

Road Movies
From Muybridge and Méliès to
Lynch and Kiarostami

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preoccupations, clearly looked to Godard for inspiration. Godard also provided for American filmmakers a mechanism by which to explore themselves critically, and the road—that captivating, frequently romanticized, and seemingly American space—was an important site for this critical introspection. By the late 1960s, American films were beginning to question their own myths and its widespread influence. Godard, most especially with *Breathless*, was in large part responsible for opening up the possibility for this self-reflexive cinematic response.

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Misreading America in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*

“This used to be one helluva good country.”

*George Hanson (Jack Nicholson) in
Dennis Hopper's Easy Rider (1969)*

“Some day, this country's gonna be a fine, good place to be.”

*Mrs. Jorgensen (Olive Carey) in
John Ford's The Searchers (1956)*

Easy Rider is a film that bids farewell to a number of ideas. The idea of community, a persistent though always receding theme in the film, is one of them. Hopper's own, admittedly hackneyed, words on the subject give shape to this assertion. Here, in the space of three semi-intelligible sentences about cinematic authorship, Hopper articulates a generation's surging faith in the individual: “Film is an art-form, an expensive art-form, it's the Sistine Chapel of the Twentieth Century, it's the best way to reach people. The artist, not the industry, must take responsibility for the entire work. Michelangelo did less than a quarter of the Sistine Chapel; yet directed all works, stone by stone, mural by mural, on and on and on.”¹

Confused and romantic as Hopper's words are, they very neatly encapsulate the stateside proliferation of the auteur theory and, ultimately, its marketability. *Easy Rider*, in some ways, initiated the popular growth of the concept, signaling its studio viability, and the result was a series—more a group of ripples than a wave itself—of American road movies produced by soon-to-be or would-be auteurs, each

touching, in its own unique way, on the subject of this country's post-1960s fragmentation: among them *The Rain People* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1969), *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970), *Two Lane Blacktop* (Monte Hellman, 1971), *Duel* (Steven Spielberg, 1971), *Vanishing Point* (Richard Sarafian, 1971), *Boxcar Bertha* (Martin Scorsese, 1972), *Badlands* (Terrence Malick, 1973), *Electra Glide in Blue* (James William Guericco, 1973), *The Sugarland Express* (Steven Spielberg, 1974), and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (Martin Scorsese, 1974).² While critical approaches to the road movie have thus far attempted to further slot these films into subcategories—outlaw couple road movies, buddy road movies, road melodramas, disenchanting cop road movies, etc.—I hope to draw attention to their connectedness, both to each other and to a larger tradition of films that use motion to critique the hypermobility of the contemporary moment, to lament the passing of stability, of community, and of communication. These are strange fascinations indeed for a genre associated with, and that would in fact ignite, a movement in independence.

Easy Rider helped solidify the rules of this cinematic tradition, establishing as it did so a genre that, in spite of its visitation of themes that have been with the cinema since its inception, would forever be associated with a generation's youth culture. To this day, the road movie in its myriad forms travels the same roads and attempts to reckon with the same core problems Hopper confronted in 1969. It is, however, *Easy Rider's* mode of address that made it, within the late 1960s popular American context, seem so new, so revolutionary, so rebellious, so countercultural. All of this "newness," however, has origins that can be traced to France, to the films of Jean Luc-Godard, and most especially to *Breathless*.³ Like Godard's film, which restitutes the cinema's perennial desire to explore the tragedy of mobility, its mistaken directions, Hopper's film similarly explores the seductive powers of modern motion and critiques its often empty inspiration.

Although the examination that follows is a critical one, I hope to offer a more generous reading of the film than currently exists. Many of the film's "failures," I contend, need to be explored for their critical and symbolic importance as well as their popular reception. This is, of course, a film about failure. In this sense, its form fits its theme. The confusion of the film's visual world, its seemingly self-indulgent and meaningless formalism, even its empty attempts at a meaningful and significant verbal language are symptomatic—more self-critical

than they are self-indulgent. They are important, though difficult to negotiate, parts of the film, which, in the final analysis, give way to meaning. *Easy Rider* is, ultimately, a film that admits its own confusion, its naïveté, and perhaps even its failure. The deliberateness of these admissions is questionable. The effect, however, is remarkable and has too often been overlooked.

Godard introduces to the road narrative a wide variety of concerns that are still fundamental to the road movie, even for those films that move more successfully than, for instance, *Breathless*. Godard's interest in the narrativity of the road—transportation's deeply significant relationship to language and to story—occupies a central position in the post-*Breathless* road movie. Godard's concurrent exploration of the road's seductive nature, its promise (often false) of fulfillment, escape, and completion, has also been absorbed into the basic road movie structure. These mutually informing ideas are central to *Easy Rider*, a film most film historians consider to be the first of the road movie genre. These same concepts find theoretical expression in the work of Roland Barthes, particularly in *The Pleasure of the Text*, where Barthes' investigations of textual eros often quite explicitly employ the language of transportation. Though perhaps less concerned with its relationship to narrative, Jean Baudrillard, since the late 1960s, has been similarly drawn to critically exploring automobility's fascinatingly erotic call and its relationship to contemporary existence.

In this chapter I hope to unravel the mysteries of these seductions, beginning with the Barthesian notion of drift, an idea that, at its center, is concerned with the erotic relationship between reader and text.⁴ The relationship between driver and road, as we will see, is provocatively similar, and Barthes' own text everywhere bears the mark of its maker's own readerly and writerly journeys.

Roland Barthes and the Pleasure of the Road

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes describes the curious, erotic tie that binds reader to text by alphabetically enumerating the details of that relationship. While Barthes' text is itself wonderfully seductive—for with little work Barthes' elegantly phrased ideas can be almost universally "applied"—the road film, and especially the road film in light of Dennis Hopper's contributions to it, seems to demand Barthesian scrutiny. Discussing the seductive nature of the

text, Barthes offers the following (seductive) words: "The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*. This proof exists: it is writing. Writing is: the science of the various blisses of language, its Kama Sutra (this science has but one treatise: writing itself)."⁵ Barthes describes the text as a desiring subject—a critical component to an assumed pairing between text and reader. The Barthesian text is not an innocent object but a seductive and placating one. This idea would seem to run counter to Barthes' notion of the liberated and active reader because it imagines the textual seducer as the dominant of this pairing—the imagined active desire of the text, it appears, makes the reader passive. Barthes, however, describes a peculiar sort of *active* passivity wherein the reader's liberation (or activity) is enacted precisely out of a *giving in to* (which involves, also, a *giving up on*) the text. It is the rebellious act of giving in or up that constitutes readerly liberation.

Road movies also demand—Barthes might say seduce—their viewers, a logic that is central to Hopper's film and to the road movie more generally. They create in the viewer the seductive illusion of motion by locking the viewer's gaze into the three elements that make up the road film—subject, vehicle, and landscape. These cinematic elements and the process by which they are presented, however, are entirely familiar. They are the components of road travel itself, which, as we have explored, is a curiously textual activity. Road films, because of their narrative attention to motion, implicate a viewer similar in disposition to Barthes' reader. Seduced by motion, the road movie viewer actively agrees to be passive—to be a passenger—and is liberated in his/her identification with the presumably liberated on-screen road traveler. The viewer figures into the equation as "passenger" and is left "riding along" wherever the subject(s) of the road film takes him/her. This structure, as we have seen, is as old as the cinema itself. Road movies, in reducing this structure to its bare essentials, also foreground the consequences of this active passivity, and *Easy Rider* perfectly illustrates this idea. Tenuous to begin with, by film's end the viewer's own sense of pleasure in the journey, analogous to the pleasure that presumably leads the protagonists on the road in the first place, is not just disrupted, it is destroyed. Our seduction, however ineptly, is critiqued. The road's innate ability to seduce has to do, in part at least, with its ability to create in the viewer a sense of "drifting."

Barthes employs the metaphor of unthinking travel through space to describe the elation of losing one's narrative bearings, of "drifting"

off and allowing one's own unconscious to enter into the narrative process. In the classic Barthesian figuration, readers *complete* texts in this manner through a fairly complex, though instinctive and passive, interaction with them.⁶ Road movies foreground this idea of drift, often introducing characters that have succumbed to its spatial or geographical pleasures. More important than their presentation of characters *adrift*, road films encourage spectatorial drift by employing a variety of formal techniques to visually approximate the film's desire for movement, its particular modes of travel. In *Breathless*, for example, Godard uses the jump cut to represent Michel's frustrated stuttering attempts to regain kinetic energy in a world that would have him stand still. Michel, it can be said, is guilty of "drifting" when the narrative would dictate otherwise. Nowhere is this more perfectly realized than in the extended indoor sequence in the film where even the viewer is anxious for the action, or at least Michel's attempts at action, to resume. These "drift-inducing" techniques capitalize on the (sometimes disorienting) pleasure of the journey itself.

Barthes describes the process of drift in the following, highly provocative way: "The pleasure of the text is not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. No need to throw out one's chest. My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. *Drifting* occurs whenever *I do not respect the whole*, and whenever, by dint of seeming driven about by language's illusions, seductions, and intimidation, like a cork on the waves, I remain motionless, pivoting on the *intractable* bliss that binds me to the text (to the world)."⁷

Barthes' explanation of the process of drift is particularly illuminating in relation to the road, for it clearly relies on the metaphor of transportation. Barthes speaks of being "*driven* about by language's illusions" and suggests that in drifting, the reader—or, for our purposes, viewer—assumes the role of passenger; he or she is motionless but constantly moving through narrative time and space.

While Barthes speaks of written language, the visual language of cinema is doubly seductive because it is itself always, already kinetic. Known as a language of light and shadow, the cinema is equally a language of motion and stasis, and it capitalizes on the tensions that exist between. In their explicit focus on these basic elements, road movies literalize and exaggerate within the viewer a sense of being chauffeured about by narrative, often in the face of its quite literal absence. Travelers along the cinematic road become easy surrogates because they participate in a motion that is the basis for cinematic narrative and of cinematic pleasure. We are all, in this very basic

sense, “passengers.” As will be demonstrated, *Easy Rider* thinks critically about this process of identification, about the ease with which viewers are transported.

For Barthes, drift moves rebelliously against the rigid textual grain. Pleasure, as Barthes understands it, is linked to the reader’s ability to subvert writerly attempts to control and corral the readerly process, to determine the shape and scope of readerly pleasure. *Easy Rider* and its Godardian source, then, present us with something of a puzzle. If spectatorial pleasure is similarly linked to the viewer’s ability to circumvent an overtly determined, orderly, and confining logic, what do we do in the face of disorderly films, films whose formal “structures” self-consciously mirror the thematic chaos they hope to represent? In their formal presentation of diegetic drift, these films determine their own breaches and impose limits on spectatorial drift. The resulting structure, then, is perversely orderly and, I think, inescapable. This logic is picked up in Oliver Stone’s 1994 *Natural Born Killers*, a film that critiques the manner by which our contemporary universe controls through its illusions of “freely” accessed channels of information. Hopper, too, is critical in his use of a formal structure that unmasks his characters’ his generation’s, and perhaps his own inattentiveness.

Barthes continues his description of drift and states, “Drifting occurs whenever social language, the sociolect, *fails me* (as we say: *my courage fails me*). Thus another name for drifting would be: *the intractable*—or perhaps even: Stupidity.”³⁸ This idea is critical in two very important ways. First, the characters’ *adrift* in the contemporary road film are characters for whom “social language, the sociolect” has failed. As I argue throughout this book, the road movie’s protagonists are curiously inarticulate individuals whose motion seems, in many ways, to stand in place of communication. Secondly, Barthes’ statement about the failure of language sheds light on the opening through which the spectator enters (or is forced to enter) the process of alignment. In road movies, language also frequently fails the viewer. Like the drifting characters, then, the viewer finds him/herself in a forced state of compensatory drift. This idea of spectatorial alignment with the inarticulate is handled with unusual dexterity in *Easy Rider*, and the film’s preoccupation with language and its connection to the road is re-examined in subsequent road movies. We are along for the ride, but our willingness, in the end, is punished.

Easy Rider is about the state of drift, both formally and thematically. It begins with only the vaguest notion of narrative motivation

(a silent drug deal) and continues for nearly its whole length wandering about and refusing to stop for any extended period. While the men have a destination, Mardi Gras, it is rendered largely arbitrary; that the men focus on the event more than the place that hosts it is key. The film provides Billy (Dennis Hopper), Wyatt (Peter Fonda), and the viewer with several narrative options, several opportunities to stop drifting. The rancher’s house and the hippie commune are both viable possibilities, and Wyatt even vocalizes his approval of both of these social alternatives, one of the antiquated, patriarchally organized domestic variety and the other a more countercultural, though still *cultural*, variation. Yet Wyatt and Billy take pleasure in the disconnect of the road, in their silent and blind drift across the country. In this way, their road—which is, of course, ours as well—resembles the Barthesian text. Billy, Wyatt, and, by proxy, the viewer are guilty of skimming through the text of the American landscape, of “not respecting the whole” of its history, its present, its future. This may well be pleasurable were it not for the stark fact that the landscape itself, that textual structure they and we ignore, contains the presumed “goal” we are questing toward: the film’s longed for “America.” Billy, Wyatt, and the viewer are seduced by the highly charged kinetic language of the road, and these stops, the details themselves seem just that: interruptions in what becomes the forceful, predictable, and unsustainable narrative energy of the film.

The distinct, often-overcharged pleasure of the road and the need to continue along it has, of course, to do with the journey and not the destination. This idea takes hold in part because the characters in road films are always, in some critical way, incomplete. The road itself, however, is an incomplete text without the traveler. It offers the illusion of completeness because in traveling along it, the incomplete character completes the road that, as previously indicated, “needs or wants” him or her. Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), another important road film predecessor, takes this characteristic quite literally by featuring characters in search of completeness along the yellow brick road, characters in search of missing parts. This idea is introduced, even though it is self-consciously stunted, in Godard’s *Breathless*; it is expanded upon and, in the end, questioned in *Easy Rider*; it is re-worked in important ways in the films of Wim Wenders; and recent years have seen equally committed explorations of the subject in films by Oliver Stone, Abbas Kiarostami, Jim Jarmusch, David Lynch, and a host of other more or less self-conscious road film makers. Often with a sense of irony, our

road-bound travelers are forced to accept the fact that the missing elements are precisely those the road seems to lead away from: community and communication.

Easy Rider, in this sense, is significantly different from its predecessors and its followers, and the difference is largely dispositional. *The Searchers* and *Detour*, for example, explore the journey as a desperate and obstacle-laden necessity, something that must be endured in an effort to find or restore some degree of unreachable domestic stability. Ethan Edwards and Al Roberts are doomed to wander forever, and their perpetual mobility, set as it is against the disintegrating promise of home, is de-romanticized, tragic. *Breathless*, of course, responds differently; Michel's mobile desires, which affect even the film's hyperkinetic form, are, like so much in the film, the product of mistranslation, a misreading of the generic codes his character mimics. Michel, unlike his generic predecessors, wants to keep moving. Though he is not personally aware of its sources, however, Michel's desire for automobility is a product of the cinema and, relatedly, his wish to make narrative sense of his own self-willed alienation. Godard, in this way, comes close to exploring the road's textual seductiveness in Barthesian terms but disallows completion of the mobile act by cutting Michel's "drift" short figuratively in the film's formal propensity towards the jump cut and literally in Michel's hyperkinetic death at the intersection. Michel's death, in fact, is the mantle *Easy Rider* picks up. Hopper's film imagines a pair of characters in drift, consumed and enthralled by the road's seductive structures, living the mobility Michel longs for even in death. Their seduction is itself seductive, though their disconnect (social, cultural, geographical) is, in the end, problematic.

In its focus on Billy and Wyatt's largely antisocial rebellion, *Easy Rider*—like its turn-of-the-century predecessors and, for that matter, like *Detour* and *The Searchers*—makes a case for the social, a case for community. There is no question that bigotry—here, as in so many films of the era, rendered as a particularly Southern affliction—is one of the film's enemies. It is also clear that the death of Billy and Wyatt carries on its surface all of the earmarks of martyrdom. The pair are shot down brutally, unfairly. Save for a few semi-articulate rants about "freedom," however, Billy and Wyatt's worldview is also flawed, and their desire to pull away, to remain deaf, dumb, and blind, is held up for scrutiny. Critically, one of the elements Wyatt and Billy pull away from is the landscape itself.

The Landscape of Myth

We learn early in the film that Wyatt and Billy are from Los Angeles, California. LA—or "El-Eh," as the rancher calls it—is a mythic location. It suggests promise, fortune, and fame. It is a modern, cinematic El Dorado. It is also the destination for films like Edgar Ulmer's *Detour*. Our protagonists in *Easy Rider*, however, have exhausted the mythic city and are in search of something "different." LA is also, of course, the land of movies—an artificial dream machine where back lots are transformed into "landscapes." Ideally, Billy and Wyatt seek to escape the artifice of LA, its movie-made reality. A fragment of dialogue blurted out in their jail-cell after they are arrested for parading without a permit reveals that Billy and Wyatt (as Billy the Kid and Captain America) have been employed in the service of artifice as stunt motorcyclists. The move outside of and away from LA, in this sense, seems a self-conscious move away from the nonreality of stunt work and away from merely "representing" life, danger, and excitement. Unfortunately, however, their treatment of reality and of the real American landscape seems equally representational. Monument Valley, we quickly learn, is little more than a backdrop for Billy and Wyatt.⁹

Monument Valley figures early in the film to alert the viewer to a contradiction that the film is intent on calling to the surface. For despite its arising from the handiwork of nature, Monument Valley has all of the earmarks of artificiality. It is too big, too colorful, too precarious, and perhaps even too beautiful. It is nature's supreme artifice. This natural artificiality is compounded further by the fact that by 1969 it was recognizable first and foremost as a cinematic location, a very large back-lot. *The Searchers* is, of course, the most famous aesthetic predecessor, and Ford's legacy in Monument Valley is crucial. For it was John Ford, in 1956, who brought roads (primitive though they were) to the valley floor, making it from that point on Hollywood-accessible and, significantly, I think, making it an especially important location for a number of road movies from *Easy Rider* forward.

The valley's role in Hopper's film is complicated further by our travelers' ignorance of it. For, in spite of its delicate and majestic beauty, Monument Valley is of little interest to our traveling pair. This is due at least in part to the fact that the valley itself shares many characteristics with the city. It initiates only vague and always critically

passing interest in our otherwise concerned travelers. It, like the city, is a place to move *through*.

Billy and Wyatt pick up the Stranger (Luke Askew) directly before entering the valley. They also fuel up for the journey ahead, a moment attended by Billy's paranoia and distrust as he fears that the Stranger will see the money they have stashed in the gas-tank. The journey into the valley is formally remarkable. Laszlo Kovacs's camerawork is in constant motion and, for that reason, captures a Monument Valley significantly different from Ford's more static and lingering vision. This is not to suggest that Ford's camera or, for that matter, his themes are motionless. We have discussed the mobility of *The Searchers*. It is important to point out, however, that this mobility is infrequently represented through camerawork. The cavalry scene, near the end of the film, with its stately tracking shots, is an important exception. In Ford's film, motion is for the most part calmly, even statically *observed*. In *Easy Rider*, it is watched nervously and anticipated by an equally mobile camera.

The camera zooms in and out on the traveling trio, pans along with them, tracks in front or behind them. These shots of motion are interrupted by occasional cutaways to the location's open terrain and visually impossible rock formations. The composition and editing of the sequence suggest some separation between our travelers and the landscape they travel through. Nowhere is this more evident than in the technically remarkable ascent that begins in a medium shot, the men composed tightly in the frame, and zooms back, seemingly at the command of the Stranger's perhaps more attentive pointing finger. Billy, as the camera zooms back, rides to the left of the road and seems to push the frame out with him as he moves. Directly before the shot is cut, however, the frame again constricts and squeezes the composition back near the center. The men believe in the illusion of their "escape" but the film's form suggests their mistake. They are as contained in the wilderness as they were in the big city. And their containment itself is perceptual (see Figure 4.1).

The idea of cities enters into the campfire conversation that night. Billy asks the Stranger where he's from. The Stranger responds by saying, "It's hard to say." Frustrated, Billy asks again, and the Stranger teases him, saying, "It's hard to say because it's a very long word." Billy asks again, and the Stranger says, "A city" and elaborates at Billy's request saying, "It doesn't make any difference what city. All cities are alike. That's why I'm out here now . . . 'Cause I'm from the city, a long way from the city—and that's where I want to be right now." The

Stranger's words are fairly obvious and fairly clichéd, as words tend to be in the film. The camera, however, tells another story. I have remarked on the fact that Monument Valley, in its extreme verticality and the separation between formations, resembles some surreal cityscape. The campfire conversation takes place in a location that drives the idea home—a Mexican village built right into the landscape. Billy, as always, is loud, abrupt, defensive, and unthinking. While the Stranger chastises Billy for his lack of respect, informing him that they are resting atop an Indian burial ground, the irony of his earlier comment is profound. For not all cities are alike, and this native city upon which they rest is an important exception. The men, however, seem hardly to notice the alternate civilization, which they hurriedly vacate in the morning. Once again, America's alternatives are lost on our wanderers as they continue their blind ramblings.

Hopper's use of the iconography of the film Western throughout *Easy Rider* demonstrates his preoccupation with its mythology. In his seminal essay, "The Western, or the American Film Par Excellence," André Bazin states this relationship between the Western and motion through the American landscape quite succinctly when he writes, "It is easy to say that because the cinema is movement the western is cinema

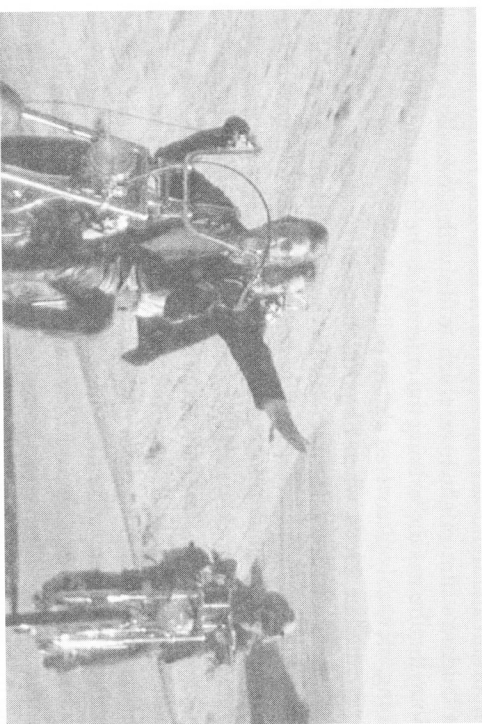


Figure 4.1 *Easy Rider* (1969). The frame expands as Billy swerves, capturing more of the landscape as it does so. As he swerves back, this momentarily expansive space constricts around him.

par excellence.”¹⁰ Bazin continues, arguing that while the Western cannot be reduced to a set of characteristics, these formal attributes combine with myth and an equally mythic geography, creating a fundamentally American generic form. As always, Bazin’s idea is more suggestive than dogmatic and leaves ample room for interpretation. The idea grows legs, however, when aligned with a statement made at the beginning of the same essay (I have quoted this statement already in Chapter 2, but it bears repeating): “The western is the only genre whose origins are almost identical with those of the cinema itself.”¹¹ The shared origins of the Western and the cinema, it would follow, have something to do with the profound interest in motion contained within each. The stability of the Western, even when it ceases to be “The Western,” has to do with its interest in the mobility that comes naturally to the cinematic event. It is precisely this connection between the Western and the cinema in general that intrigued Hopper.

Early filmmakers turned to the subjects of the road and travel because they were thematic concerns suited to a new medium that “caught” motion in a way that painting, sculpture, and even still photography could not. The road remained important to the cinema in the years up through the late 1960s, but its appearance in films and its effects on film were simply assumed and not commented on, with the important and trend-setting exception of *Breathless*. In fact, the road in Godard’s film might have much to do with Godard’s belief all along that he was discovering the cinema for the first time and, in so doing, inevitably discovered also its primal themes.

By the late 1960s, when *Easy Rider* was in production, a similar process of discovery (or rediscovery) was taking place, this time brought about by the collapse of the once-seemingly omnipotent studio system and significant advancements in the tools of the trade. New lightweight and highly portable cameras were being manufactured that not only made taking the show on the road more convenient but more affordable as well. *Easy Rider* takes place on the road, in part, because the road is accessible in ways that it had not been before. Cameras could move like the vehicles they recorded—could even easily be mounted on those vehicles—and Hopper did not have to pay exorbitantly for union crews bound to the studio. The film’s “location” and its mobility has everything to do with the highly kinetic spirit of the so-called “new Hollywood.” “Old” Hollywood did, of course, go outside. In part a reaction to Italian Neorealist films of the 40s, many noir films explored the city streets—an idea wonderfully realized in

Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil* (1958). Westerns, especially those of John Ford, also spent much time outdoors. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962), a film some regard as the last “classical” Western, is shot in a studio and seems to play self-consciously with that fact. *Easy Rider* seems to want to open the doors to these worlds once again. The progressive, linear myths associated with these locations, however, are not so easily handled in Hopper’s film.

In comments after the release of the film, Hopper did much to romanticize the decision to shoot on the road, exaggerating—in fact, lying blatantly at times about—the linearity of the shooting schedule. Hopper spread the idea that he and Fonda simply mounted their bikes and shot as they went. Peter Biskind and Lee Hill have uncovered a more accurate shooting schedule and have also dispelled the myth of spontaneity that has circulated since 1969. Hopper, continuing to mythologize the film’s location, is quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as saying, “The whole damn country’s one big real place to utilize and film, and God’s a great gaffer.”¹² Tom Burke’s interview with Hopper entitled “Will *Easy* Do It for Dennis Hopper?” captures this bit of romanticization. Hopper said, “[Bert Schneider and Bob Rafelson] gave us complete control. They just said, ‘Go and do your thing and come back and show us.’ And we did, man. Except for the Mardi Gras scenes, we just started out on our bikes across the West and shot entirely in sequence, as things happened to us.”¹³

Hopper’s words are indicative of his own seduction, his own desire to buy into the very myth his film systematically dismantles. Less a banal celebration of its characters’ search for freedom, *Easy Rider* is a celebration of cinematic freedom, and the proximity of these two worlds—the cinematic and the extra-cinematic—results in a degree of confusion. The film, however, is highly, and I should think self-consciously, aware of itself as a film about filmmaking, an idea that Hopper takes to its extreme in *The Last Movie*.¹⁴

Hopper is acutely aware of the fact that his characters are relying—rather like Michel in *Breathless*—on a recycled mythological framework. They exist problematically within what has become a cinematic and not a real landscape. At the beginning of the first campfire scene, Billy articulates the mythic confusion that both characters are guided by: “Out here in the wilderness, fighting Indians and cowboys on every side.” Billy does not appear to understand the parameters of the dying myth of the expansionist West and imagines, like a child, a scenario in which everyone, at least within the rubric of the film Western, is the “enemy”: he’s fighting both cowboys and

Indians, a paranoid view that cannot be sustained. Along with the Stranger, the men rest on top of an Indian burial ground and, except for the Stranger, seem wholly unaware of the location's significance.

Easy Rider, like *Breathless* before it, is also interested in exploring the road as metaphor, as a tenuous connective tissue binding international cinematic practice. Hopper is sensitive to the idea of intellectual trade and foregrounds his Godardian and Brechtian influences. His concrete metaphor for the idea of artistic import/export, however, is more problematic. Cocaine, the journey's primary motivation, was a relatively "new" drug in 1969. Half-bragging, Hopper continues, in comments about the film, to claim that he introduced the country to the substance. The deal, however, also signals the fact that *Easy Rider* is a film about a new breed of filmmaker, right on down to the rock-star-style deals (drug and otherwise) that "New Hollywood" became famous for. Read in this way, the film's tragic silence is also a prophetic statement about the naïveté and ultimate failure of the post-Hollywood era.

The Search for Language

The American Art Film cannot be an imitation of the European Art Film. Simple enough statement. Yes, it's simple enough, that statement. What's the answer? What's the question?¹⁵

—Dennis Hopper

Easy Rider continues, and perhaps establishes as iconic to the genre of the road, the interest in language and its relationship to the road found in the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard. Hopper's characters are, as critics have continued to point out, frustratingly silent. This silence, however, and its occasional, semi-articulate interruptions, foregrounds the importance of language to the cinematic road narrative. It is important to recall that *Easy Rider* is not a triumphant road narrative but one that ends tragically with the death of its protagonists. Its tragedy, like the tragedy that punctuates *Breathless*, needs to be understood specifically as a failure in language. This failure in language occurs on two levels. First, the film explores the failure in verbal communication between its two male protagonists. Billy and Wyatt's dumbness is, for a short time in the film, compensated for by the film's highly pathetic and unusually (within the context of the film) articulate "voice," George Hanson (Jack Nicholson). George, a hard-drinking, educated, ACLU lawyer whom Billy and Wyatt meet

in jail and travel with for much of the film, is a critical figure. He is the voice of the film, there is no doubt, providing both a hearty dose of comic relief and, in his monologues, an equal degree of seemingly right-minded ideology. But Hopper is also careful to demonstrate George's own problematic removal. Spending more of his time cooling off in jail than fighting for civil rights (unless, it seems, those in need happen to be sharing a cell with him), George's highly sensible verbal logic goes unheard. Billy and Wyatt, in fact, only half-register it, failing even to comprehend the significance of his death at the hands of the angry rednecks whose appearance in the second half of the film forecasts their own doom.¹⁶

In addition to this more literal interest in the failure of language, *Easy Rider* also explores its own failure to contain itself—its own inability to find a cinematic language suitable for itself. This second, more reflexive understanding of the film's preoccupation with language is especially interesting in relation to an oft-quoted line of dialogue in the film, an admission of both of the film's failures: "We blew it." Both of these linguistic failures coalesce in the film, and the distinctions between the two are blurred, so that the film's confused visual construction comments on the characters and vice-versa. The strange quote that opens this section finds Hopper struggling with his relationship to both literal language (his statement is characteristically circular and nonsensical) and cinematic language. Unable or unwilling to reconcile his imitative strategies, Hopper, like his film, is tongue-tied.

Speaking Parts: Verbal Language and the Road

Easy Rider begins its investigation of linguistic failure with a fairly traditional establishing shot of "La Contenta Bar." Billy and Wyatt ride in on dirt-bikes from frame left to this undisclosed location in Mexico near an automobile wrecking yard where the initial drug transaction takes place. The wrecking yard speaks silently and symbolically about our protagonists and the world they inhabit. Billy and Wyatt are on motorbikes, vehicular symbols of autonomy, freedom, and rebellion. Motorcycles are essentially antisocial, antifamilial modes of transportation; this is the case for reasons that are both practical—they are loud, usually intended for one rider, and physically and linguistically isolating—and mythological. By 1969, the motorcycle's reputation as the carrier of trouble was firmly in place in part because of real news events and in part because of the cinema:

one need only look back to *The Wild One* (1953) to encounter an early instance of this representational tendency. Automobiles, however, and especially the antiquated automobiles that litter the wrecking yard, are symbols of the family rather than the individual on the move, signifying a dead 1950s social and familial conservatism that Billy and Wyatt are quite literally moving against, or so it seems.

The dialogue at the beginning of the film is all in Spanish without subtitles, and while translations affirm that the conversations themselves are not especially interesting, the viewer is introduced to a cinematic world where language and basic communication are immediately rendered problematic. The English-speaking viewer is denied a simple linguistic entrance into the film and, to be perfectly accurate, is never really compensated for the loss: in Barthesian terms, we might say that social language has, in the film's opening, failed us. Like Godard's characters in *Breathless*, Billy and Wyatt, despite some expenditure of wind, are wholly unable to communicate with each other or, for that matter, with the viewer. This inarticulateness is important to the film, for it is itself an exploration of the consequences of non-communication. Motion, not language, is the primary seducer in *Easy Rider*.

Hopper claims to have opted for a predominantly "visual" style of filmmaking, a more "pure" cinema. This idea, imported from the French films he claims to have admired, is as naive as it is distracting. His words, as is so often the case, mask a broader concern in the film to explore the breakdown of the counterculture, an idea that I believe Hopper was loath to admit to if he was responsible for its entrance into the film. The characters in the film are not just quiet, they are self-consciously so, and their quietness needs to be explored for its implications within and outside of the genre. *Easy Rider* is a film that at every moment seems to concern itself with aurality, with what we might more generally call the "noise" of contemporary existence, and yet the film denies both its characters and the audience access to traditional, verbal communication. Billy and Wyatt begin by speaking Spanish and move, after extended stretches of silence, into the hip, truncated, and socially signifying English of the counterculture. By having his genuinely misdirected characters speak the language of the counterculture, Dennis Hopper levels a critique against it, though the critique still goes unnoticed by generations of fans captivated by the romance of motion, or who pay attention only to the film's surface-level rejection of the dominant culture and its intolerant trappings. In the end, however, the counterculture (or at least its language) has little to say about its situation.

The scene where the men meet their Connection (Phil Spector) and receive payment for the two containers (motorcycle batteries) filled with cocaine, takes place on an airport runway, a setting that foregrounds the film's concerns. To begin with, this is Phil Spector more or less playing himself in a film where characters and locations always carry with them a certain amount of reflexivity. Spector, of course, was a recognizable rock figure. Not a performer, but an innovative—perhaps auteuristic—producer, Spector seems to stand in for the pop industry and filmmakers, I would argue, are a critical part of that industry. Spector is most certainly not a member of the square, dominant culture; he is, in fact, the epitome of what we might call the "landed" counterculture. The cocaine deal, however, places him in a critical light. In the scene, Wyatt refuses to "sample" the product and The Connection, smiling, takes a nose-full. This moment establishes a central theme in the film: making it, even for the counterculture, means moral corruption; it means losing touch. When the tables are turned, when Billy and Wyatt have "made it," they are guilty of the same. The lines, and the pun is deliberate, between "making it" and "blowing it" are blurred, indistinct.

Like the automobile wrecking yard that precedes it, the runway where the deal transpires is an obvious signifier for motion, for modern transportation. The location, which makes anything resembling traditional verbal communication impossible, fascinates Wyatt and terrifies Billy and The Connection. The transaction, which takes place in Billy and Wyatt's pickup, is largely silent save for a few grunts from the men and the gigantic, almost deafening sound of incoming planes. In the first two scenes Hopper has presented the non-verbal texture of his cinematic world. Billy and Wyatt's physical existence within these spaces, however, does much to describe their characters. Billy is clearly concerned about the money; he cannot, in fact, keep his eyes off of it when they see The Connection off to his automobile. Wyatt, on the other hand, seems visibly distracted. Wyatt's body language suggests his ease within the space of this scene in a fashion that signifies beyond it: he moves slowly; his gaze is calm, direct and steady; he exists within space and is not merely contained by it. Billy, on the other hand, cowers within the film's scope—he is typically hunched over, his motions are jerky, his gaze is shifty at best, he is almost always physically withdrawn.

The silence of the film continues through the next scene as Wyatt rolls bills into a corked tube, which he then delicately stuffs into the teardrop tank of his chopper. The suggestion here, of course, is that

money fuels the American dream and that the dream, like the cocaine that begins the film, can be bought and sold, used and abused. This idea is critiqued in Hopper's film, as it scrutinizes the dominant as well as a certain segment of the counterculture's ideals. The counterculture, as it is imagined in this scene, has adopted the fiscal ideals of the dominant culture. Steppenwolf's "The Pusher" comments, however superficially, on the action, but the characters themselves do not speak.

Wim Wenders, a fan of the film and, perhaps more critically, a legendary rock music devotee, has suggested (but does not take quite far enough) that the now-treasured soundtrack of *Easy Rider* functions counter to cinematic narrative itself. Wenders observes that, at critical moments in the film, the soundtrack seems to suggest more about these characters and their situations than the characters, the mise-en-scène, or the cinematography are able to express. As Wenders suggests, the images comment on the music, and not the other way around.¹⁷ Rock music, a preexisting and well-established form of expressive revolution in this country, is simply plugged into the film in order to suggest the *idea* of revolution; an idea our characters are only passively engaged in.

Traditional notions of narrative are disrupted further by the film's treatment of space and time. In preparation for the journey ahead of them and directly following an abrupt cut that is both visual and aural, for "The Pusher" stops prematurely without any decrease in volume, Wyatt self-consciously looks at his watch and drops it to the ground near his bike. As this action transpires, the camera zooms abruptly in and out, first on him and then on the watch. The rather obvious gesture of the sacrificed watch coupled with Laszlo Kovacs's camerawork suggests that traditional notions of both space and time will not be adhered to in this film.

Indeed, as the men travel to their first resting point with Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild" on the soundtrack, time and space both seem to collapse. No concrete sense of the length of the journey is provided, and the camera, while typically framing the men from the side in expansive tracking shots, zooms in and out, disrupting spatial constraints and making the viewer's relationship to the space represented and the characters depicted even more problematic. Lens flares, another taboo of traditional Hollywood cinema, also lend to the riding sequence an amateurish, documentary-like feel, an awareness of the camera's presence in the proceedings. This formally produced disorientation, however, is part of the film's seduction, a key

element in the manufacturing of a viewer willing (forced?) to identify with its characters' drift.

"Traditional" sound enters the film when the men arrive at sun-down at a roadside motel. The background music stops and is replaced by the deep grumble of motorcycle engines, one of the film's alternative dialogues giving way to another. Billy honks his horn impatiently and the innkeeper, an old man, emerges, looks at Billy and Wyatt, and goes back inside. Wyatt yells "You got a room? Hey man—you got a room?" Silently, the old man answers: the vacancy sign in front of the motel changes to "No Vacancy." This moment, compounded by Billy and Wyatt's own communicational difficulties, indicates that the world has become increasingly alienating, troublingly non-verbal. Barthes' ideas about the failure of the sociocultural and its relationship to drift returns, this time complete with Saussurean reminders, in the form of literal signs.¹⁸ The old man answers through the sign and Billy responds in kind, yelling "You asshole!" and giving him the finger. Meaningful verbal communication is foiled throughout this film and is replaced by half-articulate grunts (from Billy), clipped and vacant "words of wisdom" (from Wyatt), and gestures (most obviously represented by Billy's up-turned finger).

Unwelcome at the motel, Wyatt and Billy opt to camp outdoors. The campfire scenes, here and elsewhere, are the most verbal (though still largely incoherent) moments in the film. Throughout they are preceded by a series of rhythmically organized direct cuts back and forth, a jarring technique that further disrupts traditional notions regarding the cinematic treatment of time and space. The cuts do, however, advance the confused kinetic energy of the film. In their back-and-forth movement, they suggest a certain irreverence with regard to both time and space that is punished in the end. The cuts also demonstrate, I think, a degree of trepidation with regard to cinematic language. The intensely linguistic or verbal moments in the film are always bookended by these rather obvious moments of cinematic language, which indicates the filmmaker's confusion. Like the characters of the film, who seem unable to advance their relationship linguistically, the film's form suggests that Hopper is unsure as well as to whether he should advance his narrative or let it stand still.

In this first campfire scene, the differences between Billy and Wyatt are drawn more distinctly. Through much of the movie Wyatt is clearly the more attractive character with his supposedly liberated worldview and his quietness in the midst of Billy's pot-induced babble and more flagrantly displayed uncouthness. In spite of Wyatt's

equally questionable morality, the viewer is swayed by his poetic (though uninformed) view if only for its romantic dedication to kinesis. Billy sings of "Going down to Mardi Gras" to get himself "a Mardi Gras queen" and criticizes Wyatt for his silence, saying, "You're pulling inside, man. You're getting a little distance tonight. You're getting a little distance, man." While Wyatt's words are certainly less offensive in their gender implications—for, even when Wyatt is face to face with a "Mardi Gras queen," he seems wholly uninterested—his words are equally lame. He responds "I'm just getting my thing together, man."

Billy's critique of Wyatt is interesting, for it points out the major flaw in both of their characters. Distance, in Billy's understanding of the term, has to do with pulling inside—has to do with self-centeredness and self-absorption. Both Billy and Wyatt are "distant" in this way. Their ideas about manhood are borrowed, it seems, from the film Western's representation of the solitary wanderer—the Fordian hero. Yet all the while both men attempt to achieve a different, positive kind of distance, one that is both geographical and spatial. The breakdown in these characters rests in their inability to reconcile these two "distances"—to achieve spatial distance together, while not submitting to social distance from each other, those they encounter, etc.

When the film was released in 1969, detractors were especially angered by the film's large silent sections and the fact that, in their inarticulateness, Wyatt and Billy could not be "related" to by the youth generation the film appeared to target. That same criticism exists in a number of recent critical approaches to the film. Lee Hill has claimed,

Easy Rider can be crude, occasionally incoherent, smug and self-indulgent. The short and clipped dialogue is something of an error in strategy. The shooting script and rough cut were more verbose. America is a nation of talkers, but the richness of regional voices is muffled in the film . . . And, of course, there are no speaking parts for blacks in the film. George Hanson refers to the racism of the South, but he is, after all, a privileged white liberal. The absence of a significant dialogue scene or encounter with a single black man or woman was a missed opportunity to expand the film's critique of the American Dream.¹⁹

I have quoted at some length here because Hill's concerns with the film's failure at the verbal level and with what the film does or does not do are intriguing. Like many before him, he suggests that "more powerful dialogue" and a more even hand with regard to gender and race would have advanced the film's critique of the American Dream.

Hill's oversight lies in his assumption that Wyatt and Billy are meant to be read as purely sympathetic characters, as arbiters of some mythic 1960s idealism. I would argue instead that Hopper's film critiques not only the American Dream but also these two American Dreamers. Their inability to communicate coherently with the world around them or each other makes them unattractive, to be sure, but this is the point. Relating to these characters was precisely what Hopper wanted viewers not to do—or at least not in any simple way. The film is about outcasts, individuals who have removed themselves from society (the viewer is included in this group in his/her relationship to the motion represented on screen) and are forced, in the end, to admit the failure of their vision. They are strangely Fordian characters: like Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, they are occasionally interesting or funny; they captivate our attention; we "follow" them; but they are also tragically flawed. The explosions and bloodshed at the end of *Easy Rider* are a modern-day version of Ethan's walk back into the wilderness clutching his arm, defeated and alone.

Hill has in mind a dream film, an *Easy Rider* that moves beyond the uncomfortable realm of ambiguity and into the realm of reasoned and sustainable ideology. *Easy Rider*, however, is not so easy. It is a film that holds up a generation as it was coming to a close and asks its viewers to scrutinize its emptiness. Hill suggests that "regional voices" are "muffled" in the film. While the comment is, on the surface, wholly accurate, it seems to be not an error in, but an important aspect of, the film's strategy. The silence of this "nation of talkers" is indicative of the listening skills of the film's protagonists, and perhaps of its viewers. Billy and Wyatt do not see or hear their surroundings because they are not looking or listening; as is made clear in the campfire scene set atop the Indian burial ground. This is made doubly disturbing by the fact that the viewer, in the ninety minutes that the film rolls, might find him or herself in an equally ambiguous moral location. The seduced viewer, perhaps without reasoning why, wants the motion of the film to continue. Stopping means paying attention.

The characters do speak, however infrequently, and their language often mixes prophecy with self-referentially. The campfire scene with the Stranger demonstrates vividly Billy's intolerance and Wyatt's inaction. The inarticulateness of the conversation that takes place here, a conversation that, as is typical of these sequences, is heavily steeped in marijuana, has generally been explored for its absurdity, its comic pointlessness. But within this conversation can be found a rather telling explanation of the film's motivations and a rather accurate

reading of its characters. Also under the veil of smoke can be found an interesting explanation of the film's confused form and its apparent irreverence with regard to the constraints of both space and time.

Wyatt's seemingly self-referential words at the campfire, directly following his prophetic (though ultimately practical) statement—"I think I'm gonna crash"—are especially useful to this discussion. In the midst of the scene's pot-induced babble, Wyatt's, sitting uncomfortably close to the fire, says "I keep seeing things *jumpin'* all over the place" (emphasis mine). After plucking a moth from the air and rubbing his eyes, he says that the smoke (and the reference is deliberately vague) is getting to him. The Stranger responds by saying "Yeah, but I notice you're not moving."

This brief exchange of dialogue, despite its giddy circularity, is important for its dual valences. Wyatt is speaking about the film on which he worked as a producer and is commenting on the formal jumpiness of the film itself. Within the film he is also explaining away the seemingly self-referential moment as a drug-induced hallucination. It is the Stranger's comment regarding the stasis of Fonda and the film in the midst of what appears to be the motion of both that is most self-critical. His statement in fact functions as an admission that the film and its characters cannot or will not go anywhere.

In the virtual absence of language, the film's form begins to express ideas about space, time, and movement that the characters are not fully able to articulate. A film about mobility, *Easy Rider*, like *Breathless*, employs a kinetically suggestive formalism from its camera movements, to the lens effects, to the film's cutting structure, to the changes in film stocks. Some of the ideas appear dated now and have lost their particularly timely efficacy. Others have been absorbed wholesale into the structure of the road film specifically, and mainstream cinema more generally. Still others, through this absorption, have become clichéd. Like the film's verbal language, however, its formal language requires our attention.

Formally Speaking: A Road Grammar Primer

While *Easy Rider*'s form is fairly apparent, it is worth commenting on some of its techniques in detail, as many of these elements of cinematic language continue to be central to the road movie. Because it is a film about movement, the camera work in *Easy Rider* is both suggestive of motion and is specially suited to capture it. It is also, like the film's verbal language, constantly shifting. We have explored in passing

the collapsing effect of the zoom lens in the film and its ability to disrupt traditional notions of space and time. The dolly in or out is primarily a technique of proximity. A dolly in seems to bring the viewer closer to the subject of the gaze, while a dolly out seems to back the gaze up, seems to create distance. The zoom in or out functions differently. It can be observational—like the dolly—guiding the viewer's gaze, directing or playfully misdirecting it as it peers into the recesses of space. Even in this primarily "practical" capacity, however, the zoom is also expressive. In the films of Robert Altman, for example, it functions poetically, its haphazard meanderings mirroring the randomness and the democracy at the center of Altman's cinematic world.

Because of its inherent optical distortions, however, the zoom also suggests ideas about space, characters' interactions in and with it, and the viewer's relationship to it. As we have noted, the zoom creates the illusion of space expanding or contracting around the subject of the gaze. Functioning in this capacity, the zoom is not a suturing device but a poetic component that describes and elaborates upon a character's relationship to the space he/she inhabits. In *Easy Rider*, the zoom enters into the formal milieu to illustrate the confused and confusing relationship our characters have with the world they occupy. The zoom in *Easy Rider* is rarely a singular movement in or out; it is more typically a rapid movement in and out suggesting that, for our characters, the American landscape is an ever expanding and contracting space. Even in its "practical" capacity, however, the zoom in *Easy Rider* does more than simply direct the viewer's gaze towards our traveling protagonists. In its often quite supple pan and zoom combinations, in its constant and often quite rapid reframings, Kovacs's zoom lens aesthetic in *Easy Rider* comments upon our protagonists' perceived dominion over and curious disregard for the landscape they traverse, a landscape that, within the space of the film, exists despite their diminished attentions. Even as the zoom seems primarily to facilitate following the motion of our characters (functioning in this respect, much like it did in televised motor sports in the early 1960s), it continues to elaborate on the psychological state of Billy and Wyatt, whose relationship to space is always fragile.

Less obtrusive, though functioning in an equally metaphorical capacity within the film, are the camera movements themselves. The tracking shot and the pan are critical to the road movie, for they allow the frame to "follow" the horizontal movement of the subject in motion. In *Easy Rider* these camera movements are dexterously handled and have been widely celebrated by fans of the movie. However,

these movements are not mere celebrations of mobility. They are expressive of some of the film's core concerns. A curiosity of Kovacs's work is that it frequently disallows the subject (Billy or Wyatt) to "escape" the frame. The composition of these tracking shots typically places the motorcycle riding men at the center of the frame and keeps them centered until such composition becomes impossible, at which time, typically, the film is cut. Billy and Wyatt, this composition hints, are always "contained" within the space of the road and the recording space of the apparatus. This is an interesting and telling technique, considering that containment seems to be precisely what they strive to escape.

Editing, too, is symbolically important in the film. Hopper was intrigued by Godard's use of direct cutting and wanted to achieve much the same effect of stuttering motion in his film. And yet Hopper, as Peter Biskind's research has revealed, was a remarkably bad editor:

According to Bill Hayward, Hopper's knowledge of editing came from the hot splicing days, where you cut into a frame every time you make a splice, losing the frame in the process. In the 60s, film editors developed but splicing, cutting between frames. Consequently he would never cut anything. One day, Hayward asked him to take out a scene: "If we hate it, we'll stick it back in." But Hopper stared at him blankly. "Dennis believed," he continues, "and this was a revelation after we found it out, because he cut for months under this misapprehension—that once you made a cut you couldn't put anything back. It was absolutely stunning. He was the worst editor that's ever been."²⁰

Hopper's misunderstanding is uniquely suited to the road film; in fact, his logic seems strangely road-based. Decisions made on the road are narratively permanent. The driver along the road can turn around, but the narrative has been inflected by the mistake; it has been changed. With or without the misunderstanding—which may or may not be, also, the product of hyperbole—*Easy Rider*, which squeezes most of its meaning not from the cut but from the shot and its Fordian resonances, does contain a few interestingly cut moments; moments that render the Fordian shots themselves interestingly problematic. We have already discussed the pre-campfire back-and-forth cuts that give way to the confusion over the forward motion of the narrative. The function of this technique, however, is not entirely unlike the function of the dissolve in its ability to connect two discrete moments in time. Like the dissolve, the cuts back-and-forth suggest here a more confused passage of time.

The direct cut in general, however, is something of a curiosity. At its base, it seems to betray the road and its governing logic, the passage of time. Godard's *Breathless* uses direct cutting techniques to emphasize the frustrated kinetic energy of its protagonist, who desires but only momentarily realizes the space of the road. The direct cut fits here, suggesting as it does a degree of impatience. Hopper's cuts function similarly, demonstrating his protagonists' disregard for the duration of the road, their inability to patiently absorb its passages. Even their drift seems stripped of pleasure, as it is ultimately only a means to an end. The viewer is enthralled by the landscape while, save for one especially odd, satisfyingly under-lit, silhouetted ascent of a rock formation in Monument Valley, where Billy and Wyatt rather robotically point at what they see, our characters seem otherwise concerned.

Changes in film stock are also suggestive of the film's formal, optical, and psychological distraction. An often-remarked upon scene in the film, the acid-laced Mardi Gras sequence, stands apart from the rest of the film because it is shot in a grainy, under-lit 16mm stock. The change fits nicely into the context of the film, as the characters at this point in the journey are forced to literally see things differently. However, the different stock also has a somewhat less mystical and more practical explanation. The footage was shot much earlier than the rest of the film, by people including Henry Jaglom, as a sort of experiment; the studio okayed Hopper's project with the provision that he shoot some film and screen his results; the Mardi Gras scenes are those results.

An object of critical neglect, however, is the scene's unusual relationship to *The Wizard of Oz*, that other, very "Old Hollywood" road film. Like the *Wizard of Oz*, with its alterations between black and white and color, the 35mm and 16mm worlds of *Easy Rider* suggest a difference between the realm of the real and the drug-induced realm of the fantastic. Changes in film stocks and a general consciousness about the effect of the "material" of the cinema on the efficacy of the journey have become fundamental icons of the road genre. David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990), Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) all begin in black and white. *Natural Born Killers*, in fact, with its desire to comment on the effect of the media, employs a wide array of visual formats including animation. Martin Scorsese's *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) moves beyond mere black and white and, in a self-conscious mining of *The Wizard of Oz* and its visual structure, imagines a young Alice who plots an escape that will take her far too long

to realize in a Kansas-like landscape drenched in an oppressive blanket of red. The use of alternative film stocks to make a transition between "here" and "there" is absorbed into the road movie vocabulary to such an extent, in fact, that its negation, in films like Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road* (1976) or Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) is itself a self-conscious acknowledgment of the impossibility of escape.

Easy Rider, then, begins to strike a cinematic language peculiar to the road, the lexicon of which is partly borrowed and partly new. What many critics have written off as its stylistic abuses—the film's formal confusion, its indulgence in "empty" and naïve experimentation—is, in truth, a metaphor for existence: existence generally, but also the film's specific existence. *Easy Rider* appeared at the end of the 1960s when, in a moment that has proven rare indeed, American culture found itself at a loss for adequate words. For a period, American cinema reflected upon this loss, and many of these reflections—Euro-inflected, ponderous, empty—took place on the American highway. Emptyness, I think, is *Easy Rider*'s point, and the American road movie spends much of the 1970s contemplating precisely this notion.

In looking for a cinematic language suitable to contain its late-1960s narrative of the frontier's second mythic death, *Easy Rider* begins to articulate the importance of the search itself, empty or not. The film's highly quotable commercial credo: "A man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere" has, in this way, more to do with the filmmaker's search than with any of the film's characters. The film's sometimes falsely ringing European echoes are a fundamental part of the search. Hopper, intrigued by Godard's skepticism of things American, adopts a similar position; he finds himself, in fact, using the same confused language of disbelief as the French director. *Easy Rider*, in other words, is the product of an American director obsessed with French images of America. Godard's longed-for and always stymied mobility is realized in Hopper's film; Michel cannot move, but his need to move has translated to the American screen where it becomes more mobile but equally tragic.

As we have discussed, the beginning of the 1970s brought with it a flood of American road movies, most bearing the uneasy mark of the genre's European inheritance. Wim Wenders, an acutely aware German director, however, contributed most consistently to the genre and to the perpetuation of its curiosity with regard to the international movement of cinema itself. His work continues to ask questions about the relationship between the road and narrative cinema.

Wenders is also conscious of the rate of cinematic exchange and the profound influence of American images on the rest of the world's image-makers. His 1976 film, *Kings of the Road*, makes explicit many of the ideas left shrouded or neglected in Hopper's film. His entire body of work—itsself a continuing, expanding road narrative—explores the transportability of images and the metaphorical highway that makes that transportability possible. Through a profound formal sensibility exactly opposite to Hopper's or Godard's, Wenders also sets out to redeem the articulate image; he sets out, in fact, to rescue the redemptive and political power of cinematic drift.