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WHAT A TRIP: THE ROAD FILM AND AMERICAN CULTURE

DAVID LADERMAN

In the winter of 1993, four road films were released almost simultaneously: Tony Scott's *True Romance*, Dominick Sena's *Kalifornia,* John Whitesell's *Calendar Girl,* and Roger Weisberg's *The Road Scholar.* More recent road film entries include Clint Eastwood's *A Perfect World*, Gus Van Zant's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, and Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (all 1994). The road film genre seems to have permanently settled itself into our post-baby boom, millennium-ending visual and cultural landscape.

As a recent article in *Sight and Sound* by Michael Atkinson suggests, the 1980s and early 1990s have been flooded with variations on the road film. He fruitfully sketches some elements of the genre's appeal and purpose: "a generation raised on television and the open ended road-like format of the weekly serial" sees the road film as an "ideogram of human desire and last-ditch search for self," where "the journey's the thing" (14). Indeed, the ad line for yet another contemporary road film, Adam Rifkin's remake of *The Chase* (1994), reads: "Getting there is twice the fun." More generally, Eric Mottram notes the presence of cars in American films for "purposes other than transport," including thrill seeking, pyrotechnics, courtship, and "the alleviation of drudgery, loneliness and isolation" (226–35).

Clearly, the birth of the road film seems to reflect two interrelated postwar phenomena: the advent of the automobile as a fundamental expression of individuality and the emergence of a large strata of restless, often suburban, youth in the 1950s, depicted in such films as *Rebel without a Cause* and *Blackboard Jungle* (both 1955). As this restless youth culture evolved into the countercultural movements of the 1960s, young people weaned on the automobile seemed to appropriate it from its drab nine-to-five or weekend leisure routine and transform it into a literal vehicle for their restlessness and rebellion. Thus, the road trip became valorized as a rite of countercultural passage.

The cultural roots of the road film go beyond the immediate context of its emergence, however, and include a literary tradition focused on voyaging (the Journey), which in turn often reflects an ideology of expansionism and imperialism (in the strict literal sense of asserting one's self elsewhere). This Euro-American ideological strain, which combines enterprise and mobility, is perhaps best summed up by the term "manifest destiny," which reverberates with connotations that may seem contrary to the overtly rebellious themes of the genre. Viewed from this more insidious perspective, road films appear to be "analogues of American official aggression, both imperialist and domestic" (Mottram 241).

The dialectical tension between the road film as a rebellious critique of conserva-

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tive authority and as a reassertion of a traditional expansionist ideology will form the framework for the following consideration of its cultural significance. This survey will situate the staging of this dialectical tension historically, across several series of films, but particular attention will be paid to contemporary road films. I will therefore examine the ideological consequences of shifting patterns of style and plot as they reflect the general drift—from progressive and politicized to depoliticized and socially indifferent—that have loosely characterized the changes in American culture from the 1960s to the present.

On the Road: Literary Inspiration

Jack Kerouac's 1955 watershed novel *On the Road* can be understood in retrospect as a formative literary source for the road film, especially the distinctive rebel version that emerged in the late 1960s. Several of the novel's thematic and stylistic preoccupations prove useful both in describing the road film as a genre and in outlining its ideological contours and contradictions.

On the Road tells the rambling tale of two young male buddies, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, who trek back and forth across America, reawakening their souls by rediscovering the landscape. The somewhat cyclical, meandering quality of the narrative combined with Sal's whimsical first-person narration—neither in the classical realist vein—contribute to the novel's celebration of quest and transience over destination and stability. *On the Road* quickly became a countercultural manifesto that articulated a bohemian lifestyle marked by its rejection of traditional, conservative "family values," the Protestant work ethic, and middle-class materialism (all of which, of course, were signature characteristics of the fifties).

On the Road glorifies the automobile not only as the primary means for traveling but also as a figurative vehicle of transformation. Many lengthy, poetic descriptions of riding in cars and driving cars suggest even a mystical fusion between Sal and Dean and the car. The road itself is another overinvested motif in the novel, romanticized as a sort of wilderness beyond urban and suburban enclaves. This sense of road travel as outside and opposed to mainstream urban culture is bolstered in *On the Road* by the dominant frontier imagery of the American Wild West. Several passages express Sal and Dean's spiritual and sensual awakenings in terms of retrieving a mythical cowboy identity: early on, Sal describes Dean as a "Western kinsman of the sun" (11). A related figure, comprising the novel's "outer form," is the hobo—symbol of the Depression era—idealized by Sal and Dean for his unattached, rambling lifestyle and for the implicit critique of materialism he represents. Sal and Dean embrace the hobo lifestyle as the debris of a failed economic system—thus as holding special spiritual secrets for them. These themes are reworked in various contexts in many road films, in which even the specific imagery of *On the Road* gets translated into the mise-en-scène.[1] For example, many road films blend the cowboy and hobo figures into the road outlaw, crystallizing the notion of being both morally and literally outside the law and society.

Yet *On the Road*'s basic themes and style also highlight the ideological contradiction mentioned earlier, between rebellion and tradition. Although a bible for the Beats, bohemians, and hippies, *On the Road* nevertheless perpetuates a western travel/frontier literary tradition that includes Homer's *Odyssey*, Voltaire's *Candide*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In these narratives, the Journey functions ambivalently, as a mode for critical social observation but also for conquest. In other words, *On the Road*'s idealism becomes haunted by the very norms the followers of the book sought to alter.

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The road film genre too is characterized by this general ideological contradiction between rebellion and tradition. Characters who transgress social laws and bounds through road travel represent an alternative to society's conventions. Yet the road film's generic structure covertly incorporates many traditional conceptions of society and classical film values.

One example of how *On the Road*'s traditional subtext undermines its bohemian content is the rugged white male individualism driving the novel, which perhaps can best be perceived in the treatment of women and people of color. Blacks, Mexicans, and Native Americans are romanticized as "repositories of authenticity," antidotes to white urban angst. As Cameron Bailey explains with regard to the New York independent film movement (which, as Bailey points out, descended from the Beats), this gesture ends up emptying these cultures of their ethnic heritages (30).

Likewise, the novel's treatment of women seems embedded in a distinctly male romanticism that exalts women—but usually as a pretext for in turn exalting the male romantic impulse.[2] For the most part, Sal and Dean use women to satisfy the sexual drives they sublimate through driving; conversely, the female characters ultimately become distractions from their freedom on the road.[3]

The novel's latent sexism and racism serve as an access point to its conservative ideological framework, because these views reinforce and derive from its other imperialist/capitalist values, which can be summarized as freedom to roam for the privileged white male; mobility and opportunism; and glorified individuality and conquest. *On the Road* admittedly wrestles with these issues, especially through Sal's conscientious and self-critical narration; however, these latent values create a tension in the work: a critique of American culture via a renewed reiteration of it, through the back door, so to speak, and a rejection of *and* a rediscovery of Americanism.

Not surprisingly, this ideological tension pervades many road films of the '60s and '70s. To specify it further in cinematic-historical terms, we shall take a brief detour to examine the classical Hollywood precursors to the road film. The

The Searchers and *Detour*: Classical-Era Precursors to the Road Film

Generally speaking, the road film carves out an antigenre narrative path; by venturing beyond society in its content and imagery, it also ventures beyond the traditional rules of genre. Yet closer inspection reveals that the road film is not an antigenre so much as an amalgam of genres, reflecting another facet of the traditional underside of the road film's rebellious attitude.

Three classical film genres that figured in the development of the contemporary road film are the western, the gangster film, and film noir. All three of these genres predated *On the Road*, and Sal and Dean affectionately invoke western and gangster films throughout. Classic westerns, such as John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956), place great aesthetic and thematic emphasis on the vast open spaces of the Old West and on perpetual, unfulfilled wandering. Like most other westerns, they also focus on the confrontational and ambiguous border between culture and nature, which becomes a prominent feature of the road film (Kitses 20–24).

Ford's work is especially relevant here, since he went so far in exploring the idea of travel as narrative framework. The obsessive search of Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) for his captive niece is ostensibly motivated by vengeance, but it becomes a pretext for lyrical images of two men out

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in the wild arid desert. Part of the plot centers on how their goal loses meaning and becomes superseded by the revelations of the voyage itself (especially for Ethan's young companion). With its focus on automobile travel and the homelessness spawned by the Depression and its visionary ending, in which the prodigal son departs the family to fight for social justice, Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) is likewise one of the great precursors to the road film.

Though Ethan's character is morally dubious, he does not deliberately and maliciously transgress the law the way the protagonists in gangster films do. The road film inherited a criminal element from the gangster film, in that an ambitious outsider usually tries to succeed (often financially) by breaking society's laws (Mitchell 162–63). Depression-era gangster films often focus on fugitive transience sympathetically, as a means of social commentary, as in *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932) and *Wild Boys of the Road* (William Wellman, 1933).[4]

Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937) is an important early example of how the criminal and the road converged. Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda) is an ex-convict who is trying to reenter society (job, marriage, and so on) but finds that society refuses to accept him (hypocritically, in Lang's scathing view). Through a snowball effect and a series of tragic misunderstandings, Eddie and his new wife, Joan (Sylvia Sidney), must take to the road, heading for Canada. Though they are actually on the road for only the last half hour or so of the film, they are an important precursor to the "outlaw couple" Marsha Kinder describes in the early 1970s (2). Anticipating many later road films, Eddie and Joan are shot down in the end, their fate romanticized by both their undying love for each other and the connotations of religious redemption, even martyrdom, suggested by the soothing voice of the priest Eddie accidentally killed.

As the ending of *You Only Live Once* suggests, the outlaw road couple seems doomed to death, even when the film's sympathy is with them—which is most often the case. The theme of implacable fatal destiny eventually overtaking road film protagonists was developed during the postwar period in film noir, which in many ways grew out of and transcends the gangster film (Schrader 170). Because road film characters literally and figuratively venture beyond society, they seem to call down upon them the wrath of a desperate, fatal end. This dark tone pervading most road films is prefigured in Edgar Ulmer's film noir classic *Detour* (1945).[5]

In *Detour*, pianist Al Roberts (Tom Neal) decides to hitchhike across the country to meet his girl in Los Angeles. He never makes it, his life having been destroyed by the terrors of the road. Along the way, a man named Haskell picks Al up, then mysteriously dies, and it's all downhill from there. Al decides to adopt the dead man's identity, but he then picks up a woman who knows what's going on: she ends up blackmailing and tormenting him, until he accidentally kills her in a Los Angeles hotel room where she has more or less imprisoned him.

Whereas in *You Only Live Once* the road represents a desperate escape to freedom, in *Detour* the road seems to hasten dangerous provocations and seductions that end up consuming and distorting Al's very identity. The foreboding, shadowy style of *Detour*'s camerawork and especially its flashback structure reflect its theme of doomed fate in typical noir fashion. But *Detour*'s originality lies in its symbolic use of the ominous road as the site of an asocial no man's land and the dissolution of Tom's sense of who he is. This theme of road travel as a risk with the highest stakes becomes formalized in many later road films.

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All these precursors to the road film set in motion its basic gender pattern: the woman as either a passive accomplice to the man or a threat to him, part of the road that lures him to his downfall. Perhaps unconsciously in response to this paranoid construction of women on the road, the male road pair was simultaneously set in motion in *The Searchers* and *Detour*, anticipating *Easy Rider* and the numerous 1970s buddy films it spawned. Either way, the road was destined to be traveled by a couple. This almost unwavering pattern seems a generic trace of the ideological contradiction between rebellion and tradition described above. In fact, most often the road film couple is divided along these lines: one is more wild, the other more straight.[6]

More significantly, the classical precursors of the road film began to formulate road travel as a temporary and vicarious adventure in socially alternative excesses and thrills: temporary, in that the road film narrative usually punishes (and thus contains) the rebellious road couple's ramblings, and vicarious, in that for the audience the narrative provides a surrogate indulgence in these very excesses and thrills. The doomed fate of most road film couples often looks like an indictment of traditional legal and social standards as brutal authority; yet, as we shall see, these very standards often seem to have the last word.

Uneasy Riders: The Rebel Road Film

If we were to date the emergence and consolidation of the road film as a genre distinct from the precursors described above, 1967 would probably be the date we would pick, the year of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*.[7] This film deploys road travel extensively and self-consciously as an instrument of social critique and rebellion. Bearing considerable traces of the French New Wave *camera stylo* approach Truffaut and Godard helped fashion a few years earlier, *Bonnie and Clyde* greatly expands upon the road film's American precursors. The auto-mobility of the film's Depression-era outlaw couple serves as an incisive allegory for the 1960s countercultural critique of Big Business and conservative values; it also becomes an explicit, crucial element of both Bonnie and Clyde's mystique and their visionary, sensual lifestyle.

At the beginning of the film, Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) is portrayed through a series of carefully framed jump cuts as trapped at home: bored, restless, and static. She spots Clyde (Warren Beatty) outside, planning to steal her mother's car, which foreshadows the film's association of freedom with the road and stolen cars. In the spirit of *On the Road*, this thematic association of liberation with motion will persist throughout the film: whenever the members of the Barrow gang are stationary, in a motel room, for example, they become irritable and vulnerable to attack; on the road, they are free and happy, symbolized by the upbeat banjo music that usually accompanies their flight from a heist.

Another way in which *Bonnie and Clyde* associates driving with liberation is by developing sympathy with the average working person, over and against conservative authority figures (the banks, the police, and so forth). Bonnie and Clyde's chosen homelessness mirrors that of the victims of a cruel economic system but turns the dismal effects of the Depression into affirmation. One poignant moment occurs when C. W., their adopted mechanic-chauffeur, drives an injured Bonnie and Clyde into a makeshift group of homeless families, who share food and water with their folk heroes.

Beyond establishing the road as a trope of rebellion and social critique, *Bonnie and Clyde* elaborates two important road film themes that descend directly from *On the Road*: visionary ambition and sensual

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restlessness. In an early scene in a diner, Clyde lures Bonnie to run away with him, not only because of the exciting life of crime he offers, but because he "sees" into her, knows with prophetic insight all about her, and tells her so. However inarticulate and clumsy he is, Clyde displays this visionary quality throughout most of the film, which proves complementary to Bonnie's overt, restless sensuality. Although her mostly unfulfilled sexual appetite seems a traditionally sexist characterization (in that she is overtly linked with sexuality), Penn somewhat overcomes this stereotype by not punishing her for her excessive sensuality (though, of course, they are both punished at the film's end, by the brutal police).

In fact, Bonnie's sensuality eventually becomes visionary, suggesting through her characterization an almost Blakean link between eros and insight. In writing poems about their adventures, she, not Clyde, becomes the public voice of their exploits. Moreover, the publication of her mythologizing poem is what finally triggers Clyde's dormant sexuality. In a less positive vein, Bonnie also articulates the aimless underside of the film's many manic driving sequences, as a lament: "We used to be goin' somewhere, now it seems like we're just goin'."[8] This ephemeral sense of regret may be a resurgence of what she had been taught as a young girl: to settle down and start a family. It also suggests, however, that she has a vision of a life beyond crime, which Clyde is too blind to see.

Ultimately, though, Bonnie is unable to use her visionary qualities to protect them. Driving back to their hideout, they stop to help someone with car trouble, which turns out to be an ambush, and hidden police slaughter them.

Bonnie and Clyde's sudden, gruesome, apocalyptic ending set the tone for the narrative fate and closure of many road films to follow. It also raised the specter of the ideological tension between rebellion and tradition. In other words, where does the road of rebellion and alternative vision lead? *Bonnie and Clyde* strongly suggests that the alternative is doomed to defeat by the fascistic trappings of a conservative society. This sense of doom is one way in which the film passes judgment on, or at least exposes, the extremes of conservative, traditional social bounds. Yet the alternative is also politically limited and naive, for Bonnie and Clyde have internalized the conservative values they intend to flee, and, especially for Clyde, the lust for money and success mirrors the capitalist society from which he has excluded himself.[9]

Likewise, in its structure, the film follows the gangster formula (tradition) as much as it reinvents it as a road film (rebellion). These generic and thematic traces of the conservative within the alternative suggest the ideological complexity of narrativizing political rebellion, as the road film often attempts to do.

All of the themes mobilized in *Bonnie and Clyde*—glorified transience, the fugitive/alternative lifestyle, sociopolitical critique, visionary ambition, and sensual restlessness—were molded into the generic standard for road films in 1969 in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*. Most other road films seem either to lead up to it or to fall away from it. This is not to say it is a great film, but as an extremely popular, low-budget, overtly countercultural statement, it successfully launched the fusion of independent narrative film and the road film genre—a fusion that remains potent to this day.

Easy Rider sets two men out "looking for America," as the celebrated ad line reads. Thus, the plot pretext invokes more of a quest for spiritual and cultural identity than was permitted in the previously dominant gangster/outlaw scenario. With its meandering plot and mild lawlessness (usually related to drugs), *Easy Rider* con-

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Captain America (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper) went "looking for America" in *Easy Rider*, which epitomized the road film of the late 1960s.

stitutes a certain return to *On the Road*, an explicit attempt to rediscover America.

Peter Fonda plays Captain America, the detached, visionary observer, while Dennis Hopper's Billy is the earthy, impatient partner. (This variation on the Sal/Dean and Bonnie/Clyde pairings more or less maintains the personalities of the road film couple.) Captain America chucks his watch before they take off on their motorcycles, signaling an urge to move beyond social and narrative conventions and distinguishing the film somewhat from *Bonnie and Clyde*. Similarly to Bonnie and Clyde, however, Captain America and Billy become vulnerable to society's shackles when they stop moving, exemplified when they attend Mardi Gras and end up in prison. This critique of stability is crystallized shortly after the Mardi Gras episode, when lawyer George Hansen (Jack Nicholson) is murdered while all three are sleeping. Even though they are camped out in the forest, seemingly peaceful and in the wilderness (as in "Born to Be Wild," the film's theme song), their stasis renders them prey to the wrath of bigots.

Though most of the men's experiences occur when they stop riding, the film exalts the aesthetics of road travel more than *Bonnie and Clyde* does. For one, *Easy Rider*'s rock music soundtrack is more heavy-handed as an accompaniment than *Bonnie and Clyde*'s banjo music. More significantly, many tracking shots and montage sequences aim to convey aesthetically the thrill of the road. Some of the most memorable examples occur during scene transitions, when flash forwards are rapidly intercut with shots in the present. This technique translates the excitement of the characters' tripping with Eisensteinian energy; moreover, it visually conveys the sense that in their travels they are transcending not merely cultural limits but temporal and spatial ones as well.

Thus, *Easy Rider* moves beyond *Bonnie and Clyde* and is a more explicit rebel road

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film: it celebrates road travel aesthetically as much as narratively; it is less reliant on a traditional generic formula, such as the gangster film; and, set in the present, it possesses more political relevance. Yet despite its overt countercultural stance, *Easy Rider* reiterates many of the ideological contradictions of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *On the Road*. And, not surprisingly, these contradictions revolve around the film's overinvested white male point of view.

In *Easy Rider,* women are reductively marginalized as either burdens or sex objects. More generally, the ambitious drive to go outside American society that the film celebrates becomes recuperated to the traditional American culture the film seeks to critique. Several sequences recall the Wild West imagery of *The Searchers*, with the motorcycle substituted for the horse. Captain America's peaceful soul searching strangely recollects and rearticulates the quiet stoicism of the cowboy.[10] He also admires the rugged individualism of the farmer; from this perspective, his name suddenly reveals the militant patriotism and "manifest destiny" it intends to mock. This emphasis on self-determination and independence from a conservative, reactionary society is coded as a crossing from culture into nature, but in doing so, *Easy Rider* precariously straddles *another* borderline, this time between left-wing anarchy and right-wing survivalism. David E. James has described this ideological contradiction in terms of an ambiguous statement near the end—"We blew it"—which unconsciously suggests the film's failure to be truly countercultural (14–18). Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner put it this way:

> [The film] is critical of a certain America, but it can also be read as merely enacting the fundamental principle of capitalist America—the freedom of the market, which is in some respects metaphorized as the freedom of the open road. The primary complaint against America in the film is that it is not American enough (25).

Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider* ends on a brutal note as conservative authority figures fatally punish the road rebels. Camera technology, travel imagery, and death converge as they are shot by rednecks. This gesture seems to represent two views: a cynical indictment of society as vicious and repressive and a reassertion of this society by its very triumph in narrative closure. Instead of Penn's bloody machine gun-fire montage, Fonda's gas tank is exploded with one shot. The exploding gas tank not only symbolizes a certain nemesis, since the rebels' money is stashed there; it also dramatizes how Captain America has "become" his bike, since we never see his body dying, only his bike's.[11]

The residual political ambivalence mentioned above becomes further complicated by the suggestion of transcendence and martyrdom: the film ends with an aerial shot of the burning bike, as if his/its spirit were rising to heaven (Corrigan 145). The cultural dominance of the redneck Captain America (expressed through his phallic gun blast) becomes mirrored by the countercultural dominance of the radical Captain America (expressed through his assassination/crucifixion and ensuing spiritual sublimation). Put differently, the film's modernist critical perspective vacillates between utopian social solutions and, more insidiously, a reiteration of elitism and imperialism.

In the next section, I will demonstrate how this modernist, visionary confidence and the theme of social rebellion began to diminish in the 1970s as road films became postmodern—a reflection of the cynicism and irony of that decade's cultural reaction to the 1960s.

Kings of the Road: Angst and Irony on the Road

In the wake of the overwhelming and unexpected success of *Easy Rider* (made

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for $375,000, earned $50 million), a flurry of low-budget road films were made in the 1970s, including *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafaelson, 1970), *Two Lane Blacktop* (Monte Hellman, 1971), *Vanishing Point* (Richard Sarafian, 1971), *Badlands* (Terence Malick, 1973), *Sugarland Express* (Steven Spielberg, 1973), and *Thieves Like Us* (Robert Altman, 1973). The trend appeared to culminate in Germany with Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road* (1976).

In contrast to the modernist, visionary idealism of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*, most of the later road films seem to pick up on and elaborate on the "we blew it" comment. These films focus on the theme of existential loss rather than social critique; these narratives, still nomadic, are laden with psychological confusion and wayward angst (Elsaesser 13–14).

Two Lane Blacktop and *Vanishing Point*, for example, take to an extreme the fusion in *Easy Rider* between character and vehicle: they contain almost no dialogue, just the spectacle of driving cars. Beyond the virtual absence of any political context, both films substitute nihilism and irony for the sense of discovery in *Easy Rider* and *On the Road*. This nihilistic tone harks back to *Detour* but flattens out that film's narrative intensity into a dehumanized, near plotless overvaluation of the automobile.

Likewise, the blistering, arid landscapes in these films shift in tone from Kerouac's heartland to Eliot's wasteland. Both *Two Lane Blacktop* and *Vanishing Point* develop a certain potency as vintage road films, in that they displace human expression with automobile expression. *Five Easy Pieces*, a more conventional film, articulates this early 1970s road film angst.

Five Easy Pieces focuses on the confused character of Robert Dupea (Jack Nicholson), who is trying to find *himself* rather than America and who suffers from an internal crisis rather than from the legal system, or the culture at large. Thus, the road becomes a metaphor for his psychological confusion and ambivalent desires. An educated concert pianist from a stuffy, wealthy family, he thinks he prefers work in construction. In one amazing scene, he jumps out of his car in a traffic jam to play a piano sitting in a truck up ahead. Yet the film's long driving sequence, its "spiritual as well as structural center," is more indicative of a cultural shift (Cagin and Dray 66). The visionary idealistic 1960s attitude of *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie and Clyde* is condensed into the character of a woman hitchhiker Robert picks up who rants about ecological disaster and the end of the world. The film suggests that '60s idealism has become just another distracting signpost on the road of internal confusion; it also seems to treat the woman character with cold irony, even mockery, as evidenced in Robert's aloof point of view as he looks back at her in his rear-view mirror.

The nihilism and irony being born in *Five Easy Pieces* and other road films of the early 1970s are less theatrical and extreme than the punk subculture that emerged a few years later. Robert's motivation derives from his *lack* of a motivation (Elsaesser 13). Wherever he is, he is homeless. His confusion drives him, which can be distinguished sharply from Sal's frenetic need to ramble, or from Captain America's clear purpose. Robert's nihilism grows out of his inability to find meaning and thus a reason to stay put, anywhere. A cynical tone prevails, which often expresses itself through his ironic, detached dialogue. His attitude toward relationships—whether romantic, familial, or topological—is equally ironic and detached: psychologically, emotionally, and literally, he's a drifter.

The cultural transition occurring in the road film is perhaps most dramatically evident in the ending of *Five Easy Pieces*. Rather than the overt disaster and doom of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*, *Five*

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Easy Pieces ends on an ambiguous note that leaves Robert much as he was at the beginning of the film: lost. Waiting in the driver's seat for his girlfriend, Rayette (Karen Black), at a gas station, he slowly but deliberately gets out of the car and climbs into the passenger seat of a truck going in the opposite direction—to where, neither he nor the audience knows.[12]

If *Five Easy Pieces* rearticulates *Easy Rider* in an ironical and cynical 1970s context, then certainly Terence Malick's *Badlands* does the same for *Bonnie and Clyde*. But unlike *Bonnie and Clyde* and similarly to *Five Easy Pieces*, *Badlands* makes little reference to social issues. Though unemployment seems to contribute to Kit's (Martin Sheen) murder spree, the film flaunts a garish, gothic visual approach that emphasizes the aesthetic over the political (Kinder 2–8). Much of the stunning cinematography recalls John Ford's vast, formally composed landscapes, which contribute greatly to the sense of liberation experienced by this outlaw couple on the road. But the film chooses not to articulate character motivation or social context. The minimal(ist) dialogue (linking it to a film like *Two Lane Blacktop*) mirrors the sublimely vacuous, almost abstract compositions, which seem self-referential and ironic more than romanticized. The visuals, like the characters, are beautifully distant.

Moreover, the film's ironic treatment of romantic characters only undercuts the drive behind their rebellion. Kit's "James Dean" posturing and fever for creating monuments to himself are so self-conscious that, according to one contemporary critic, irony is surpassed by an "inhabiting of images" and a reveling "in the materiality of predicament" (Corrigan 151). The flat, matter-of-fact voice-over of Holly (Sissy Spacek) likewise forges cool distance between audience and subject matter. Though the film's distancing effects provoke an intriguing viewing experience, they display little Brechtian sociopolitical referencing. *Badlands* can therefore be situated in the cultural context of the more self-conscious, image-oriented 1970s.

The ending of *Badlands* also resembles that of *Five Easy Pieces* in its poeticized ambiguity. Though Kit finally gets captured, the 1960s sense of violent doom becomes ironic, angelic exaltation. He is glorified not only by the military police force that had hunted him down but also in the last aerial shot of heavenly clouds gliding across the screen—creating a tone that certainly runs contrary to the final aerial shot of *Easy Rider*.

The tension described earlier between rebellion and tradition persists in these films but has been softened by an emphasis on the psychological rather than the sociopolitical (even when that psychology eludes the audience). *Badlands* serves especially well as a transitional road film, signaling the cultural drift from romance to irony, from modernist vision to postmodern image.

Delusions: The Postmodern Road Film

Since the mid-1980s, the road film has flourished in various guises and contexts. Jim Jarmusch and Gus Van Zant have emerged as road film auteurs in the wake of Wenders. Films like *Lost in America* (Albert Brooks, 1985), *The Hit* (Stephen Frears, 1985), *Raising Arizona* (Joel Coen, 1987), *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (Aki Kaurismaki, 1989), *Roadside Prophets* (Abbe Wool, 1992), *Guncrazy* (Tamra Davis, 1993), and *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1993) all rework the genre in a variety of directions. Most of these films reflect a postmodern aesthetic and self-consciousness. Below, the rebellion/tradition dialectic shall be explored in terms of this postmodernaesthetic and how it expresses this period's more conservative political climate.

One general way in which the contemporary road film has become more politically

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conservative is its pervasive tongue-in-cheek tone. Recent road films often make fun of the genre as they revisit/revise it. Such generic appropriation, even with a humorous edge, does not preclude a social/political critique automatically; however, many contemporary road films can just as easily be read through their ironic mockery of social/political critique. That is, their posturing overtakes and often nullifies any sense of positioning. Such pluralistic spectator address, in other words, is no guarantee of politicized narrative and more often seems concerned with dazzling rather than critically engaging the audience.

This road film dazzle—stunning mobile camerawork, excessive violence, deadpan irony—can be understood in the context of Timothy Corrigan's notion of the "hysterical": "representations overdetermined by their materiality and no longer even interested in accommodating history and cultural change" (151). In the contemporary road film, visual thrills often overcompensate for a lack of historical, social, or political grounding, even when the point of view is marginal (gay, drug addict, ex-convict, woman, etc.). Perhaps because of this prevalent postmodern mode, the very accessing of the road film genre by marginal voices often results in a certain trivialization and/or assimilation.

A good example is Carl Colpaert's *Delusion* (1991). George (Jim Metzler) is a CEO trying to subvert a merger by embezzling money so he can start his own "alternative" company. Thus, he has a much more concrete goal than the protagonists of most previous road films (more culturally indicative is the dressing up of rebellion in corporate attire). Yet the film's introduction is quite elliptical in providing details, and soon the narrative becomes, in typical road film fashion, a pretext for the terror George experiences on the road. Recalling *Detour*, Chevy (Kyle Secor) and Patty (Jennifer Rubin), to whom George offers a ride after their speeding car spins out, terrorize him. Like most 1970s road films, *Delusion* is thin on social and political context; yet that period's psychological crises have been replaced by a postmodern sense of hyperreality and generic pastiche.

As its title suggests, *Delusion* uses the road and desert landscapes to challenge the very notion of reality: the desert becomes an empty spectacle, a spectacle of emptiness. Thus, road travel through it becomes a descent into an abyss of "astral indifference," which can be both exhilarating and terrifying (Baudrillard 6–9). Chevy points out to George that "out there" nothing has any meaning or makes any difference. In an absurdist play on appearances, Chevy seems to be an emissary to punish George for his heist; but it turns out George is being carjacked so Chevy can assassinate someone else. The campy plot and self-conscious photography create an ironic tone that reshuffles the western and the gangster genres.

This slippery portrayal of an even more slippery reality lends itself to a depoliticized scenario that flaunts style and image construction. An important thematic facet of this postmodern, more culturally conservative approach is the fact that George, the driver, becomes a *victim* of the outlaw couple. As mentioned above, his crime is vaguely stated, certainly white collar; he is portrayed as a straight family man who may have made a bad, well-intentioned decision. But Chevy and Patty are true outlaws, and though they crash their car in the beginning of the film, they are *passengers*, not drivers. Thus, road film rebellion has not only become depoliticized and relativized; it has been taken out of the driver's seat, externalized as part of the threatening, confusing landscape (recall *Five Easy Pieces*' hitchhiker).

With Patty's triumph at the film's close, *Delusion* might be making a political, feminist statement. But just as easily, it might be fashionably reflecting feminism's cul-

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tural currency. Like Penn's Bonnie, Patty is often portrayed through the "male gaze" as a sex toy who likes "to be looked at." But toward the end she asserts herself by driving off, leaving the two men to kill each other over money. The camera lingers on their standoff, then glides down the road after her. During the closing credit sequence, Patty performs "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" for the camera. This ambiguously uplifting tone reflects the film's less socially contentious, ultimately nonrebellious topography. Although this credit sequence underlines Patty's appropriation of the (male) thrill of driving, it also expresses this appropriation through a traditional sexist cliché.

Given its huge commercial and critical success, David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990) apparently went much further than *Delusion* in presenting a sign of the cultural times. Lynch's style—flashy, bizarre camera techniques; a recycling and blending of genres; extreme self-consciousness and posturing; an ironic attitude toward suburban culture—seems the epitome of cinematic postmodernism. Yet beyond—or because of—the film's "hip" veneer, one discovers another depoliticized, neoconservative view of the world. Aside from the film's notorious racism and sexism, described by Sharon Willis ("Special Effects"), any trace of modernist rebellion has been collapsed and flattened into an oddly sensationalized celebration of the traditional white patriarchal family. This is in fact what Sailor (Nicholas Cage) and Lulu (Laura Dern) aspire to. *Wild at Heart* exaggerates to an almost ridiculous degree all the wild energy, ambition, and violence of most previous road films, insidiously recontextualizing them as "special effects"—thereby reinventing road film rebellion as a sick joke.

Sailor is an ex-convict who returns home intending to scoop up his girl Lulu and start a family with her (very similar to *Raising Arizona*, also featuring Nicholas Cage as an ex-convict and directed by fellow postmodernist Joel Coen). Lulu's mother, however, despises Sailor because he rejected her sexual advances, so the young couple must flee on the road.

One terribly significant aspect of *Wild at Heart*'s conservative revision of the road film is that Sailor and Lulu are running *from* gangsters (though he is initially coded as a criminal). They want to start a family but must escape the mob Lulu's mother has set on them. Like *Delusion* and other recent road films, the driver is trying to get back *to* society, not away from or beyond it. This shift in emphasis exaggerates the classical underpinnings of road film ideology discussed earlier, precluding, or at least severely sanitizing, any politically rebellious point of view.

Another aspect of *Wild at Heart* distinguishes it as a truly revisionist, conservative road film. Though Sailor and Lulu ostensibly are running from her mother's mobsters, the film makes it clear that they are equally running from their pasts. Employing a complex, haunting flashback structure organized around the visual motif of lighting a match, both their childhoods, and especially Lulu's, become confessed/represented as sexually abusive and traumatic.

Unlike *Detour*, in which the past constitutes the body of the narrative, in typical noir fashion, and unlike the emphasis on existential psychology in the 1970s road films, *Wild at Heart* seems distinctly 1980s in its lavish ridicule *and* celebration of psychotherapy (in the postmodern context, ridicule is celebration, as in many tabloid TV talk shows). *Wild at Heart*'s obsession with Sailor and Lulu's lurid psychosexual anecdotes functions to displace the sociopolitical (no radical Freudianism connecting the personal and the political here). It also trivializes these anecdotes into a surreal freak show spectacle. Such sensationalizing of traumatic and dysfunctional childhoods, interwoven

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with playful allusions to Elvis Presley and *The Wizard of Oz*, renders this road film a lateral offshoot of the early 1980s Lucas-Spielberg blockbusters—that is, an amusement park ride road film in which the status quo get to drive and rebellious critique gets dispersed as stylized violence.

Wild at Heart may treat traditional family life with some irony, but this is offset by the fact that Lulu and Sailor *do succeed* in their aspiration. Though *Wild at Heart* is a grotesque road film spectacle, it does not end with punishment, apocalypse, or tragedy (it therefore sidesteps the cynical ambivalence marking the closing of most previous road films since the 1960s). Rather, *Wild at Heart* ends with joyful if trivialized reconciliation: the triumph of the Family. *Wild at Heart* effectively dilutes road film rebellion by glorifying its signifiers while betraying its signified. In Lynch's hands, dominant traditional ideology has no need for fatal punishment.

Michael Atkinson warns against impulses epitomized in *Wild At Heart* for the genre either to sanitize itself as sappy melodrama (*Rain Man*) or to self-reflex itself into oblivion (14–17). Certainly the road film and its outlaw couple have become a hackneyed pretext for ever more extreme spectacles of violence, as witnessed in *Kalifornia* (1993), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *The Doom Generation* (1995). The only thrill for the post-punk, post-yuppie wanderers portrayed in these films seems to be a cultural landscape that substitutes technologically contrived sensations/s(t)imulations for politics, psychology, and history.[13] Even a film like *Natural Born Killers*, with its fairly overt political critique of the mass media and the current prison system, ultimately undermines that critique with what I would describe as its postmodern conservatism: the hysterical celebration of violence and special effects.

The Road Scholar (Roger Weisberg, 1993) displays a different kind of conservatism toward the road film that shall be considered briefly here. The title's pun on "Rhodes scholar" signifies an effort to be countercultural, or at least nonacademic. A first-person documentary, the film in fact purports to help the intellectual emerge from the ivory tower that kept him so pretentiously naive in *Kalifornia*. Andrei Codrescu—National Public Radio commentator, professor, poet, ex-1960s radical—explains to the camera, with his tongue partially in his cheek, that it's time for him to learn how to drive and make that singularly American cross-country trek. This introduction casts the road trip as a cliché; it also reveals a desire to be as American as possible, a kind of back-door patriotism.

Early on, Codrescu quotes from and tries to reinterpret *On the Road*; the film proceeds to invoke an array of ghosts of Beats past (Whitman, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and so on). Yet despite Codrescu's affectionate intentions, the film's tone ends up trivializing the novel's (and the film genre's) rebellious qualities, turning the road trip into a comfortable vacation: no desperation or rebellion here, and social critique has been watered down to cute observations on all the peculiar oddities that make up the American heartland. In fact, *The Road Scholar*'s tone exemplifies the subtle ethnographic arrogance Cameron Bailey describes in David Byrne's *True Stories* (1986), another postmodern road film (29). Codrescu's constant winking at the camera undercuts his attempt to contrast multicultural differences with the stereotype of a homogeneous Middle America.

The ending of the *The Road Scholar* represents the conservative flip side to this trivializing approach, with its nauseating celebration of that magical open-armed America Codrescu had mildly mocked earlier in the film. By ending on the swearing-in ceremony of immigrants, the film praises America for accommodating difference. Yet this celebration is diametri-

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cally opposed to more authentic "Beat" road films, such as *Easy Rider* or even *Five Easy Pieces*, which end by at least questioning conservative America's façade of accommodation. Admittedly, *The Road Scholar* is a totally different kind of film than either of those two, and the comparison might be unfair. But in terms of the cultural changes speaking through the road film genre, the film provides a useful sign of how mainstream culture today absorbs and softens social critique and rebellion by trivializing it as innocuous, TV news-style commentary or, in the *Wild at Heart-Kalifornia-Natural Born Killers* approach, substituting lavish, infantile spectacles of sex and violence for it.

Thelma and Louise: An Alternative Route

Despite the dominance of the postmodern road film style described above, there have been notable attempts recently to reclaim the road film's rebellious terrain, without lapsing into self-conscious nostalgia or spectacles of violence. Agnes Varda's *Vagabond* (1985) puts a special European twist on the road film, in a compellingly personal format, by using the homeless protagonist's very passivity (she is always driven by someone else) to critique social hierarchies.

Gus Van Zant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) and Gregg Araki's *The Living End* might be described aesthetically as postmodern but do not sacrifice the politically biting consequences of their gay perspective. Alex Cox's *Highway Patrolman* (1993) is also striking in this context, indicated by its nearly invisible distribution. Set in Mexico, spoken in Spanish, this curious road film critiques conservative authority from within, so to speak, by focusing on the gradual disintegration of a policeman's faith in the institution he represents.

Perhaps the most significant example of the repoliticized road film is Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Here, the outlaws are back in the driver's seat, and, for the first time, they are two women. The film successfully fuses mainstream road film narrative with feminist social critique—despite Sharon Willis's claim that politically contentious readings overlook the film's simple fantasy of thrilling, senseless driving ("Hardware and Hardbodies" 122–23). Beyond the challenge to patriarchal culture expressed by its content, generically it poses radical questions about the road film and its potential to present nonmainstream perspectives. As Manohla Dargis puts it, "In the absence of men, on the road Thelma and Louise create a paradigm of female friendship, produced out of their willful refusal of the male world and its laws. No matter where their trip finally ends, Thelma and Louise have reinvented sisterhood for the American screen" (18).

Before considering where their trip finally does end, let us first note that the film recalls politicized road films by crucially linking rebellion to motion and the road: Thelma's marriage and Louise's job are coded as static and enslaving. Moreover, their outlaw rambling generates visionary revelations in the spirit of Kerouac. Watching the desert landscape simultaneously recede in the rear-view mirror and unfold through the window, Thelma (Geena Davis) reveals to Louise (Susan Sarandon) that she feels "wide awake" and that "everything looks different."

More significantly, the debate about the film's feminist politics reflects an ideological tension similar to that surrounding the more politicized 1960s road films. This tension, which informed much of its popular, controversial reception, might be generalized in the following question: is *Thelma and Louise* an effective feminist critique, or does it betray feminism to patriarchal Hollywood narrative? For example, the film seems to substitute a female buddy pair for the traditional male one, a depoliticizing gesture of assimila-

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tion; on a certain level, Thelma and Louise seem to be acting like men.[14] Yet the film complicates this assimilation in its articulation of resistance to patriarchal oppression. At the very least, their flight on the road is doubly motivated by rebellion against patriarchy: to get away from a male-dominated home (Thelma) and workplace (Louise) and, more emphatically, to evade a patriarchal legal system that legitimizes rape. Though the articulation of rebellion in *Thelma and Louise* is sometimes humorous, it is never ironical or even self-conscious. The film positions itself as rebellious and thus repoliticizes the genre.

The film carries with it all the ideological tensions described earlier, however, around the problem of representing rebellion in a mainstream narrative format circumscribed by dominant ideology. This becomes most clear in the film's cathartic ending. Here, the dominant (patriarchal) ideology vies with social critique for the last word. In one sense, the film cops out by eliminating/martyring Thelma and Louise; in another sense, it exalts their resistance by taking it to a dignified extreme.

In any case, by virtue of its consistency, the resolution in such tragically fatal road films may be read as an (unconscious) ideological necessity whenever the genre articulates rebellion. Yet one feature of the film's infamous ending that distinguishes it from most rebel road films (linking it not coincidentally with *The Living End*) is that Thelma and Louise *choose* to die. Their joyful embrace of their fatal destiny may signify Rebellion's dying but triumphant slap in the face of Tradition. Or, the bloodless, happy white light washing out their slow-motion leap may signify Tradition's triumphant absorption of Rebellion.

Conclusion

This essay may betray what some would call a nostalgia for socially critical 1960s-style road films. Yet I hope to have demonstrated that *The Road Scholar*'s conservative ideology was, in a sense, *always there*, especially in *On the Road*, with its many lyrical passages praising "the vast American night." That is, the contemporary postmodern road film is a culturally indicative variation on the dialectical wrestling match at the heart of the genre, between the dominant cultural ideology and rebellion against that ideology. The gradual depoliticization of road film rebellion this essay has described must itself be understood finally as political. From Fredric Jameson's useful vantage point, which views all narratives as "socially symbolic acts" (*The Political Unconscious* 20), the tendency in the contemporary road film to trivialize, or its special effects, or its popular culture referencing can all be seen to function as unconscious (in Jameson's sense) advertisements for corporate-controlled mass media. (These same tendencies exist in various mass media contexts: in TV news and talk shows, movies, music videos, and so on). Likewise, the conservative "family values" craze might be unconsciously motivating the family photo perched atop George's dashboard in *Delusion* or the happy family endings of *Wild at Heart*, *The Road Scholar*, and *Natural Born Killers*.[15]

At the same time, road films like *Thelma and Louise* and *Highway Patrolman* testify to the genre's persistent vitality as a form for exploring and reconfiguring the parameters of rebellion and social critique. What needs special attention (what always needs special attention anywhere in our media-saturated society) is the process by which Tradition maps the trajectory of Rebellion—sometimes even going along for the ride.

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Notes

[1] Edward Buscombe emphasizes the importance of "outer form" ("what we actually see on the screen") in determining the definition of a film genre (13–14).

[2] Sally Potter's film *Thriller* (1979) deconstructs the same patriarchal romanticism underlying Puccini's *La Boheme*, especially relevant here.

[3] For a good discussion of the road/buddy film's "marginalization of women," see Wood 228–29.

[4] Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934), which more or less invented the screwball comedy genre, makes an interesting comparison here, since it too blends road travel and social commentary.

[5] Two other important noir road films are Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948) and Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1950).

[6] Mark Crispin Miller's "End of Story" discusses this trend in contemporary characterization as an insidious strategy for containing rebellion (236–43).

[7] Laslo Benedek's *The Wild One* (1954) and Roger Corman's *The Wild Angels* (1966) are two biker-gang films, among others, that should be mentioned here as influencing the rebel road film, especially *Easy Rider*. Across the Atlantic, Godard's *Weekend* (also 1967) had much more elaborate apocalyptic imagery associated with the road. Unlike Penn (and most American directors of road films), however, Godard has no sympathy for his couple: they are unfaithful, greedy, and ultimately barbaric as they drive around the French countryside. He likewise has no sympathy for road travel and refuses to valorize it as a means of flight from or rebellion against society. Rather, it becomes the ultimate symbol of society's materialism and decadence. As a distinctly European road film, *Weekend*, by its very difference, helps define the cultural significance of the American road film.

[8] We may contrast this melancholy tone with the excitement surrounding a question put to Sal early in *On the Road*: " 'You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?' We didn't understand his question, and it was a damn good question" (20).

[9] On this generic character trait of the gangster, see Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* (88–90).

[10] Note, however, that, on the one hand, traditional genre returns in *Easy Rider* more indirectly than it does in *Bonnie and Clyde*: the latter film shares its "outer form" and plot with the gangster genre, whereas *Easy Rider* obliquely invokes the western. On the other hand, Cagin and Dray see *Easy Rider* as a reaction *against* the western, suggested by the fact that Captain America and Billy are traveling eastward (52–53).

[11] This is also suggested in the bullets ripping the bodies of Bonnie and Clyde—and their car.

[12] Wim Wenders's *Kings of the Road* (1976), along with his other road films, makes an excellent comparison here in terms of European versus American versions of the genre. While his road films generally partake of the existential and psychological malaise I am describing here, they also display considerable affection for romanticized American auto-mobility (unlike *Weekend*). See Kolker and Beichen, especially 34–41, on Ford and Ray as Wenders's cinematic forefathers.

[13] Corrigan offers an uplifting appraisal of this phenomenon (158–60), Miller a more pessimistic one (234–35).

[14] A related residue of the white patriarchal perspective might be the grossly stereotyped appearance of the black rasta bicyclist, which resembles the "progressive racism" Bailey describes.

[15] See also Jameson's "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture," in which the author shows how the film is not so much about rebelling against authority (its overt content) as it is (unconsciously) "about" authority containing and coding rebellion.

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