

Road Movies
From Muybridge and Méliès to
Lynch and Kiarostami

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Introduction

Road Work Ahead

The Seduction of the Century

Where the others spend their time in libraries, I spend mine in the deserts and on the roads. Where they draw their material from the history of ideas, I draw mine from what is happening now, from the life of the streets, the beauty of nature. This country is so naïve, so you have to be naïve. Everything here still bears the mark of a primitive society: technologies, the media, total simulation (bio-, socio-, stereo-, video-) are developing in a wild state, in their original state. Insignificance exists on a grand scale and the desert remains the primal scene, even in the big cities. Inordinate space, a simplicity of language and character . . .

—Jean Baudrillard, *America*¹

Baudrillard's words, themselves the rambling and ecstatic product of road travel, begin to articulate many of the themes that run through *Road Movies*. His *America*, first published as *Amérique* in 1986, is the transitory account of a French postmodern theorist traversing and attempting to make sense of the literal and philosophical American landscape.² Like many of the international filmmakers explored in these pages, Baudrillard is "taken" by America, and the transportational valence of the word "taken" is appropriate. Baudrillard sees in the American road, which he links to the American cinema, an apt metaphor for contemporary existence *in relation to* America. The road, for Baudrillard, is emblematic of America's curiously seductive and seemingly contradictory *primitive modernism*. Travel along it reveals a landscape of constantly evolving, barely sustainable "newness," an endless series of rapidly moving and occasionally dumbfounding images that we experience only fleetingly, that remain—conceptually

and literally—primitive. Deny it as he might, in terms that themselves indicate his own self-awareness, Baudrillard is seduced by what he refers to as *astral* America—an America of speed, surfaces, and (to borrow his term) “vanishing points.”

Road Movies examines the terms of this seduction, engaging with the two foundational twentieth-century technologies at the center of Baudrillard’s work in *America*: cinematic and automotive. As its title suggests, this is a book about road movies, a genre burdened, it seems, by the seductiveness of its own mythological systems. Road movies appeal to us because they tap into as well as arouse our desire for modernity, our desire to be perceived as moving (and quickly at that) against or beyond tradition. *Road Movies*, however, is also a book about mobility more generally and the socially critical function that images of human motion have served since the cinema’s inception. Through a series of chapters focused on major figures of and moments in film history, *Road Movies* foregrounds a much broader pattern of self-reflection and self-criticism in the cinema and automobility’s central and often surprising position within this pattern. More than a study of any single generic category, its attending history, or its iconography, *Road Movies* makes a case for the cinema’s transnational, trans-historical, and trans-generic attraction to the subject of transportation. Contrary to what we might assume to be the attractiveness of the road movie, however, this vehicular curiosity arises from the cinema’s perennial though rarely discussed skepticism of modernity and its social costs.

Beneath an attractive veneer of iconoclastic radicalism, especially as the American road movie genre peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, these motion-obsessed films are often, paradoxically it seems, dead set against the forward march of culture, clinging nostalgically to a past that really only ever existed cinematically. Mining the cinematic history of these mobile obsessions straight through to their current manifestations, we will find that the films themselves repeatedly focus on the consequences of a culture moving, often quite rapidly, away from the stabilizing structures of community and communication. Road movies, I argue, extend a longstanding cinematic tradition that posits a hopeless and lamentable mobility in an effort to eulogize or find *stability*. The book’s goal is to trace the history and evolution of this tradition.

The Transportation of American Culture

In contextualizing the Baudrillard quote that opens this introduction, I refer to the critic’s being “taken by” America and to the appropriateness of this language for its transportational suggestiveness, for its conjuring up images of a country literally driving the imaginations of its own inhabitants and its spectators overseas. One of *Road Movies*’s more complex tasks, in fact, is to examine the mobility of American culture itself, especially American cinema and the seductiveness of the myths contained within this highly mobile cultural form. As we shall see, this very seductiveness, the allure of certain American cultural myths, has helped shape critical approaches to the road movie thus far.

In his 1991 *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*, Timothy Corrigan discusses the hysterical nature and the near impossibility of genre. In a chapter that has become central to scholarly examinations of the road movie—its subtitle, “The Road Movie in Outer Space,” encapsulates its spatial concerns—he writes that “[contemporary] 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.”³ Within this categorical chaos, Corrigan positions the road movie as a modern, postwar, and knowingly impure generic phenomenon, underscoring its overdetermined and built-in genre-blending tendencies. In so many words, Corrigan suggests that we read the road movie as a highly self-conscious, post-generic, hysterical genre, unique in part for its nearly exhaustive classical generic referentiality.⁴

Sowed in the soil of classical genre, the road movie, in this way, is first and foremost about the cinema, about the culture of the image. *Road Movies* seeks to roll back Corrigan’s explicit historical markers, exposing the cinema’s international and *pre*-generic interest in the subject of vehicularity. Doing so ultimately casts Corrigan’s assertions even more boldly. Not only is the road movie about genre, but cinematic genre itself seems to arise at least in part from the cinema’s relationship to vehicularity.

If the road movie is assembled from the dispersed particles of Classical-era Hollywood genres, we must also, however, attend to the

structures that laid the so-called Classical period to rest. Implied though interestingly veiled in Corrigan's work is the enormous postwar influence European cinema in particular exerted over American attempts to reorganize *after the fall*. As a newly forming, highly educated, and deeply skeptical postwar youth market clamored in the 1960s for new fare, a wave of existentially inflected, formally inventive European cinematic products filled the recently opened gap. The road movie is one of the first postwar, post-Hollywood, postgeneric American cinematic categories to bear the sometimes uneasy mark of this relationship. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), in this respect, are heirs to what we might call, in an echo of Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless (à bout de souffle, 1960)*, a cine-ideological "Franco-American encounter."⁵

Not simply a homespun cinematic movement erupting from the literary spirit of Jack Kerouac, the road movie's structure arises—strangely, perhaps—out of a postwar European cinematic swell (French cinema in the 1960s was one of its most important waves) intent on questioning the ease and plentitude of the Hollywood machine, while celebrating and drawing inspiration from the periphery of that machine. The road movie's famed political, aesthetic, philosophical and moral confusion (what Corrigan might call its hysteria) arises, in this way, from its similarly conflicted lineage; from its desire to both admire *and* critique American mythologies in a distinctly European dialect. Baudrillard seems acutely aware of this mode of address when he states that "it may be that the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum—that of the immanence and material transcription of all values."⁶ Commenting further on the nature of this continental exchange, a state induced by a desire for history, authenticity, and a mythically rooted intellectualism—desires forming the core of the American road movie—Baudrillard writes,

When I see Americans, particularly American intellectuals, casting a nostalgic eye towards Europe, its history, its metaphysics, its cuisine, and its past, I tell myself that this is just a case of unhappy transference. History and Marxism are like fine wines and haute cuisine: they do not really cross the ocean, in spite of many impressive attempts that have been made to adapt them to new surroundings. This is just revenge for the fact that Europeans have never really been able to domesticate modernity, which also refuses to cross the ocean, though in the other direction.⁷

Modernity, in Baudrillard's understanding, is a distinctly American affair; something coveted across the Atlantic but only *incompletely* absorbed. History, on the other hand—and Baudrillard's understanding of history is as broad as any of his terms—is understood to be a distinctly European commodity. The road movie, perhaps more than any genre, exists between these poles; it is a genre that appears to move forward, though always longs for some mythic past.

In her engaging book on the postcolonial shift in French consumer culture, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Kristin Ross offers support for Baudrillard's sentiment, arguing that, while the desire to reach specifically American levels of modernity was not uniquely French, France's colonial past made the soil particularly rich for rapid consumer growth. The nearly instantaneous domestic attainment of modernity, the rapid spread of consumer goods promising to make the French elite truly "modern," would create within dominant French culture the necessary postcolonial difference that would separate "the nation" from the nation's still-lacking postcolonial subjects. The key areas of French life affected by these products were domestic and vehicular, locations central to *Road Movies* as well. Ross writes that the French described their newly acquired modernity "in terms of abrupt transformations in home and transport: the coming of objects—large-scale consumer durables, cars, refrigerators—into their streets and homes, into their workplaces and their *employs du temps*."⁸ This desire for specifically American standards of modernity, however, is cinematically fed.

Ross goes on to indicate that the speed of Fordist production and consumption in France paired with these attempts at modernization along American lines were, in some ways, the result of France's voracious appetite for newly available American *cinematic* products, which, in their own way, were selling a way of life; selling, that is, a host of other goods. A pivotal precursor to the American road movie, Godard's *Breathless* stands at the intersection of this transcontinental flow of traffic, signaling Europe's conflicted relationship to American cinematic modernity and providing a richly modern cinematic template for a generation of international introspection on the subjects of vehicularity and domesticity.

With the exception of Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark's excellent and diverse collection of essays, *The Road Movie Book*, and David Laderman's impressively comprehensive overview of the genre, *Driving Visions*, little sustained critical attention has been paid to the road

movie, and still less to this much broader international and historical context. Perhaps descending from Timothy Corrigan's chapter on the road movie in *A Cinema Without Walls*, most studies of the auto-cinematic pairing peel the generic layers only as far back as the Western and film noir, extending a reasonable but problematic "genre begets genre" logic. Additionally, the scholarly attention that has been paid, more often than not, rather unproblematically assumes the inherent *Americanness* of the road movie, a state of affairs *Road Movies* seeks to reevaluate. In the introduction to their collection, Cohan and Hark suggest, for example, that "[f]rom the old studio system to the new Hollywood in short, the American road movie has measured the continuity of the US film industry throughout its various economic incarnations. The road movie is, in this regard, like the musical or the Western, a Hollywood genre that catches peculiarly American dreams, tensions, and anxieties, even when imported by the motion picture industries of other nations."⁹

Cohan and Hark's provocative suggestion that the road movie is a Hollywood genre because it functions like other Hollywood genres—containing, as it does, American dreams, tensions, and anxieties—acknowledges the possibility of a wider sphere of influence, but it stops just short of addressing either the peculiar mobility of this and other presumably American obsessions via the cinema or the equally critical fact that the road movie is modeled on postwar European cinematic reflections upon American genre and, to some degree at least, its impossibility.

Though David Laderman's *Driving Visions* makes strides towards critically unearthing both the continuity and the importation Cohan and Hark refer to, his argument, too, hinges upon what in the end proves to be a frustratingly—for him and for the reader—elusive, largely mythic vision of the perfectly rebellious American road movie of the 1960s. This is, in other words, Laderman's *driving vision*. The opening to his section on the European road movie encapsulates his position:

In the spirit of the genre, then, our critical survey ends with an open-ended continuation of our exploration in Europe.

Such exploration helps to "define" the genre by way of contrast with the formative American version. In venturing to Europe, we can more lucidly appreciate the cultural specificity of the genre's American development and influence. Indeed, many contemporary European road movies seem a reaction to, or reformulation of, the American genre.¹⁰

Laderman is aware of Europe's importance, and his analyses here are, as elsewhere, first rate. They are also, however, clouded by a conviction that the road movie has, since its American pinnacle in the 1960s, been orbiting further and further away from its politically charged center of gravity (to borrow and alter Corrigan's titular invention in referring to "The Road Movie in Outer Space"). For example, in a move that has become almost an obligatory gesture, Laderman offers a section at the end of the book entitled "Traveling Other Highways," which features critical overviews of no less than six European road films. While elsewhere acknowledging the American cycle's debt to Europe, this notion of a "formative version" and the book's structural foregrounding of American films is misleading.

The trouble is, as Laderman keeps realizing and cautiously tiptoeing away from, this politically charged center never existed—not, at least, in the form Laderman appears to be searching for. This is, in fact, the illusion the genre perpetually critiques. Laderman's poetic suggestion in an earlier article that "Tradition maps the trajectory of Rebellion—sometimes even going along for the ride" is, in this way, an important miscalculation.¹¹ The films Laderman and I examine are frequently about rebels. Perhaps even more critically, however, these films often wage war against a state of affairs—social, political, technological—that has resulted in this particular form of rebellion.

Driving aimlessly and wandering are late-model cinematic responses to modernity, a dilemma European films of the 1960s pulled into focus. Far from rebelling against tradition, our road-bound protagonists rebel against the corrosion of the substantial and buoying myths that once sustained them. In this respect, the journeys explored in the latter chapters of *Road Movies* share much in common with the preservational acts of mobility explored in Chapter 1, where we consider the ideological motivation, for instance, of Eadweard Muybridge's Motion Studies. Like those early images, the wave of American road movies central to Laderman's study, their European predecessors, and the international road movies riding in their wake *rebel*; they rebel, however, against a culture that, in the name of modernity, has buried its traditions, cinematic and otherwise.

Again, America is a central player in this international relay. The history and the politics of this centrality, however, needs to be excavated and not simply assumed. Jack Sargeant and Stephanie Watson's collection, *Lost Highways: An Illustrated Guide to the Road Movie*, while demonstrating an admirable grasp of the genre's considerable international breadth, also demonstrates the tendency,

when approaching the auto-cinematic pairing, to catalogue—both films and generic tropes—and to adopt a nearly encyclopedic form.¹² Sargeant and Watson's collection is less idealizing of American iterations of the genre, suggesting the importance of a transnational and historically broad approach, though each "entry" in the book functions almost discretely and the history they suggest is never made concrete, never unified.

As their titles and implied mission statements would indicate, though, all of these books are primarily interested in charting out the admittedly expansive generic territory of the road movie: one is a collection of essays about the genre, one is a guide to it, and one is a critical survey. The rationale for these forms is perfectly justified. The genre is enjoying a continued, maybe even a revitalized screen relevance as it considers a new wave of drivers and passengers (see, for example, Vincent Gallo's *Brown Bunny* [2003], Alexander Payne's *Sideways* [2004], Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* [2005], and Kelly Reichardt's *Old Joy* [2006] for four recent American spins) and as critical interest in the genre has continued to flourish. *Road Movies* adds to this expanding field while suggesting a move away from traditional genre studies or surveys and toward an analytical process that seeks to account for the larger, *genre-defying* cultural influences that shape and define this particular representational obsession. By casting America not just as a "star" producer of road movies but as an integral part of a longstanding international cinematic conversation about the human price of modernity, I hope, in *Road Movies*, to create a sense of global and historical context. As we will see, this conversation often pivots upon a veiled faith in "The Familiar," a concept infrequently associated with the genre, its predecessors, or its decedents.

Stops Along the Road

"The Familiar" manifests itself in a variety of ways in the films examined here, and *Road Movies* traces the roots of this association to the turning of the twentieth century. Chapter 1, "Early Cinema and the Mobilization of Narrative," lays the foundation for the book by demonstrating the degree to which cinematic modes of narration and presentation were shaped by advancements in transportation technologies. The relationship, however, was uneasy from the beginning. Eadweard Muybridge's "scientific" attempts to unravel the mysteries of human and animal locomotion, a fascination predated

by Muybridge's own highly mobile traveling photography, demonstrate an early imagistic fascination with travel and movement, but they also express a degree of skepticism with regard to machines. This skepticism emerges in Muybridge's work precisely in the photographer's desire to, with the assistance of his own machines of course, scrutinize and preserve the human body in its *organic* mobile form at a moment when machines were about to permanently alter the human relationship to space and time. The chapter traces this preservational impulse as it takes narrative shape in the similarly transportationally obsessed work of the Lumière Brothers; as it goes lunar in Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (*Le voyage dans la lune*, 1902); and as it examines transitional modes of transit in Edison and Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). All of these works warn of the physical and social costs of mechanized mobility. This tendency takes on nearly generic proportions from the early 1900s through 1915 in the Keystone comedies of Mack Sennett and the early Billy Bitzer/D. W. Griffith Biograph films, where plots often turn on the automobility of a young couple and the perceived threat they pose not to the physical body but to the established *body familial*. These largely domestic concerns will come to occupy the center of the modern road movie.

Chapter 2, "Highways and Trails: Postwar American Cinema and the Journey Home in *Detour* and *The Searchers*," explores the emergence of American film genres around the central motif of mobility, focusing on the Western and Film Noir to demonstrate the degree to which these American genres shaped international perspectives both on the American landscape and American mobility. The chapter looks closely at exemplary films from opposite ends of the economic strata: Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* (1945) and John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). Ford's film establishes the questionable motives of and strained sympathies toward the cinematic wanderer, a character the road movie genre will organize around. Ethan Edwards's (John Wayne) mobility—violent, vengeful, and solitary—must, in the end, serve the unity and stability of the family. Mobility in Austrian born filmmaker Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* is similarly conceptualized. Al Roberts (Tom Neal) keeps moving, the carrot of family and home dangling just beyond his reach. Perhaps as false as anything in the grim Ulmerian universe, home is one of the victims of a culture that keeps orbiting away from its influence in search of other, perhaps more seductive myths. These analyses reveal the road's metaphorical

position in America's darkening cinematic reflections upon its own postwar and cold war fears. Critically informing these fears are modernity's effects upon human communication. The following three chapters will explore this perceived breakdown and its centrality to the road movie even more closely.

Chapter 3, "Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* and the Road to the Road Movie," departs from the American scene of Chapter 2 and travels to France in order to establish Jean-Luc Godard's central position in an international cinematic conversation at the center of which the road and automotive travel have presided. Godard, beginning with *Breathless* and extending well into 1960s, adopted the automobile as a central metaphor in his films, frequently placing it and his camera on the same tree-lined stretch of French country road. Organized as this portion of Godard's career was around the investigation of American cinematic genres and American culture more generally, the automobile became central to Godard's work and to his attempts at self-definition. The chapter closely explores *Breathless* through this lens, suggesting that the film is a frustrated road movie focused upon its protagonist's inability to leave the streets of Paris except through imaginative, cinematic links to America's perceived and highly generic hyper-mobility. Godard's oft-discussed, infrequently contextualized jumpcuts are examined as a reaction to the false order of American mobility, an idea Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* picks up.

Chapter 4, "Misreading America in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*," develops the linguistic argument begun in the preceding chapters. *Easy Rider*'s much-discussed (often uncharitably) inarticulateness is, I suggest, an important part of the film's formal and thematic strategy. Turning to the work of Roland Barthes, I posit the possibility of reading the road itself as a deeply and problematically seductive text, one capable of rendering its "reader" speechless. While critics have often remarked upon the film's self-indulgently clipped dialogue and its vapid echoes of New Wave formal strategies, I argue that Hopper, though certainly not free of self-indulgence, is engaged in a process of self-reflexive self-criticism. Though focused on *Easy Rider*, the chapter traces this same trajectory through several American films of the 1960s and 70s (including Hopper's almost career-killing 1971 endeavor, *The Last Movie*).

The seductions so central to our analysis of *Easy Rider* and to our exploration of the road as a potentially and lamentably misreadable text, brings us to Chapter 5, "Kings of the Road: Wim Wenders and the

Mobile Home Movie." Focused on Wenders's *Kings of the Road* (*Im Lauf der Zeit*, 1976), a film bearing the mark of Godard and Hopper (not to mention Ford and Ulmer), the chapter analyzes Wenders's almost Muybridgian attempt to slow male automobility down in an effort to reveal its motivations. Instead of Godardian quick cuts, the film is defined by the long take and its ability to comment upon the fracturing of the structures his characters seem anxious to move away from, an idea most articulately presented as Robert Lander (Hanns Zischler), in the midst of the kamikaze drive that opens the film, tears into pieces a photograph of "home." The film's many remaining minutes will find Robert and Bruno Winter (Rüdiger Vogler) moving futilely and silently *back* toward that very structure, a structure modernity itself has rendered impossible.

Chapter 6, "Roads and Movies as Another Century Turns: Oliver Stone and David Lynch," concerns itself with postmodernity, less as a theoretical construct and more as a large-scale cultural phenomenon manifesting itself in an increased sense of chaos in a historical moment of technological and communicational change akin to the one Muybridge found himself in at the end of the nineteenth century. As in the century prior, reactions to this era of transformation often focus on issues of mobility, in this case both literal and communicational. Baudrillard's *America*, an account of the French critic's road trip across America, forms the critical core of this chapter while its cinematic center is formed by David Lynch and Oliver Stone. Through close examinations of Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and Lynch's *The Straight Story* (1999), the chapter illustrates the manner by which each filmmaker has explored the human consequences of the postmodern condition through the use of road imagery and a kinetic—or anti-kinetic, as the case may be—formalism. As in the turning of the last century, "home" and "the family" preside over both of these road narratives. The movement these films present is decidedly preservational; Stone and Lynch both imagine characters moving toward some longed-for and long-denied stability.

Road Movies ends by reflecting back on the ground covered over the course of the book, and offering a focused analysis of Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's transportational obsessions from his earliest, Neorealist influenced shorts through his highly acclaimed feature work. Kiarostami descends in marked ways from the other filmmakers explored in the book and, in an era that has classified his region of the world as part of the "axis of evil," has found in the road and in transportational metaphors more generally a new language by

which to critique the politics of global stasis and mobility. Focused on *Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm e guilass*, 1997) and *Ten* (2002), "New Directions and Intersections: The Road Reworked and the Case of Abbas Kiarostami," underscores the abiding relevance of the cinematic road as metaphor and suggests the manner by which the Euro-American dialectic upon which the road movie is built has expanded geographically. At the center of Kiarostami's narratives of mobility are family and home, mythically stable structures rendered all the more complicated given Iran's particular and, some would argue, highly unstable recent history. The epilogue includes a brief overview of the road's continued screen presence, from reality television programs to the recent work of Jim Jarmusch and Vincent Gallo. The final pages of *Road Movies* reinforce the book's central thesis by focusing on the increased frankness with which images of road travel have come to support not independence and mobility but community and stability.

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In his 1983 analysis of international modernist cinema, *The Altering Eye*, Robert Kolker comments on several of the present study's key terms as they occur in the cinema of Wim Wenders, gesturing, towards the end of that analysis, to the international allure of America's mythic mobility. Kolker writes, "The road is more than a physical presence in American film; it is a sign—a communicative cultural presence connoting freedom of movement, adventure, discovery, danger, escape."¹³ While some attention has been paid to the cinematic road in recent years, the cultural exchange it fosters and its function as an especially problematic American "sign" readable and transferable outside of its borders has remained virtually unexplored. This is due, in part, to the scope of the road movie's history: to analyze the significance of the road in the cinema is to trace more than one hundred years of cinematic practice. It is also to expose the hollowness and the falsity of the road's legendary and romantic connotations.

Road Movies seeks to suggest something of the historical scope of the auto-cinematic pairing and its surprisingly consistent socio-cultural criticism. The book charts a selective route through film history, guiding readers from the turn of one century to the turning of another. *Road Movies*, in fact, reads like a story with two closely related, mutually informing plot lines, one cinematic and the other transportational. This pairing, as we shall see, has its origins in the cinema's roots and has, since the late 1800s, driven down a curiously technophobic road.