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Roadside America

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“Easy Rider” Along Route 66

The long winding road, Route 66, has acted as a pivotal road in American car culture, as a sign of freedom, adventure, mobility, and pursuit of the American dream. The film *Easy Rider* is a perfect example of what Route 66 can bring fellow Americans. This film has captured the spirit of a generation through two young male leads, Wyatt and Billy. They each hit the open road to pursue individual freedom, the authenticity of self, and spiritual exploration, much like the hippies in this period.

The film *Easy Rider* was made in 1969 and directed by Dennis Hopper, hoping to set the backdrop for the American landscape successfully. The film explores many motifs but the one most representative of American car culture is the motif of the open road. While the open road symbolizes freedom and nostalgia for many Americans, the film depicts the harsh reality of living on the road. Wyatt and Billy experience prejudice from local Southerners, violent acts from strangers leading to more than a couple of deaths, and social rejection. While they do find a hippie commune in New Mexico that celebrates life and the prosperity of food and nourishment, it's only one stop on their journey. Sadly, it's not just Billy and Wyatt who have experienced discrimination on Route 66, much like African Americans have for decades. The book *A Route 66 Companion* has a chapter touching on a black American, Edmond Threat's story. Route 66 stretched around half a mile along his property and Edmond remembers how he used to “run up

there and see all the cars and trucks and things” (Dunaway 73). Near the property, around a mile and a half up, there was what they called a “sundown town”. These towns were notorious for imploring discrimination and violence against non-white people entering the town. Even though Edmond’s family sacrificed a good chunk of their property they still lived with the constant threat for their safety. Even with the American dream taking place on roads and highways, many people can not explore the open road without repercussions.

The motorcycle serves as a powerful symbol of freedom and individuality, much like Route 66. Not many people during this time enjoyed the idea of motorcycles and most white town folk thought it improper. Wyatt and Billy didn’t let that idea of nonsocial conformity defuse the spark of their journey on Route 66, it did quite the opposite. In *Easy Rider* they stop at a diner in Carlsbad, New Mexico hoping to get a quiet meal. The two main characters along with their new buddy-straggler, George, are met with hostility and many insults around their figure. They decide to leave the diner leading a group of young women out to inspect their sweet rides. The older locals see motorcycles as a symbol of trouble, but the younger women audience sees them as a symbol of freedom, rebellion, and an alluring risk. Now the motorcycles may be a mix of all of those ideas but so is Route 66. It’s not just representative of freedom but of risk and cruelty. That’s why motorcycles are a crucial element along Route 66, as they act as a passageway for travelers looking to find a new reality of life.

According to the Route 66 Centennial Commission Act “ Route 66 has become a symbol of the heritage of travel and the legacy of seeking a better life shared by the people of the United States” (Public Law 116-256 116th Congress, Sec.2 paragraph 2?). This statement perfectly underlines the key ideas of the film *Easy Rider*. Billy and Wyatt met numerous people along Route 66 that showed them their specific way of life. The hippie commune feeds the two

travelers, teaching them a way of life followed by love and nurturing of the earth. Their drug exchange took place in Los Angeles, California at the beginning of the film. This exchange reflects the partnership's life choices leading to freedom found from the intake of illegal drugs. They spend many scenes smoking joints together by the campfire in the dead of night, hoping to broaden their spiritual horizons. This allows them to continue the pursuit of freedom down the road without just the act of driving.

The emergence of cars in history epitomizes post-war prosperity that paved the way for the 1960s counterculture movement to emerge. The 1960s counterculture movement focused on the rejection of mainstream values leading to new music, the use of psychedelics, communes, and long-lasting political impacts. In *Easy Rider* Billy and Wyatt are welcomed into the 1960s counterculture through the use of psychedelics to explore the idea of freedom on a spiritual level. As well as visiting a commune and the movie's soundtrack itself. The soundtrack is deliberately selected to showcase the feeling of residing on the open road. A good example song is "Born to Be Wild" by Steppenwolf made in 1968. The first verse is "Get your motor runnin', Head out on the highway, Looking for adventure" which sums up the film *Easy Rider* entirely. Two men looking for an adventure on the open road. Each aspect of the 1960s counterculture plays a specific role in the film acting as a guide for the younger generation of the time to follow when living through the new American car culture.

The article "'Not Very Attractive': How the Interstate Highway System Reconfigured Cinematic Space and Made the Rural Horrifying" states that "The Interstate Highway System, are carefully designed aesthetic experiences that, by virtue of their ubiquity, may determine cinematic representations of space" (Paul 5). Not only is the film *Easy Rider* a centering point

for aesthetic landscapes which shape American car culture today, but is by definition a



“cinematic representation of space”. Each still below showcases the beauty found on Route 66 and how this route’s aesthetic background has led Americans to want to travel from the West Coast to the East Coast just to see it.



Easy Rider is a profound commentary on American car culture and the quest for freedom. Through its depiction of the motorcycle as a symbol of individuality, the film reflects the complex relationship between the open road and the American identity. While it celebrates the allure of freedom, it also reveals the harsh realities of societal divisions and discrimination. *Easy Rider* continues to resonate as a cultural artifact, serving as a reminder of a pivotal moment in

American history where the journey toward self-discovery intersected with the evolving landscape of car culture.

Notes for Readers:

-I haven't incorporated one of my sources The Mother Road, as I am waiting for access

-I still want to expand my ideas and make sure I have a clear point of view

-still very rough

References

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