

The Aesthetics of Death, Youth, and the Road:
The Violent Road Film in Popular Culture

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Abstract

The "roadkill" films are part of a sub-genre of the more popular road film genre. Recently there has been a large number of extremely violent films featuring couples on the run. The reason behind the emergence and popularity of the "roadkill" genre can be understood through an aesthetic analysis. Chapter one examines the aesthetics and affective characteristics of the extreme violence within this sub-genre of film. This chapter refers to the works of Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, as well as René Girard. Chapter two explores the postmodern aesthetic of the roadside iconography by using authors such as Jean Baudrillard and Robert Venturi. The third chapter considers the aesthetics of contemporary youth as well as the soundtracks of four of the main "roadkill" films: *Kalifornia*, *Love and a .45*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *True Romance*. By considering the aesthetic elements of the "roadkill" film, one can understand the timely emergence of this genre.

Sommaire

Les films "roadkill" font parti de la catégorie de films mieux reconnu sous le nom "road film". Récemment, il y a un grand nombre de films extrêmement violents qui mettent en vedette de jeunes couples en fugue. L'émergence et la popularité des films "roadkill" peut être expiiqué par une étude esthétique. Le premier chapitre examine l'esthétique ainsi que les caractéristiques affectives de la violence extrême qui apparaissent dans cette catégorie de film. Le chapitre réfère aux ouvrages de Leo Bersani et Ulysse Dutoit, ainsi que René Girard. Le deuxième chapitre étudie l'esthétique postmoderne de l'iconographie de la route avec l'utilisation d'auteurs tels que Jean Baudrillard et Robert Venturi. Le troisième chapitre met en considération l'esthétique de la jeunesse contemporaine ainsi que les bandes sonores de quatre des principaux films "roadkill": *Kalifornia*, *Love and a .45*, *Natural Born Killers*, et *True Romance*. Ayant considéré les éléments esthétiques des films "roadkill", l'émergence de ce type de films est opportun.

**This research paper is dedicated
to my grandmother, Jean Gammage.**

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Introduction

The study of aesthetics and aesthetic value has traditionally been relegated to the realm of art and literature. According to *The Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, aesthetics is defined as “the philosophy of the beautiful, esp. in art” and “a set of principles of good taste and the appreciation of beauty” (1995). Thus, the study of violent film is not traditionally expected to fall within the realm of aesthetics. However, according to many theorists, aesthetics encompass more than beauty. In addition to the general composition of the image, aesthetics include affective qualities; in other words, qualities of feeling. In an essay discussing the place of aesthetics in cultural studies, Ian Hunter explains that a “work of art is essentially a device in a practice of self-problematization” and “its instituted incomprehensibility provides a convenient site for individuals to begin to relate themselves as subjects of aesthetic experience” (Hunter, 1992:351). Thus, affect occupies an important function when examining the aesthetics of film; especially when it comes to violent film.

The notion of the “roadkill” film is not an established genre, however there seems to be a long tradition of violent road films within cinematic history. The roadkill film is a new genre of spectacularly violent films which has characteristics similar to the traditional “buddy” road film and to the horror genre. There are relevant elements which reappear in several of the roadkill films. The “road” film primarily features a heterosexual couple,

with the exception of *Thelma and Louise* and *The Living End*, on the run from the law (*Breathless*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Kalifornia*, *True Romance*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Love and a .45*, *Sugarland Express*, *Badlands*, *Red Rock West*) or some other troublesome social relation (*Highway 61*, *Wild at Heart*, *Thelma and Louise*)(consult Annotated Filmography). In basic terms, the roadkill film follows Jean-Luc Godard's recipe of filmmaking: a girl, a car, and a gun.

The iconography within the film is the rich, yet at the same time barren landscape of the American (or Canadian in some cases: *Highway 61*, *Roadkill*) highway. Motels, gas stations, coffee shops, all figure prominently within the setting of the roadkill film. The aesthetics are kitschy in that the America which is presented to the viewer is glamorous as well as "trashy". In fact, the young couples within most of these films can be classified under the designation of "white trash", in other words white lower-middle class. The appeal of many of these films, such as *True Romance*, *Kalifornia*, and *Love and a .45*, is precisely that they are "B" movies (or use a "B" movie aesthetic), they are outside the mainstream, yet they tend to have a cult following. They paint an offensive picture of American culture as an anti-utopian wasteland, where if you want to survive you have to have a gun and not be afraid to use it. The portrayal of thieves, murderers and criminal minded protagonists is nothing new within film; however, the cinematic representation of these criminals is different within the majority of these road films. The

protagonists are simultaneously charming, likable, witty, compassionate, nihilistic, brutally violent, and emotionless.

Many of the contemporary road films borrow from *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*, and *The Wild Bunch*. The road film has been compared to the western, however the desert is replaced with highways, diners, and gas stations. Many of the films which were made during the late sixties and the early seventies laid the ground work for the road films to come. *The Wild Bunch*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*, *Weekend*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and *Badlands* all incorporate youth, sex, and violence with the character of the "anti-hero". The glorification of open spaces is prevalent, as well as cinematic effects such as slow motion and quick cutting (Mast, 1992:434). Many of the stylistic and iconographic elements of the roadkill films were laid during this period of cinematic production.

Genre films are often powerful instruments of ideology. The spectator relies on continuity of iconography and form in genre films in order to reinforce or transcend social ideologies. The apperception of aesthetics, themes, rituals, and ideology work as a system in order to provide a reference for the spectator. However, there has been a trend toward the dismissal of genre theory within film. Genre theory is said to explain more about the period in which it was made, than the film. Genre theory provides a mode of storytelling which reflects the time in which the story is told. Many argue that genre shows us no more than a reflection of how we, as a

society, view the world. However, this argument provides an excellent reason for keeping genre studies in circulation for the purpose of studying our own culture. In addition, the flexibility and transformation of many genres reinforces the genre argument. Genres are by nature mutable because films must connect with contemporary culture. Genres tend to “bleed” into one another without strict structures, thus creating a system of (self)referentiality. The roadkill aesthetic has borrowed from this system of self-referentiality by using and transforming the road genre iconography with subtle twists.

In taking an aesthetic approach to genre film, one must draw the relationships internal to the genre with reference to techniques and creative choices. In other words, we must ask what makes a certain film similar to others. A ritual approach to genre film allows one to compare similarities between films, thus suggesting a common language. Hence, one is able to recognize elements from our culture and our cultural moment. As mentioned above, these elements are aesthetic or affective in nature. Finally, an ideological approach enables one to identify the elements which uphold the “status quo” and encourage containment of the existing system. All of these approaches are intertwined with one another. Thus, while the aesthetic approach may be emphasized throughout this paper, I have attempted to be inclusive of other perspectives. The advantage of the aesthetic approach lies in its focus on the image, the visual. Those other elements, such as narrative,

are important; it seems to me that it is the image and the form which are distinctive within the roadkill film.

Genre theory has much to do with audience expectations, thus it is necessary to explore the notions surrounding youth, and youth culture. As will be explained in the third chapter, youth is primarily an ideological and cultural construct which has more to do with an aesthetic and affective state than with age itself. In other words, the roadkill films are not necessarily geared only toward a youthful audience, but toward those who seek pleasure through a youth aesthetic.

Through an analysis of several films (see Filmography) and the consultation of theoretical frameworks, such as those of René Girard, Jean Baudrillard, and Robert Venturi, the following study will focus on the aesthetic and affective qualities of the sub-genre of the roadkill film. Various sources are consulted and referred to, from academic references to elements in popular culture. The purpose of this study is to examine a recent sub-genre of film through an aesthetic and cultural approach in order to have a greater understanding of the aesthetic style of contemporary 1990's youth film and culture.

The first chapter entitled "The Aesthetics of Violence" examines the roadkill film as a sub-genre of the traditional road film featuring a new aesthetic of hyper-violence. The hyper-violence aesthetic creates an affective experience. An outlook of this aesthetic is developed by consulting a number

of theorists, including Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's work, *The Forms of Violence*. In addition, René Girard's theories of ritual killing, sacrificial crisis, and scapegoating are useful in developing a theory on the hyper-violent aesthetic of the roadkill films. Freud's theory of the uncanny contributes to the analysis of the affective qualities of the roadkill aesthetic. And finally, the spectator/killer identification through the use of point-of-view camera techniques will be examined as another factor contributing to the roadkill aesthetic.

The second chapter examines the aesthetics of the road. In other words, the basic iconography within the road genre is present within the roadkill film. For example, the car, the road, the diners, the gas stations, and the roadside architecture are icons within road genre as well as the sub-genre of the roadkill film. When the roadkill iconography is paired with extreme violence, a unique aesthetic is produced. This aesthetic is unique in that the affective result is one of uneasiness and the "uncanny". Thus, the roadkill film provides an "aesthetic twist" to the traditional road film. Jean Baudrillard's *America* is discussed in reference to the roadkill aesthetic, particularly referring to his theories of simulation, hyper-reality, and American culture. The postmodern architectural writing by Robert Venturi, *Learning From Las Vegas*, sheds light on the iconography of the roadkill film. The cultural significance of the car within American culture is examined

along side of the roadkill narrative. In addition, travel and the tourist gaze prove to be important factors within the roadkill aesthetic.

The third and final chapter is separated into two sections. The first section briefly examines the aesthetics of contemporary youth culture, and how these elements contribute to the roadkill aesthetic. Among the authors consulted are, Charles Acland in *Youth, Murder, Spectacle*, and Dick Hebdige. The second section focuses on four soundtracks and how they contribute to the aesthetic and affective qualities of the following roadkill films: *Natural Born Killers*, *Love and a .45*, *Kalifornia*, and *True Romance*. Claudia Gorbman's *Unheard Melodies* is instrumental in understanding the aesthetic and affective elements within the roadkill film. The roadkill soundtrack is an important cultural commodity which is firmly linked to youth culture. Pierre Bourdieu is consulted in order to establish the role of taste creation and authenticity. Additional theories which are discussed within the context of the roadkill soundtrack originate from Simon Frith and Lawrence Grossberg.

Chapter One: The Aesthetics of Violence

The Technology of Violence

Technological developments have allowed for stylistic and narrative changes in motion pictures. The term "special effects" is used to encompass the "techniques employed during motion-picture production to enhance reality, to create illusions of action or simulate events too difficult to film for reasons of safety, convenience or cost" (Clark, 1966:5). For clarification, it is important to distinguish between "technology" and "techniques". Technology refers to the apparatus itself, whereas technique concerns the way in which one utilizes that apparatus in order to create an effect. Since, the development of film technologies and techniques has a long and debated history, much of what will be discussed is purely for introductory purposes. Motion picture violence is directly tied to the expansion of film technologies and techniques. Consequently, the background of certain developments will expand our conception of violent film.

Violence has always existed in film; however, the need for more graphic violence in film grew alongside changes in genres and audience expectations. As audiences anticipated realism and the fantastic in motion pictures, the individuals creating these special effects were forced to bring forth new creations. An example of the genres which demanded visual effects was the post-Depression gangster film of the thirties. A decade later, "in the 1940s, depictions of violence, terrorism, and murder became more

graphic, as gangsters, policemen, and detectives (many now with weapon fetishes) became more violent" (Surette, 1992:29). Bold special effects were developed and practiced throughout these films, such as the use of "sharpshooters, armed with rifles, to shoot at rocks or other buildings near actors, allowing the cameras to photograph the strike of the bullets" (Clark, 1966:24). The development of various technologies and techniques, including bullet impacts, holes, and hits, as well as the "flack burst gun", influenced the use of firearms within motion pictures (Clark, 1966:173).

An essential yet overlooked technical development associated with violent film is the use of artificial blood. In the age of black-and-white film, one of the typical alternatives was the use of chocolate syrup (Clark, 1966:16). However, with the development of colour film stock, artificial blood was necessary in order to create a realistic and shocking visual for the audience. The formulas of artificial blood are either applied to the actor prior to the take, or a thin plastic bag or condom called a blood sack is attached to the body to be broken by a bullet hit or by the actor (Clark, 1966:128). A bullet hit to the center portion of the sack allows for the blood to flow out freely once the sack is ruptured (Clark, 1966:170). The development of the blood sack allowed for better quality editing and more realistic violence. Gangster, war, and detective films used these innovations in order to heighten the filmic experience for the audience. The use of graphic violence became a more regular practice within film due to a relaxation of the censorship

standards in the 1960s. Bloody violence escalated within the late 1960s with the technological development of the spurting blood capsule. According to some theorists, this is possibly due to audience fascination with the nightly news broadcasts of the Vietnam War (Paul, 1994:30). It is crucial to remember that the Vietnam War was the first war to be broadcast directly into the living rooms of North Americans.

The use of special effects in film is not only a necessity but it also raises the question of style. "The criteria placed on the selection of the effects, and the manner in which they are employed, then becomes a matter of taste" (Clark, 1966:218). Technology and techniques allow and even encourage the spectator to gaze at horrific images of death and suffering. These technological developments have greatly influenced the visual representation of violence in film. Correspondingly, the desire for new techniques of visual expression induces technological developments. In writings about the history of technology and techniques in film, this opposition points to significantly different historical, social, and economic factors in that "each justifies the other in a hermetic circularity" (Branigan, 1985:126). Thus, in lieu of promoting a "split between history and aesthetics", one must consider the development of film technology as an influencing and influenceable element within the formation of violent film aesthetics (Branigan, 1985:125). The stylistic use of these technologies encourages the exploration of the aesthetic qualities of extreme violence in film.

A Violent Debate

The presence of violence within cultural communication has existed since humans have attempted to communicate through drawings in caves. The debate about violence has paralleled the growth and development of visual media, notably film and television

In recent decades, numerous governments and private institutions have poured millions of dollars into the research and production of countless publications, studies, and reports. The general objective of these investigations was to prove “scientifically” and “empirically” that media violence has an “effect” on the individuals who watch it. The methods of measuring the “effects” of media violence vary from one test to another. Media effects research includes practices such as counting violent acts within a specific time frame, aggression research conducted with groups of children, use of the stimulus-response model, as well as the psychological analysis of individual aggression and violence.

According to the UNESCO publication “Violence and Terror in the Mass Media”, the research apparently demonstrates that “consistent exposure to stories and scenes of violence and terror can mobilize aggressive tendencies, desensitize some and isolate others, intimidate many and trigger violent action in the few” (Gerbner, 1988:9). However, the following sentence reads: “But it is also clear that media inspired mayhem does not pose a threat to modern societies” (Gerbner, 1988:9). One of the chief problems with media

effects research is that in reality, these studies have been inconclusive. In addition, the language which is used surrounding the debate on media violence is questionable. For example, the UNESCO quote above uses the wording "consistent exposure". "Consistent exposure" is not defined and suggests that the viewing of violent films has a cumulative effect.

The majority, if not all, of these "effects" studies are problematic. This is not to deny some individuals have performed "copycat" crimes based on violent films. "Copycat" crimes are generally so well publicized, that several infamous examples can be cited. The case of John Hinckley, Jr.'s assassination attempt on President Reagan is perhaps the most famous. Hinckley was said to have repeatedly watched the film *Taxi Driver*, and subsequently emulated the film. The media, especially Hollywood film, were accused of "creating a tolerant atmosphere for violence" and "providing criminal role models and techniques" (Surette, 1992:139). In addition, there were reports of "murders and the formation of delinquent gangs" following the showing of *A Clockwork Orange* in England (Surette, 1992:130). The *Montreal Gazette* featured an article entitled "Pulp Fiction Becomes Fact" which reported a restaurant holdup reminiscent of the opening scene in Quentin Tarantino's film, *Pulp Fiction* (1994) (Fitterman, 1995:A3). And recently, the author John Grisham is taking director Oliver Stone to court. Grisham claims that Stone should be held legally accountable for several murders inspired by his "roadkill film", *Natural Born Killers*. A friend of

Grisham's was shot by a young couple who apparently had "hit the road, juiced up on 17 tabs of LSD and multiple video viewings" of *Natural Born Killers* (Freedland, 1996:85). However, there is no definitive evidence supporting the suggestion that media violence increases already existing aggressive and criminal tendencies.

The position of many scholars is that "there simply isn't a 'thing' called 'violence in the media' that either could or couldn't 'cause' social violence" (Barker, 1995:10). The general argument against the media effects research maintains that it is ridiculous that one can abstract violence "from the hugely different contexts of meaning and use in which it occurs - any more than you can 'smiling', 'buying a cup of coffee' or 'the use of fast editing'" (Barker, 1995:10). Consequently, the issue of media violence is less straightforward and more complex than previously thought.

Studies of media content and its effects are of secondary interest to those who research the *affective* qualities of violent film. The aesthetics of hyper-violent films have a common yet complex emotional thread which can be traced in the sub-genre of the roadkill film. The continued popularity of violent films prompts the question "Why do we enjoy these violent films so much?". The answer may be similar to the question "Why do many of us slow down to scrutinize a car accident?". Just as these films do not solely exhibit "killing for killing's sake", the study of the aesthetics of a film is not necessarily "art for art's sake". In other words, roadkill films have aesthetic

value as well as social purpose. Thus, the remainder of this chapter will explore the aesthetic and social qualities of hyper-violence in film, notably the roadkill film.

Towards a Theory of a Violent Aesthetic

The appeal of cinema lies in the fear of death.

- Jim Morrison,
*The Only Published
Poetry of Jim Morrison,*
1969.

Spectacular violence has existed in film for a long time. In fact, as early as 1893, the Edison company created a one-and-a-half-minute film for Kinetoscope viewing called *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (French, 1968:59). Films such as *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), *Spartacus* (1960), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Straw Dogs* (1971), *The Godfather* (1972), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), and a host of horror films all contain scenes or moments of spectacular violence. Within their socio-political context, these films are easily considered extremely violent and bloody.

Recent films, such as *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1990), *Reservoir Dogs* (1991), *Romeo is Bleeding* (1994), *The Bad Lieutenant* (1992), *Man Bites Dog* (1992), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Killing Zoe* (199), and a host of John Woo films, have transformed our definition of hyper-violence. The violence in these films may seem no

different than violence from those of past decades; however, a definite evolution can be demonstrated. The difference is within the aesthetic of the films, as well as their ties in authorship and genre transformation. Many critics would contest any transformation of film violence into something bloodier. However, some critics have called the "new Hollywood" "pulp" (obviously referring to *Pulp Fiction*) in that it is "bone-shattering, skin-splitting, blood-spurting [...] cinema of viscera" (Dargis, 1994:6). It is qualified as "lurid, wild, sensational, cheap" (Dargis, 1994:6) and "hyperbolically visceral and self-conscious" (Taubin, 1992:3). The dark humor of *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Seven* and even of the black teen comedy *Heathers* (1989) resonates within cinema as films continue in the 1990's.

Some film critics, social commentators, columnists, and even media effects researchers consider the spectatorship of the hyper-violent film as a sinfully offensive type of entertainment. Those groups and individuals who are diligently monitoring films and other products of popular culture have roots in various political affiliations, notably the so-called extreme right wing politics of the "new conservatives". Commentary scorning any viewer who would find such obscenity appealing produces feelings of guilt and shame for the interested spectator. What kind of person would you be if you enjoyed the sanguineous visuals of a young man's head being blown off in the back seat of a car? Or take pleasure from the murder of a rapist on the

hood of his own pick-up truck? Or revel in the hail of bullets from a senseless rampage?

Perhaps the answer to that question is: an ordinary human being who exists within our visually charged society. The violent imagery may be disturbing and socially corrupt, yet it provides a strange kind of pleasure. Filmic violence seems to fulfill affective needs and dispositions latent in all ordinary individuals.

The media mayhem surrounding *Natural Born Killers* prompted many critics to chastise the fans of the highly violent film. One author pointed to a review by the "Sun" which characterized *Natural Born Killers* as "'clever' for the way it glorified violence *under the guise* of social comment" (Barker, 1995:13). Subsequently, the author asks, "If you go and see the film, and can't see behind the guise, what kind of person are you?" (Barker, 1995:13). As noted above, the public outcry and moral panic surrounding film has fostered a widespread assumption that violent imagery has a causal relationship with aggressive and violent behavior. The obvious result of these allegations is a feeling of guilt and perplexity on the part of violent film spectators.

But violent films remain very popular, and fans continue to line-up in order to experience the latest one. This suggests that there is much more to these films, on the social, public, aesthetic and affective levels, than a depraved regression from image to behavior, from vicarious pleasure to

imitative crime. Noel Carroll, in his work entitled *The Philosophy of Horror*, conceives the attraction as rooted in the "paradox of horror" (Carroll, 1990:160). He writes, "the paradox of horror is an instance of a larger problem, viz., that of explaining the way in which the artistic presentation of normally aversive events and objects can give rise to pleasure or can compel our interests" (Carroll, 1990:161). Carroll attempts to understand the coexisting reactions of repulsion and fascination one has with violent imagery and violent themes. There are several ways in which one can explore our pleasurable relationship with violent film. In the following sections, the roadkill film will serve as the "sub-genre" in order to explore our fascination with cinematic violence.

Violence in Assyrian Art

*Once that you've decided on a killing
First you make a stone of your heart
And if you find that your hands are still willing
You can turn a murder into art*

- The Police, *Murder By Numbers*.

*But it's not a hunt, it's a dance. And sometimes they
turn off the lights in this ballroom.
But we'll dance anyway, you and I. Even in the dark.
Especially in the dark.
May I have the pleasure?*

- Stephen King,
Danse Macabre,
1983.

In *The Forms of Violence: Narrative in Assyrian Art and Modern Culture*, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit explores the problem of violence in relation to

narrative structure. The people of the ancient country of Assyria, which is now northern Iraq, have left behind sculptures which provide much insight into our relationship with violence. The authors propose that "the anti-violent tradition of Western humanism has defined violence in ways which may actually have promoted an unintended fascination with violence" (Bersani et al., 1985:V). Such ways of defining violence resemble the negative discourses provided by "effects" researchers surrounding violence in the media.

The authors link this to the Western tradition's "tendency to narrativize human experience as one of its principal strategies for making sense of experience" (Bersani et al., 1985:V). Bersani and Dutoit's study is offered as an attempt to theorize an alternate understanding of narrativity and violence by focusing on understanding, perception, and desire in art and history (Bersani et al., 1985:V). They privilege Assyrian sculptures as an aesthetic and cultural realization which evokes a fascinating, yet alien and taboo dimension of cultural experience. One might almost consider the roadkill film, or the violent film in general, as having similar allegorical significance.

Within cinema, "spectacular violence has become the sign of a crisis of vision, seducing the spectator into a belief in the unrepresentable - the death of an actor" (Russell, 1993:175). The "unrepresentable" is understood through its placement within a narrative structure. The violence is

understood as a climactic event within the storyline. The construction is achieved through the use of quick edits, privileging music over dialogue, slow motion, long takes of bloody images, etc... The highly violent scene in *True Romance* where Clarence murders Alabama's pimp by shooting him in the groin is set up in typical narrative fashion. Clarence is told by his friend and advisor, an apparition of Elvis, that he should kill Drexil in order to be confident that he will never hurt Alabama again. As Bersani and Dutoit explain:

Violence is thus reduced to the level of a plot; it can be isolated, understood, perhaps mastered and eliminated. And having been conditioned to think of violence within narrative frameworks, we expect this mastery [of the narrative] to take place as a result of the pacifying power of such narrative conventions as beginnings, explanatory middles, and climactic endings (Bersani et al., 1985:51).

In other words, narrative prioritizes and hierarchizes specific moments, especially violent moments. While violence may not assist in solving the narrative, it is a climactic element which the narrative effectively forms and controls. Thus, one can comprehend the spectator's tendency to privilege these moments. This manner of isolating and sequestering the violent events as significant within the narrative is, according to Bersani and Dutoit, a way of producing "the ideal conditions for a mimetic relation to violence" (Bersani et al., 1985:52). At this point, the authors turn to Freud in order to

elaborate a theory of mimetic and nonmimetic desire as it relates to narrative violence.

Bersani and Dutoit explore Freud's notions of "transformations in the objects and aims of instincts" through sadism and masochism in his 1915 work "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" (Bersani et al., 1985:31). Sexually explicit and/or violent films have often shared similar popular reactions within film. Both violence and sex are taboo elements to view as a spectator. The two situations have negative connotations which are connected since they both produce similar affective and mimetic responses. They are similar in nature since they are both extreme responses. Some film critics consider that within the neo-violent Hollywood film "the torch has been passed from sex to violence", and "to replace sex, of course, violence has to provide a cathartic release" (Rich, 1992:5). However, violence is not a *replacement* for sex within film because the two have highly different visual (affection versus death) and narrative (happiness versus moroseness) results. Would the spectators and fans of the hyper-violent film necessarily take pleasure from a highly sex laden film for the same reasons?

Rather, sex and violence are presented as fantasy which can be understood as "the imaginary expression and fulfillment of a desire" (Bersani et al., 1985:34). Desire can be defined as "a pleasurable movement toward an absent (and, in nonfetishistic theory of desire, unlocatable) source of satisfaction" (Bersani et al., 1985:105). The cinema has always been referred

to as a realm through which one can fulfill mimetic and affective desires. The cinema is a form of escape, thus a "safe" realm to experience any mimetic desires of violence. Thus, Bersani and Dutoit conclude that due to our capacity to view representations empathetically we should "take into account the possibility that a mimetic relation to violence necessarily includes a sexually induced fascination with violence" (Bersani et al., 1985:38). Mimetic desires are fulfilled through the act of spectatorship. In other words, we as spectators consume film from a certain point-of-view in order to affectively experience the fantasies presented to us on screen. The fantasy is experiencing violence through the point-of-view of someone else (depending on the camera position), thus fulfilling mimetic desires. The consumption and reactions of fantasies, which are often violent and/or sexual in nature, are determined by one's own situation. Thus, the experience of extreme violence within film cannot be isolated from the narrative or from an individual's situation. This relationship will be further explored in the section dealing with point-of-view within the film narrative.

When considering an individual spectator's own situation, then one can consider allowing the "effects" research to come into play. For example, the above-mentioned case of John Hinckley, Jr.'s attempted assassination of President Reagan was said to be a copycat of the assassination attempt in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. However, as mentioned above, such cases are statistically rare and one can assume the individual had a violent

"disposition" prior to watching the film. Certain films are labeled by theorists as "dangerous", and as a result, *"if anyone DID go out and shoot up their parents or a diner as a result, it was the discourses that provoked such acts, not the film, because it was the discourses that required this 'reading' of the film"* (Barker, 1995:13). The possible discourses requiring a violent reaction include the personal disposition of the individual and society. If such is the case, the media perpetuate much of the discourse about other forms of media. The circularity continues precisely because the discourses surrounding violence, such as the debates over "effects" research, are very much a part of our social and cultural relationships.

Bersani and Dutoit continue their study of violence within Assyrian art by observing the lines and their movement within the sculptures. The play between the straight and curved lines allow the Assyrians "to depict an astonishingly tender violence" (Bersani et al., 1985:80). One is presented with "the hypnotic rhythms of sameness in motion", and the authors refer to the repetitive structure of the camera movements in *Triumph of the Will* (Bersani et al., 1985:86). Such references speak poetically and sensually of the violent imagery of the hunting and killing of animals by the Assyrians. Similar aesthetic qualities can be suggested of the hyper-violent scenes within the roadkill film. Thus, there is a privileging of the violent moment within the narrative which is aligned with the Western tradition.

Yet at the same time, there is a formalistic aestheticization which is similar to the Assyrian art. Indeed, it could be argued that the violent aesthetic of the roadkill genre is so pervasive and generalized throughout the narrative structure of films like *Natural Born Killers* and *True Romance* that the narrative "framing" of violence as a privileged moment - "a certain type of eruption against a background of generally non-violent human experience" - is at least partially deconstructed or undermined even as it is being raised aesthetically to the hyperrealistic levels of intensity (Bersani et al, 1985:47). In this way, we get something analogous to the subversive effect Bersani and Dutoit find in Assyrian sculpture, that is, a tendency "to problematize the very notion of violence, to make it difficult for us to think of violence as a subject unique in itself, a subject easily identifiable and easily isolated [from ourselves]" (Bersani et al, 1985:47).

An earlier film which fits the roadkill genre is *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). In the final sequence, Bonnie and Clyde are deceived into a set-up which leads to their slaughter. The young couple are struck by bullet after bullet, creating a repetition of movement and action. The endless firing and bloodshed leads the viewer into an overwhelming sense of excess. The sequence features "Bonnie's body writhing in slow motion as it is penetrated bullet after bullet" which is described as "a final and terrible orgy of violence" (Cawelti, 1973:83). At this point, the manner in which the Assyrians regard violence differs from the violent scenes within many of the

roadkill films. According to Bersani and Dutoit, "the Assyrians refuse to melodramatize" and "violent *spectacle* never maintains a privileged position" (Bersani et al., 1985:56,52). However, the images in *Bonnie and Clyde* do not promote a negative affective experience. On the contrary, the violence in the film can be described as smooth movement of editing and imagery which produces the final ambush into a balletic spectacle. Stephen King describes the horror genre similarly in his non-fiction work *Danse Macabre*, by stating that "...the work of horror really is a dance - a moving rhythmic search. And what it's looking for is the place where you, the viewer or the reader, live at your most primal level" (King, 1983:4).

Bersani and Dutoit compare the movement in the Assyrian sculpture with the movement of dance. The authors write that the momentary stop in ballet is "a *divertissement*: it diverts us from the story, which is suspended while the dancers display their virtuosity" (Bersani et al., 1985:102). The periods when the roadkill film features violence is not unlike that of the moment of *divertissement* in ballet. The spectator is compelled to view Bonnie and Clyde, Mickey and Mallory (*Natural Born Killers*), or Starlene and Watty (*Love and a .45*) as mythic figures who display the fine art of killing in a stylish and seductive manner.

At the moment of *divertissement* when the violence is at a heightened stage, there is a process of identification which helps one to understand the spectator's positioning. The narrative is in a way put on hold in order to

connect the spectator with the killers. One's relationship to the on-screen violence is experienced through the guiltless crusade of the young killers. As a spectator, one identifies with the actions and pursuits of the killers and not those of the victim. It is the killers who are displayed as skillful and their repetitive violent acts are seductively hypnotic. For example, critics have suggested "that since Mickey and Mallory operate without remorse, the guilt of *NBK* is displaced, beyond the parameters of the movie screen, onto the audience" (Smith, 1994:39). The guilt is set aside, and thus the audience possibly experiences pleasure through this temporary relief of guilt. Such an affective result from the on-screen violence leads one to consider that this guilt, or relief of guilt, is a unique pleasure for the spectator. As Bersani and Dutoit point out, "the pleasure of following a narrative lies less in the story being told than in the security of being passively carried along by an unfolding order" (Bersani et al., 1985:87). The unfolding order is from a dangerous and reckless point-of-view, thus fulfilling a fantasy of the unthinkable - ruthless killing. An example of this is in the film *True Romance*.

A consequential sequence in *True Romance* exhibits the excessive nature of violence within the roadkill film. The female protagonist, Alabama, is "greeted" by a "hit-man" in her hotel room. The man begins to beat Alabama, ordering her to reveal the location of his boss' cocaine. Alabama is kicked, slapped, punched, and threatened with a knife. However, she repeatedly refuses to give any information and deliriously attempts to fight

back. Her efforts are futile yet impressive considering she is about to drop from pain and exhaustion. She finally makes some progress and impales a cork-screw into the foot of her assailant. This enrages him and he subsequently shoves her through the glass shower door. With unbelievable effort, she gets up and manages to “torch” him through the ingenious (and convenient) combination of hair spray and a lighter. This incapacitates him and she starts to shoot him repeatedly. When the bullets run out, she reaches for the cork-screw and savagely stabs the dead body while screaming at the top of her lungs. This sequence is arguably one of the most disturbing and seemingly never-ending scenes of violent assault and death in the genre. The mayhem and blood captivates the viewer, while at the same time one is disturbed by Alabama’s raving laughter as she refuses to provide information. This repetitive display of violence disrupts our expectations of on-screen violence as well as the traditional behavior of the “female as victim”. In essence, she seemed to have ultimately *enjoyed*, and was even *thrilled* to kill violently and brutally. The spectator identifies with Alabama and thus encourages this barbarous attack chiefly for two reasons: first, due to Alabama’s victimization and second for the temporary guiltless pleasure of a moment of so-called *divertissement*. Before discussing this phenomenon of spectator identification further, we will briefly examine René Girard’s theory of ritual killing and Freud’s notion of “the uncanny”.

Ritual Killing

*What did not make this world a good place to live in
was that nobody cared about me for what I could do.
They hated me because of the way I looked, and because
I was poor and had to live in a goddamn shack...*

- Charles Starkweather

*I saw her standin on her front lawn just twirlin' her baton
Me and her went for a ride sir and ten innocent people died*

*From the town of Lincoln, Nebraska with a
sawed off .410 on my lap
Through the badlands of Wyoming I killed
everything in my path*

*I can't say that I'm sorry for the things that we done
At least for a little while sir me and her we had some fun*
- Bruce Springsteen, *Nebraska*.

In order to understand the paradox of violence in these films, critics have turned to René Girard's theory of ritual killing. Girard argues that ritual sacrifice is used as a preventative measure against violence in primitive societies. Sacrifice is performed in order to restore harmony to the community and it "prevents the spread of violence by keeping vengeance in check" (Girard, 1977:18). Girard defines "the sacrificial crisis" as a problem with the cultural order which regulates and establishes "differences" among individuals (Girard, 1977:49). In the sacrificial crisis, the ritual has failed its objective of organizing violence within society. In contrast to Girard's small scale tribal societies, there is no contemporary way of organizing violence within society. Due to the heterogeneous nature of contemporary culture, there is no uniform agreement on what is considered "acceptable" or

"admissible" violence. Perhaps, it is this lack of consensus which allows room for the pleasure of violent imagery.

Girard also points out that "in the midst of a sacrificial crisis there is no point in attaching desire to any one object, no matter how attractive, for desire is wholly directed toward violence itself" (Girard, 1977:145). Hollywood cinema has been influenced by this concept of a crisis which turns inevitably into a violent situation. The mimetic and reciprocal violence which fuels the American myth of "regeneration through violence" is a popular theme in American film (Russell, 1993:183). Sacrificial violence can be considered an act of stripping away the everyday. According to Georges Bataille: "[Sacrificial] killing is the only exhibition of a deep meaning" (Bataille, 1989:49). Thus, Hollywood has captured this meaningful moment of crisis and displayed it for audience consumption.

In order to fully understand sacrificial violence, one must define the various meanings behind these violent acts. There are many different kinds of killing, such as killing for revenge, redemption, or meaningless killing. However, the killing within the roadkill film appears to relate primarily to killing for redemptive reasons and meaningless killing. Killing out of revenge is an act of retaliation which is directed at a particular individual for specific reasons. The roadkill couples do not focus on any victims in particular, thus the killing has very little revengeful qualities. Killing out of redemption is an act which seeks to recover social justice through destructive

means. The redeeming element within redemptive killing is the "purification" of society through the death of an individual. It will be explained further on that the roadkill couples do exhibit redemptive qualities due to social injustices, such as abusive families, etc. ... Finally, meaningless killing is a random act of violence. The roadkill couples commit extremely violent acts which are void of meaning or direction. Meaningless killing is neither driven nor planned, as revengeful or redemptive acts of violence are. Thus, the roadkill couples would be classified as mass murderers and not serial killers. Serial killers plan their travel and actions. For example, in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1990), Henry points out to his partner, Otis, "the most important thing is to keep moving, that way they might never catch you". Henry and Otis stalk and kill their victims, while the roadkill couples kill randomly and without warning.

The meaningless violence within the roadkill film is often partly committed out of redemption, though frequently this is perceived as retribution for social and political injustices. The roadkill films depict moments of sacrificial crisis which lead to retributive acts. The killing in the roadkill film may seem to be revengeful killing on the surface. However, each of the violent acts were done to "purify" society. The killing is redemptive, even though it is committed in an almost unconscious manner. For example, Kit and Holly in *Badlands* (1974) kill Holly's abusive father; similarly in *Natural Born Killers* (1994), Mickey and Mallory kill Mallory's

mother and sexually abusive father; Pauline shoots her therapist, Dr. Peterson, to seek redemption for her mother's murder in *Alligator Eyes* (1991); in *True Romance* (1993), Clarence pursues redemption on Alabama's pimp; and in *Guncrazy* (1993), Anita kills her rapist step-father. After many of these initial killings, more acts of violence are committed in the name of recovering social injustice. The acts of violence are forms of retribution arising from the killer's socio-political position within society. The initially passive victim (Anita), turns into an active perpetrator. The victims are often innocent individuals who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. This randomness and unconscious choice are characteristics which figure within Girard's conception of the "scapegoat".

The idea of the "scapegoat" has many dimensions within Girard's study. His most useful definition, for the purposes of this paper, is the "*psychosocial meaning*" which refers to the "victim or victims of unjust violence or discrimination" who are blamed for the sins of others as well as for "tensions, conflicts, and difficulties of all kinds" (Girard, 1987:74). While the murderous mayhem of the roadkill couples may not be considered a textbook case of Girard's theory of scapegoating, they certainly have unconscious redemptive objectives which have been displaced onto random victims.

Girard's theory of scapegoating can be applied to contemporary Western society if one observes the actions of mass murderers. Elliot

Leyton's book *Hunting Humans* profiles six multiple murderers of the past few decades. Nineteen-year-old Charles Starkweather went on a killing spree in 1958 with his fourteen-year-old girlfriend, Caril Fugate. The body count ascended to eleven victims who were innocent individuals of the greater Lincoln, Nebraska area. Without providing the entire case study, it was found that Starkweather went through an impoverished childhood and became enraged due to his "degrading social position as a garbageman" (Leyton, 1995:220). Thus he decided that "a brief but spectacular *vendetta* offered more to his spirit than an eternity of submission" (Leyton, 1995:220). Obviously, there occurred a sacrificial crisis whereby Starkweather had a problem with his placement in the cultural order. There was a crisis in the regulation and establishment of Starkweather's "difference" within the social order, and the result was violence. The violence figures as "reciprocal killing" which is "an infectious crisis of mimesis" (Russell, 1993:183). Revenge is one of the dominant themes of violent imagery according to Irving Schneider, along with humiliation and powerlessness (Schneider, 1987:146). Director Terrance Malick transformed the story of this killer couple into a Hollywood film called *Badlands* (1974). Subsequently, Oliver Stone was inspired by Malick's film and hence created the highly debated film *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

The never-ending body count hints at a ritualization of violence within the roadkill films. The repetition of the killing leads one to question why the

spectator is continually expecting and wanting more. When one asks the question why people ritually kill, the answer is desire. According to Girard's theory, "ritual killing is the necessary, public justification and display of the many transformations involved in the psychosocial dynamics of a dark desire" (Mack, 1987:69). The roadkill film displays a dark desire which incites an "uncanny" affective response from the spectator. At this point one must diverge momentarily from Girard in order to understand the notion of "the uncanny".

The Roadkill Aesthetic and the "Uncanny"

Freud states that aesthetics is "not merely a theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling" (Freud, 1919:219). Thus, as described throughout this chapter, the aesthetics of film include an affective element. The feeling of the uncanny is a difficult concept to describe. Freud points out that "many languages are without a word for this particular shade of what is frightening" (Freud, 1919:221).

The notion of the uncanny is strongly linked to the perverse violence executed by the serial killing couple, Mickey and Mallory Knox in *Natural Born Killers*. The sequence in question is a flashback to when the couple first met. The outcome is a perverse pastiche of situation comedy called *I Love Mallory*. The loud and repetitive laugh track coupled with the exceptionally tacky interior decorating leaves the audience unable to decide whether

laughter or disgust is in order. In order to recognize an element as being "uncanny", "something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar", thus distinguishing from what is simply frightening (Freud, 1919:221).

The "uncanny" is described as "that which makes you feel uneasy in the world of your normal experience" (Arnzen, 1994:178). In other words, the aesthetic quality of the film creates a strong sense of nostalgia while at the same time a sense of estrangement. Freud states that: "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud, 1919:220). The sit-com sequence is very familiar to the majority of North Americans; however the perverted and "fantastic" version creates a shift in the positioning of the viewer. Thus, the viewer is displaced and dislocated from their viewing position.

An additional concept which provides complementary analysis to Freud's notion of "the uncanny" is Fredric Jameson's concept of "blank parody". According to Jameson, "pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor" (Jameson, 1983:114). The sequence captivates the audience and provides a perverse pleasure in the combination of warped comedy and the drowning of Mallory's father by the couple. In order to create an even more unsettling atmosphere, Stone introduces the taboo subject of incest to the scenario of the sit-com. The sequence was created to be "a chilling, ironic, and highly effective critique of television's clichéd vision of the 'happy nuclear family'" (Pizzello, 1994:45). The sequence plays

with our knowledge and expectations of television genre, therefore extending the cultural production based on prior experience. The film uses a cultural vocabulary, the "citations are seemingly socially de-historicized and culturally de-contextualised except their place in the narrative gives them a new history and a new context, and the *bricolage* of such quotations creates new meaning" (Arroyo, 1994:13). As Baudrillard comments, with reference to the idea of simulation in a highly mediated cultural environment, "events no longer have any meaning: not because they are insignificant in themselves, but because they have been preceded by models with which their own process can only coincide" (Baudrillard, 1987:21).

This is the notion of recycling images and aesthetics from the past in order to create an aesthetic of the present. By adding violence to this form of pastiche, the image becomes unsettling and disturbing. The spectator point-of-view is a significant element which comes into play. The point-of-view plays the role of positioning the spectator to view a simulation (the hyper-violence on film being more "real" than the "real") of violent imagery which evokes the feeling of the uncanny.

Point-of-View: Killer Identification

You have to remember that Psycho is a film made with quite a sense of amusement on my part. To me it's a fun picture. The process through which we take the audience, you see, is rather like taking them through the haunted house at the fairground or the roller-coaster, you know.

- Alfred Hitchcock

The study of the camera apparatus within film is an extensive endeavor. Thus the following discussion is not intended to be exhaustive, but merely to enhance the understanding of the violent aesthetic within film. Initially, one must accept the simplified and fundamental notion that the camera point-of-view is equivalent to audience identification. Of course there are variations to this basic equation. However, this manner of identification is the most significant for the purposes of this paper. Since identification is of fundamental importance within the horror genre, there is an abundance of theoretical writings on this subject.

Much of the theoretical literature on "identification" follows Christian Metz's theory of "primary identification (with the camera, wherever it may be and whatever it may be up to) and secondary identification (with the character of empathetic choice)" (Clover, 1992:8). Primary identification has various degrees of point-of-view. On the one hand, there is identification which does not efface the existence of the camera. In other words, the camera is "the machine between us and it" (Clover, 1992:185). On the other hand, a direct identification with the killer is achieved without reference to the camera. This technique is often used in the horror genre. For example, the opening sequence of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) enables the audience to "adopt the vision of an entity that stalks a house" (Clover, 1992:185). In other words, "we are invited to look not through a murderous camera, but with our own murderous eyes" (Clover, 1992:186). Clover points out that this

device, called the subjective camera, is a widely imitated and parodied cliché of modern horror (Clover, 1992:186).

The roadkill films adopt several points-of-view throughout the narrative. Identification techniques are used in order to situate the spectator in a position which connects him/her with the murderous couple. There are several obvious indicators which guide the audience toward one direction of identification and not another. For example, the character development is that of the young couple, their actions are what propel the narrative, and any other characters have a "relationship" or connection with the couple in question. Since the couple is the catalyst of the narrative, the camera hovers over their actions and reactions.

In order to achieve a connection with the killer couple, the camera entertains various positions. To a large extent, the point-of-view of the films is from an omniscient position. In other words, the camera entertains the positions of characters and of an absent "observer". These omniscient positions are sometimes referred to as the "absent one" or a transcendental look. In psychoanalytic film theory, pleasure is achieved by reducing ourselves to the look of the "absent one". Desire, as defined earlier, is "a pleasurable movement toward an absent (and, in a nonfetishistic theory of desire, unlocatable) source of satisfaction" (Bersani et al., 1985:105). Thus, the omniscient camera position *attempts* to fulfill that desire. However, desire is by definition an incomplete pleasure which stimulates the "productive

restlessness of fantasies always on the move" (Bersani et al., 1973:105). The point-of-view is "god-like" in that it is mobile and it is able to see things other characters are not able to see, such as extreme close-ups, long shots, and zooms. Thus, the point-of-view does not occupy a constant position within the roadkill film. It alternates between identification with the camera as the intermediary, the subjective camera, or the omniscient camera. However, the audience identification always falls back in orbit of the murderous couple.

The opening sequences of these films determine the manner in which the spectator identifies with the protagonists. The process of character identification is well constructed within the first sequence of *Love and a .45*. The film begins with the male protagonist, Watty, entering a convenience store in order to rob it. Watty's face is covered with a ski mask throughout the entire sequence, so the audience is not initially presented with the character's face. The character identification begins by switching from an omniscient camera to the point-of-view of the young clerk reading "Girls and Guns" magazine. The point-of-view switches momentarily when the masked man points a gun at the clerk's head. While the camera is not a subjective camera, the identification is not unlike the horror films which feature a stalker.

As the sequence continues, the clerk's point-of-view enables the spectator to connect and identify with the armed robber. As Watty gives the clerk amicable advice on the fine art of convenience store robbing, the

audience identifies comfortably with the male protagonist. The identification is completed with a following sequence of Watty driving away from a successful heist. During this second sequence, the audience is presented with Watty's unmasked face and his own personal voice-over. At this moment of the narrative, the audience is presented Watty's tendency to philosophize his own life.

Thus, as mentioned above, there is no constant camera point-of-view within the roadkill film. However, the audience is connected to the character's "personalities" as well as their actions. To understand the various points-of-view within *Natural Born Killers* would be an enormous task due to the collage-like quality of the film. Various film stocks, such as color and black & white 35mm, black & white 16mm, Super 8, Hi8 and Beta, are used in order to create an overwhelming cinematic visual as well as to dislocate the viewer from a comfortable position (Pizzello, 1994:37). Similarly to *Love and a .45*, the opening sequence of *Natural Born Killers* establishes identification with Mickey and Mallory.

The infamous opening sequence takes place in a roadside diner where Mickey and Mallory have stopped for food and "fun". As Mickey inquires about the key lime pie from the waitress, we are presented with a black & white repetition of her saying "It's an acquired taste". Similarly, as Mallory walks to the jukebox, the audience is presented with her glance toward a seat where a man is sitting reading the paper. The shot is in black & white and

the headline of the paper reads "666 Death". The two black & white shots connote the psychological and emotional condition of Mickey and Mallory. Subsequently, "most of the black & white was used for the violence, except for shots that provided a pinpoint of color, such as the green pie, the records inside the jukebox, or blood on the tables" (Pizzello, 1994:42).

Other stylistic points-of-view include that of a spinning bullet traveling toward the cook, as well as the perspective of a knife thrown at a cowboy outside the diner. Such shots establish a certain language: "what you're about to see is not realism" (Pizzello, 1994:41). The perspective switches to a subjective camera when Mickey and Mallory play "eeny meeny miney moe". Both Mickey's and Mallory's perspectives are presented, and the spectator is given the opportunity to point and hold the gun. The audience looks through the murderous and demented eyes of Mickey and Mallory Knox. Thus, the audience has no choice but to identify with Mickey and Mallory throughout the remainder of their crusade.

In *Kalifornia*, the spectator is often provided with a direct connection with Carrie's point-of-view. This occurs most often when Carrie is photographing the murder sites of infamous killers. The spectator is given a direct link with Carrie through the lens of her camera. In addition, she is the character who is most skeptical and suspicious of their driving companion Early. Carrie's boyfriend, Brian, denies that anything is really wrong with Early, other than his repugnant "hick hillbilly" demeanor. However, it

seems Carrie has privileged knowledge of Early which she shares with the spectator. This knowledge is made apparent when she takes some candid photographs of Early and Adele in the car. Early eerily gazes directly into the lens of Carrie's camera, thus directly into the spectators eyes. The discomfort felt by Carrie is shared by the audience.

In the case of *Kalifornia*, the spectator is more connected with the fascinated and repulsed gaze of Carrie than with the gaze of Early or Adele. The narrative operates between the two couples and contrasts their attitudes and actions. However, the violence within the film is propelled by Early; therefore the spectator's identification shifts between Carrie's point-of-view and an omniscient camera. The omniscient camera is seduced by Early's violent behavior. It is through the omniscient camera that the audience learns about the character Early Grayce. Many of the first kills executed by Early are privileged knowledge for the audience. This adds to the pleasure of occupying the "look" of an absent observer.

Charles Acland contrasts the cinematic and televised modes of address in *Youth, Murder, Spectacle*. Acland writes that the cinema substitutes the camera for the spectator which differs from television's inclusive mode of direct address (Acland, 1995:103). Thus, talk shows such as *Geraldo*, *Ricki Lake*, *Sally Jesse Raphael*, *The Gordon Elliot Show*, *Oprah*, and *Donahue*, are "a space that designates a particular community of viewers" (Acland, 1995:103). There is an abundance of television talk shows which feature the perpetrators

of violent crimes, the victims of violent crimes, the “experts” on violent crime, and any other individual who can attest to a sensational story. The pleasure of these television programs is not reached through occupying the “look” of an absent observer as it is through the film, but through a participatory gaze.

Several of these issues will emerge in the chapter discussing the images of youth within the roadkill films alongside images of youth and violent crime in the media. The examination of violence through anthropological, psychoanalytic, and cinematic theories has constructed a basis for understanding film violence. The following chapter will discuss the overall aesthetic of the roadkill film, taking into account the paradox of the hyper-violent film.

Chapter Two: The Aesthetics of the Road

The unfolding of the desert is infinitely close to the timelessness of film...

- Jean Baudrillard

The road film genre has always embodied recognizable elements which become expected icons: the wildness of a convertible car, the open space of the road, and the vanishing point leaving problems behind. The road film genre has emerged from “the post-Second World War *noirs* [*Detour* (1945)] and late-60s, early seventies counterculture hot rods [*Easy Rider* (1969)]” (Atkinson, 1994:14). The genre itself has allowed for significant transformation and progression over the past few decades. As mentioned in the introduction, genre is considered a “process” of shifting and fluctuating practices, depending largely on the social and cultural ideologies of the time (or more accurately the *perceived* ideologies). Thus, the iconography is consistent with the “code” of road films, however the road film of the late eighties and the early nineties varies aesthetically from earlier examples within the genre. This chapter will explore those aesthetic variances.

The road film genre remains a constant reference of American film. Hollywood has a stronghold on the road genre (with the notable exception of Jean-Luc Godards’ *A Bout de Souffle* and *Le Week-End*). Considering the United States is a car-centered culture, the periodical resurgence of the road film is not surprising. The genre has come to represent “Americanness” through its imagery and thematic structure. *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*

are films which respectively depict the ideological struggles of the post-war and hippie generations. Due to the cyclical nature of the road film within American culture, the "roadkill" film is not a momentous shift within the Hollywood filmscape. Yet the neo-violent nature of these films, which was discussed in the previous chapter, sets the roadkill film apart as a distinct cinematic form from the road genre as a whole. As such, the aesthetics of the roadkill film have a layer of unsettledness which figures as an essential aspect of the films.

It is important to be reminded once again of the affective relationship a spectator has with a film. The discussion of the spectatorship of violence within the previous chapter established the perception and the persuasiveness of affective connections with violent imagery. The significance of film aesthetics can be understood through the deconstruction of aesthetic elements. Freud points out that "aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling" (Freud, 1919:219).

Jean Baudrillard's *America* illustrates metaphorically the "America" of the roadkill film. His use of metaphor and his pessimistic outlook in *America* serves as a tool to examine the roadkill aesthetic. The purpose of this chapter is to understand the aesthetics of the roadkill film in relation to Baudrillard's *America* and additional theoretical approaches. Another text which will be of use is *Learning From Las Vegas* by Robert Venturi. Many theorists have

considered the architecture of Las Vegas, known as "the roadside town", as a valuable discourse for discussions of postmodern theory. The aesthetic of motels, billboards, neon signs, and roadside diners are necessary elements of the roadkill film. In addition, these elements create an especial aesthetic when combined with graphic violence. Besides architectural theory, related areas of analysis include the cultural history of the automobile and travel theory, which will be addressed in this chapter.

In order to understand the aesthetic of the roadkill film from a postmodern perspective, one must come to terms with the notion of "postmodernity" itself. By definition, postmodernism resists explication. The variety of definitions which circulate throughout academia and popular culture creates a precarious view of the postmodern and poststructuralist approaches. Dick Hebdige writes:

the degree of semantic complexity and overload surrounding the term "postmodernism" at the moment signals that a significant number of people with conflicting interests and opinions feel that there is something sufficiently important at stake here to be worth struggling and arguing over. (Hebdige, 1988:182)

Thus, the term is worthy of inquiry and it is important to establish what is intended when using the term "postmodern". A useful definition of postmodernism is provided by Norman Denzin in *Images of Postmodern Society*:

a nostalgic, conservative longing for the past, coupled with an erasure of the boundaries between the past and the present; an intense

preoccupation with the real and its representations; a pornography of the visible; the commodification of sexuality and desire; a consumer culture which objectifies a set of masculine cultural ideals; intense emotional experiences shaped by anxiety, alienation, resentment, and a detachment from others (Denzin, 1991:vii).

While this may not be a thorough collection of the terms used to define postmodernism, this definition will be useful in reference to Baudrillard's *America*, Venturi's *Learning From Las Vegas*, and the roadkill films.

The *real* point of the road film is not the narrative, nor the character development. It is the pleasure in watching the road images. This may seem to be a ludicrous statement considering the banality one experiences on cross-country car rides. Reflecting back to one's childhood, one can think of at least a single car vacation which seemed to be an endless journey across barren landscapes. My own memories consist of my brother and I in the back of our parent's van playing with the magics of Silly Putty and comic books while driving through the Canadian Prairies. This is not an image of endless divertissement and pleasure. Thus, to assert that many of the pleasures from road films are derived from the road imagery and not *entirely* from the narrative and character structures, is an unlikely claim. However, before discarding such an argument, one must acknowledge that there exists a long history of road travel and of the road film in America.

Baudrillard's *America*

The journey not the arrival matters.

- T. S. Elliot

In order to understand the angle from which Baudrillard wrote *America*, one must consider Baudrillard's theoretical paradigm. According to general postmodern or Baudrillardian thought, the West is presently experiencing a shift in its manner of production. Information, rather than durable goods, has become the most important commodity. We now speak of the "Information Age" or the "Pay-Per Society". However, Baudrillard goes a step further by characterizing the contemporary condition in terms of "simulation". Baudrillard defines simulation as "the generation by models of a real without origins or reality: a hyperreality" (Baudrillard, 1983:2). Baudrillard's notion of hyperrealism has become a characteristic component of postmodern thought. Hyperrealism can be defined as the condition where "the distinction between simulation and the 'real' continually implodes; the 'real' and the imaginary continually collapse together" (Storey, 1993:163). The loss or the collapse of the referent is a characteristic of simulacra.

Baudrillard's notion of the loss of the referent is further elaborated through his concept of "seduction". In a 1991 interview, Baudrillard states that:

My concept of seduction is a critique of production, but not a rational critique. [...] My notion of seduction is a fatal notion. There is a fatality in it that has to do with predestination of signs and loss of identity (Hunter, 1991:289).

The “fatal notion” is referred to throughout his work, including *The Evil Demon of Images*, where he notes that “cinema is fascinated by itself as a lost object just as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as referential in perdition” (Baudrillard, 1987, 31). Dick Hebdige writes that “psychosis, waste and death are positively valued so that only ‘fatal strategies’ can prevail” (Hebdige, 1988:209). These concepts surface within the reading of *America*.

Baudrillard’s concept of “simulation” is directly related to his obsession with cinematic America. The visual spectacle of the postmodern age is a factor within all of Baudrillard’s writings. Baudrillard calls into question the notion of “representation”. There is no longer such a thing as a “representation” of reality; “representation doesn’t stand at one remove from reality, to conceal or distort, it is reality” (Storey, 1993:165). Thus, Baudrillard’s notion of simulation and hyperreality has radically revised our understanding of “re-presentation” and visual imagery. A parallel may be drawn with the postmodern concept of the collapse of the metanarratives. One can no longer believe in the modernist ideal of absolute truth. The postmodern culture is a culture of visuals, self-referentiality, and competing narratives. The spectator of this culture is increasingly unable to establish a rigorous differentiation between images and reality, or between discourse and fact.

In essence, *America* is Jean Baudrillard’s road film. This text is not Baudrillard’s first collection of his thoughts on travels within the United

States; *America* is referred to as "a child of *Cool Memories*" (Denzin, 1991:122). Baudrillard illustrates his trip across the United States with metaphorical detail. The "snapshot" and the image are necessary ambient factors within Baudrillard's conception of America. An emphasis on the image is obviously a Baudrillardian theme. The postmodern society is "a looking culture, organized in terms of a variety of gazes, or looks (tourist, investigatory - medical, social sciences, television, religious, political - artistic, photographic and so on ...)" (Denzin, 1991b:9). Baudrillard's tourist gaze is one which has been influenced by much televisual and filmic imagery.

Baudrillard states that he left on this trip in search of "l'Amérique sidérale" or,

astral America, not social and cultural America, but the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways, not the deep America of mores and mentalities, but the America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces (Baudrillard, 1989:5).

The America which Baudrillard is in search of has a specific iconography. The United States has a history of being associated as a "car-culture" symbolizing freedom. Baudrillard and the road film travelers are considered by others and themselves as being nomads living on the fringes of society. The isolation of the road and the seediness of the motels contributes to the notion of the traveler as an outcast. The aesthetic becomes more clear when one compares the iconography of a suburban setting of a melodrama to that of the road film. The homes and white picket fences of the Hollywood

melodrama depict a certain comfort, stability, and class. The neon signs, the highways, and the roadside diners of the road film produce an affective sense of decay. Many of the films exhibit this aesthetic in scenes when the characters are driving along the highway, or driving through small towns.

Nostalgia is a component of postmodern culture. Elements of nostalgia are featured within the roadkill film, thus further transforming the aesthetics of the film. According to Catherine Russell, "the work of the text blurs the distinction between 'classic' American popular culture and the 1990s on all levels", thus "the difference between the 1950s and the 1990s is lost to the universalizing discourse of Americana" (Russell, 1993:195). Many of the roadkill films feature nostalgic elements. For example, the scene in which Mickey and Mallory get married on the bridge in *Natural Born Killers* connotes the hippie-generation of the late 1960s, early 1970s. And much of the backdrop imagery after the opening diner scene of the film while they drive off suggests the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Another example is the cameo appearance of Peter Fonda in *Love and a .45*. Peter Fonda adds a nostalgic element to the film due to his connection with the road genre through his starring role in *Easy Rider*. The spectatorship of the two films is similar in nature, however the films emerged from two different generations. Such a nostalgic element contributes to the "authenticity" of the film as being part of the road genre. The roadkill genre is able to "quote" other examples

from the road genre. In other words, the road films use nostalgic elements in order to refer to the genre itself.

True Romance offers additional examples of the use of nostalgia particularly with reference to the past the 1950s. Even the clothing which Clarence and Alabama wear is reminiscent of the 1950s. But more important are the constant references to Elvis Presley throughout the film. Elvis appears before the male protagonist, Clarence, in order to give him guidance. As well as being a "white trash" hero, Elvis evokes the myth of a more carefree era. The presence of Elvis in the film plays off of the contemporary "Elvis Lives" folklore. Baudrillard states, "the fifties were the real high spot for the US ('when things were going on'), and you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, for the ecstasy of power, when power held power" (Baudrillard, 1989:107). The inclusion of nostalgic elements within *True Romance* and the other roadkill films is a method of "re-signifying" or recontextualizing the present by connecting it with elements from the past. Our present seems "more real" when we refer to elements of our past.

Baudrillard has been accused of having been influenced from watching too many American films, and thus virtually creating a parody of America and Americans: "So clear cut are his stereotypes that they could almost be a composite of the America that can be derived from television and Hollywood films" (Vidich, 1991:138). And this is exactly Baudrillard's point. The destination of Baudrillard and many of the roadkill characters is

California. While it may seem pure coincidence, the fact is Baudrillard is drawn, to the location which, for the last 100 years, has defined the American character through cinematic impulse (Denzin, 1991:128).

The society which Baudrillard describes is that of America as seen through the eyes of a European. According to Denzin, "his is an urban reading of Europeanized America" (Denzin, 1991:126). At certain moments, Baudrillard is obviously overwhelmed by the spectacle of it all:

To see and feel America, you have to have for at least one moment in some downtown jungle, in the Painted Desert, or on some bend of freeway, the feeling that Europe had disappeared. You have to have wondered, at least for a brief moment, 'How can anyone be European?' (Baudrillard, 1989:104).

Such a reading of American culture raises the issue of multiple meanings and codes within a given text. I have already suggested that Baudrillard's reading of America in *America* is particularly useful for illustrating the cultural aesthetics of the roadkill film. The multiple codes contribute to a "reader-oriented" criticism in which, similar to the Fiskian approach, the audience and the reader draw from several positions and codes in order to create meaning. For example, Baudrillard's reading of American culture can be read in a pessimistic vein as a dystopia or, at the same time, as a celebration of American culture. For example, Baudrillard exploits "obvious clichés of conservative antimodernism [...], turning them into ironic figures of utopian destiny and flinging them in the reader's face" (Levin, 1996:205). We have already encountered a similar ambiguity in the public response to

Natural Born Killers. Some thought it glorified violence, while others considered it a thoughtful critique of violence in the media. A third point of view might be that *Natural Born Killers* has nothing to do with the “reality” of violence, either as a glorification or as a critique. Rather, it explores the American cultural system as a simulation, in Baudrillard’s sense of the term. By focussing on certain a aspect of a film, such as the dismal aesthetics of genre quotation, popular culture icons, and self-referentiality, the spectator is able to explore various interpretive possibilities, and to shift subject positions.

Dystopic Visions

The America described by Baudrillard is far from the “happy” narrative endings of Hollywood films and the world of Disneyland. Baudrillard presents a discrepancy by stating that “the US is utopia achieved” in the midst of demonstrating the degeneration of America and American culture (Baudrillard, 1989:77). For Baudrillard, the realization of imaginary utopic visions is always dystopic - a loss of imagination. There is a lurid aesthetic which figures within Baudrillard’s *America*. Baudrillard paints a pessimistic view of America:

It is a world completely rotten with wealth, power, senility, indifference, puritanism and mental hygiene, poverty and waste, technological futility and aimless violence, and yet I cannot help but feel it has about it something of the dawning of the universe (Baudrillard, 1989:23).

Such negativity is apparent within the roadkill genre. The violent nature of the roadkill film contributes to the dismal cinematographic ambiance. The narratives of many of the roadkill films are pessimistic and morbid in nature. For example, in *Kalifornia*, the pursuits of Carrie and Brian are traveling across America in search of infamous murder sites. Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* sets an ominous tone with the music and quoting of Leonard Cohen in the opening sequence. And while *Love and a .45* is comparatively more upbeat than *Natural Born Killers* due to its black comedy characteristics, the film's pessimism is evident in the portrayal of the American "white trash" couple. Nonetheless, as Baudrillard points out, there is an attraction to such melancholy. The couples are considered pathetic and nihilistic, yet they are glamorized to the point where the audience is convinced "that living in a trailer park while downing generic beer and holding up the odd 7-Eleven could be a fun way to waste your life" (Griffin, 1995:31).

Such morose humor corresponds to Baudrillard's nihilistic view of the future in *America*. Baudrillard remarks on:

the thousands of lone men, each running on their own account, with no thought for others, with a stereophonic fluid in their heads that oozes through into their eyes, that is the world of *Blade Runner*, the post-catastrophic world (Baudrillard, 1989:38).

The apocalyptic narrative is a reoccurring theme within Hollywood film, notably within science fiction narratives, such as *Outland* (1981), the *Terminator* films, the *Alien* trilogy, and the above mentioned *Blade Runner*

(1982). These fantasies of the future are often said to be “ways of putting quotation marks around the present” (Ryan et al., 1988:254). The “future” within these films is often an caricature distinguished by an emphasis on the exaggeration of negative aspects of the present moment. Thus, the nihilism of the “dystopia” film parallels that of the roadkill film.

In the futuristic dystopian narrative as well as the roadkill film, the characters completely reject authority and society through the use not only of violence, but of deviance. The postmodern apocalyptic narrative is achieved through seediness. For the roadkill film, this translates into dismal motels, diners, isolated roads, and confining urban landscape. These atmospheres suggest the theme of rejection, “something which is really about longing and loss rather than completion” (Owens, 1983:67). There is an emptiness implied through the use of structures which seem to have no local character. In other words, a motel or diner along Route 66 could be any motel or diner along the American roadside. The lack of history and the lack of location contribute to the sense of emptiness and loss. James Clifford offers the motel as an excellent “chronotope” of what we can call postmodern: “The motel has no real lobby, it’s tied into a highway network - a relay or node rather than a site of encounter between coherent cultural subjects” (Clifford, 1992:106).

The roadkill film leaves no sense of completion within the aesthetic of the film nor within the narrative. The violence and the nihilism are still present within the characters and American society at the end of the film.

The films such as *Love and a .45* and *True Romance* depict the killer couples driving toward the sunset of the Mexican border. The protagonists had to escape the confines of American society, thus retreating to an alternate "world". *The Living End* (1993) finishes in a similar fashion where the closing shot features the couple, Luke and Jon, sitting on the ground in the middle of a desert with a sunset background. The two escape on a road trip after learning they are infected with the AIDS virus. The narrative is unable to attain closure due to the sense of loss, the remediless condition of society and of their health. Correspondingly, Baudrillard points out that the American deserts "denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution" (Baudrillard, 1989:63).

According to Baudrillard, violence is a way of life, it is part of the everyday:

The American street has not, perhaps, known these historic moments, but it is always turbulent, lively, kinetic, and cinematic, like the country itself, where the specifically historical and political stage counts for little, but where change, whether spurred by technology, racial differences, or the media, assumes virulent forms: its violence is the very violence of the way of life (Baudrillard, 1989:18).

The violence within the roadkill film is naturalized and displayed as the norm, whether it be the holding-up of a store in *Love and a .45*, *Natural Born Killers*, or *Thelma and Louise*, or part of a shooting rampage in *True Romance*.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the spectator encourages the violence, thus accepting it as part of the "roadkill culture".

Baudrillard allows us to return to the issue mentioned within the introduction of this chapter. The issue concerning the pleasure one derives from the road imagery and not solely from the narrative of the film. Baudrillard refers to "the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move" which is enabled by the freeways (Baudrillard, 1989:53). The pleasures of the roads and the freeways are that they do not emphasize destination, they are purely about constant movement. In addition, as Baudrillard has suggested, simulations can be experiences which seem more real than reality itself - "even better than the real thing" according to the Irish rock band, U2. As such, the *real* experience of a road trip is not as exhilarating as the simulation of a road trip through its images and cinematic representation: "life is cinema" (Baudrillard, 1989:101). The road film is a cinematic rendition of what the real should look like and how it should feel. Thus, it is not only a blurring of the real and simulation, but it is when the simulation becomes more real than reality. Baudrillard explains the logic of simulacra when "events no longer have meaning: not because that are insignificant in themselves, but because they have been preceded by models with which their own processes can only coincide" (Baudrillard, 1987:21).

The expansive reproduction of images through photography, film, and video has produced a *banalization* of the world which surrounds us.

According to Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*: "Capitalist production has unified space, which is no longer bounded by external societies. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of *banalization*" (Debord, 1968:165). Through the consumption of images, one is able to conceive travel and tourism through the images provided by the capitalist system. For example, the images of the Eiffel Tower have been consumed by individuals who have never seen it. When the Eiffel Tower is finally seen by an individual through the actual experience of traveling to it, the structure possesses a banal character since it has previously been consumed. In other words, "this society which eliminates geographical distance reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation" (Debord, 1968:167). Thus, we possess an internal separation between our experience of looking at images of the Eiffel Tower and our experience of traveling to the actual Eiffel Tower. This separation is produced through the reproduction of images and capitalist production. Debord writes: "A by-product of the circulation of commodities, tourism, human circulation considered as consumption, is basically reduced to the leisure of going to see what has become banal" (Debord, 1968:168). The banalization of the world around us is apparent within the depiction of American culture. American culture is the "everyday", however through the reproduction of images of American culture, it also becomes "spectacular". When Baudrillard speaks of the

"American 'way of life'", it is "to emphasize its utopian nature, its *mythic* banality, its dream quality, and its grandeur" (Baudrillard, 1989:95).

Las Vegas: The Aesthetics of a Roadtown

The town of Las Vegas has a mythic and grand status in the pattern of American cultural icons. The architectural form of the Las Vegas city-scape is a remarkable and unique feature of American culture. At first glance, the use of Venturi's book, *Learning From Las Vegas*, may seem questionable within the context of the roadkill film. After all, the destination of choice in the roadkill film is California, and then usually on to Mexico to flee from the authorities. However, if one considers the iconography which is featured in Venturi's study, the aesthetic relations between that and the roadkill films are considerable. Thus, *Learning From Las Vegas* is a text which enhances the aesthetic account of the roadkill film. In addition to Venturi's study, other conceptions of architecture and postmodern theory will be utilized.

Postmodern theoretical discourse has filtered into almost every area, including art, film, literary criticism, architecture, and social science theory. The use of postmodern theory in architecture was one of its first applications.

In *Learning From Las Vegas*, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour analyse Las Vegas as "a phenomenon of architectural communication" (Venturi et al., 1991:3). The study is meant to examine the "relationships, and the combinations between signs and buildings, between architecture and symbolism, between form and meaning, between driver and the roadside"

which "are deeply relevant to architecture today" (Venturi et al., 1972:4). The iconography of Las Vegas in particular is a continually fascinating theme within Hollywood film, for example the recent films *Casino* (1995) and *Leaving Las Vegas* (1996). The iconography which is highlighted within Venturi's book includes highways, signs, neon, motels, and the desert. Venturi writes that Las Vegas space is "not chaos, but a new spatial order relating the automobile and highway communication in an architecture which abandons pure form in favor of mixed media" (Venturi et al., 1972:11). Every one of these symbols are present within the imagery of the roadkill film.

In terms reminiscent of the "high/low" pop art debate, Venturi says that "one can learn from the ordinary, for it reflects the values of everyday people" (Fontana et al., 1990:4). The ordinary or the "everyday" is often equated with the lower class and the mundane. Many of the protagonists within the roadkill film are precisely that. In many instances, they are referred to as "white trash" or they have appropriated the term and refer to each other as "white trash". For example, Starlene calls Watty's friend Billy "white trash" in *Love and a .45*, and Sailor calls Laura's mother "white trash" in *Wild at Heart*. However, the ordinariness and mundanity of the iconography and the protagonists is contrasted with the glamorization of their style, such as their youth and effortlessly fashionable clothing, as well as the attraction they receive as celebrities. These contrasts are present

throughout the films and they are indicative of the function of the iconography within the roadkill film.

The function of iconography and visual structure within a film is to create an atmosphere redolent with allusive and seductive signifiers. Venturi points out that certain banal architectural forms, such as parking lots, are “ritualized and given a ceremonial function” (Venturi, 1991:77). The same is done within the roadkill film. By presenting imagery such as a wide-open desert highway or a seedy motel within a violent and dark narrative, the film achieves a particular atmosphere. The aesthetic principle here, closely related to the notion of the uncanny discussed in the previous chapter, is to transform the common into the uncommon.

The transformation of the common into the uncommon creates an affective relationship for the spectator toward the film. It can occur within several different spheres. Just as the transformation of the common creates a sense of the uncanny, the unfamiliar within the familiar, so the banality of the common suggests a degree of “authenticity” which borders on a sense of the unique and the eternal. An image of a roadside diner within the roadkill film is perceived as an “authentic” image of how a roadside diner *should* look. This “authenticity” is problematic on several levels, but what is of concern is the perception of authenticity, of the ordinary as universal and somehow timeless. American artist, Edward Hopper, plays upon this notion of the everyday and the authentic in images characterized as “quintessentially

American". For example, his painting, *Four Lane Road* (1956), is of a gentleman sitting at a small town gas station off of a highway, which could be a gas station in any small American town, however.

Authenticity is partly achieved through the cinematic mode of making the image more spectacular and more "real" than reality. It relies on the cinematic apparatus which "interpellates" and positions the spectator. Interpellation is described as the "conjunction of imaginary and symbolic transactions which results in the subject's insertion into an already existing discourse" (Silverman, 1983:219). Thus, within the road film genre, the image of the desert highway is suddenly a remarkable spectacle. One automatically constructs an understanding of film imagery through personal experience. Thus, unexpectedly, "roadside watching is a delight, and the highway is - or at least might be - a work of art", furthermore, "the view from the road can be a dramatic play of space and motion, of light and texture" (Appleyard et al., 1964:3). Therefore, Debord's prior mentioned theory of the banalization of the world through consumption coincides with Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality in simulation. Once an image or experience has been consumed, that experience may take on a priority which is perceived as more "real" than the actual experience. The cinematic form authenticates the common and provides the spectator with unique insight into the banal.

The Automobile and American Culture

The automobile brought a definitive transformation of American culture in the first half of the twentieth century. The impact of the automobile is difficult if not impossible to measure due to its pervasiveness in everyday life and culture in North America. The automobile cross-cuts all classes, "beginning in the 1920s for the middle class and in the 1950s for the working class", thus revolutionizing "the lifestyle of the typical American family" (Flink, 1988:158). Since the end of the Depression, music, television, film, and photography have made abundant reference to the automobile and its central function within North American culture. The automobile has had a great influence on aesthetic and cultural forms within North America. Thus, a brief history of the automobile and road travel is essential in understanding the cultural significance of the road film.

At the beginning of the automotive revolution, the car was considered an icon of American morality and righteousness. Prior to the automobile, the train was the means of travel for most. However, the automobile offered a greater degree of flexibility and freedom than the train. In 1921, E. C. Stokes, a former governor of New Jersey, stated that "next to the church, there is no other factor in American life that does so much for the morals of American the public as does the automobile". He continued that "any device that brings the family unit together in their pursuit of pleasure is a promoter of good morals and yields a beneficent influence that makes for the good of

American civilization" (Flink, 1988:158). However, the perception of the automobile changed drastically due to its rapidly changing role in society.

During the Cold War, the automobile was further promoted as an icon of "Americaness". In 1950, "75 percent of the world's cars were in the United States" (Metcalf, 1993:52). However, the car also became a symbol of freedom associated with youth and rebellion. The automobile was an ideal method of under-cutting "parental supervision and authority" (Flink, 1988:159). One could escape the suburban home to explore the outside world with a previously unattained independence. In addition, the flexibility of the automobile encouraged the motorist to pursue a new mode of travel, entirely in the pursuit of pleasure. Thus, the automobile is synonymous with American culture. Baudrillard agrees when he writes:

All you need to know about American society can be gleaned from an anthropology of its driving behavior. [...] Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together (Baudrillard, 1989:54).

The automobile influenced architectural design and had an aesthetic impact on American culture. Streamlined moderne architecture reflected the "increasingly automobile-centered American way of life" (Craig, 1990:15). Thus, the aesthetic of the roadside is not the only influence which has contributed to the wider scope of popular culture. The automobile aesthetic, such as "rounded building corners, plastic entry canopies, metallic

architectural facades, neon tubing, curving access ramps", and "fluid profiles", began to appear as part of the roadside landscape (Craig, 1990:17). Thus, the automobile became a fascination in the American psyche due to its role as a symbol of "Americaness", as well as due to the aesthetic influence within architecture and popular culture.

In terms of popular culture, film, music, and photography were greatly influenced by, and contributed to, the American obsession with the automobile. Many of the films of the 1950s can be qualified as "teenpics", which feature narratives surrounding youth and rock n' roll. As mentioned above, automobiles were an intrinsic element of youth culture. Rock n' roll, and to a certain extent, the blues, defined cars as "sexy and exciting, one might even say liberating, both for the personal privacy they permitted *and* for the social and financial emancipation they proclaimed" (Widmer, 1990:83).

In addition to music, photography incorporated the automobile as a central subject when representing American culture. Art photography was greatly influenced by the work of Robert Frank. Frank's *The Americans* is a collection of photographs taken in 1955 and 1956 throughout the United States (Paster, 1990:59). As Paster points out, Frank's work is greatly influenced by the aesthetic of the snapshot, which often features automobiles (Paster, 1990:59). As mentioned previously, Baudrillard's *America* was greatly influenced by the aesthetic of the snapshot as well. During the post-

war period, the snapshot had the ability to freeze time as if to capture the ideality of America according to Americans at that time. A sense of that perfection derived from the economic prosperity of the immediate post-war era and the rise of a highly consumeristic ideology.

As a symbol of consumerism and social status, the automobile also represents "mobility - or the lack of it" in a dark style (Paster, 1990:60). Frank succeeded in depicting the dark side of American culture, a side which emphasizes the unusual, or even the uncanny. The snapshot style is a familiar form, however the photographs evoke a strange emotional response (Paster, 1990:60). A similar response is felt throughout the roadkill film. The uncanny affection is meant to incite a dark representation of America which opposes the prevalent representation of American culture as the ideal.

The automobile and the travel industry coincide with, and emerge from, American consumer culture. Just after the automobile was developed, the travel industry emerged. As mentioned above, roadside architecture became an important aspect of American culture. The automobile enabled the consumer to travel leisurely in the pure pursuit of pleasure. The signs which extend along the roadsides "throbbed with the creative native spirit" and "proclaimed the essentials of our free enterprise system. Buy this. Stop here. Consume. Spend." (Margolies et al, 1993:9). The roadside aesthetic developed alongside the fundamental element of North American consumer culture. The prominence of roadside diners and fast-food chains helped to

"link distant cities together in the minds of the traveling consumer" (Craig, 1990:21). These links are important elements within the roadkill narrative. The diners and motels are the pivotal locations of consumption and action, until the urban destination is reached. The following section will explore the notions of travel, the "tourist gaze", and the central aspect of travel as consumption.

Travel and the "Tourist Gaze"

... I travel not to go anywhere, but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move.

- Robert Louis Stevenson

Travel has traditionally been an activity for the wealthy and the privileged. Throughout the Victorian era, traveling was an activity only for bourgeois men and, on occasion, bourgeois women. According to James Clifford, "travel has an inextinguishable taint of location by class, gender, race, and a certain literariness" (Clifford, 1992:110). The roadkill film plays upon many of these notions of travel. For instance, as mentioned above, the majority of the roadkill characters are "white trash", which is a description that indicates a particular racial, class, and educational characteristics. Tourism and the "tourist gaze" has changed since the "Victorian" practice of travel due to several factors, including the aforementioned introduction of the automobile. The tourist gaze has been altered to include aspects such as the female gaze. Several accounts of road trips by women have emerged in popular culture, including a recent novel called *Spinsters* (Kennedy, 1995).

The tourist gaze is no longer a stagnant, predictable element, "the distinctiveness of the 'tourist gaze' is lost as such gazes are irreducibly part of a postmodern popular culture" (Urry, 1990:100). Baudrillard makes a similar point in *America* concerning his own tourist gaze. Film and television contribute a great deal to the construction and popularization of the notion of the "tourist gaze".

The tourist experience is primarily visual. Such a visual experience is expressed through images and objects, such as photographs and momentos (Bruner, 1989:112). To a certain extent, tourism is culturally constructed within the social imaginary. This collective social imaginary can loosely be termed the "tourist gaze". However, according to John Urry in *The Tourist Gaze*, because the tourist gaze is socially constructed, there is "no single, authentic tourist experience" (Urry, 1990:100). Urry uses a prominently Foucaultian model of the gaze in order to examine the connections between tourism and postmodernism. In Urry's description of contemporary tourism, he states that "tourism is prefiguratively postmodern because of its particular combination of the visual, the aesthetic, and the popular" (Urry, 1990:87).

A dominant aspect of tourism is the shameless pursuit of pleasure. This pleasure is partly achieved through the consumption of goods, food, and activity. In other words, tourism necessarily embodies a commercial dimension. As Urry points out:

Particularly important in tourist pleasures are those that involve the energetic breaking of the mild taboos that operate on various forms of

consumption, such as eating or drinking to excess, spending money recklessly, wearing outrageous clothes, keeping widely different time patterns, and so on (Urry, 1990:101).

Such breaking of taboos are demonstrated with excess and spectacle within the roadkill film. The living patterns of the roadkill characters are behaviors which center around consumption. As a consequence, each behavior is a spectacle. Hurley's excessive drinking in *Kalifornia*, the outrageous clothing worn by Alabama in *True Romance* as well as by Mickey and Mallory in *Natural Born Killers*, and the time patterns of all the characters are only a few examples of reckless consumption. The spectacle of these behaviors encourages subsequent taboo actions. The actions pursued by the roadkill characters achieve the ultimate extreme: the consumption of human lives. In other words, the characters expend and destroy human lives as their most spectacular act of excessive consumption.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the road film is a composite of many references in American culture and Hollywood film. The road movie genre is described as "a hybrid of forms produced by various cultural determinants and undergoing continuous variation" (Griggers, 1993:130). Thus, the aesthetics of the roadkill film do not follow a comprehensive set of codes. In other words, "... meaning (like identity) is not determined through reference to a single code (...) but through an assemblage of multiple codes and in a context

of a performance" (Griggers, 1993:131). As we learn from Baudrillard, meaning is produced through the variety of ways the reader or viewer assembles them and makes meanings of them. As a result, Baudrillard has a unique, yet helpful insight into American culture.

In order to understand the aesthetics of the roadkill film, one must refer to diverse sources. Due to the composite nature of the road film genre, many sets of codes can be referred to, such as postmodern theory, architectural studies, travel theory, and the cultural history of the automobile. Many factors contribute to the lurid aesthetic of the roadkill film.

As it has been explored within this chapter, Baudrillard's America is a postmodern narrative filled with pessimism, nihilism, isolation. In the following chapter, the issues of youth and music will be examined further within the context of contemporary youth and the roadkill film.

Chapter 3: The Aesthetics of Youth and Music

The Paradox of Youth

*Every day there was something about Modern Youth,
but the best veshch they ever had in the old gazetta
was by some starry pop in a doggy collar who said that
in his considered opinion and he was govereeting as a
man of Bog IT WAS THE DEVIL THAT WAS
ABROAD and was like ferreting his way into like
young innocent flesh, and it was the adult world that
could take responsibility for this with their wars and
bombs and nonesense.*

- Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*.

"Year of the Killer Kids" reads a headline from the *Montreal Gazette*, in July of 1995. The article describes the viscious murders of several victims: an American fisherman by two 13 year olds in Prince Rupert, B.C.; a beaten to death 82 year old woman named Ida Rudy by two teenagers in Outremont, Quebec; as well as the severely violent death of the elderly couple, Rev. Frank and Jocelyne Toope in Beaconsfield, Quebec, by three adolescents, the youngest being thirteen years old (Goyette, 1995:B3). Similar articles have appeared in thousands of newspapers and magazines throughout North America in recent years. The actions of "killer kids" are the subjects of numerous talk shows and panel discussions on television. The growing quantity of such discussions leads the [adult] public to believe that society has reached an alarming stage of danger. A stage where this current generation of young adults are in a state of emergency. Films, such as

Natural Born Killers and *True Romance*, are under attack for contributing to the problem of violent youth, youth out of control.

The roadkill films are decidedly '90s youth-oriented: the dry humor, the brazen palaver, the modern rock or "alternative" soundtrack, the pop culture references, and the "cool" characters. The violence within these films differs from the delinquency films of an earlier time. The purpose of the following section is to situate the social and cultural construction of "youth" within contemporary North American society. Youth is a prominent element within the roadkill films, but how does it contribute to the aesthetic of the roadkill films? First, youth culture in general will be considered. Second, the contributions of the soundtracks will be analysed in greater detail.

In the first chapter, we considered Noel Carroll's "paradox of horror". The following chapter focuses on what one could call the "paradox of youth". Youth culture is a contradiction for primarily the following reason. In contemporary Western society, youth is concurrently celebrated as well as condemned. Youth is envied and pursued within our society, we strive for a youthful appearance and ideology. While at the same time, youth is considered apathetic, nihilistic, and "a problem". This paradox exists because youth is socially and culturally constructed. Therefore, it is important to remember that youth signifies more than an age demographic. Lawrence Grossberg emphasizes that youth is an ideological and cultural signifier independent of age (Grossberg, 1992:198).

The Youthful Aesthetics

Boomer Envy: Envy of the material wealth and long-range material security accrued by older members of the baby boom generation by virtue of fortunate births.

-Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*.

Mid-Twenties Breakdown: A period of mental collapse occurring in one's twenties, often caused by an ability to function outside of school or structured environments coupled with a realization of one's essential loneliness in the world. Often marks induction into the ritual of pharmaceutical usage.

- Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*.

Why are these images of "kid killers" so prevalent? Why is the younger generation framed as "dangerous" within the media? How do the media shape the public perception of youth? In order to have a clear understanding of this cultural and social construction, one must consider several social realities and cultural representations of youth. This includes the process of labeling generations and stereotyping youth with various contradictory identifications: helpless, dangerous, lethargic, overworked, "slacker", etc. Multiple labeling and classification creates a layering of identities and a multiplicity of discourses. It is within these discourses of "youth" that young people must maneuver in order to make themselves be understood.

The hyper-violent aesthetic within youth-oriented road films is an aesthetic which parallels the prevalent media construction of "youth-as-problem". Dick Hebdige points out that "in our society, youth is present only when its presence is a problem, or is regarded as a problem" (Hebdige,

1988:17). Films, such as the roadkill films, reflect and construct the image of “youth-as-dangerous” within cultural and social spheres. A case can be made that youth is no more dangerous now than it has ever been. Whether that is true or not changes very little in the social imaginary.

From the earliest conception of the social category of “youth” and “adolescents”, the discourse surrounding this formation has centered on it’s problematic and unstable nature. The juvenile delinquency films of the 1950s, most notably *Rebel Without A Cause*, were popularized and naturalized as the typical youth experience. In *The J.D. Films: Juvenile Delinquency in the Movies*, Marc Thomas McGee and R. J. Robertson have compiled a cultural history of the juvenile delinquency films of the 1950’s and 1960’s. According to the authors, much of the teenage violence and the films of the 1950’s were the result of many factors, including the impending threat of a nuclear holocaust due to the Russian possession of the atomic bomb (McGee et al, 1982:18). Atomic warfare is perhaps less a concern of contemporary youth; however many other factors featured daily in the mass media are of great concern.

The mass media play a role within the representation of youth culture. In *Youth, Murder, Spectacle*, Charles Acland characterizes the role of the mass media as “not only reactive or reflective but also involved in the complex loop of definition, specification, and legitimation” (Acland, 1995:35). In many of the roadkill films, the media create a sensation surrounding the

killer couples. *Natural Born Killers* is often read as a commentary on the media's role in creating celebrities out of serial killers and mass murderers. A significant element in the role of the media is the creation of a cultural "aura", borrowing from Walter Benjamin, surrounding youth in the media. The category of youth is regarded by the adult world as a site of conflict and disruption. Statistics are meant to shock and frighten, such as:

Today, American adolescents are twice as likely to be victims of violent crimes than are adults. Homicide is now the leading cause of death among African-American adolescent males and the third leading cause of death for all adolescents (Côté et al, 1994, 64).

And according to the article entitled "A Generation of Stone Killers", "the number of killings by younger and younger kids has rarely been higher" (Minerbrook, 1994:33). The statistics contribute to the ongoing cultural construction of youth. Youth becomes a category which can be easily referred to, especially for marketing purposes.

One method of categorizing and labeling youth is through the process of creating and giving titles to "generations". According to Acland, generation are defined as "discursive constructs, marshaling certain meanings and desires into a single imagined location, rather than statistical truths, pure and simple" (Acland, 1995:24). Contemporary youth have been marked as "Generation X", a label which emerged around the publication of Douglas Coupland's novel of the same name. "Generation X" is identified with many of the contradictory characteristics previously mentioned within

this chapter, such as nihilism, pessimism, poverty, laziness, unemployment, and overeducation. Many of the "Generation X" themes come through clearly in films, such as *Slacker* (1991) and *Reality Bites* (1994). As a result of excessive labeling, "Generation X" becomes an aphorism used as a marketing tool for cultural commodities directed at youth markets. For example, a popular Nike shoe ad reads: "Life is short. Play hard.", and the title of the public affairs program on MTV in the United States is "Like We Care". Nihilism and despair are expressed by youth culture through the music of various artists, such as Nirvana, Sloan, The Smashing Pumpkins, and Pearl Jam.

The young are presented as an anathema within society. Discussions of the problem of youth fall between debate of failing socio-economic policies on education and employment, and under-funding of social and educational programs for youth. Experts claim several factors contribute to the disenfranchisement of youth: "the growth of single-parent families, a sharp rise in child abuse, the arrival of crack cocaine, the escalation of weaponry in the streets and the despair caused by the massive loss of urban manufacturing jobs" (Minerbrook, 1994:33). As a result, youth are often talked about in terms of a "subculture". Youth as subculture, according to Dick Hebdige in *Hiding in the Light*, "forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched", in other words, "it is

hiding in the light" (Hebdige, 1988:35). Again, youth is a paradox: the pleasure of being watched contradicts the need for withdrawal.

While much of the media attention to youth focuses on the negative, there is an antithesis to the pessimistic representation of youth. Youth is a celebrated state within Western society. The cultural aspiration to remain looking young focuses especially on the preservation of the body, and subsequently on a youthful disposition. Baudrillard writes that

the body has been made to forget pleasure as present grace, to forget its possible metamorphosis into other forms of appearance and become dedicated to the utopian preservation of a youth that is, in any case, already lost (Baudrillard:1989, 35).

According to Baudrillard, the pursuit of the youthful body [and mind] indicates one's anticipation of death and fear of failure (Baudrillard, 1989:35). These two traits are indicative of contemporary youth. Hence, the aesthetic of the roadkill film is distinguished by this paradox of youth. The celebration of youthfulness is a spectacle of beauty, pleasure, nihilism, and violence.

The Aesthetics of Violent Youth

... teenage angst bullshit has a body count.

- Veronica in *Heathers* (1989)

Henry Giroux examines violence in youth culture in his recent work, *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth*. Giroux addresses the new emerging violence in 1990's films, such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Killing Zoe*, and roadkill films, such as *Natural Born Killers* and *True Romance*. He

refers to this violence as "hyper-real violence - with its technological wizardry and its formalist appeals, irony, guilt-free humor, wise guy dialogue, genuflection to the cultural pap of the '70s" (Giroux, 1996:64). According to Giroux, this hyper-real violence has "a generational quality that captures the actual violence that youth encounter in the streets and neighborhoods ..." (Giroux, 1996:64). The roadkill films would be aesthetically distinct if they had featured older couples, for example in their forties. The "hipness" of the young roadkill couples almost *distortedly justifies* their violent actions. A certain degree of sympathy is awarded to the roadkill couples. This empathy is to some extent related to an understanding of the socio-economic situation of contemporary youth, or the so-called "Generation X". The spectator does not excuse their actions, however the audience often cheers on the couple to reach a safe destination.

The concept of violence as ritual was introduced in the first chapter. While Giroux considers films of the roadkill genre "hyper-real", there is also a ritualistic element to be considered. Giroux writes that "ritualistic violence in film draws attention away from representational politics" (Giroux, 1996:61). Ritualistic violence is present within youth film, such as the roadkill film. In his essay on *Rumble Fish* (1983), Jon Lewis writes: "we are forced then to re-read the narrative of youth (on and off the screen) as hardly antisocial, as a ritual (an acting out) of impatience and need in the absence of functional and deeply desired authority" (Lewis, 1993:135). The absence of

authority is definitively an element within the roadkill genre. However, this absence is not dwelled on by the characters, nor by the spectator. The action is spontaneous and thrilling. The killing in the roadkill films is meaningless and senseless in a way that it is directed at nothing or no one in particular. However, at the same time, it is directed at everything. Grossberg explains: "youth involves an excessiveness, an impulsiveness, a maniacal irresponsibility which escape time and potentially go on forever" (Grossberg, 1992:177). The roadkill film is an endless drive of youth mayhem.

As mentioned previously, a large cultural industry has emerged, which targets the youth market. Guy Debord writes: "youth, the transformation of what exists, is in no way the characteristic of those who are now young, it is a property of the economic system, the dynamism of capitalism" (Debord, 1968:62). Marketing analysts have taken advantage of the contemporary labels given to youth and have reaped commercial benefits. Marketing researchers estimate that Canadian teenagers spend \$6 billion per year on consumer products (Côté et al, 1994:119). The youth market in the United States is estimated at \$240 billion (Marney, 1991:16). Roadkill films are big business and the music which goes into their soundtracks can be just as lucrative. As we shall see, the roadkill genre is in many ways an important showcase for the music industry.

The Roadkill Soundtrack

Often, music is a neglected element within film analysis and film theory. However, the music within the roadkill films is a significant element of the overall narrative and aesthetic structure. The relationship of film music to the visuals is often crucial in some scenes, especially when violent action is on-screen. The following selection of roadkill film soundtracks will be considered: *Kalifornia* (1993), *Love and a .45* (1994), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *True Romance* (1993) (please see Discography).

The above-mentioned roadkill soundtracks feature popular music, thus the following will focus on the aesthetic and affective functions of popular music within the films, as well as their relation to youth culture. The chapter will explore two main issues. First will be a discussion surrounding issues of "taste" and "authenticity" regarding the relationship between popular soundtracks, youth culture, and films. Second, the aesthetic and affective functions of music within the roadkill film will be examined.

Taste and Authenticity

The notion of "taste" is associated with consumption of cultural commodities. Cultural commodities are defined as products which serve aesthetic and expressive functions as well as utilitarian functions which are not as clearly defined (Hirsh, 1972:341). The soundtrack can be considered a cultural commodity which shapes and locates a consumer within a system of

consumption. The soundtrack is the result of powerful economic mergers and the process of creating and manufacturing associated cultural commodities (the film, the soundtrack, the posters, the magazines, the books). However, one must question what these products signify aesthetically and affectively to the consumer. Thus, cultural commodities function and interact on two levels, an economic level and a cultural level. The two levels interact in order to create networks of social prestige. In other words, the two categories are dependent on one another in order to have meaning. A theory of taste, which has its provenance from the work of Pierre Bourdieu, can be applied to cultural products which have a prominent aesthetic and affective quality. As defined earlier, affect is the creation of emotion. The definition of the term will be further expanded later on in this chapter.

A theory of taste rests on the assumption that consumers of cultural products are producers of meaning. In other words, the cultural level of a commodity enables the individual to experience pleasures and identity production. Taste, according to Bourdieu, is a category which functions as a marker for class (Storey, 1993:188). "Class" in this sense is being used as "both a socio-economic category and a particular level of quality" (Storey, 1993:188). Thus, the distinction between high and low culture, dominant or official culture and popular, are important for Bourdieu, however the element of taste is of *primary* importance. In other words, the choice of a

particular cultural product is an act with the intention to transform and maximize our social trajectories.

As a result, a theory of taste rests on a system of ideology and hierarchy. The priority of form over function is the zenith of the taste hierarchy (Storey, 1993:188). The appreciation of aesthetics is a sign of high cultural value in a commodity. In other words, "aesthetic distance is in effect the denial of function: it insists on the 'how' and not the 'why'" (Storey, 1993:189). Taste becomes an appreciation for, and a connection with cultural products, which connote a certain ideology. This ideology helps to reinforce culturally produced class differences according to taste.

It is my contention that the roadkill soundtrack is a cultural commodity which is used in the formation and reaffirmation of taste culture aligned with the category of "youth culture". However, at the same time, youth culture is not a fixed category with a predetermined social function. It is a loosely defined, extremely dynamic, open-ended social formation which, since at least the beatnik era, has provided cultural "space" for critical reflection on the larger mainstream society. It has also provided for a significant degree of oppositional politics, in the broad sense of the term. Thus, from the point of view of the sociology of taste, roadkill film music serves to integrate the audience and position the viewer according to hierarchies of socioeconomic status and education. However, and perhaps more profoundly, from the point of view of cultural contestation, the use of

modern rock and punk, which tends to disrupt the closure of the conventional film surface, serves to dislocate the viewing "position" of the audience and thus to provoke a critical relationship, however unsophisticated, with the established social structure.

Thus, the concept of youth culture within a theory of taste is highly problematic. Does one integrate youth culture as a part of the hierarchy set up within taste culture? Or does one distinguish youth culture as a separate sphere, a sphere which is a precursor to the "adult world" of the aesthetic appreciation within taste culture? Or, as mentioned above, is youth culture a "space" for questioning the mainstream and for subverting conventional culture? In some ways, there exists a reorganization of the "adult world" hierarchy of taste within youth culture. There is a perpetual reassertion of taste and what is considered "cool", in other words high class. A cultural product, such as a film, enters the market and establishes itself within the hierarchy of youth culture. Its position is ranked and judged according to the consumption patterns of its consumers. The consumers use this cultural product in order to position themselves within the class system, or system of "coolness" which applies almost solely to youth culture. Thus, this level of taste culture could be considered generational. On many levels, this consumption is purely aesthetic, thus a taste culture based on style and identity. However, some aspects of youth culture create a social formation which is not completely tied to the consumption of commodities.

Bourdieu points out that “‘intellectuals’ and artists always tend to align themselves with ‘youth’ in their manner of dress and in their whole bodily *hexis*” because:

in their representations as in reality, the opposition between the ‘old’ and the ‘young’ is homologous with the opposition between power and ‘bourgeois’ seriousness on the one hand, and indifference to power or money and the ‘intellectual’ refusal of the ‘spirit of seriousness’ on the other hand (Bourdieu, 1993:105).

Bourdieu considers that this alignment is due to the common status of the ‘intellectual’ and the ‘young bourgeois’ as “dominated fractions of the dominant group” (Bourdieu, 1993:105). Thus, Bourdieu seems to consider youth culture as a separate yet associated sphere to the “adult world” of taste culture. Youth culture requires an aesthetic criteria in order to give it some kind of system of classification and reference. Thus, individuals who align themselves with youth culture choose to do so because they are able to critique the mainstream culture.

On the one hand, the roadkill soundtracks are obviously compilations of the music used throughout the film, and of music “inspired” by the film. On the other hand, the soundtrack represents a collection of representative songs and bands of the lifestyle and aesthetic of the roadkill film. The songs are performed by bands which are primarily classified as “indie-rock”, “post-punk”, or “modern rock”. Such labels are classified hierarchically superior to other forms of popular music, thus creating a high/low differentiation. It

must be noted that this hierarchy is constructed within the minds of that particular youth culture. According to some theorists, the distinction between high and low culture is often considered a collapsed category; however one can speculate that within youth culture this distinction is significant. Since the dominant discourse of youth culture is popular culture, the distinction between high and low culture also operates *within* popular culture. For example, there is always a distinction between "serious" or "intellectual" popular music and "trite" popular music. Music labeled as "post-punk" or "modern rock" is historically defined as emerging from college campus radio, thus such music is considered "intellectual". However, at the same time, youth culture defines itself *against* the so-called high culture. Modern rock is simply not slotted into the category of youth culture. It also seduces us into questioning the mainstream social structure. As we shall see, this is used as an aesthetic technique within the roadkill films.

The roadkill soundtracks, notably for the films *Love and a .45* and *Natural Born Killers*, are compilations made up primarily of "modern rock" or "post punk" groups/artists such as L7, Nine Inch Nails, Jane's Addiction, Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dog, The Flaming lips, Meat Puppets, Butthole Surfers, and The Jesus and Mary Chain. By compiling these songs and groups, the soundtrack creates a certain aesthetic or taste culture. It should be noted that in addition to taste position, many of the so-called modern rock or alternative bands featured on the roadkill soundtracks are unified by a reoccurring quality of

youthful angst and nihilism. These soundtracks are released in the hopes of creating and recreating a taste culture built upon the aesthetic of the film and the music. The aesthetic and affective experiences of the soundtrack and the film are held up as "cool" within the sphere of youth culture. Much of this has to do with the young age of many of the writers and directors in Hollywood. As *Rolling Stone* points out, "a younger, hipper generation of directors better appreciates the atmosphere that fresh music provides" (Foege, 1994:34). The use of these musical artists is an obvious effort at integrating into and profiting from the youth market.

The issue of taste leads us to the notion of "authenticity". In order for a cultural commodity to achieve a certain level within the hierarchy of taste, it must prove to be authentic. The question of authenticity is raised in "highly ideologically charged discourses around aesthetic values" (Fornas, 1995:99). Authenticity can be defined as "a special relation between style and identity" whereby "an authentic style is particularly well anchored or rooted in an identity, or at least foregrounds such style/identity-homologies" (Fornas, 1995:100). The homologous relationship between identity and aesthetic/style creates a "play" between the cultural value of the film and of the soundtrack.

In many ways, the release of a soundtrack with so-called popular "modern rock" bands authenticates the film as a viable aesthetic and affective experience. Correspondingly, the film, which portrays a certain aesthetic or

style, authenticates the consumption of the soundtrack. An example of this relationship would be the *Singles* (1992) soundtrack. The success of the film was due significantly to the well-timed "grunge" explosion or "Seattle scene". A certain taste culture had formed and *Singles* was able to capitalize on it, through marketing to youth in the 1990's. While the film was not extraordinarily successful, the soundtrack gave the film its "authenticity". In other words, the release of an additional cultural commodity, such as the soundtrack, is a device which increases the cultural value of the film. Thus, the film is often sold via the promotion of "alternative" music. The cultural value of a soundtrack is also increased through the reference to influential individuals who convey authenticity. For example, the producer of the *Natural Born Killers* soundtrack is Trent Reznor, the lead singer of the *Nine Inch Nails*, who conveys an authentic relationship to the taste culture surrounding "alternative music".

In this context, however, we should not assume that "authenticity" is purely a category of the commodity culture of simulation functioning only in relation to a passive consumer audience. Like certain forms of jazz, rock music has been associated with rebellion from its birth. It is deeply rooted in the history of the marginalized black culture of North America; its contemporary evolution is inseparable from the ethos of the counterculture during the Vietnam war, and emblematic of contemporary oppositional politics in general. Such music resists being positioned in a rigid way. No

matter how cynical, the commercial packaging of the roadkill films, as a mutually reinforcing family of cultural commodities must at certain points be trumped and transgressed by its circulated references to artifacts of cultural contestation. The roadkill soundtrack also represents an active choice which deliberately "rejects" mainstream culture and social structure, suggesting a deeper layer of "authenticity" which is difficult to grasp, but remains present as an allusion to the "idea" of an alternative culture.

Just as the soundtrack contributes to the authentication of the film, the film contributes to the authentication of the music and the bands featured on the soundtrack. A song featured in a film is a highly effective and sought after form of advertising. Given that so-called alternative bands do not have a large niche in this era of "format" radio (for example, easy listening, adult contemporary, country, urban contemporary, or Top 40), films reach a wide audience. Thus, the films are able to give the alternative music access to the mainstream.

The roadkill film soundtracks work within this relationship between style and identity. One must keep in mind that this authentication between the film and the soundtrack takes place predominantly within the space of youth culture, thus delimiting the hierarchy of taste culture. The aesthetic of the roadkill films, as described above, features a unique lifestyle. In order to further understand the aesthetics of the roadkill film and its soundtrack, one must look at the aesthetic and affective functions of popular music in film.

The Aesthetic and Affective Functions of Popular Music in Film

The function of popular music in film is complex to untangle. The music is on the one hand used for purposes of commodification and integration, and on the other hand, it is used for disruption. In order to allow for such a discussion, several assumptions must be explored. First, when film music is accompanied with the visuals, it has the ability to shape perception. The ability to shape audience perception comes from music's power "to tap specific musical conventions that circulate throughout the culture" (Kalinak, 1992:15). In other words, as Simon Frith points out, one "can't develop an explanation of how [popular] music works in films without reference to an explanation of how popular music works more generally" (Frith, 1984:79). Thus, in order to understand the use of popular music within film, one must examine the meanings and associations of popular music both outside and within a given film.

The second assumption is that music functions on different levels simultaneously. Frith raises Claudia Gorbman's classification of music through a system of "codes". These codes are pure musical codes, cultural musical codes, and cinematic musical codes. The sets of codes refer to an "organizing discourse on three different levels in any film" (Gorbman, 1987:13). The pure musical codes refer to the musical structure itself. The cultural musical codes refer to the cultural context of the music within the

narrative. And finally, the cinematic musical codes refer to meaning through the filmic context itself (Gorbman, 1987:3). Frith points to the difficulty of separating these codes. However one can use them in order to provide a greater understanding of the multiplicity or layering of meaning which popular music provides to film.

The third and final assumption is that a mood or feeling is created through the affective result of music and film. Affect can be defined as the creation of emotion. Grossberg considers that affect is closely linked to "what we describe as the 'feeling' of life", whereby this "'feeling' is a socially constructed domain of cultural effects" (Grossberg, 1992:80). In addition, affective responses are non-intellectual, thus they are difficult to depict accurately. The significance of affect is noted by Claudia Gorbman in that

affect is the missing term in an adequate understanding of ideology, for it offers the possibility of a "psychology of belief" which would explain how and why ideologies are sometimes, and only sometimes, effective, and always to varying degrees (Gorbman, 1987:82).

She continues to explain that "it is the affective investment in particular ideological sites that explains the power of the articulation which bonds particular representations and realities" (Gorbman, 1987:83).

Keeping these assumptions in mind, one must also consider the aspect of the complexity of the spectator. The filmic elements, such as music, are powerful; however often these elements are chosen as an aesthetic strategy to

subvert the conventional form. As it has been mentioned in the previous chapters, the audience views film from several positions. To be lulled into a fixed position is especially unlikely while viewing the roadkill film.

An example may further one's understanding of the significance of affect within film and music. A frequently cited quote by Tony Thomas in *Music For the Movies*, illustrates the effects of classical music scores:

Your musical tastes become molded by these scores, heard without knowing it. You *see* love, and you *hear* it. Simultaneously. It makes sense. Music suddenly becomes a language for you, without your knowing it. (Huckvale, 1990:1).

Without saying it directly, Thomas suggests that one *feels* love as well. In *Natural Born Killers*, the first "love scene" of the film occurs after the two protagonists, Mickey and Mallory, kill several patrons and a waitress of a road side diner. The scene is of Mallory and Mickey stopped in the desert to rest. Mallory is standing on top of the car with a halo effect around her, and there are floating images of horses in the sky. The scene establishes that the two have an emotional and psychological need for one another. The music is a cover of Lou Reed's "Sweet Jane" by the Cowboy Junkies. The sultry and haunting voice of the lead singer and the slow pace of the song are socially constructed intimations of "love" and "romance". Thus, the music normally would allow the spectator to *feel* love in addition to seeing it.

However, this scene is far from being a conventional love scene. The spectator is not diegetically prepared to see this couple in a loving and

affectionate situation based on the highly violent opening sequence. The music is an important element within the film since the narrative is discontinuous, non-linear. The soundtrack supplements the narrative in order to provide several "readings" of the scene. The scene can be read as a "love scene", and also as a parody or irony. The narrative undermines the romantic quality of the soundtrack. The music adds another dimension in order "to satisfy a need to compensate for, fill in, the emotional depth not verbally representable" (Gorbman, 1987:67). As a result, the irony of the scene creates a distancing or decentering effect for the spectator.

As "Sweet Jane" is repeated at each "love" sequence, it triggers the appropriate affect or emotion from the audience. For example, "Sweet Jane" is heard as the two are exchanging marriage vows on a bridge, as well as in the scene during which Mickey writes a touching letter to Mallory while they are both incarcerated. The consistent repetition of this music assists to "construct a sense of continuous duration and a sense of coherent space" (Huckvale, 1990:6). And at the same time, the intrusiveness of the rock musical form and parodic quality of its use tends to decenter the audience viewpoint and to fragment the narratives line.

In an ironic sense, "Sweet Jane" can be considered the love theme of *Natural Born Killers*. A theme, as defined by Gorbman, is "any music - melody, melody fragment, or distinctive harmonic progression - heard more than once during the course of the film" (Gorbman, 1987:26). As a result, the

theme allows the spectator to absorb "the diegetic associations of its first occurrence" and "its very repetition can subsequently recall that filmic context" (Gorbman, 1987:26). This is demonstrated in *True Romance* through the repetition of a composition by Hans Zimmer called "You're So Cool". The repetition of this simple melody throughout the film is either on the one hand accompanied by the female protagonist's voice-over dialogue, or on the other hand during the scenes which feature no dialogue and only visuals. Thus, the use of music recalls the spectator to a context of personal thought and reflection.

Discussions of film music must refer to the methods by which the filmmakers integrate music within a film. Music is used inside and outside the diegesis of a film. The diegesis can be defined as "*the narratively defined spatiotemporal world of the actions and characters*" (Gorbman, 1987:21). On the one hand, music can be diegetic, meaning the source of the music is incorporated within the action world of the film, and subsequently the world of the characters. On the other hand, the music can be non-diegetic, meaning the music is from a source outside the diegesis.

Most often, both diegetic and non-diegetic film music lessen "the awareness of the frame, of discontinuity; it draws the spectator further into diegetic illusion" (Gorbman, 1987:59). The use of music is an element of "suture" which creates a seamless filmic experience. The distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic music is significant when referring to the creation

of affect (emotion) within the diegesis even though the music itself is non-diegetic. Thus, the spheres of diegetic and non-diegetic music are not distinct. To some degree, the two spheres converge in order to further integrate the spectator within the narrative. An example of this is the use of music within most Hollywood cinema while characters are driving. The obvious diegetic source would be a car radio, however the music is heard without any visible effort of turning on a radio. Music while people are driving has become a convention within Hollywood cinema, especially in the road film. In *Kalifornia*, as the four characters (Carrie, Brian, Adele, and Early) begin their road trip to California, the start of the car signals the cue for the music, which is "When You Come Back" by Drivin' N' Cryin'. The music may have been *theoretically* non-diegetic, however the genre of the road film further naturalizes the use of music. Thus, the music is so involved with the diegesis of the film that it is difficult to propose that this kind of music is completely non-diegetic.

The music used within the roadkill film creates narrative connections for the audience and enhances the visuals of the film. Music helps "to *make a spectacle* of the images it accompanies; it lends an epic quality to the diegetic events" (Gorbman, 1987:68). This can be illustrated through one of the many violent scenes within the roadkill films. For example, the hyper-violent scene in *True Romance* when the male protagonist Clarence decides to visit his girlfriend's pimp, Drexel. The sequence turns into a violent and bloody

encounter which ends with Clarence killing Drexel. The music which accompanies the scene is "I Want Your Body" by Nymphomania, an intense dance track. The prominence of the music is heightened as the violence progresses, thus creating a spectacle. This particular scene provides another way interesting illustration of the way in which the soundtrack helps both to decenter the audience position in relation to the narrative while simultaneously implicating and estranging the viewer from violence. In a sense, the loudness and crudeness of the music distances the spectator, thus making the violence more easily digestible. At the same time, however, the music mirrors the aggression visually depicted in the scene. This not only amplifies the violence itself; it doubles the violent assault of the film on the audience. The viewer is engulfed in a sensory onslaught, but the result of this may be less a matter either of legitimating or subverting the commodity culture and its exploitation of violence, and more a matter of experience into a painful emotional dilemma (often exacerbated by the soundtrack) is typical of the more sophisticated roadkill films and should be distinguished from the simpler "scare" effects of the conventional horror film, which are less likely to confront his or her own contradictory response to violence.

Another example of the creation of spectacle through music is the opening sequence of *Natural Born Killers*. The sequence is of Mickey and Mallory in a roadside diner. Mallory is dancing seductively to music on the jukebox, thus the music is from a diegetic source. Mallory asks a "redneck"

patron who is harassing her: "Are you flirtin' with me?". At the onset of a change of music from the jukebox, Mallory attacks him by throwing a dish at his face while he is drinking a beer. She proceeds to beat him severely by punching and kicking him incessantly. The music is "Shitlist" by the female "post-punk" band L7. The genre of music heightens the spectacle of violent imagery and distances us from the extreme nature of the violence. The music also emphasizes the quick cuts, the switching from colour to black and white footage, and the use of slow motion effects for point-of-view shots of a bullet and a knife. The music and the lyrics are an obviously important element within the narrative of the sequence. The lyrics of "Shitlist" demonstrate Mallory's anger and madness:

When I get mad
And I get pissed
I grab my pen
And I write out a list
Of all the people
That won't be missed
You made my shitlist

For all the ones
Who put me out (shitlist)
For all the ones
Who filled my head with doubt (shitlist)
For all the ones
Who got me pissed
You made my shitlist

The music is so wrapped up within the diegesis of the film that Mallory screams "You made my shitlist.", while jumping on the "redneck's" dead body. Much violent imagery is scored with the intention of making the

violence spectacular, and also to produce an affective response. Composer of classical scores for horror films, Simon Boswell, explains that he “was not scoring the violent images, but the emotional sub-text, the inner feelings of the character” (Boswell, 1995:37).

However, the Mallory jukebox scene goes much further, since the “emotional sub-text” conveyed is contradictory and absurd - the menacing atmosphere established so pointless and arbitrary that the “inner feelings of the character” appear empty and meaningless or perhaps even non-existent. It is not difficult to see how in this context we are confronted not only with a satirical deconstruction of Mickey and Mallory, but of our own emotional responses to the film, and more generally of Hollywood film conventions as such.

The use of popular music within cinema creates a sense of shared knowledge for the audience. But in roadkill films this conventional commercial strategy sets up a common set of cultural referents against which the satirical and critical impulse can play on an implicit counterpoint. The music is by a known artist or band, which thus manipulates the audience into reliving a familiar musical experience in a new context. The audience has most likely heard the music on the radio or in public places prior to the film experience. The song is continuously presented within the context of promoting the film. Thus there is anticipation on the part of the listener to hear the piece in the film. The anticipation, of course, is not a conscious

desire. For instance, most members of an audience would be familiar with the voice of Bryan Adams in the theme of *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* or the voice of Whitney Houston in *The Bodyguard*. The recognition and the anticipation of the film music enhances the filmic experience for the spectator. The repetition of these songs is essential to the success of a cultural commodity. This is one distinct difference between the experience of a film with a classical music score and a film featuring popular music. Popular music has become one way in which filmmakers can use recognition, familiarity, and anticipation in order to enhance the audience's experience. But as I have tried to demonstrate, the use of popular music in the roadkill film also has the effect of decentering the spectator from a fixed viewing position and building in contradictions at the same time that it builds a narrative coherence.

Music within film provides the audience with a common language of affective expression. "Music is central to the way in which the pleasure of the cinema is simultaneously individualized and shared" (Frith, 1984:86). When the particular song or band is not recognizable to an audience, the type of popular music used nevertheless creates a certain mood and expectation. For instance, the use of hard rock or heavy metal connotes a different emotional connection to the characters and the visuals than the use of country music. These connections are molded through each individual experience of popular music and through the shared knowledges of certain forms of popular music.

These shared knowledges are often stereotypes, however their accuracy remains unimportant. What is significant is to recognize is to situate them according to the visual system of the film. Thus, the audience experiences popular music within film through several systems of recognition and understanding. These systems of recognition and understanding are created through the pure, cultural, and cinematic codes associated with film music.

This complex system between the visual text and the musical text can be illustrated by scenes from several of the roadkill films. The road film has a history of using music in order to connote a feeling of freedom, rebellion, and power. In addition, the aesthetic of the highways and motels encourage the use of moody dark music and/or kitschy nostalgic music.

For example, the *Love & a .45* soundtrack features Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" which is popular country music, as well as Roger Miller's "King of the Road". The connotations of the western film throughout the road film are obvious. The image of the wild west is heightened by the barren landscape off of the highways and the gun slinging characters. By referencing westerns, the roadkill film plays with a nostalgic element. Since a large part of the audience of these films is young, the nostalgia for westerns is based on their cultural experience and knowledge of this genre. The western genre has credibility and authenticity within the eyes of a film audience, thus the music reinforces this authenticity.

"Ring of Fire" is the music which accompanies the end scene and credits. The final scene is of the fugitive couple, Star and Watty, driving in their convertible into the Mexican sunset. The use of such songs alters the meaning when one considers the cinematic and cultural codes which layer the experience. If one considers the pure musical codes of country music, such as the Johnny Cash song, the perception of a young audience is certainly modified through the visual use within the narrative of the film, thus the cultural and cinematic codes.

There are obvious connotative and denotative elements in the relationship between the visual and musical texts. Claudia Gorbman elucidates the semiotic function of music by referring to Barthes concept of anchorage. She explains that "music [...] anchors the image in meaning, throws a net around floating visual signifier, assures the viewer of a safely channeled signified" (Gorbman, 1987:58). The use of music such as country in a hyper-violent and highly stylized film creates a "kitschy" aesthetic. An additional example is the use of Leonard Cohen's "Waiting For the Miracle" and "The Future" in *Natural Born Killers*. Mood is created through ironic overlay of contrasting images and sound. The dark serenity of Leonard Cohen's style is at odds with the violent images on screen. On the one hand, the music is disruptive for the audience due to its "kitschy" aesthetic. Thus, the use of this music has an alienating effect - perhaps even an "estrangement effect" in the Brechtian sense. On the other hand, the music is adapted as

“acceptable” and authentic for the young consumer of the soundtrack through the aesthetic of the film. And at the same time, the audience is alienated by the discontinuous narrative and the “ironic” use of the music. The act of consuming the film music as a soundtrack, while keeping in mind the visuals of the film, is a layer which contributes to the construction of identity.

The Aesthetics of Popular Music and Youth

The soundtrack of the roadkill films have greatly contributed to the understanding of the roadkill aesthetic. The theories provided by Pierre Bourdieu and Claudia Gorbman provide a proficient base to discuss popular music within film. In order to explore popular film music, one must consider the cultural codes in addition to the cinematic codes. The cultural and political identity connected with popular music colours the discussion, especially through its connection to youth culture. Considering popular music has such strong cultural and ideological connections, it is complex to assess every aspect of the visual and musical text within films. However, through examining the aesthetics of certain films and music, it is revealed that the development of a “taste culture” is significant. The formation of taste cultures surrounding the aesthetic cultural practices leads to discussions of authenticity. In the case of popular film music, the music can serve to

authenticate the film, or the aesthetics of the film can serve to authenticate its soundtrack.

In addition, the manner in which popular music is used within the roadkill film contributes to a disruptive film experience. The spectator is often decentered from his/her subject position through the ironic use of music. Music, in the case of the roadkill genre, is used as an aesthetic strategy to subvert the conventional form. Thus, the soundtrack of the roadkill film has provided an effective understanding of the roadkill aesthetic.

Conclusion

The large number of roadkill films which have emerged in the late eighties and early nineties has been popular with a wide audience. Some films, such as *Natural Born Killers*, have been surrounded by a media circus. The popularity and abundance of these films were primary factors which induced this study. When there is a noticeable number of films in a particular sub-genre, there is a need to make associations in order to study and place them within the contemporary cultural context. Similarly, in the mid to late eighties many films featuring female killers emerged, such as *Fatal Attraction*, *The Crush*, *Basic Instinct*, *The Temp*, *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, *Single White Female*, *Serial Mom*, *Poison Ivy*, and *The Tie That Binds*. The popularity of these films provoked a number of writings on the subject of female murderers. Thus, the study of roadkill films emerges from a tradition of surveying cultural shifts in film.

The aesthetic elements within the roadkill films are what make them notable. This study has examined the violence, the road film iconography, and the youth culture, with particular focus on the roadkill soundtrack as an aesthetic element and a cultural commodity. As mentioned previously, the aesthetic approach is crucial within the roadkill film because it concentrates on the image and the affective nature of the stylistic choices.

The theoretical framework of this study has been slanted toward a postmodern approach. Theorists often labeled as postmodern such as Jean

Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson, Robert Venturi, Lawrence Grossberg, and Dick Hebdige were referred to in order to develop a conceptual framework. However, due to the undeveloped nature of this subject, many other types of theorists were also consulted, such as René Girard, Leo Bersani, Freud, Pierre Bourdieu, Simon Frith, and Norman Denzin. In order to provide an encompassing account of the roadkill genre, it was necessary to consult a variety of theoretical frameworks. In other words, film theory alone would have been insufficient. Thus, literary and social theory, psychoanalysis, architectural theory, and cultural studies were united under the rubric of the roadkill film.

The violence within many contemporary films, such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Killing Zoe*, *Pulp Fiction*, and several of the roadkill films included in this study, is a violence which is particular to the 1990's. Much of this has to do with the influx of young new directors in the film scene. For example, Quentin Tarantino has been a major influence in Hollywood since *Reservoir Dogs*, given that his style of violence is mixed with humour, youth, and glamour. One must ask what the appeal is, given their popularity. The roadkill films, and other films featuring this hyper-violent aesthetic, have redefined violence and humour within contemporary society. The aesthetics of roadkill violence were described within the first chapter. The addition of a cool quick wit and "hipness" transform what audiences expect from this type of contemporary film.

The aesthetics of the films contribute to how the films are received within popular culture. As mentioned previously, many right-wing activists consider the roadkill films reprehensible. However, their popularity proves that many individuals have enjoyed the extreme violence. In the *New York Times*, *True Romance* is described as “a tale of young lovers” “who accidentally fall into murderous doings and still manage to remain sweet kids” (James, 1993:11). The same can be said of the young couple, Starlene and Watty, in *Love and A .45*. The hyper-violent films are pleasing thanks to the pop-culture aesthetics, such as “Alabama’s blue plastic heart-shaped earrings” in *True Romance* (James, 1993:11). It is the blending of the traditional road film, the charm of a “B” movie, and a “hip” aesthetic that renders these hyper-violent films popular and palatable with the younger generation and audiences beyond. The 1974 film *Badlands* is also a violent road film; however the aesthetic of the contemporary roadkill genre is not present. The film incorporated popular culture references such as allusions to James Dean regarding the Martin Sheen character. However, the violence of *Badlands* was not as graphic as the contemporary roadkill film and the film did not incorporate the same degree of humour in a macabre way. Thus, the aesthetic is definitively of the 1990’s.

Perhaps the reason why these films cause such an uproar is due to the way violence is presented. We must ask ourselves: Does this violence disturb us precisely because it parodies our worst fears and reenacts our less

socially respectable desires? We might consider these films to be a kind of extension, in the visual sphere, of what Charles Levin calls "cultural metaphysics": a "conceptual holding room[s] for paradox and nonsense, for everything in the contemporary social imaginary that is illegitimate, unpleasant or indeterminate" (Levin, 1996:3).

The purpose of this study was to provide a cultural and social account of the roadkill film through an aesthetic reading of the violence, the road iconography, and the youth culture. It is hopeful that the identification and investigation of sub-genres within film adds to our understanding of contemporary North American culture. The road genre will continue to change according to cultural moment. However, the roadkill film belongs to the first half of the 1990's.

Filmography

Alligator Eyes (1991)

Castle Hill Productions. Laughing Man Partnership. Academy Entertainment. Director: John Feldman. Producers: John Feldman and Ken Schwenker. Executive Producer: David Marlow and Joe Marlow. Starring: Annabelle Larsen (Pauline), Roger Kabler (Robbie). Running Time: 101 min.

The motivation behind the main character of this road film is revenge. Pauline witnesses the murder of her mother at the age of two and she is blinded by the murderer. She is taken care of by a Dr. Peterson for the next twenty years. She decides to seek revenge on her mother's murderer and hitchhikes from New York to Portsmouth Island and Atlantic Island. She is picked up by two men (Robbie and Lance) and a woman (Marjorie) who are on the road vacationing. Robbie, Lance, and Marjorie suspect that Pauline has ulterior motives behind her trip to these islands when they find a gun in her bag. She is expecting to meet with her mother's murderer, however Dr. Peterson is there instead. Pauline feels she has been deceived and shoots Peterson.

The images of long stretches of highway as well as the motel and diner establishments are prevalent within this film. The narrative of the film is very weak, however this film is worthy in that it features a visually impaired woman on the road by herself who intimidates the travelers who pick her up.

The traditional image of road film features a sole male, or a male and female couple. The road trip is obviously a male venture since we are presented with the dangers of being an attractive female, however Pauline proves that she is capable of protecting herself in many different situations.

Badlands (1974)

Warner Brothers. Director: Terrence Malick. Producer: Terrence Malick. Screenplay: Terrence Malick. Starring: Martin Sheen (Kit) and Sissy Spacek (Holly). Running Time: 95 min.

This is one of the many films based on the actual killing spree in Nebraska and surrounding areas in 1958 by Charles Starkweather and Carol Fugate. Kit and Holly go on the road after Kit murders Holly's father. The body count begins, and similarly to Starkweather and Fugate, the couple is responsible for at least ten deaths. Holly follows Kit blinded by what she thinks is love (love anthem of the film is "Love is Strange"), while Kit exhibits an attitude similar to James Dean. The characters are low-key, which compares interestingly to those developed in *Natural Born Killers*. The juxtaposition of violent a narrative and remarkable visual imagery becomes an established tradition within the road film.

Breathless (1983)

An Orion Pictures release of a Martin Erlichman/Miko Productions production. Director: Jim McBride. Producer: Martin Erlichman. Executive Producer: Keith Addis. Screenplay: L.M. Kit Carson and Jim

McBride. Based on the script for: *A Bout de Souffle* (1959) by Jean-Luc Godard. Starring: Richard Gere (Jesse Lujack) and Valerie Kaprinsky (Monica Poiccard). Running Time: 105 min.

Within the first few minutes of the film *Breathless*, the rockin' Jesse Lujack kills a highway patrolman and takes off for Los Angeles in pursuit of a French architecture student named Monica. Jesse continues to evade the law and cause corruption throughout the film by mugging coffee shop customers and stealing cars. "Most of the time they're one step ahead of the law, and the rest of the time they're heavily engaged in sex" (Winsten, 1983:47). As Jesse collects the money that is owed to him, he convinces Monica to escape to Mexico together.

I would not qualify *Breathless* as a remake of Godard's *A Bout de Souffle*. McBride constructs the character of Jesse as an anti-hero who revels in glamorized nihilism. The characters resemble the "lovers-on-the-run" established in many "road" films, however the "road" component of the film is at the absolute beginning and the absolute end. The violence is not spectacularly bloody, but the continual disregard for the law colours the film with a *Rebel without a Cause* sensibility of the 80's.

***Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)**

Director: Arthur Penn. Producer: Warren Beatty. Screenplay: David Newman and Robert Benton. Starring: Warren Beatty (Clyde), Faye Dunaway (Bonnie Parker). Running Time: 105 min.

The outlaw couple, Bonnie and Clyde, start on the road robbing banks. Along the way, they pick up various interested parties: a driver, Clyde's brother, and his wife. Bonnie becomes distressed with the growing size of the group, however she continues to participate in the shooting and running from the law. She longs to be Clyde's lover, however he cannot "perform" until later on in the film. The body count of their adventures rises and eventually they are framed and killed in a bloody shoot out. This is one of the first major films which features a blood bath of violence. *Bonnie and Clyde* "kindly stylized death for us; it created nobility from senselessness, it choreographed a dance out of blood and death, it gave meaning and import to our mortal twitchings" (Sobchack, 1976:84). The use of slow motion during the last bloody scene is a key element which is employed in violent films to come. The overall aesthetics of death and violence shaped and influenced the future of filmmaking.

***Detour* (1945)**

Black and white. Producers Releasing Corp. Director: Edgar G. Ulmer. Producer: Leon Fromkass. Screenplay: Martin Goldsmith. Starring: Tom Neal (Al Roberts), Ann Savage (Vera), Edmund MacDonald (Charles Haskell Jr.), and Claudia Drake (Sue). Running Time: 67 min.

This is the only *film noir* I was able to watch. It is a fascinating character study as the tormented lead male, Al Roberts, narrates the events of his story from a diner in the middle of nowhere. Al is a piano player in a

New York night club. He decides to join his love interest (Sue) in California, so Al starts hitchhiking. Along the way, Al is picked up by a young wealthy gentleman, Charles Haskell Jr.. While Al is driving, he discovers that Haskell has died in his sleep. Al panics and dumps Haskell's body, however he eventually meets a mysterious hitchhiking woman (Vera) who knows what has happened with Haskell. Vera plans to profit from Haskell's death, however Al is reluctant to go along with her. The ending returns to Al who has been distressed about the entire situation.

The use of "night-for-night" filming is highly effective in creating a dark and ominous tone to Al's adventures. The psychological glimpses into Al's world through voice-over is helpful and fascinating. The icons of the road film are present: motels, diners, and gas stations. There are several *film noirs* which I want to explore within my thesis in order to look at the beginning of the road film.

***Easy Rider* (1969)**

Director: Dennis Hopper. **Producer:** Peter Fonda. **Screenplay:** Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Terry Southern. **Starring:** Peter Fonda (Wyatt), Dennis Hopper (Billy), and Jack Nicholson (George Hanson). **Running Time:** 94 min.

Easy Rider is often considered *the* rock and roll road film. The story is of two motorcyclists (Wyatt and Billy) on the rural highways of the USA and the main streets of cities. Their adventures include picking up a hitchhiker

(George) who is later killed in a fight. The pair escape police several times during their adventures, but the end comes too soon when Billy is shot and Wyatt rolls his motorcycle. This film features some extreme violence (came out the same year as *The Wild Bunch*) while two males explore roadside USA. The elements of the road film are there, as well as the "rock and roll" soundtrack which is a characteristic of many other road films to come (*Natural Born Killers*, *Love and a .45*, *Highway 61*, *Roadkill*). This film is made during a significant period of American cinema when sex and violence was beginning to be used in a cynical manner.

***Freeway* (1988)**

Gower Street Picture. Director: Francis Delia. Producers: Peter Davies and William Panzer. Screenplay: Darell Fetty and Francis Delia. Based on the novel "Freeway" by: Deanne Barkley. Starring: Darlene Fluegel (Sarah "Sunny" Harper), James Russo (Frank Quinn). Running time: 91 min.

This is not a traditional road movie, but it gives new meaning to "road kill" film. The story is set in Los Angeles where there is a killer on the loose responsible for the "freeway shootings". There has been a rash of killings done by a psychopath, calling himself the "angel of death", a "servant" and a "traveler", who shoots people from his car while they are driving. Sunny is a nurse in an LA hospital and her husband was a victim of the freeway shooter. She is convinced that she can catch him. The killer calls a radio psychiatrist show and recites passages from the bible. A retired cop (Frank) decides to

help Sunny catch the freeway shooter. The ending is a shoot out at the intersection of five main freeways because the shooter is convinced that the apocalypse is coming and that God is to come down at that location to punish all sinners.

The imagery of the freeways and the city are interesting for a road movie that does not actually go "on the road". The shooter also kept blood-stained maps in order to track his shootings. This resembles a horror/thriller on the road, however the fear is brought to the arteries of the city circulation. The couple are on the "good" side of the law in this film, contrary to many other road films.

***Guncrazy* (1993)**

**Zeta Productions - Academy Entertainment and First Look Pictures.
Director: Tamra Davis. Producer: Zane W. Levitt and Diane Firestone. Co-Producer: Mark Vellen. Writer: Matthew Bright. Editor: Kevin Tent.
Starring: Drew Barrymore (Anita), James Legros (Howard). Running Time: 97 min.**

Anita lives in small-town America in a trailer park with her mother's sexually abusive boyfriend (Rooney). Her mother left for Fresno and Anita hopes to find her someday. Anita, age 16, is given an assignment in school to find a pen pal. She chooses a convict, Howard, age 24. Anita corresponds with him until his release. Howard is delighted he has found a girl who likes guns. The two become close and practice shooting together. One evening

after Rooney rapes Anita, Anita shoots her mother's boyfriend while he is watching TV. Anita picks up Howard in the car and they escape on an road adventure. The body count continues, with the death of a police officer and of two young men. In addition, the couple rob several locations, such as a bar and a convenience store. They drive to Fresno to find Anita's mother. After breaking into a beautiful house, they watch themselves become "celebrities" on television. The police surround the house; Howard give himself up for Anita, however he is shot in the process.

This B film is similar in many ways to *Badlands* (1974). The film follows the typical roadkill genre, including references to the couple as "[white] trash". The characters consider themselves superior when they carry a gun: "I got this gun, ya see. As far as I got this gun, I'm smart and you're stupid", and when they appear on television: "Cheer up... we're celebrities; people will want our autograph.". However, the pessimism and nihilism continues throughout the movie: "Our lives are over now", "There's no place for us now", and "I was never really alive until I hooked up with you".

***Heathers* (1989)**

A New World Pictures release in association with Cinemarque Entertainment (USA) Ltd. Director: Michael Lehmann. Producer: Denise Di Novi. Executive producer: Christopher Webster. Screenplay: Daniel

Waters. Starring: Winona Ryder (Veronica), Christian Slater (J.D.).
Running Time: 102 min.

The setting of the film is a high school with a fixed cast system in place which is controlled by three teenage "bitches" named Heather. Veronica, a "Heather-in-training", falls in love with the dark and mysterious new student, J.D.. Veronica is tired of the Heathers ruling and ruining the school, so she and J.D. feed Heather no. 1 a concoction to encourage her to be sick to her stomach. However, unbeknownst to Veronica, the concoction is lethal liquid drain cleaner and Heather no. 1 dies. This murder as well as the following murders are covered up to appear as suicides. The film is written in witty slang and features a humorous portrayal of a unhumorous subject "teen" suicide. Christian Slater, who plays J.D., puts on the sly yet charming character of Jack Nicholson.

Heathers qualifies as a teen "angst" film which emerged just prior to a series of black comedies (*So I Married an Ax Murderer*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). However, there was one predecessor: the 1976 *Massacre at Central High*, directed by Renee Dalder (Hoberman, 1989:53). The macabre of *Heathers* is balanced between the hilarious witty dialogue (much like "Bart-speak" in *The Simpson's* which is to come a few years later) and the tragic body count of numerous high school students. This contrasts many of the "lighter" teen comedies which preceded this film (the *Bill and Ted* series, *Wayne's World*, *Johnny Be Good*, *Son in Law*). While the violence of this film is

not especially bloody or spectacular, the combination of the macabre and humor creates a new genre of "teen" film and reflects the transformation of other genres, such as the horror film which incorporates humor. And as many "road kill" films, the stars are young, "cool", and reckless. Film critic David Denby writes: "*Heathers* was conceived in the Reagan era, but released now, a blast at the cant of 'niceness' covering greed and opportunism, it becomes the first significant Bush-era movie" (Denby, 1989:68).

***Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1990)**

A Greycat Films release. Director: John McNaughton. Producers: John McNaughton, Lisa Dedmond, and Steven A. Jones. Executive Producers: Waleed B. Ali and Malik B. Ali. Starring: Michael Rooker (Henry), Tracy Arnold (Becky), and Tom Towles (Otis). Running Time: 90 min.

The location of the film is Chicago. The film begins with Henry on the road, he gives hitchhikers rides and asks people for directions. The murders seem not to touch Henry's consciousness. The "white trash" characters of Becky and Otis enter the picture, and Otis and Henry join forces in videotaping the killings. The murders are a necessity for Henry, a compulsion. But things take a turn when Henry finds Otis raping his sister, Becky. Otis is killed by Henry, and the two escape together and check into a motel. The next morning, Henry leaves alone depositing a bloody suitcase by the roadside.

This film was made in 1986, however the MPAA rated the film X, and soon after the film was picked up by a film festival and released without a rating (Benson: 1990:1). The murders are not seen on-screen, and this is partly due to the low budget of the film. The signs of the traditional road film are present: the diners and motels become hunting grounds for Henry. The aspect of dark humor is present within much of the dialogue. This road film is more specifically about a serial killer who is continually hitting the road and less about the random killing of roadkill couples.

Highway 61 (1992)

A Skouras Picture release of a Shadow Shows Entertainment Corporation presentation. Director: Bruce McDonald. Producer: Colin Brunton and Bruce McDonald. Executive Producer: Daniel Salerno. Screenplay: Don McKeller. Starring: Valerie Buhagiar (Jackie Bangs), Don McKeller (Pokey Jones). Running Time: 102 min.

This Canadian production starts at the top of Highway 61 in the Canadian backwoods and follows the highway until the southern US. A young aspiring jazz musician (Pokey) decides to drive a young rebellious woman (Jackie) and the body of her dead brother to New Orleans. Pokey is misled by Jackie into thinking the body is her deceased brother, however she is simply using the anonymous corpse as a means of transporting a significant amount of cocaine across the US/Canadian border. The "lovers-on-the-run" are being chased by Satan, who wants to recover the dead body

in order to claim his soul. Jackie and Pokey procure a gun and experience the "easy rider" adventure to the music of Bob Dylan, as well as stopping off at the house where Elvis grew up. The adventure highlights the Canadian relationship to American pop culture and debunks several myths along the way, especially the nostalgia of American rock and roll. The story is described as "a sexual dream fantasy about making it with an outlaw babe" (Wilmington, 1992:12).

Kalifornia (1993)

Polygram Filmed Entertainment in association with Viacom Pictures and Propaganda Films. Director: Dominic Sena. Producers: Steve Golin, Sigurjon Sighvatsson, and Aristides McGarry. Screenplay: Tim Metcalfe. Starring: Brad Pitt (Early Grayce), Juliette Lewis (Adele), David Duchovny (Brian), and Michelle Forbes(Carrie). Running Time: 117 min.

Early is a twisted ex-con who needs to leave town with his "girlish" girlfriend (Adele) because he has just killed his landlord. The couple get a ride with another couple (Brian and Carrie) heading to California who need to share expenses for the cross-country road trip. The psychological contrasts between the couples are exhibited as the narrative moves along. Brian and Carrie are the intelligent and socially stable couple, while Early and Adele are the immature psychopathic white trash couple. Brian and Carrie are writing a book on serial killers: Brian does the psychological research and Carrie is the photographer. They visit stops along the way which are

landmarks of serial killings. As Brian explains the psychological makeup of the standard serial killer, the character of Early develops further along similar lines. Early murders a few individuals along the way without Brian and Carrie knowing, however they begin to suspect that something is wrong. The illustrated descriptions of the serial killings which are to be featured in the book create an ominous and serious tone to the film. The irony is that our fascination with extreme violence may lead us too close to real violence.

The Living End (1992)

Cineplex Odeon Video. Director: Gregg Araki. Producers: Jon Gerrans and Marcus Hu. Executive Producers: Evelyn Hu, Jon Jost, Henry S. Rosenthal, and Mike Thomas. Writer: Gregg Araki. Editor: Gregg Araki. Starring: Craig Gilmore (Jon), Mike Dytri (Luke). Running Time: 85 min.

This B movie begins with a shot of a young man (Jon) on the road in his Subaru decorated with a bumper sticker declaring "Choose Death". Jon, a gay writer in Los Angeles, has just found out that he is HIV positive. Still getting over the shock, Jon encounters Luke, a nomadic loner who is also infected. The two set off on the road to avoid the "everydayness" of their lives. During the course of their travels, Luke shoots three homophobic rednecks and a police officer. They travel as far as they can until the disease finally catches up with them. The closing scene depicts Jon and Luke sitting by their car in the desert, watching the sun set. The two protagonists did their utmost to salvage what was left of their living experience.

This film is a deviation from the traditional heterosexual couple of the roadkill genre. However, this low-budget film offers the audience the similar narrative of being marginal individuals within society who decide to take off on the road. The film presents a different representation of AIDS; the protagonists are active until the very end of the film and not presented as deteriorating and passive victims.

Love and a .45 (1994)

Tristar Pictures. A Darren Scott/Tristar production. Director: C.M. Talkington. Producer: Darin Scott. Co-Production: Jim Steele. Executive Producers: Mark Amin and Andrew Hirsh. Screenplay: C.M. Talkington. Starring: Gil Bellows (Watty), Renee Zellweger (Starlene), and Rory Cochrane (Billy). Running Time: 102 min.

This film is interestingly a parallel to *Natural Born Killers* and *True Romance*. The two main characters, Watty and Starlene, are a love struck couple living in a trailer park. Watty and his buddy Billy make their money by robbing convenience stores, but things go wrong during a robbery because Billy took drugs before entering the store. Watty complains: "speed sucking psychopath sitting next to me interrupting the flow of my happiness... he killed someone in my presence, my life has been fucked". The incident forces Watty and Starlene to skip town. The two are on the road to Mexico, however they are being followed by a vengeful Billy and by two men who are owed money. During their adventure, Watty and Starlene get

married and become media stars for killing two police officers in their home town. Starlene does phone interviews while staying at motels and watches for their pictures on "All crime all the time" TV. The couple encounter Billy just prior to the Mexican border. They cross together (one of the few films where they actually make it to Mexico) and have a shoot out. Watty and Starlene survive and the film closes with the two driving further South.

The similarities between *Love and a .45* and *Natural Born Killers* are suspicious, however *Love and a .45* has some attributes which make it stand out. The character of Watty presents us with a voice-over lesson about life: "the two things you need to get by on this planet: love and a .45". Watty "specializes in risk management", however he does remind us that "through repetition of danger, we become accustomed to it". The dialogue is witty and self-reflexive. Starlene tries to convince Watty that their adventures "are gonna be just like the movies", "like movie stars... desperado and outlaws who remind me of Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty". Watty responds: "But everybody gets shot and killed in those movies". Well, not this one....

Man Bites Dog (1992)

A Roxie release of a Les Artistes Anonymes Productions film. Directors: Remy Belvaux, Andre Bonzel, and Benoit Poelvoorde. Producers: Remy Belvaux, Andre Bonzel, and Benoit Poelvoorde. Screenplay (French with English subtitles): Remy Belvaux, Andre Bonzel, Benoit Poelvoorde, and

Vincent Travier. Starring: Benoit Poelvoord (Ben Petard). Running Time: 95 min.

This film can be considered a “mockumentary” about a murderous thief whose life is being documented by a cinema-vérité crew. As the serial-killer does his rounds, the crew captures his every move on film. The film is not a road movie, however it is an interesting comment on the role of the media. The humor mixed in with the death makes for a macabre combination. The film provides us with a comment on the numbing role of the media toward violence. The media is a feature in many of the road films (*Natural Born Killers*, *Love and a .45*).

Natural Born Killers (1994)

Director: Oliver Stone. Producers: Jane Hamsher, Don Murphy, and Clayton Townsend. Screenplay: David Veloz, Richard Rutowski, and Oliver Stone. Starring: Woody Harrelson (Mickey Knox), Juliette Lewis (Mallory Knox), and Robert Downey Jr. (Wayne Gale). Running Time: 119 min.

This is another film which is loosely based on the true story of the 1958 killer couple, Starkweather and Fugate. The story of Mickey and Mallory is one of a killing rampage which begins with Mallory’s father. The love stricken couple start on a road trip which features extremely violent killings along the way: a diner, a pharmacy, a gas station and even a prison. The mass murder turns into a media mayhem, which is paralleled in *Love and a*

.45. Mickey and Mallory become pop icons with the help of the host of *American Maniacs*, Wayne Gale. The visual imagery of *NBK* exhibits the psychological mindset of the two murderers unlike any other film of this genre. The imagery is hyperrealistic and schizophrenic; it is achieved with various kinds of film stock ("colour and black and white 35mm, 16 mm, Super 8, Hi8 and Beta") (Pizzello, 1994:37). The importance of the media within this film is similar to that in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*. The stylized violence of this film resembles that of many of its predecessors, and the film deals with the *idea* of violence as well as portrayal of the killers.

***Red Rock West* (1993)**

A Propaganda Films production. Columbia Tristar. Director: John Dahl. Producers: Steve Golin and Sigurjon Sighvatsson. Screenplay: John Dahl and Rick Dahl. Starring: Nicholas Cage (Micheal), Lara Flynn Boyle (Suzanne), and Dennis Hopper (Lyle). Running Time: 98 min.

Micheal is a young man who rolls into Red Rock and is mistaken as a hitman from Texas who is hired by the sheriff (Wayne) to kill his wife (Suzanne). Suzanne hires Micheal to kill Wayne, when Micheal informs her of her husbands' plans. Micheal was simply a "good" guy looking for work, but falls victim of mistaken identity. Micheal refuses to kill anyone, however he does attempt to skip town with the money. But when the real Texan hitman (Lyle) shows up in Red Rock, Michael's plans backfire. Until then, this film is a road movie wanting to happen, however all that is accomplished

is getting in and out of Red Rock. Micheal and Suzanne (who owns a gun and is not afraid to use it) eventually escape the small town only to return to steal money from Wayne in order to escape to Mexico. However, Lyle catches up with them. The film ends with Micheal escaping the police, Suzanne, and Lyle. The characters of Micheal and Suzanne are engaging and strong. The deceptive yet strong character of Suzanne is not as highly sexualized as female characters in other road films, however she possesses a mysterious sexual appeal.

Roadkill (1989)

Black and White. Cineplex Odeon Pictures. Mr. Shack Motion Production. Director: Bruce McDonald. Producers: Bruce McDonald and Colin Brunton. Screenplay: Don McKeller. Starring: Valerie Buhagiar (Ramona). Running Time: 85 min.

This is the first Canadian production by McDonald. The story is about a young record company assistant (Ramona) who goes on the road to track down a missing rock band. She is determined to find the band and arrange a concert in Thunder Bay. She encounters a variety of individuals along the way, including a self-proclaimed serial killer (however, he hasn't actually killed anyone yet, but he plans to make it big in Canada without having to go down to California), a patient taxi driver, and a sexually promiscuous fifteen-year old male. The film is primarily a black comedy road movie until the final shoot-out scene when the serial killer finally gets his chance to claim a

life. The film has many comedic references to Canadian culture and features a woman on the road alone.

Sugarland Express (1974)

Universal Pictures. Director: Steven Spielberg. Producers: Richard D. Zanuck and David Brown. Screenplay: Hal Barwood and Matthew Robbins. Based on story by: Steven Spielberg, Hal Barwood, and Matthew Robbins. Starring: Goldie Hawn (Lou Jean Poplin), Ban Johnson (Capt. Tanner). Running Time: 109 min.

This is Spielberg's first feature film. The narrative is based on a true story. Lou Jean is a woman who helps her husband (Atherton) escape prison in effort to keep the authorities from putting her child up for adoption. The mother is accused of being an unfit mother. The couple go on the road and are chased by the police and covered by the media. The beginning of the film is lighthearted, however the tone takes a turn into an abyss. The characters are not as glamorized as other road films, however the long chase across America's highways exhibits the characteristics of the typical road film.

Thelma and Louise (1991)

An MGM/UA release of a Pathe Entertainment presentation of a Percy Main production. Director: Ridley Scott. Producers: Ridley Scott and Mimi Polk. Screenplay: Callie Khouri. Starring: Susan Sarandon (Louise), Geena Davis (Thelma). Running Time: 120 min.

Thelma and Louise are two women who can't wait to get away from the constraints of their daily lives, so they decide to take off on a road trip. But the trip takes an early drastic turn when a man attempts to rape Thelma and subsequently Louise shoots him. The two women panic and drive to escape the police. The police pursue Thelma and Louise toward the Mexican border by tracing their trail of illegal activity, such as convenience store robbery. The body count along the way rises and they eventually are cornered by the police.

The film has been compared to *Bonnie and Clyde* as well as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. One critic compares the three films and concludes that, the films, "however entertaining they may be - embrace death as a kind of romantic escape" (Mason, 1991:11). This is a key element within the "road kill" films. The killings effected by the women are not spectacularly bloody, however the film is one of the first mainstream films to feature women in close and competent contact with guns (with the exception of the above mentioned films and some *films noirs*).

Too Young to Die? (1994)

Republic Entertainment. Director: Robert Markowitz. Producers: Susan Weber Gold and Julie Anne Weitz. Writers: David Hill and George Rubin. Story: David Hill. Starring: Juliette Lewis (Amanda Sue Bradley), Brad Pitt (Billy Kanton). Running Time: 92 min.

Amanda Sue Bradley (Mandy) is a 15 year old Oklahoma girl with no family. Her mother abandoned her when she was 13 years old, explaining that "I've done my job with you". Her step-father was an alcoholic who would continually abuse Mandy sexually. Mandy hitchhikes until she meets Billy who arranges for Mandy to strip in a club for 60\$ a night. It does not take long before Billy has a hold over Mandy physically, as well as mentally. One night in the club, a gentleman by the name of Mike stands up for Mandy and punches Billy in the face. Mike offers Mandy a place to stay until she can be on her own. However, before she was able to leave, Mike's commanding officer finds out that Mandy is a minor. Mike is forced to make Mandy leave. Mandy regrettably ends up with Billy once again. Through Billy's encouragement, Mandy knifes Mike. Eventually Mandy is arrested. Mandy's lawyer pleads publicly that: "Amanda is just a part of the growing tragedy of this country", "This is a new breed, and Amanda is one of them", "Amanda is a child of our crimes.... We as a society has failed.... She had no chance to live". Despite her lawyer's efforts, Amanda Sue is sentenced to death.

True Romance (1993)

Morgan Creek Production. Director: Tony Scott. Producers: Samuel Hadida, Steve Perry, and Bill Unger. Screenplay: Quentin Tarantino. Starring: Christian Slater (Clarence Hurley) and Patricia Arquette (Alabama). Running Time: 111 min.

Clarence Hurley is a young man with a simple life of working in a comic-book store and frequenting kung-foo movies. He falls in love with the prostitute (Alabama) who was a birthday gift from his boss and kills her pimp in order to free her from his stronghold. The two escape town when they discover that they are in the possession of several pounds of cocaine. The owners of the cocaine are in pursuit of the two. The couple head to Los Angeles to sell the coke to a movie director, however the shoot out in the hotel room ends in up as blood bath. They drive on to Mexico and live "happily ever after".

True Romance contains elements of pastiche, nostalgia, and aesthetically rich images of extreme violence (the assault on Alabama is especially disturbing and "never-ending"). The love-struck couple could be traveling all the while through Las Vegas since that is the visual trashy picture the viewer gets of roadside U.S.A.. Hurley is obsessed with Elvis, a reoccurring reference within this genre of film (*Highway 61*, *Wild at Heart*). The slow motion of the final blood bath is purely for voyeuristic pleasure. The emphasis of violence is often done through slow motion action.

***Wild at Heart* (1990)**

A Samual Goldwyn Company release of a Propaganda production in association with Lava Films. Director: David Lynch. Producers: Monty Montgomery, Steve Golin, and Joni Sighvatsson. Executive Producer: Micheal Kuhn. Screenplay: David Lynch. Based on a novel by: Barry

Gifford. Starring: Nicolas Cage (Sailor Ripley) and Laura Dern (Lula Pace Fortune). Running Time: 124 min.

The opening scene of *Wild at Heart* becomes a bloody mess when Sailor bashes the brains (literally) out of a man's head. Sailor is sent to several years in prison, but his true love, Lula, is waiting for him to get out. The couple take off on the road and travel from Cape Fear to Big Tuna, Texas. Lula's neurotic trashy mother hires a hit-man to pursue them in order to kill Sailor and return Lula to her home. The characters they meet along the way are perverse and macabre in nature.

The film is highly violent and sensualized, which is Lynch's forte. Lynch shows the viewer the underside of American culture by taking a road trip to hell, a.k.a. Big Tuna. The surreal style developed by Lynch adds to the perversity: Sailor's snakeskin jacket (which represents his "individuality and personal freedom"), the Elvis impersonations, the references to *The Wizard of Oz*, and the visual imagery Lynch adds to the film. The eroticism and sexuality between the two leading characters is woven into the wicked violence they encounter throughout their highway travels. "The violence is both painfully realistic and obviously hyperrealistic, at once stark and exaggerated" (McKinney, 1991:41). Lynch allows for "a dark glimpse at the 'underside' of Middle America, an attempt to show the unwholesomeness behind the white picket fences of the rural small town that gained particular symbolic importance in that most politically reassuring of all forms, the TV

sitcom" (Sharrett, 1991:39). One cannot help but think of the perverse rendition of the TV sitcom in *Natural Born Killers*. Thus, the decaying vision of the film reflects the vision in many of the "road kill" movies, such as *Natural Born Killers* and *Kalifornia*. *Blue Velvet*, the film Lynch directed prior to *Wild at Heart*, would also be an interesting comparison in terms of characters. While it is not a road film, the characters are similar in nature.

Discography

Kalifornia

(1993, Polygram Film Productions)

Mind Bomb - "Do you Need Some?"
Quicksand - "Unfulfilled"
East 17 - "Deep"
Drivin' N' Cryin' - "When You Come Back"
Sheryl Crow - "No One Said it Would be Easy"
The Indians - "I Love the World"
X - "Lettuce and Vodka"
Therapy? - "Accelerator"
David Baerwald - "Born For Love"
The Soup Dragons - "Dive Bomber"
The Indians - "Look Up to the Sky"
Carter Burwell - "Kalifornia"/"Cactus Girl"

Love & a .45

(1994, Epic Records Group, Trimark Pictures)

The Flaming Lips - "Turn it On"
Meat Puppets - "Animal"
Mazzy Star - "Ghost Highway"
The Jesus and Mary Chain - "Come on"
Kim Deal & Bob Pollard - "Love Hurts"
The Reverend Horton Heat - "The Devil's Chasing Me"
April's Motel Room - "Black 14"
FSK with David Lowery from Cracker - "Unter Dem Doppeladler"
Butthole Surfers - "Who Was in My Room Last Night?"
Johnny Cash - "Ring of Fire"
Courtney & Western - "Am I in Love"
Roger Miller - "King of the Road"

Natural Born Killers

(1994, Warner Bros. Productions)

Soundtrack Produced by Trent Reznor, Executive Producer Budd Carr, and
album Director Oliver Stone.

Leonard Cohen - "Waiting For the Miracle"
L7 - "Shitlist"
Dan Zanes - "Moon Over Greene County"
Patti Smith - "Rock n' Roll Nigger"
Cowboy Junkies - "Sweet Jane"
Bob Dylan - "You Belong to Me"

Duane Eddy - "The Trembler"
 Nine Inch Nails - "Burn"
 Robert Downey Jr. and "BB Tone" Brian Burdan - "Route 666"
 "Kipenda Roho" Remmy Ongala & Orchestre Super Matimila - "Totally Hot"
 Patsi Cline - "Back in Baby's Arms"
 Peter Gabriel / Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan - "Taboo"
 Jane's Addiction - "Sex is Violent" featuring excerpts from "Ted just Admit it" and Diamanda Galas - "I Put a Spell On You"
 A.O.S. - "History (Repeats Itself)"
 Nine Inch Nails - "Something I Can Never Have"
 Russel Means - "I Will Take You Home"
 Hollywood Persuaders - "Drums A Go-Go"
 Barry Adamson - "Hungry Ants" featuring excerpts from "Checkpoint Charlie" and "Violation of Expectation"
 Dr. Dre - "The Day the Niggaz Took Over"
 Juliet Lewis - "Born Bad"
 Sergio Cervetti - "Fall of the Rebel Angels"
 Lard - "Forkboy"
 Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra - Janos Sandor, Conductor - "Batonga in Bagatongaville" featuring "A Night on Bare Mountain"
 Nine Inch Nails - "A Warm Place"
 Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan & Party - "Allah, Mohammed, Char, Yaar" featuring excerpts from Diamanda Galas - "Judgement Day"
 Leonard Cohen - "The Future"
 Tha Dogg Pound - "What Would U Do?"

True Romance

(1993, Morgan Creek Music Group, Warner Bros.)

Hans Zimmer - "You're So Cool"
 Charlie Sexton - "Graceland"
 John Waite - "In Dreams"
 Charles & Eddie - "Wounded Bird"
 Nymphomania - "I Want Your Body"
 Hans Zimmer - "Stars At Dawn"
 Shelby Lynne - "I Need A Heart To Come Home To"
 Delibes as arranged by Howard Blake - "Viens Mallika Sous Le Dome Edais From Lakme"
 Robert Palmer - "(Love is)The Tender Trap"
 Soundgarden - "Outshined"
 Hans Zimmer - "Amid The Chaos of the Day"
 Chris Isaak - "Two Hearts"

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