movies is that they make generic and gender hysteria such a transparent vision of the present and the breakdown of male subjectivity.

The Road to Contemporary Culture

The road movie is the genre most demonstrative of this contemporary trouble with genre for two reasons. First, as a relatively recent generic form, it is especially close to the historical conditions that have destabilized interpretive viewing in general. As a film genre, road movies are frequently bypassed by some of the best studies of genre, and one explanation for these omissions could be that it has only recently appeared as a major direction in film history, the modern descendant of westerns such as *The Searchers* (1956), and so is recognizably less stable than most so-called classical genres. There have been important prototypes such as Raoul Walsh's *They Drive by Night* (1940) and Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937). But it seems clear that the road movie is very much a postwar phenomenon and is rooted in the institutional turbulence that describes the cinema after that war, with its foundation in the fifties and its maturity in the sixties and seventies. Second, as a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women, the road movie self-consciously displays the crisis of gender, so central in stabilizations of any genre, around the seemingly peculiar and historically recent proliferations of the threat of male hysteria (Theweleit vol. 2, *passim*). In keeping with the back-to-the-future position of the contemporary spectator, it is accordingly appropriate that Lynne Kirby aligns "cinematic hysteria" with males and trains in

the late nineteenth century, a preclassical version of the postmodern crisis played out by the contemporary man on the road: "The male hysteric . . . might then be seen as the boomerang of male, technological culture against itself, a vision of the railroad neurotic as a man reduced to female, or non-male state. . . . The paradox: investment, or, overinvestment in the male 'culture of time and space' was emasculating" (125, 124).⁴

What most of the films of this genre share is, quite obviously, a quest motif, which propels the usually male characters along the road of discovery. With this limited definition, road movies might have their precursors as far back as Homer's *Odyssey* where Odysseus appears as the first Western road warrior; and the heritage could easily be traced through Chaucer, Voltaire, Fielding, Goethe, and Hogarth to Joyce's reincarnation of that original street wanderer. As with the later road movies, the heroes of these travelogues embark on a learning experience that becomes most historically determined in bildungsroman tradition: the familiar is left behind or transformed through the protagonist's movement through space and time, and the confrontations and obstacles that he encounters generally lead, in most cases, to a wiser individual and often a more stable spiritual or social state. In these early treatments, the road invariably represents the inscription of a superior (usually patriarchal) perspective that keeps the protagonist from wandering into dangerous unmarked space. Whether it is God's way or the author's, the road limits and circumscribes desire as a way of mapping meaning, and the vehicle or sign for this mapping, even when it is displaced onto a ship or a horse, remains the human (invariably male) body, whose transformations become a metaphor for growth or progress.

With real road movies, however, the terms change in ways that seem superficial only at first. Besides the specifically postwar anxiety that gives these films a distinctly existential air, road movies are, by definition, movies about cars, trucks, motorcycles, or some other motoring soul-descendant of the nineteenth-century train. They are peopled with male buddies, usually a pair whose questing will only be distracted or, at best, complemented by the women who intrude from time to time. Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), for example, combines film-noir and road-movie narrative, as it tells the unhappy tale of Al Roberts's attempt to get to Los Angeles from New York; he is picked up hitchhiking but unfortunately the driver of the car dies of a drug overdose; after dumping the body, Al returns the favor by

giving a ride to a woman who then tries to blackmail him; she too lives in a world of hostile inanimate objects and unluckily strangles herself with the telephone cord when she tries to call the police. Poor Roberts waits dejectedly to be arrested for two murders he simply found along the road. That the director Ulmer, a displaced German, had apprenticed with Lang on both *Metropolis* (1927) and *Spies* (1928) explains much of the dark economy in the film, but *Detour*, I believe, is a thoroughly postwar, sexually haunted vision in which an automobile becomes the sign of a psychic and social dispossession spread across Europe and America, where identity becomes lost in violence. By 1953, Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Wages of Fear* makes this vision much more historically transparent. The vehicles of adventure this time are trucks loaded with nitroglycerin, driven by an international group of Italians, Germans, and French through Central America. Permeated with hints of American exploitation and a sexual instability left over from the war barracks, the road film focuses on the trucks that must deliver a remedial explosive to stop an oil fire. With their lives defined by oil, money, energy, and explosives, the men of *Wages of Fear* think they are driving to freedom but instead die in a variety of ghastly ways, victims of their own vehicles and monstrous environment.

With these two films as backdrops, some of the distinctive characteristics of the genre begin to emerge as it developed through the fifties. (1) More and more, the family unit, that oedipal centerpiece of classical narrative, begins to break apart, preserved only as a memory or desire with less and less substance. (2) Unlike other genres, such as the detective film where characters initiate events, 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. (3) As this genre develops through the fifties, the quest motif becomes increasingly mechanized through those central vehicles in a manner far different from even the industrial quests of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the mid-sixties, the protagonist's identity is almost fully displaced onto the mechanized vehicle as that vehicle becomes transformed into a human or spiritual reality. Peter Fonda would become his motorcycle, and both become something transcendent. More importantly, the perspective of the film as relayed through the central characters becomes a function of those vehicles. If the thriller makes the camera a weapon and the melodrama makes it a family member,

in the road movie the camera adopts the framed perspective of the vehicle itself. In this genre, the perspective of the camera comes closest of any genre to the mechanical unrolling of images that defines the movie camera. As with the movie experience, time on the road becomes figurative space, and the buddy system, which informs most road movies, could be seen similarly as a reflection of the voyeuristic mechanisms of a historically patriarchal medium through which all the world might be seen as "male" while being founded on heterosexual desire. In the mechanics of its narrative structures and concerns, road movies are doubly self-reflexive and excessively self-conscious, both inside and outside of oedipal structures and inside and outside of the tropes of a cinematic realism.

With just these anchoring points, the link between road movies and a war-torn midcentury becomes a bit more graphic and more historically complex. If the search for an obscure object of desire—even one that is never named or known—is not particularly new to art, literature, or film, it seems to me that the mechanical agency that now moves that search is very much a modern image. After a war in which most signs of traditional culture were actually or figuratively blasted away by the relentlessly mechanistic forces of modern warfare, Europe and America moved towards a new industrial and technological future, and what becomes a ubiquitous symbol for that so-called progressive energy is the automobile. Surely there are other signs of the burgeoning materialism that, in the late forties and fifties, becomes a way of covering the spiritual destitution that World War II represented. But motorized transportation carried an unusually large number of historical resources that the shared structures of cinema might engage—ones dramatically troubling to the humanistic body. Cars and motorcycles represent a mechanized extension of the body, through which that body could move farther and faster than ever before and quite literally evade the trajectory of classical narrative and twentieth-century history.

As a perspective and frame, the road movie embodies the endless potential of future space, outer space, and a past that is continually fleeing. The car becomes the only promise of self in a culture of mechanical reproduction. As in the economic politics of most post-war societies, boundaries and borders disappear (at least temporarily) in a car and with them the sanctions, securities, and structures of a family tradition. Most importantly, unlike Westerns or sci-fi

films, the space that is explored in these films is usually familiar land that has somehow become unfamiliar: the road and the country may be known, but something has made it foreign.

Energy becomes the key metaphor but that energy, as in *Wages of Fear*, has nothing spiritual or intellectual about it: energy is gasoline; energy is material, and to have it concretized in the form of a car is the surest sign that the past is disappearing in your rearview mirror. That mirror, along with the window frames of a car, also assures a kind of perceptual self-consciousness that identifies a generation whose present, past, and future is more and more mediated by the images of visual technology and whose ultimate aim is to possess those images within the frame of a moving body. For the children of the fifties and sixties, the world viewed is always and anxiously viewed as image, distanced, disenfranchised, and eventually possessable. The distinction between public and private space becomes less and less meaningful.

To summarize this reductive plot, the material progress of the postwar decade can be seen as a function of the fears of historical regression. As the ideal represented by the family begins to crumble and dissipate in the explosion of World War II, the most secure and likely replacement for that heterosexual unit is the male buddy-group left over from that war. If a friendly horse became the way a person would gallop through the Wild West, a train the way to cross nineteenth-century industrial landscapes, and a silly jalopy the way to get through the newly risen urban jungles of the first quarter of this century, the car of the fifties and sixties becomes a consumer tank. If in the fifties, the road spawned social outcasts that the film's narrative tried to socialize, this narrative action is then the naturalizing of a visible anxiety that would become an (hysterical) excess of indeterminable possibilities contained only by its self-consciousness in the road films of the sixties. By 1953, the United States had six percent of the world's population and sixty percent of its cars. By 1959, 1.25 million Americans had died in car accidents, more than in all U.S. wars combined. The strangers on the trains of the early fifties begin hopping into cars by the turn of the next decade and acting out a psychodrama in which cars were the vehicle of escape, as well as the grim reminders of repression and death. Indeed, perhaps the finest overture of the threat that drives men to repeat and keep moving through the road movies of the fifties, sixties, and

seventies is the key sequence in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955). Shortly after watching an astronomer's demonstration of man's insignificant presence within the galaxies of outer space, James Dean prepares to do battle with his local rival Buzz, who in a twisted way is also his buddy. As a test of their manhood, their cars are lined up to race toward a cliff that plunges into the ocean below. Dean, a traditionalist even then, naively asks, "Why are we doing this?" His rival, who would have been a man of the future if he had survived, replies, "You gotta do something."

In the sixties and seventies, road movies, like all genres, adjust their anxious relation to the sociocultural fears and complexities that threaten to make their codes and formulas at best fragmented languages and at worst the meaningless debris of history. One obvious index to this historical movement is the emphasis in these films on social rebellion and the mostly token appearance of women—who usually appear as ways of emphasizing the unrecuperable spectacle of the road. In this context, there are, I believe, two notable changes in the road movie genre: first, the humanistic transformation of that material vehicle begins to break down entirely; and, second, the traveler or traveling pair loses that James Dean-like innocence and embraces, with increasing abandon, its own definition as material image. This commodification of the image as vehicle underlines, in brief, the central crisis that is developing: it increasingly marks the separation of human perspective and the genre from any sort of logical or natural relation with the history of culture, forcing each to take as its subject only its own symptoms, the material excess of a culture's failure to naturalize its rituals. As Guy Debord suggested about this relationship between driving and culture:

When culture becomes nothing more than a commodity, it must also become the star commodity of the spectacular society. Clark Kerr, one of the foremost ideologues of this tendency, has calculated that the complex process of production, distribution and consumption of *knowledge* already gets 29% of the yearly national product in the United States; and he predicts that in the second half of this century culture will be the driving force in the development of the economy, a role played by the automobile in the first half of the century, and by railroads in the second half of the previous century. (par. 193)



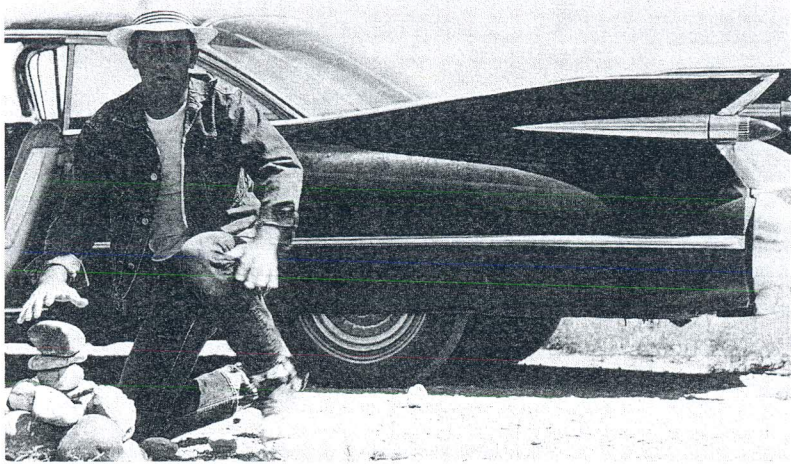
Bonnie and Clyde: The Crisis of Male Subjectivity (Warner Bros., 1967. Tokyo Stills)

A telling evolution in this regard is the development of the genre from Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 to Malick's *Badlands* in 1973. *Bonnie and Clyde* remains, of course, one of the premier examples of the genre, an infinitely more intelligent and eloquent film than the more popular *Easy Rider* (1969) and one that demonstrates a more historical sense of its own historical neurosis. In true sixties fashion, Bonnie and Clyde are road rebels as odd heroes whose travels are a media tour of meaningless violence. As travelers, they are as displaced from any sense of place as they are from any sense of their own subjectivity: as that fifties nostalgia for character and morality fades, all experience becomes the mechanical reproduction of the road through a real or metaphoric windshield, and these perspectives then become redundantly relocated in the images of themselves that they see distorted and reproduced in the local newspapers. The putative documentary look of *Bonnie and Clyde* is thus aptly a ruse and a red herring: the focus is instead on how the conjunction of road, vehicle, character, and perception becomes a collection of sensational, mass-produced consumer images, the material of a documentary on a desperate consumer culture. Bonnie and Clyde's feverish repetition of crimes is largely an attempt to see themselves in the newspapers, sensationally and therapeutically separated from the historical Depression outside their ken, and Clyde's response to Bonnie, when she asks him to imagine another way of life, is that of a man theatrically passionate about his own symptoms—he imagines different strategies for committing crimes, not a life outside crime. The celebrated conclusion to this film—the grotesque, multi-angled, slow-motion execution of Bonnie and Clyde—describes the end of the road only in that the road has become fully merged with the mechanical vehicle of the car and the ironically popular images of the film—both torn apart in the final sequence: a ritualistic slaughter of the material of these characters as characters defined by their material and an ironic ritualistic destruction of the “natural and transparent image.” If *Bonnie and Clyde* is based on a historical account, it is more accurately a historical account of modern perception, perception that in the sixties is already beginning to reduce history to the material of images, material in which a culture must obsessively act itself out in order to displace the return of more threatening histories. (Like so many other genre films of this era, such as *The Wild Bunch* [1969], the confused and uncertain recep-

tion of *Bonnie and Clyde* suggests the significant problems in trying to address political and social issues through forms whose tendency towards hysteria always theatricalizes the relation of genre and history.)⁵

Malick's *Badlands*, in fact, takes this logic and perspective to an even more disturbingly witty conclusion. Whereas *Bonnie and Clyde* borrows enough from the French New Wave to make it look as if it could or should be “read” through its irony, *Badlands* suggests, more accurately, that hysteria is always one of the most difficult texts to read and analyze. The movie contains a plethora of road-movie markers, which display themselves too obtrusively and densely. Martin Sheen playing Kit postures himself not as an ironic James Dean but as someone who totally inhabits the image of that character: he makes that image physical by becoming it, with little regard for an ironic distinction between image and world or with any sense that there is some human individual who precedes that character. What drives Kit and Holly, his strangely passive accomplice, seems to be nothing more than the accumulation of dramatic but completely unmotivated images as they arise arbitrarily and violently out of coincidental situations: killings or courtesies, there is little difference when motive or reference is unimportant. Where the sensational materialism that motivated *Bonnie and Clyde* remained linked to the narrative history that they were making through their own exploits and which Penn is ironically exploiting in his narrative film, in *Badlands* that narrative voice, which is the road that structures images in road movies, dislodges itself through the flat, uncomprehending voice-over of Holly. On this road, action and character stand out like roadside billboards that believe themselves true or like debris that has been discarded. This new James Dean does not ask why but simply accepts and revels in the materiality of predicament: he suggests that they smash their hands with a large rock as a ritualistic monument to their love; when he is about to be captured, he builds a mound of stones by the side of the barren highway. Only debris has ritual meaning along this road with no other signals or signification.

In *Badlands*, the formulas, characters, and images often look like generic waste, multiplying as representations overdetermined by their materiality and no longer even interested in accommodating historical and cultural change. It is no accident that this James Dean



Desperately Marking Space in *Badlands* (Warner Bros., 1973. Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)

starts the film as a garbage man who, instead of waging before a cliff about life and death, bets his partner that he can't eat a dead dog. Nor is it insignificant that the road in this film, in one of its most striking sequences, ultimately becomes the borderless wasteland of the Dakotas. Both suggest how far the road movie has traveled 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.

The historical journey of the road movie might consequently be described through an obsessive itinerary that moves through the prophetic tales of Ulmer and Lang, prototypical road movies that were not yet generic, through the postwar formulation of the genre, characterized by amnesia, hallucinations, and theatrical crisis. In the mid-seventies and eighties, the genre has made its very action and subject its own historical hysteria: if genre is the prototype of classification and interpretation, it now becomes the *mise-en-abyme* reflection of an audience that can no longer imagine a naturalized history. The environment, conditions, and actions of the road movie have become a borderless refuse bin, limning the state of contempo-

rary perception, both in- and outside the movie theaters. If the road movie traditionally subsisted on gasoline as a metaphor for restless energy, when that gasoline begins to dry up in the seventies the vehicles it propelled become scrap by the road. One reason the road movie has remained a culturally central genre today may be because the oil and energy crisis in the world reflects the much larger historical and cultural crisis in which traditional images of male identity and significance have also become generic debris.⁶

Off the Road, Into Space: *Paris, Texas*

Paris, Texas is a remarkable example of a road movie that has embraced its hysterical relation with history, made by a displaced master of the genre, a filmmaker who seems to grow successfully more and more in love with the generic symptoms of that displacement. The ten years that intervene between *Badlands* and *Paris, Texas* are cataclysmic years for Hollywood and narrative movies in general, the prophecies of *Badlands* spreading rapidly through a culture now permeated with VCRs, blockbusters, and the consumption of non-narrative images. Whereas before, the crisis of genre was how to naturalize (which also means to defer) its materially overdetermined relation to history and culture, now the excesses of history and culture have essentially become reflected in the material forms of the very images they previously could pressurize into a humanistic and ritualistic form. The crisis is now not between the language of images and the body of cultural history but between multiple conflicting languages that pretend repetitively and desperately to some meaning, yet without anything to refer to. This is the state of things from which *Paris, Texas* is born, where the disappearance of roads and boundaries and narratives has left the characters with little but undefined space. In this state of things, space is all outer space, a sci-fi road movie in which the increasingly undifferentiated global culture of earth is the garbage of the galaxies.

The story of *Paris, Texas* focuses itself as a desperate need to reclaim a family and a language through a paranoid narcissism. Produced in a cultural no-man's land as a German-French-American project, a melange, not a dialectic as in *The American Friend* (1977), it was written by at least two script writers and spurred appropriately multiple responses from viewers who either loved it (as at

Cannes) or detested it (as with some feminist responses), but always seemed to read it differently. The film itself looks like the quintessential road movie in some ways: the story concerns Travis, a wanderer who has not only lost a family and an identity but, more importantly in some ways, a road and a car. As the film opens he marches resolutely across a desert landscape going nowhere, but going there with hypnotic purpose. What Travis might have been searching for once is what most road questers invariably want: an authentic home, a lost origin where what you see is what you are. In 1984, however, that kind of authenticity is simply impossible: Travis's lost home is a photograph of a barren plot in Paris, Texas, where he thinks he may have been conceived. The name of the town itself represents a blurring and final confusion of cultural identity, a sacred origin which is, in effect, nothing more than a mechanical reproduction, possessed and carried in his pocket. The joke of the title, repeated a couple of times in the movie, is based on the exotic expectations associated with Paris, France, but, with the punch line, that space is then reduced to substance: the aura of an image becomes the waste of historical reality, whose ultimate significance for Travis is that he possesses it as a material image. Like Barthes's photograph, history here is "that time when we were not born. . . . History is hysterical" (*Camera Lucida* 64–65). But, for the contemporary Travis, that hysterical history can be gathered up as a concrete possession and put in his pocket.⁷

In *Paris, Texas* the road goes nowhere except, in a very literal way, to "outer space." The driver is a backseat driver (where he sits when his brother first retrieves him). He does not desire even to see the road and does not particularly wish even to talk to his buddy except maybe through walkie-talkies (as he does with his son Hunter as they travel in search of his mother). In one odd sequence the vehicle itself becomes identified with rusting pieces of junk, off the road in the desert, not even capable of being recycled. Outside the borders of family and "beyond rage," Travis returns to childhood where, if there is a bond formed with his wife and son, it is totally regressive to the end—before speech at the start of the narrative and situated in imaginary images through to its conclusion. With Travis's surrendering the object of his quest, the reuniting of mother and son, the ending is, possibly, ambiguous but, more likely, the confirmation of a state of things in which all that has been affirmed



Postmodern Buddies: Off the Road and Broken Down (*Paris, Texas*, 20th Century-Fox, 1984. Manayunk Pictures)

is Travis's ability to recycle his family as an empty image, his need to be in love primarily with his own symptoms.

As opposed to the usual readings of the movie, I would describe the pathos of this film as the pathos of post-humanism, the inability to distinguish human subjectivity from its mechanized vehicle: not that of Henry Fonda on the run in *You Only Live Once* but the comic and hysterical pathos of a man who would insist on exactly the same rental car he once had as he makes his way through a sea of rental cars. This is not, as Richard Kearney would have it, an "unresolved quest" (328–329), anymore than Jane and Travis's encounter in the peep-show club is about "the art of mutual dis-possession," reach-

ing “toward a form of genuine communication, however brief, by abandoning the image in favor of the world” (327). This narrative, like that climactic confrontation between husband and wife, only parodies a road quest and its search for communication, while in fact Travis remains absolutely adrift in his own narcissistic play with the images of family and home. From beginning to end, Travis stands beyond any cultural road that could socially ritualize history: he is in the desert of “outer space,” and can no more communicate with his history than he does with Jane, his back turned, separated by a mirrored glass, and telling only *his* story of their tragedy. Like the central shot in this climactic sequence, which superimposes the reflection of his face on her body, he sees her only in the image of his failure to have any history but his own, again blindly in love with his own symptoms.

Images in *Paris, Texas* thus constantly call attention to themselves as images, not in the usual Wenders manner as self-conscious perspectives through which a character sees and encounters the world but as the exclusively material terms of the world and identity. The tension and difference on which the road movie once built its drama is collapsed into an equivalence: outside the frames of the cars in this road movie there are only more frames; the wild west is a neon landscape where the lack of spatial depth makes everything look a bit like a postcard or a movie quote; a father becomes a father through his imitation of magazine images; the family discovers a shaky and temporary presence only through the material images of home movies and scrap books. Indeed, this collapse of the subjective into the ubiquitous and undifferentiated images of a consumer culture is best summarized in a passing remark between the two buddy-brothers: as they drive into L.A., Walt explains that he runs a billboard company (like the patriarch in *Badlands*); Travis then responds like a Chancey Gardner raised exclusively on television and finding subjective intention dispersed everywhere in a world of simulacra: “Oh, you’re the one who makes those. I love those. Some of them are just beautiful.”

In the last part of the film, one witnesses the climactic instances of this imagistic bind, of this hysterical paralysis. Travis has it both ways: at the end of the road he has reconstructed his symbolic family under his gaze, but concomitantly he has remained narcissistically free of that structure, possibly on the road to the desert again.



Reunited in Male Narcissism: The Peepshow in *Paris, Texas* (20th Century-Fox, 1984)

As the graphics of the embrace between mother and son make clear, Travis is allowed the reality of being at once father and son, lover and child—a much more muted and masculine version of the horrific child-mother-sister in *Chinatown* (1984). In these final revelations there is therefore also the final reduction. As Wenders’s script describes this ending, only the mirror remains: the doubling of Travis’s position becomes more than just an imaginary projection of himself, as the glare and frames of so many reflecting windows make that imaginary scene into a new kind of symbolic order whose excessively and exclusively material construction becomes the only means of mediating and designating a contemporary history.

If the road in *Kings of the Road* (1976) led to modern Germany

and the road in *The American Friend* led always to the same city which is Hollywood, the road in *Paris, Texas* goes from a photographic home to the space city of Houston where banks need no people, where the future is the electronic perception of no one's point of view, and where the dialectic between a male subjectivity and a symbolic historical order collapses into the identity of material images. The logic of looking is no longer the road-movie track, outwards towards something. In *Paris, Texas* it is now a combination of the slow horizontal pan of (usually) empty landscapes and the strange vertical tilt up (often) empty skyscrapers, neon, and American flag poles, twin actions that describe the direction of this road. Together it maps a visual trajectory that points off the road and into an outer space where this way of looking expects to see only its own frames emptied of objects and to encounter other equally empty frames. Clearly driving this road is a different sort of road movie in a different culture, characterized astutely by Baudrillard as the emptying of an appropriative drive into the ecstasy of open space:

If one thinks about it, people no longer project themselves into objects, with their affects and representations, their fantasies of possession, loss, mourning, jealousy: the psychological dimension has in a sense vanished, and even if it can be marked out in detail, one feels that it is not really there that things are being played out . . . little by little a logic of "driving" has replaced a very subjective logic of possession and projection. No more fantasies of power, speed, appropriation linked to the object itself, but instead a tactic of potentialities linked to usage: mastery, control and command, an optimization of the play of possibilities offered by the car as vector and vehicle, and no longer as an object of psychological sanctuary. . . . The vehicle now becomes a kind of capsule, its dashboard the brain, the surrounding landscape unfolding like a television screen. ("Ecstasy" 127)

Changing Drivers

But let us not forget what this end of the road often obscures as it drifts into space: that the vehicle here is still a historically pressurized vehicle, pressurized quite specifically in terms of a male

subjectivity in crisis. Earlier, Marlon Brando, James Dean, and a young Dennis Hopper represented the male neurosis of this driving, searching for a self and a home through the frames of a mechanically rotating fifties, and attempting to find an image where the two might find some postwar balance. With the new waves of the sixties, the security of the road itself began to be washed away, and the relation with modern history became a crisis of images that never quite fit, marking the melancholic distance between a masculine self and his restless regeneration. Since the early seventies, this crisis of self has become the carnival of a male narcissism without subjectivity, where the vehicle seems to run according to its own culturally mechanized point of view, like Spielberg's driverless truck in *Duel* (1971). Indeed, the road to this road has historically wound its determined way from Joseph Strick's prophetic *Road Movie* (1974), along the roadsides of Godard's *Weekend* (1968) to George Miller's post-apocalyptic *Road Warrior* (1981): in all three, the contemporary world becomes a wasteland strewn with industrial junk and lost male souls whose vehicle has become a rusty collage of postmodern cultural debris. In today's historical place, the most concise and accurate image of the status of that once-dominant male ritual may be Travis's first gesture as he crosses "Devil's Graveyard" in Big Bend, Texas: he carefully caps an empty bottle before he tosses it away.

In the hysteria of this contemporary ritual, watching the drama of a vacated patriarchy, a viewer, of any gender possibly, may therefore be able to participate in it only as the ritual of repo men, hysterical and paralyzed cultists who can, at best, recycle the images of this genre as generic name brands and who, if lucky, might be released through the ascension of the vehicle into an outer space free of their historical burden. Today, as the many different readings of *Paris, Texas* might suggest, that predominantly male road movie invariably turns into, for its producers and its audiences, a sci-fi film that is historically incomprehensible.

I will conclude, though, on a slightly different road, found in a recent television commercial and suggestive, I believe, of the other roads that might be pursued in the futuristic space of the present. The setting for the commercial is a roadside, perhaps abandoned, gas station, set on some wide-open Western plain, perhaps Texas. A teenage couple tenderly and poignantly say good-bye, and the young man hops into an old red sportscar and zooms down the dusty road—

perhaps the beginning of another road movie. As the car heads into the sunset, the images suddenly rewind to the beginning of the scene; the frame pulls back and we realize that the young woman who has just said good-bye is reviewing the scene on a VCR. As she caresses the television screen and the recycled sequence ends, the logo queries, "Is it love or is it Memorex?" The answer may be that the difference is insignificant today. Or it may be that the answer, as the young woman watches the man drive off into space, is left to the woman with the remote control to determine herself: in that case, it would be a choice of *her* relation with her own roadside history.

In this other space, the debris of generic history now has the potential of becoming the generic cure. The departure of a male subjectivity under the burden of its hysterical relation with its own history may mean that other roads can now be mapped across the landscapes of contemporary culture (which certainly have more contours than a desert). As contemporary viewers, in short, we can select, across an expanded galaxy of images, other roads, other generic rituals, and other subjectivities with which to try to formulate different histories within other generic economies. Once the buddy movie has driven itself into outer space, other drivers might take the wheel. As movies such as Agnes Varda's *Vagabond* (1986), Chantal Akerman's *Meetings with Anna* (1979), or Percy Adlon's *Bagdad Cafe* (1987) have shown, the road might now explore other cultural and other gendered geographies. According to the rager on the bridge overlooking the road in *Paris, Texas*, "the safety zone has been eliminated" and we have been "extradited to the land of no return . . . flying blind to nowhere. And if you think that's going to be fun, you've got another thing coming." For those of us looking for other roads, it may indeed.