Road Movies

From Muybridge and Méliès to Lynch and Kiarostami

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which explores late twentieth-century contributions to the road movie genre, is also concerned with dreams and with the curious position the mobile American male body occupies in the cinematic subconscious. Like the films that paved the way for them, the films of Oliver Stone and David Lynch, are, at their base, films about disconnectedness. They are also, however, highly articulate pleas for connection.

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Roads and Movies as Another Century Turns

Oliver Stone and David Lynch

This chapter, like Chapter 1, is poised at the *fin de siècle* and hopes to illuminate a new generation's social and technological concerns as they are expressed along the cinematic highway. The chapter closely examines the late twentieth-century films of two filmmakers with established relationships to the cinematic road. Although their routes are different, like their cinematic predecessors of one hundred years prior, each uses the road to comment critically on the costs of modernity. Oliver Stone, whose *Natural Born Killers* (1994) we will explore closely, has returned repeatedly to the subject of desperate and destructive mobility since *Salvador* (1986). The noirish *U-Turn* (1997), sort of a *Detour* with the lid blown off, was received with very little fanfare. Its look—the film was shot using airplane surveillance stock—and its mobile generic obsessions punctuate (though it may only be a comma) a career-long and sometimes both terrified and terrifying investigation of American vulnerability. This vulnerability, Stone's work suggests, peaks at moments of mobility: at war overseas, along the motorcade, or, as Jim Morrison's nightmare visions in *The Doors* (1991) and the whole narrative trajectory of *U-Turn* or *Natural Born Killers* would have it, along the Western American highway.

David Lynch nurtures a similar relationship to the subject of mobility, one that has cropped up repeatedly in his work since *Blue Velvet* (1986). The mock-ironic family values at the center of the Lynchian universe, some critics have suggested, set his particular road narratives apart from the supposed anti-establishment sentiments running through the road movies of the 1960s and 1970s. A careful examination of his 1999 *The Straight Story*, however, reveals that the

film's own wry subversiveness lies in its ability to frankly represent ideas that the road movie (Lynch's included) has both thrived upon and *concealed* since its inception. The often-horrific chaos of the Lynchian imagination arises from breakdowns within both the familial and the linguistic order, concepts central to our previous analyses.

Oliver Stone and David Lynch's work at the end of the twentieth century also establishes a critical link between the literal, physical road and its metaphorical counterpart, the road along which our culture's vast quantities of information must travel. These filmmakers, in other words, have developed an approach to the road movie that has flexed to accommodate the postmodern condition, a perhaps decreasingly physical era of rapidity. As I hope to indicate, these films, exemplary though they are, exist within a larger turn-of-the-century gravitational pull toward the road as a critical cinematic location, a pull that expresses itself in a variety of ways ranging from the barely articulate but still somehow intriguing *Dumb and Dumber* (Peter Farrelley, 1994) to Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous* (2000); from Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny* (2003) to Alexander Payne's more conventional *Sideways* (2004); from the painfully defeated *Broken Flowers* (Jim Jarmusch, 2005) to the muted, almost-Wendersian Pacific Northwest, mid-age angst of *Old Joy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2006).

In spite of their inherent differences, road movies have always been about communication, about the need, and sometimes the inability to "tell." In the information age, however, the genre's interest in this idea has increased exponentially as we stand, as they stood a century prior, gape-jawed, contemplating the human effects of a new era's technologies. I have argued in previous chapters that modernity has been defined in large part by our transportational machines, especially the automobile. The technology of postmodern existence, however, is less discrete and, critically, is less a matter of moving "matter" than moving information, strings of numbers, binaries, and frequencies.

Postmodern ecstasy, of the sort that Jean Baudrillard discusses, is a giving-in to this fact: it is joy in the chaotic, technological traffic we find ourselves in. When I use the term "the information superhighway," then, I refer not only to the worldwide Web to which the term has traditionally referred, but also to the more general web that is postmodern existence. This web intersects in interesting ways with our literal highways. Oliver Stone's *fin de siècle* film, *Natural Born Killers*, is especially interested in the relationship between this postmodern flow

and the figure of the road. The film reorganizes the road movie's terms, capitalizing on the genre's ability to critique the particular misdirection of contemporary culture.

Oliver Stone: *Natural Born Killers* and Cinematic Channel Surfing[1]

> There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean. Precisely what the first analysts of narrative were attempting: to see all the world's stories (and there have been ever so many) within a single structure . . .
>
> *Roland Barthes*, S/Z[2]

> So it's a road movie/prison movie crossed with 90s media; criminals are perceived in the movie via the media. In the old days they would have had an independent existence—in *Scarface* you don't see much media—but in the 90's version of the gangster movie (or at least in this one) they exist only through the media.
>
> *Oliver Stone*[3]

Though it seems like an odd pairing, Roland Barthes' comments regarding the study of narrative structure and Oliver Stone's comments regarding *Natural Born Killers* share much in common. Stone, himself a dabbler in Eastern philosophy and religion, is as concerned with narrative structure as is Barthes. Stone's film, which attempts to dramatize many of the world's late-twentieth-century stories, is nonetheless contained within a single structure. While Stone wants to point out that his film is not *only* a road film, *Natural Born Killers* begins and ends on the road. Structurally, the road functions in a way similar to the Barthesian bean: it has emerged as a highly symbolic master narrative that is concerned with a variety of topics including criminality, the media, the family, the human psyche, and the postmodern condition. The cinematic road has, it seems, absorbed the landscape of contemporary existence, and Stone's film skillfully draws the connection between the flow of media and the flow of symbols and signs along the road.

Natural Born Killers takes the Bonnie and Clyde myth and both updates and hyperbolizes it for the information age. It is the story of Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis), an outlaw

couple on the run from their violent domestic pasts and from society, who go on a rapacious killing spree that appears primarily motivated by the sheer pleasure they take in harming others and being talked about for doing so. It is also a postmodern parable of the information age.

In a 1993 *Cineaste* interview with Gary Crowdus and Richard Porton, Arthur Penn claims that all along his landmark late-1960s film was intended to be allegorical and not historical. In 1967, it was a film about 1967 and beyond; not necessarily a film about Bonnie and Clyde's historical moment.[4] *Natural Born Killers* is similarly allegorical, similarly larger than the narrative that (barely) contains it. Contrary to Stone's attempts to distinguish generically between road movies and films about the media, road movies have always taken an interest in the flow of information. But where Bonnie and Clyde exploit the media in an attempt to mythologize themselves, Stone's film explores the *competing* desire of the media to mythologize itself. In fact the media, embodied by exploitation TV personality Wayne Gale (Robert Downey Jr.), seeks Mickey and Mallory out in an attempt to boost ratings. The police, too, are seen as an extension of the media, or at least as pandering to the media's perceived powers: Jack Scagnetti (Tom Sizemore) is a self-adoring cop in search of increased book sales and his own sensational mythologization.

From the very beginning of the film, Stone attempts to demonstrate the symbiotic and cannibalistic relationship between the media and criminality in a way that echoes and perhaps pays homage to *Bonnie and Clyde*. After an intensely violent and jolting prologue in a diner, the credits roll in front of an obviously projected background of various "media images." Also in the frame are Mickey and Mallory in a hyperkinetic toy-like car directly in front of the already competing images of the credits and the media/stock footage. Mickey and Mallory are here envisioned as quite literally riding off into a media frenzy/sunset in search of a multi-media narrative form adequate to "tell" their stories. The moment formalizes the connection between the road and postmodern culture by transcribing to the visual realm the decay of American culture catalogued in Baudrillard's *America*. The American landscape, Stone suggests, no longer exists. It has been replaced by a sort of "drive-thru" movie. Mickey and Mallory drive gleefully through the flow of media images and give in to the drift of modern culture. The viewer's position in all of this, however, is less stable.

Stone literalizes, but perhaps banalizes, his characters' search for narrative space by switching formal and contextual modes throughout

the film—at the price, some of his critics have argued, of narrative continuity. In a 1994 interview in *Sight and Sound* Gavin Smith asks Stone, "In terms of its form, doesn't the film raise a lot of questions about the medium of cinema? For instance, the idea of a unified, coherent text is all but swept away—or is the film only superficially incoherent?" Stone retorts with a laugh that the film is perfectly coherent to him and asks in return, "Is it my fault for not having clarified? Possibly, but haven't I been criticized eternally for being heavy handed?"[5]

In *Natural Born Killers*, Stone does not escape his heavy-handedness. It is difficult for him to identify, however, because unlike his previous endeavors, *Natural Born Killers* is simultaneously ideologically and formally heavy-handed; it is visually and aurally anarchic because the film is concerned with a foreboding sense of late twentieth-century cultural anarchy and the havoc that confusion has played on the human psyche. That psyche, Stone suggests, has itself become another product of media culture.

Mickey and Mallory undergo several critical transformations during their journey, but perhaps the most critical change they undergo is the switch from the oral tradition—leaving "one clerk alive to tell the tale of Mickey and Mallory"—to visually-oriented documentation. This shift to a kind of video tradition is a modern twist on the several photographing scenes in *Bonnie and Clyde*, where members of the Barrow gang pose for photographs (sometimes with a captive) in order to perpetuate their own myth. Wenders, too, has a thematic interest in the preservational potential of photography, especially "instant" Polaroid photography; in *The American Friend* (*Der Amerikanische Freund*, 1977), Ripley nearly drowns himself in a mass of Polaroid photos, and photojournalist Philip Winter, in *Alice in the Cities* (*Alice in den Städten*, 1974), is similarly obsessed.

Oral narrative, which Mickey and Mallory abandon, is perhaps the most complete of narrative forms in that it presumes the critical "presence" of the narrator. Mickey and Mallory, who so desperately seek to legitimize their own existence, begin their story with the "human element" still intact. Their myth is perpetuated from mouth to mouth, or at least from mouth to media. The pre-credit scene in the diner, that site of so many road film encounters from *Detour* to *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, is a case in point. After a hyperbolically violent showdown with a group of sexually delinquent rednecks—shot in a color-rich stock equal to the scene's thematic exaggeration—Mallory advises the petrified waitress, who has witnessed the entire scene, with

the following words: "When them people come in here and they ask you who done this, you tell 'em Mickey and Mallory Knox did it, alright? Say it!" Orality, here and elsewhere in the film, is an acknowledged necessity in the perpetuation of the myth, and it fuels the pair's murderous road trip.

As the film progresses, however, the teller becomes less critical because he or she can be effectively replaced by technology. A fundamental turning point that speaks to this issue occurs at a Native American lodge. After Mickey inadvertently kills their Native American host, Mallory, in their escape, is bitten by a rattlesnake. As they seek out the anti-venom in a fluorescently lit super-drugstore, Drug Zone, the situation turns violent. A clerk, another Native American, who has been watching the story of Mickey and Mallory on Wayne Gale's sensationalistic *American Maniacs* from behind the pharmaceutical booth, is held at gunpoint. But the clerk reminds Mickey that the duo always leave one person alive to tell the story. Mickey, in a transitional moment, laughs and says, "If I don't kill you, what is there to talk about?" Like many road movie protagonists before him, Mickey has learned that his own—in his case, extremely violent—motion *is* his story. And though he doesn't comment on it at this point, the recording of Mickey and Mallory's exploits via surveillance and security cameras will become central to the film's understanding of this contemporary imagistic crisis.

As in so many heterosexual outlaw road films like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Gun Crazy*, the road in *Natural Born Killers* is figured as a space between crimes. It is also a space where the characters attempt, in a variety of ways, to reaffirm their broken heterosexuality, to renegotiate their fragmented family structures. In *Bonnie and Clyde*, a roadside motor lodge becomes an important, failed alternative domestic site, and, later in the film, a roadside roll in the hay "cures" Clyde of his impotence. In *Natural Born Killers*, Mickey and Mallory, in an impromptu "ceremony" complete with blood letting, are married on a bridge overlooking a deep canyon (see Figure 6.1). The episode resembles the roadside marriages our first chapter ended with. Both those earlier films and Stone's are premised upon generational hemorrhages, a perceived need for the younger generation to escape the domestic confines of the older generation, albeit to establish their own domestic situations. But where our early 1900s elopers are, in the end, re-absorbed back into the familial, Stone throws physical, mental, and media abuse into the mix, a frightening combination of ingredients that, rather like the murder that starts Kit and

Holly (Sissy Spacek) on the road in *Badlands*, results in the slaughter of Mallory's sexually abusive father (Rodney Dangerfield) and her dangerously silent mother (Edie McClurg). Mickey and Mallory must "escape," but we are always painfully aware of their fate; they are doomed to repeat the cycle. Violently programmed, the "I Love Mallory" sitcom, which awkwardly parodies their familial disharmony and their brutal solution, will be rerun in perpetuity.

Stone's masterful crane shots lend to Mickey and Mallory's roadside marriage scene a warped kind of majesty. While the canyon and much of the road scenery in the film suggests John Ford, the irony of our socially, morally, and mentally inept protagonists within this landscape is equally foregrounded. Their "togetherness," symbolized rather obviously by the bridge and its own geographically connective function, is as problematic as it is inevitable. This idea is driven home in the roadside motel room scene (Mickey and Mallory's first failed domestic site) where Mickey's sexual interest in their female hostage causes Mallory to leave Mickey temporarily and commit murder in her own act of sexual violence, at a gas station no less. Movement, the location not so subtly reminds us, is fueled by unfortunately fractured domestic interpretations, by incomplete, inappropriate simulations of community.

Stone's film, in fact, is quite concerned with the consequences of simulated culture. When security video cameras have not caught

Figure 6.1 *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Mickey and Mallory's transitory wedding recalls the confused domestic aspirations of road-bound characters nearly a century prior.

Mickey and Mallory in action, reenactments are staged for Wayne Gale's trash/trauma television show *American Maniacs*. This is the simulacra realized and fed by the public's need, fostered as it is by the media, to be *eyewitness* to such events. In fact, at one point in the film, Wayne Gale's crew reviews a reenacted version of one of Mickey and Mallory's early murders of a cop. Complaining about the ethics of cannibalizing a previous show, one of Gale's editors says, "We really raped and pillaged the first show to do this." In a statement that in many ways seems to represent Stone's sneering attitude regarding contemporary culture, Gale says—and the shot is repeated to foreground the centrality of the idea and, perhaps, to test its underlying thesis—"repetition, works David." By referring to the simulated cultural process that he participates in and perpetuates as "junk food for the brain," Gale acknowledges both the cheapness and addictive qualities of his products. This "junk food" has, as American culture always has, international appeal, as is suggested by the montages of French, Japanese, and Chinese Mickey and Mallory "fans." Junk food, Stone indicates, has superseded "real" culture; it has fostered what we, along with Baudrillard, might refer to as "the death of the real."

The death of the real is enacted most dramatically in the final narrative sequence in the film. The scene rewrites the slow-motion, balletic death scene in *Bonnie and Clyde*, only here it is the media, in its "human" form, that is riddled with bullets. The scene is positioned directly prior to an extended media-montage sequence composed of 1990s news footage complete with the sound of changing channels, itself followed by the final credit sequence, which depicts flashback images from the film and a flash-forward of Mickey and Mallory in a mobile home with their newly-started "post"-nuclear family, driving happily down the American road. Wayne Gale has, by this time in the film, himself transformed into a camera-toting media maniac after the jail riots that were (surprise!) incited by the television broadcast of Mickey's interview with Wayne Gale. Before shooting Wayne Gale, Mickey says to Mallory, "Let's make some music, Colorado," quoting Howard Hawks's *Rio Bravo*, and the couple proceeds to open fire on the already half-dead Gale. All the while, Gale's also dying video recorder is aimed at the scene as well and we witness the scene in large part through the eyes of this video camera. The scene solidifies a relationship between the camera and the gun, commenting not only on technology's ability to take the place of the human, but on the connections between the image and violence. As Mickey and Mallory make clear, the camera is all they need to "tell the tale."

Natural Born Killers critiques that which *Bonnie and Clyde* only refers to obliquely: the corruptive force of the visual media.[6] Stone's film is a highly self-conscious meditation on the relationship between the media and criminality, and his point is clearly that the two are complicit in each other's acts. But this is a dangerous line of interrogation for Stone, whose own film came under the gun for purportedly *instigating* violent acts of criminal mimicry. The lines between fiction and reality are often blurred by Stone, by his critics, and by his audience, particularly those who miss the irony of his films' violence altogether. In Gavin Smith's interview with Stone, this line of questioning is pursued when Smith comments, "This film suggests doubt about film's suitability as a medium of truth or to represent reality." Stone replies, "How often have we heard, 'The book had more density'? Reading allows you to experience multifaceted points of view and depth that you don't get in a movie. I feel the limitations of movies because I'm interested in writing. In a sense this movie for me has pushed to the limits of 2D."[7]

While Stone's response seems rather cryptic, Gavin Smith's question contains a trace of what will become a central motif in the road films that follow Stone's. Smith comments on the film's critique of image culture and seems, in a veiled way, to be referring to the film's referencing of the multiple acts of violence that, caught on tape, have come to define that part of the 1990s. These filmed or otherwise recorded moments from the time frame in which the film was made—the Rodney King beating, the O. J. Simpson chase, the Menendez Brothers trial, etc.—"suggest doubt about film's sustainability as a medium of truth." These moments, which constitute the very landscape that Mickey and Mallory drive through, have coalesced, menacingly, with cinematic and fictional television images to shape Mickey and Mallory's mythological existence. This is, to be sure, the terrified realization of the information superhighway as I have defined it earlier. The informational elements that constitute it are undifferentiated fragments of information, some fictional, some "true," but almost all *violent*. Mickey and Mallory have, in a hyperbolic extension of the type of ecstasy Jean Baudrillard describes, given in to these images; they have let themselves be defined by these images and they have reveled in this definition.

Like Bonnie and Clyde, Mickey and Mallory are concerned about their mythic status, not as populist heroes acting out the fantasies of the depression-era poor but as postmodern killers indulging in arbitrary and cartoon-like violence for seemingly little purpose save for a

desire to become famous. This idea of self-created, deluded heroism is indicated especially in the montage sequence mentioned earlier, where throngs of adolescents (presumably of the age when our "heroes" were themselves most violently abused) proclaim their empty admiration for the images of Mickey and Mallory. But Mickey and Mallory's stardom has a lineage; they become vessels for already-established, already-mediated public notions of violent criminality. In preparation for his interview with Wayne Gale, Mickey shaves his head in homage to his sensationalized, real-world serial killer forefather Charles Manson and asks about the ratings for shows dedicated to him himself in comparison to shows on his "competition." Mickey decides, after finding out that Manson "beat" him, that it's "tough to beat the king." Stone, too, acknowledges his film's ancestors. *Natural Born Killers*, like *The Wizard of Oz*, *Thelma and Louise* and, on a different level, *Bonnie and Clyde*, begins in black and white; like the Western, many of which are "road narratives," the film also begins in Monument Valley. Stone, like Mickey, pays homage to the "kings" by including references to the John Ford Western and to himself with *Scarface*. Herein lies the conundrum Baudrillard finds himself in. At what point does one's critique of postmodernity become a contribution to it, and what are the consequences? There are, of course, no easy answers to these questions, and part of what makes Stone's films so frustrating to his critics is his playful walk along the edge of both extremes.

By the end of the film, Mickey and Mallory have literally captured the apparatus and "produced" their own show. This act, however, takes place only after their confinement and momentary stasis and separation in jail. In fact, the prison bloodbath that they perpetrate is enacted in a desperate attempt to gain access, once again, to mobility and each other—to be back in that car hurtling through the seductive mediascape that, for this pair, is indecipherable from the literal landscape. Indeed, it is this final image that the film ends with: only the "show" has been altered significantly; the "channel" has been changed. Mickey and Mallory, as the credits roll, now bob and weave through the traffic of images in a Winnebago full of kids. This is, as Mickey (and Ulmer's Al Roberts as well) would have it, their "fate" (see Figure 6.2).

Stone's warped Winnebago, however, does more than simply suggest what is certain to be the perpetuation of a violently mobile line. Like the couple's roadside wedding, in fact, the image returns us in no subtle way to the cinema's core turn-of-the-century concerns. Though perhaps dancing along a more problematically comedic edge than many of his early cinematic predecessors, Stone is similarly skeptical of technology's effect upon the social and the familial. Where these concerns were expressed in exclusively vehicular terms as the nineteenth became the twentieth century, Stone also interrogates the increased mobility and rapidity of our information. Rapidity, instantaneity, and repetition, in fact, are the real villains in Stone's film. This ideological trinity, however, also forms the film's aesthetic foundation; it practices what it preaches *against*. These ideas, the risks of unthinking rapidity, are even more aggressively called into question and perhaps even answered in David Lynch's *The Straight Story* (1999).

Revising the Postmodern American Road Movie: David Lynch's *The Straight Story*

The Straight Story is a film by a director obsessed with the evocative power of the road. Since *Blue Velvet* (1986), David Lynch has returned repeatedly to this conceptual locale in films like *Fire Walk with Me* (1992), *Wild at Heart* (1990), *Lost Highway* (1997), and *Mulholland Drive* (2001).[8] His early 1990s television series *Twin Peaks* (1990) traced the consequences of getting lost on the road, both literally and figuratively, an idea perfectly encapsulated in the program's opening image of a road sign along an empty highway. *The Straight Story*, however, is a conundrum, one that requires consideration in

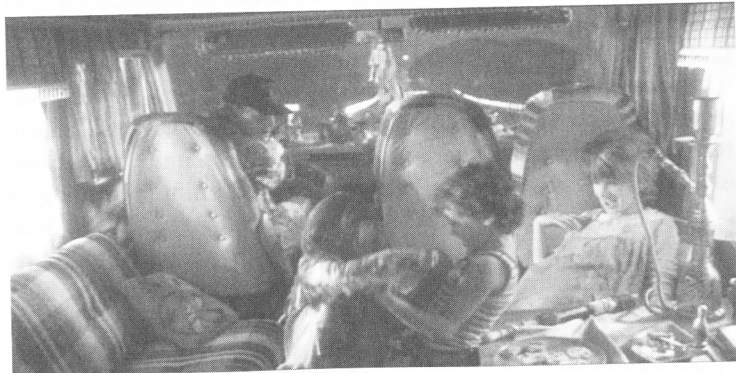

Figure 6.2 *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Riding off into the media sunset: Mickey, Mallory, and the mobile domestic.

light of the director's road-repertoire and of the road film's substantial past. What follows is an argument for the film's ideological consistency within Lynch's body of work and within the broader context of the road film itself. Lynch, like his road-bound predecessors, finds between the road and the cinema a deep, significant, and sustaining connection that allows him to investigate, in ways that are infrequently discussed, issues of family and communication, the abiding interests of the road movie, its ancestors, and its offspring.

Alvin Straight—the film's road-bound protagonist, played by Richard Farnsworth—undertakes a journey significant not only for its destination but for what lies before that destination. His journey is an attempt at self-contextualization. A sense of what lies before *The Straight Story*—those other road films that pave the way for Lynch's contribution to the genre—supports reading *The Straight Story* as an attempt to correct what precedes it, a cinematic revision that mirrors Alvin's own narrative reconciliation. *The Straight Story* doesn't bathe, however resentfully, in the contemporary condition—as films such as *Easy Rider* or even *Natural Born Killers* appear to—but rather suggests a return to the *pre*-modern.

Lynch, in a manner that seems to move against his postmodern dedication to the disconnected and the arbitrary, finds in the road a tenuous form of connectedness and meaning. It is a space linked first and foremost to the family, or at least a Lynchian version of family, and its cinematic point of reference has less to do with *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971) than with the *Wizard of Oz* (1939).[9] As with *The Wizard of Oz*, the road in Lynch's films is a space of reunion, not rebellion; a space of community and communication, not of solitude and silence. Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, like so many of Lynch's protagonists, seeks adventure and the unfamiliar, but finds instead a makeshift community with which to reconstruct her identity away from home. It is not until she regains consciousness at film's end that she realizes that her "adventures" were peopled with her own family and community, the *familiar* in disguise. The road functions similarly in Lynch's films, providing his protagonists with "alternative" families that, ultimately, bring them back to an appreciation of the "traditional" family.

Lynch's films repeatedly place his characters on the road to find connection, community, and family in a world grown impatient with and insensitive to these more "stable" ideas and institutions. While his earlier films explore the creation of imperfect, alternative communities memorable for their terrifying freakishness, *The Straight Story* takes a different road. The postmodern spectacle created by Lynch's

bizarre, ad-hoc communities has tended to overshadow the motivation his characters have had to create them in the first place. As a result, his films have been misread as celebrations of anti-establishment perversity rather than lamentations for a perceived loss of familial stability. *The Straight Story* responds to this misreading.

Joy Rides: David Lynch and the Postmodern American Family

David Lynch's familial understanding of the road indicates his commitment to traditional family values and his critique of the contemporary breakdown of those values. More than a critique of modern media culture, his films repeatedly position themselves against the breakdown of the familial unit. The trajectory from *Blue Velvet* to the more overtly familial *The Straight Story*, however, is not necessarily an easily followed one. Key to each of Lynch's films is his desire to depict characters who, perhaps without fully knowing it themselves, set out on the road not to escape but to *rebuild* families, however warped those re-domesticated structures might ultimately be.

In an interview with David Breskin, Lynch was questioned, as he often is, about his politics and especially his well-known support of Ronald Reagan. In response to a question regarding patriotism, Lynch offered the following, quite telling response: "The thing is, America is suffering such a . . . everybody's got a . . . maybe it's changing a little bit now, it's coming back a hair. But for a while we were all so down on ourselves, it was not one bit cool—just the word 'patriotic.' Because we'd done a lot of things in the name of that that were so, so bad. Anyway, it's a losing game and it has nothing to do with the films I'm making."[10]

Lynch's relationship to politics, it seems, is very much like his relationship to the familial, an idea both his comments and his films lend credence to in spite of his hope that his films have nothing whatsoever to do with this "losing game." Both political and familial structures seem boring, "not one bit cool." Lynch's films, in fact, feature characters receding from and rebelling against both structures. The false starts that mark his words, along with his tendency towards denial, suggest that perhaps, like his characters, Lynch too has sought to recede from that which is not cool: the family, patriotism, etc. His films, however, resolve with an unflinching desire for and faith in *structure*. The road—away from and back to structure—arises in his films as an integral element in the community-building process.[11]

Lynch's 1997 "road" film, *Lost Highway*, is an extreme articulation of the filmmaker's obsessions and a paranoid culmination of ideas brewing in the filmmaker's mind at least since the 1980s. The film was his last before *The Straight Story*, and it revisits, with uncanny, occasionally off-putting clarity, some of the themes that the director has made a career of: voyeurism; the existence of alternate, though frighteningly familiar, realities (an *Oz* idea Lynch is seduced by); and most critically, the breakdown of the familial, or potentially familial, unit. The film is about the growing rift between a white, upper-middle-class couple. It is a film that, in spite of its title, rarely takes to the literal road. Instead, the road in the film is equated with the psychological travel its protagonist, Fred (Bill Pullman), undergoes in his dream/fantasy state. This fantasy state, where doubles exist and where the impossible seems ordinary, is introduced in the film by a series of highly kinetic shots of a broken yellow highway line from the front of a rapidly moving vehicle.

It is this strange and fast-moving image, an exact facsimile of the image used to convey road travel in *Blue Velvet* (analyzed below), that opens and closes the film. The image itself is one of disconnectedness: the lines are broken, uneven, crooked, and lead (we suspect) nowhere. The dotted yellow line is a metaphor for the protagonists' fragmented identities. It is similar to its ideological opposite: the linear, connected, yellow brick road of Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz*. In Fleming's film, the road, while as much a product of the unconscious as Lynch's, is ultimately a catalyst for familial and self-unification; it leads, we might say, to wholeness, and in the end it leads *home*. Lynch's dotted yellow line in this film leads to fragmentation and disorientation. It also structurally resembles the very idea of narrative about which this strange film is so deeply concerned. Narrative, the line suggests, goes nowhere, is itself disconnected, crooked, an illusion—an idea upheld by the body of Lynch's work, which simultaneously participates in and defies narrative linearity.

This idea is driven home by the thematic details of *Lost Highway*. The couple receives anonymously sent VHS cassettes on their doorstep, fragmented narrative pieces of their private lives together, portions that not even they have access to in their memories because they occur while they are sleeping. The pieces, out of context and with no identifiable source, are threatening not only because of their voyeuristic implications but because they lack narrative wholeness and linearity; they are critically incomplete. They are all the more threatening because as the narrative develops, these dream-like narrative fragments seem to

have a source—a slightly diminutive, pale and extremely creepy individual known in the credits only as the Mystery Man (Robert Blake), a product of Fred's unconscious mind. But Fred's interactions with this "character" suggest also that what his unconscious mind fears most is the dissolution of his relationship with his wife Renée (Patricia Arquette).

Lynch's film argues, strangely, that the individual and his/her unconscious desires and fears are to blame; the road away from domestic unity unfolds across the landscape of the unconscious. When those desires and fears take the shape of media technology (i.e., the strange videocassettes that greet the couple each morning) and threaten the stability of the domestic sphere, they are all the more terrifying. This interest in the fragility of the domestic can be traced back to Lynch's earliest films: from the fractured "family" tree of *The Grandmother* (1970) to the nightmarish domestic scene in *Eraserhead* (1976). *The Elephant Man* (1980) similarly concerns itself with the familial, John Merrick's fondest memories being of his mother.[12] The explicit connection between the familial and the road, however, is more recent.

In *Blue Velvet*, the road makes a brief but highly kinetic appearance and functions as a disconnected, otherworldly space where Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) and his gang torture the young, naïve, and insatiably curious Jeffrey (Kyle McLachlan). Frank's gang forms a sort of ad hoc family, its members assembled precisely because, in their societal and familial status as outsiders, they belong nowhere else, a trait shared by a number of road-bound characters. Frank's confused relationship with Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rosselini) indicates this character's tortured sense of family: he is both daddy and child, she is both mommy and baby. This confusion has functioned to make Frank himself wholly inarticulate, notwithstanding his liberal use of the word "fuck."

Charles Drazin's *Blue Velvet* monograph focuses on the critical role played by family in the film. Drazin writes that "this sense of Jeffrey as the surrogate son is at its strongest when Frank kidnaps him and takes him on a 'joyride.' It's like a family outing."[13] Drazin is correct, But equally critical is the road's effect on Frank, who has a brief and pathetic roadside moment of articulateness. As the car radio plays in the background, Frank mouths words from the song that seems to express his own state: Roy Orbison's "In Dreams." Frank's act of applying lipstick to and then kissing the mouth of Jeffrey is a Lynchian act of adoption. Jeffrey, who was fairly deeply implicated

already, has become irreversibly a member of Frank's self-created and destructive family unit. In the car, before being punched by Jeffrey, Frank mutters to Jeffrey, "You're like me." This strange initiation, however, takes place not in the traditional domestic sphere but alongside an abandoned road (see Figure 6.3). Frank, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, constructs his family from the individuals he encounters along it. In this way, Jeffrey *is* like him. Both characters seek wholeness: a heart, a brain, courage. At the end of his adventure, however, Jeffrey is able to return home to his family with a new appreciation for the "strange world" beneath the surface of Lumberton and for his own surface-level existence. This familial resolution is unavailable to Frank, in spite of his confused and perverse attempts to achieve it.

Wild at Heart extends hyperbolically Lynch's *Wizard of Oz* notion of the road and incorporates its elements far more frankly, a fact not lost on Lynch scholars and written about rather extensively in Michael Chion's 1995 book on Lynch. Sailor (Nicholas Cage) and Lula (Laura Dern) are, like Mickey and Mallory in Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, a contemporary Bonnie and Clyde. Also like Mickey and Mallory, they are consumed with an alternative, road-based notion of family that runs counter to their restrictive, abusive home lives. Lynch, who is always interested in exploring what lies beneath the Rockwellian façade of American family life, is especially interested in its stasis. This stasis transforms Sailor and Lula into a constantly and dangerously mobile pair perpetually dodging Lula's murderous mother (Diane Ladd) who, we learn, was responsible for the death of Lula's father and who didn't intervene when Lula was raped by her uncle as a young girl.

For all of its wildness, *Wild at Heart*'s ending begins to articulate ideas that will become central to and less ironically handled in *The Straight Story*. Lula, against the wishes of her mother, goes with her young son, Pace, to meet Sailor when he is released from prison. Attempting to gently leave Lula and their son because "it makes sense," Sailor is assaulted by a band of thugs and, in his semi-conscious state, is advised by a hallucination of Glenda the Good Witch to return to Lula. Following this overt allusion to *The Wizard of Oz*, and a nicely handled tracking shot of Sailor running over the roofs of cars (tellingly, stuck in traffic) to reach Lula and their son, Lynch's tone changes momentarily. The high-pitched irony and bloody absurdity of the preceding scenes is punctuated by a series of deep focus shots of the reunited trio and the moment seems genuine,

Figure 6.3 *Blue Velvet* (1986). The view from the back seat: Jeffrey looks on as his ad-hoc family decides his fate on the side of the road.

the family reunited in this midst of absurdity. *The Straight Story*, I will demonstrate, is a feature-length extension of these moments.

Alvin . . . I Don't Think You're in Laurens Anymore: Or, "If You Want to Send a Message, Go to Western Union"[14]

The Straight Story follows the already-established Lynchian trajectory in every way and makes unambiguous several of the director's previously veiled concerns about the decay of the American family. In this way, the film can be understood as Lynch's attempt to "straighten out" the postmodern road film's reputation. Reviews of the film were prone to commenting on the film's inconsistency within Lynch's body of work, on the film's seductive straightness. Brendan Lemon's review of the film for the *New York Times*, "Even Auteurs Need a Break From Themselves," falls into this category: "And for those who think that Mr. Lynch, best known for movies with sadistic, drug-enhanced sex and small town violence, must have discovered Iowa's dark side—the creepy-crawlers beneath the corn—the news is that *The Straight Story* is Disney's cleanest non-animated picture since *Son of Flubber*."[15]

Other reviewers, in a gesture of critical snobbery, were eager to point out all of the weird "Lynchian moments" contained in the film that "less sophisticated" viewers were missing. This was Kevin Jackson's tactic in his review of the film for *Sight and Sound*, which attends to at least two "Lynchian" moments: "To be sure there are a

few sequences showing Lynch in a more familiar vein, such as Alvin's encounter with a woman who has inadvertently become a serial 'bambicide' ('Every week I plough into at least one deer—and I love deer!'), or his dispute with the identical twin mechanics who spend more time sniping at each other than tinkering with engines."[16] My understanding of the film, however, is somewhat different. I don't see it as a warped, Lynchian vision in a wholesome disguise, nor do I see the film as being a departure from Lynch's usual fare. On the contrary, while its presentation differs slightly, *The Straight Story*'s ideology is perfectly consistent with Lynch's concerns regarding the family and the road's power as familial redeemer.

Unlike the frenetic *Wild at Heart*, the chaotic and disturbing *Lost Highway*, or the haunting *Blue Velvet*, Lynch's *The Straight Story* is patient, slow, linear, and, it seems, about relatively ordinary people. The film is based on the true story of Alvin Straight, an elderly Laurens, Iowa man without a driver's license who, upon learning the news of his brother's stroke and his own escalating ill-health, decides to drive his ride-on lawnmower across the state to visit him in Mt. Zion, Wisconsin. Unlike Lynch's other films, which contain notably violent and grotesque moments, *The Straight Story* garnered both a "G" rating and Disney distribution. While his films have always been about family, *The Straight Story* is a family picture.

On the one hand I wish to argue that, with or without the official stamp of the Disney logo, Lynch has been making, at least ideologically, Disney films all along—films that, in spite of their apparently subversive surfaces, turn repeatedly on themes of familial unification. The "Bambicidal" moment Kevin Jackson refers to is a joke on Disney's quintessential product. The larger and more interesting joke, however, would seem to be the film's ultimate approval and replication of *Bambi*'s (1942) central themes, particularly of the notion that families are meant to be together and that misdirected human actions, undertaken most typically in the name of "progress," pulls them apart (see Figure 6.4).

The Straight Story, in its familial familiarity, moves against the road genre's perceived thematic grain and pronounces most clearly Lynch's variant treatment of its perennial concerns. Lynch's film quite frankly holds on to and attempts to reaffirm the traditional family, an idea he hints at even as he loses grip of it in his other films. In an interview with David Breskin, Lynch comments autobiographically on his own family life in a manner that is relevant here:

> It was like the fifties: there were a lot of advertisements in magazines where you see a well-dressed woman bringing a pie out of an oven, and a certain smile on her face, or a couple smiling, walking together up to their house, with a picket fence. Those were pretty much all I saw . . . they're strange smiles. They're the smiles of the way the world should be or could be. They really made me dream like crazy. And I like that whole side of it a lot. But I longed for some sort of . . . not a catastrophe, but something out of the ordinary to happen. Something so that everyone will feel sorry for you, and you'll be like a victim. You know, if there was a tremendous accident and you were left alone. It's kind of like a nice dream. But things kept on going, normally, forward.[17]

Here, Lynch speaks to the evocative power of the ordinary, the clichés of a 1950s boyhood. Ordinariness made him "dream like crazy" and, by extension, we are to assume that his films are the slowly emerging products of those childhood dreams. *The Straight Story*, on the other hand, is a replication of the quotidian; it is an exceedingly ordinary tale about a man who did an extraordinary thing. Lynch's choice of words—the theme of his description—is quite illuminating, however. When Lynch speaks of a "tremendous accident" he seems to be speaking quite specifically about a roadside automobile accident. Such an event, he suggests, would interrupt the linear momentum of the familial trajectory. Alvin's journey, much like Lynch's family life, keeps "on going, normally, forward" in spite the

Figure 6.4 *The Straight Story* (1999) examines the mortal consequences of a culture moving too fast.

occasional obstacle. Somehow, though, this normal, forward motion (at least to those initiated to Lynch's previous work) is capable of making the viewer *dream like crazy*.

Where Lynch's previous films were a litany of those "out of the ordinary things" longed for in his early family life, Alvin Straight's story is a case study in normalcy. Alvin is a dedicated father to his grown, though mentally juvenile, daughter Rose (Sissy Spacek), and his journey is in the name of family unification, in the name of putting old familial grudges to rest. It is a "matured" road film and a feature-length version of Lynch's faith in the redeeming power of the familial bond. Alvin Straight, we are led to suppose, was himself once an adventure-seeking wanderer. We learn that he was more often than not an absentee father, and when he tells Rose of his plans to visit his brother, he states in a manner pregnant with possibilities, "Rose, darling . . . I'm gonna *go back* on the road. . . . I've gotta go see Lyle" (italics mine). Contained in his words is the indication that the road for Alvin was once a mechanism for familial escapism. In this film, it functions differently.

Alvin takes to the road in spite of his community's urging to the contrary and in doing so exhibits a geriatric remnant of the free spirit earlier road films explored. The narrative, however, is careful to demonstrate that his is most decidedly not an act of abandonment but one of recuperation. Once the community has been made aware of his determination, it sets out to assist him; the journey itself, we are reminded, is being made in the name of community. He is outfitted, after a failed attempt to make the journey on his run-down lawnmower, with a newer, more powerful one owned previously by a local and amiable dealer. His daughter Rose buys groceries (mostly in the form of wieners) to fill his cooler. He even buys the local elderly hardware salesman's "grabber"—"for grabbin' things," Alvin tells him—a transaction that the salesman would prefer not to make, but makes nonetheless. The community unites in the name of the journey and, in doing so, facilitates it.

This theme of non-abandonment is an especially important one as it relates to Rose. Rose, while apparently self-sufficient, is, as Alvin reveals later in the film, a little slow. Her speech resembles a series of gasps and her look is spookily hollow. Alvin's connection with his daughter is, however, one of extreme care and dedication. A call to Rose is the only call Alvin makes on his entire journey, the phone his only indulgence in non-lawnmower technology. This relationship

between parent and child is an especially important one that Lynch invokes constantly throughout the film. It is in part what appears to justify the Disney mark at the start of the film. It is also, as we've seen, a theme common to all of his films. Rose, we learn, was once herself a dedicated parent to four children of her own. As Alvin explains: "One night somebody else was watching them and there was a fire. Her second boy got burned real bad. Rose had nothing to do with it but on account of the way Rose is, they figured she wasn't competent to take care of all them kids and they took 'em all away from her. There isn't a day goes by that she doesn't pine for them kids."

As Alvin speaks, the camera pans to the campfire in front of him. Fire, in Lynch's cinematic universe, is an important symbol and one that has everything to do with the family. In *Wild at Heart*, Lula's father is doused with gasoline and burned to death, a plan her mother had been in on all along. Here it functions similarly to split the family apart. Later in the film, just before Alvin speeds out of control as he attempts to descend a hill, a controlled fire roars as the local townspeople watch with pleasure on lawn chairs. One woman comments that "that old Rumelthanger place was an eyesore." Lynch's critique is subtle but effective. Home and family, this moment suggests, have become too easily disposed of in contemporary culture and, in fact, their destruction is itself spectacular, an idea sentimentally explored in *Bambi* as well. This spectacular destruction is at the center of Lynch's other work. *The Straight Story*, however, allows us to read those destructive moments as critical of themselves.

While its intentions appear different, *The Straight Story*'s structure is strangely similar to the road films of the 1960s and 1970s. Like Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper) in *Easy Rider*, Alvin encounters a variety of familial "options" on his journey. Alvin tells the story of his daughter's children to a teenage runaway he passes on the road and re-encounters later at his campsite. The encounter contains some of the film's most memorable, if slightly sappy, dialogue. It is also the point at which the film's concerns with the familial bubble to the surface. Alvin's comments regarding Rose's children follow his observation that the runaway herself is pregnant, about five months along, she tells him. After narrating Rose's story, Alvin offers the following: "When my kids were real little I used to play a game with 'em. I'd give each one of 'em a stick, one for each of 'em, and I'd say 'now you break that.' 'Course they could, real easy. Then I'd say,

'Tie them sticks in a bundle and try to break that.' 'Course they couldn't. Then I'd say, 'That bundle . . . that's family.'"

The runaway, for whom the road had been functioning as an escape from the responsibility and connectedness of family, leaves a bundle of tied sticks near the campsite for Alvin to find the next morning, indicating that she has seen the value in his story and that she intends to return to her family. Alvin and David Lynch seem, here and elsewhere in the film, to have stepped into the murky waters of Western Union–style message sending, a method Lynch himself has, as the quote that opens this section makes clear, been critical of.

Alvin's stick story is Lynch's most frank pro-community argument to date, and it stands in direct defiance of what appears to be the road film's privileging of the individual. But the road film itself has suffered from this misreading. For, while road films like *Easy Rider* do focus on the wandering of the individual (or pair of individuals), this self-inflicted, social disconnectedness is not uncritically romanticized. The characters themselves might be only partially aware of their situations; in *Easy Rider*, Wyatt realizes that he and Billy have blown it, and, at the end of *The Searchers*, Ethan returns to the wilderness, unable to participate in the community he has been away from for so many years. Rarely, however, does the character adrift on the road espouse so directly the virtues of community and of family. At its most basic level, Alvin's story is about the importance of *stick*ing together and his slower-than-typical journey is in the name of retying the metaphorical bundle.

Later in the film, Alvin encounters yet another familial option. When his lawnmower breaks down toward the end of his journey, Alvin resides temporarily with what appears to be a Lynchian ideal Midwestern American couple, secure and playful in their relationship, smiling in precisely the way Lynch describes his own parents—plainly, but happily. His tractor, however, is repaired by the bickering twins Kevin Jackson discusses. The caricature-like brothers, exact twins with the last name "Olson," provide an opportunity for Lynch to reinstate the centrality of the familial. After settling his bill, which takes some correcting on his own behalf, Alvin tells the story of his own brother, claiming that "no one knows you better than a brother that's near your own age. He knows you and what you are better than anyone on earth. My brother and I said some unforgivable things . . . but I'm trying to put that behind me, and this trip is a hard swallow." Alvin's words, here, are interesting in relation to Lynch's road-logic. Alvin is trying to "put that behind" himself through the act of the

journey. He puts distance, in the physical and psychological senses, behind him in the process of moving forward. And moving forward, in this film and in all of Lynch's films, is a move toward the familial.

While the road film has in recent years relied quite heavily upon the twin notions of speed and chaos, Lynch's film, in the tradition of fellow AFI alumnus Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (also starring Sissy Spacek) or Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road*, relies on a leisurely photographic pace. Unlike Malick's or Wenders's films, however, Lynch's protagonist, Alvin Straight, is as patient as the narrative that contains him. He is not the young, frustrated, and aimlessly angry Kit of Malick's film or the equally aimless and endlessly fidgeting Robert Lander of Wenders's. He is, instead, an elderly, experienced man with a destination he's determined to get to. He is the opposite of Elsaesser's unmotivated hero.[18] Because of this pacing, the film, more than Lynch's other films to date, allows the filmmaker to indulge his well-publicized love for the painterly subjects of Edward Hopper, a tremendous visual influence on Malick as well.[19] The resultant film is a slow-moving, cinematic piece of agrarian Americana and one that captures the beauty, if not the repetitiveness, of the Midwestern American landscape.

The film's establishing shots look especially Hopperesque (Edward, not Dennis) and recall, though in a more extended fashion, the opening shots of *Blue Velvet*. The absurdly simple Lumberton, with its smiling school children and its redder-than-red fire truck complete with waving crew, are here replaced with the more realist rural landscape of Iowa cornfields, deserted main streets, a water tower, and a slightly large woman sunning herself on her lawn while eating brightly colored coconut snowballs. These shots are potentially misreadable, their tone confusing to audience members familiar with Lynch's treatment of similar subjects in his previous films. The initiated smile wryly in anticipation of the shocking event that will set this quiet, simple setting upside down, as it does in *Blue Velvet* when Jeffrey's father suffers a stroke while watering the front lawn and Jeffrey, in his sophomoric, summertime boredom, seeks a form of adventure his immobilized father and television-watching mother and aunt can't provide him with, which he gets in spades.

Audience expectations are played out further in the opening scene's masterfully handled form. The soundtrack is quiet, save for the high hum of insects, and the camera dollies in slowly from its perch above the sunning woman. It moves slowly, its motion seductively voyeuristic, and it refuses to pause or focus. The viewer is given

a point of reference, however, as the camera pauses just short of a window, through which the inner activities of the home cannot be seen but, it seems, can be audibly discerned. The faint sounds of creaking and fumbling register on the soundtrack as the camera remains motionless at its post. Then, from within, a deep, dead thud, followed by silence and an immediate cut to the outside of a downtown bar, where a group of elderly men (again, heard more than seen) decide who is going to go and check on Alvin, who was supposed to meet them there.

It takes little time before the agent of the thud is identified as Alvin, who has fallen to the floor, unable to prop himself up. Lynch, however, handles this revelation delicately, not ironically. The camera, paused in front of Alvin's window prior to his fall, is rightly figured as voyeuristic; its voyeurism, however, is critically incomplete. It is forced to reside just beyond the interior action, a position the camera will find itself in repeatedly in the film. It is not until the camera is accompanied, as it were, by members of the community—by the man elected to check on Alvin, by a concerned neighbor, by Alvin's daughter Rose—that the camera is "allowed" indoors. This is careful planning on Lynch's part, and it indicates the degree to which Lynch requires that these subjects be treated with dignity. This somewhat atypical introduction to Lynch's characters suggests that we have been invited to participate in the community being observed, a theme that the film will continue to visit.

As we've seen, the notion of community, and especially familial community, is common to Lynch's films. The spectator's position within it, however, is illustrative of something quite different. In *Blue Velvet*, the spectator is also implicated as he/she hides in the closet with Jeffrey and watches Dorothy Vallens undress. In the former film, however, the viewer is subjected to Hitchcockian scrutiny; our own voyeuristic desires, aligned as they are with Jeffrey's, are called into question. *The Straight Story*'s careful preamble ensures a different, inscrutable sort of connection at once less voyeuristic and more "familial."

Different as it seems, however, the film also follows in the tradition of *Wild at Heart* and *Blue Velvet*, both of which explore, though in different ways, the need to move beyond the family in order to finally appreciate the family. The impetus for the movement in the film is also of a piece with the prior films. Trauma, of a physical sort, sets the characters into motion. In *Blue Velvet*, Jeffrey's father's stroke sets Jeffrey "free" into the world outside of the family; in the end, however, he happily returns home, a situation not unlike Dorothy's blow to the head in *The Wizard of Oz*. Here, Alvin's estranged brother suffers a stroke. The older, wiser Alvin, however, doesn't seek adventure but seeks a reestablishment of their fraternal affection realizing, as his own health and his brother's health diminish, that their time on earth is limited.

I have noted *The Straight Story*'s eerie, silent opening, but the film maintains a stance against silence that is unusual, particularly because this is a road film in which only one man is on the road. Alvin's daughter Rose suffers from a severe speech impediment. Alvin and his daughter, however, share a deeply significant relationship that revolves largely around verbal communication; as noted earlier, he even calls her as he makes his journey. Alvin's trip, in fact, is motivated by a need to reconcile the gulf of silence that has developed between himself and his brother Lyle. Lynch's choice of Harry Dean Stanton in this role is critical as well as cross-referential. Stanton, along with his fleeting role in Monte Hellman's *Two Lane Blacktop* (1971), is perhaps best known for his role in Wim Wenders's road movie, *Paris, Texas* (1984), where he plays Travis, a mute wanderer in search of his own past. Lynch's film insists on the importance of human—and, more specifically, familial—contact; while this is much the same point made in Wenders's film, it is made in a radically different, sometimes more puzzling fashion.

Alvin's journey is therefore also one of linguistic significance. Alvin is a man who contains within himself a generation of pent up emotions regarding his daughter, his deceased wife, his tour in World War II, and his relationship with his brother. His code has been to remain silent, and the film documents his own undoing of that code. His journey thrusts him—though *thrust* may not be the best word for a film that moves so gently—into situations where he is forced to discuss each of these matters and put words to the emotions that have immobilized this once-free roaming man. At one point in the film Alvin shares war stories over a small beer in a bar with another old man with similar memories; Lynch's masterful sound engineering makes audible even the minute sounds of their memories, as the noise of the bar fades and the faint sounds of battle fills the atmosphere. Alvin's discussion of the importance of family with the young runaway earlier in the film functions similarly, giving voice to another set of memories and emotions.

In its pacing, the film is also an immensely thoughtful *reaction* to the speed of modernity from a director whose work rarely functions

as such a legible articulation of criticism. Lynch's slowing down of the image—in sharp contrast to the frenetic blur of dotted yellow lines of *Lost Highway*—and the film's insistence on actual, meaningful, maybe even old-fashioned, human contact is played out unironically and comments critically on contemporary society's movement away from the dialogical. Communication technologies, critical elements to the postmodern road film—often, as in *Natural Born Killers*, in the shape of the media—are all but absent in this film about Alvin's need to see and speak with his brother. True to the film's preamble, this much anticipated conversation remains private: the film ends quietly and immediately after the brothers greet each other on Lyle's porch.

Lynch goes to great lengths in the film to create a cinematic pacing true to Alvin's journey. This film moves against all of the rules of pacing and cutting that seem inherent to late 1990s filmmaking. It is methodical, highly reliant on a rich and evocative mise-en-scène, slow, and edited in a continuous, fluid, invisible fashion. The only formally bizarre moments in the film involve the use of the zoom lens (accompanied by rapid cuts), which, since *Easy Rider*, has been a central formal technique of the road movie. Here it is used to convey a sense of rapidly approaching danger, as when Alvin nearly crashes his mower, and the effect is quite remarkable and jolting in this film that otherwise moves extremely slowly.

Kevin Jackson detects something peculiar about Lynch's formal manipulation of Alvin's slow-moving trek across the prairie: "*The Straight Story* also has the best crane-shot joke in years: the camera catches Alvin's puttering progress from behind, rises into the sky with epic majesty, then gracefully sweeps down again—to reveal Alvin, about four feet further down the highway."[20] More than a joke, however, the shot reinforces the film's central theme, casting in bold relief the loneliness, the solitary slowness of Alvin's Midwestern trek. This is not man's tendency to wander glorified; this is man's need to *get somewhere*, however slowly. In his own comments about the film, Lynch has been especially complimentary to cinematographer Freddie Francis for his patience with Lynch's requirements for these technically masterful and moving helicopter shots of Alvin Straight and his lawnmower; these shots reveal, time and time again, the lonesome perseverance of the film's senior protagonist.

The Straight Story, in its studied slowness and concern with the movement of one man, is a film strangely reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge's "motion studies." In a curious way, Lynch's film brings

us, once again, back to the beginning of cinema. Muybridge's work frequently concerned the motion of one sartorially and technologically stripped down man. Some of his studies took the bearded and grizzled photographer himself as their subject, placing his naked body in front of his pseudo-scientific numbered grid. Muybridge's work, influential as it was to the direction cinematic technology would ultimately take, was also strangely anti-technological in its attention to the artificially arranged movements of his "natural" and "organic" subjects: men, women, horses, and a variety of other animals. The bulk of his work was also undertaken in the midst of an international, technological revolution, one in which the technology of transportation played a central role; we might make analogous connections to Lynch's film, itself the product of an era of massive communicational transition. Muybridge's gaze toward the naked bodies of men and women walking, or even the horse's gait, can be explored as a reaction to the swiftness with which these changes were taking place, as a reaffirmation of man alone.

Lynch has reacted to technology similarly and has, in *The Straight Story*, sought to slow man down and analyze both his motion and his emotions removed, to whatever extent this is actually possible, from the technologies with which he has become inseparable, which have, in fact, separated him from the communities he once relied upon. Lynch, to this end, also gives the subject of his own motion study a destination. Where his previous films critiqued the postmodern condition by participating in its chaos, *The Straight Story* achieves its criticism by denial. Lynch, then, finds the elusive—as opposed to the *lost*—highway. The film's success, it seems, hinges upon a Troglodytic reaction to technology and an almost neo-Victorian notion of family that Lynch's films and the tradition they belong to have always sought to disseminate.