Identity and Marginality on the Road:

American Road Movies of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s

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Abstract

This thesis examines two key periods in the American road movie genre with a particular emphasis on formations of identity as they are articulated through themes of marginality, freedom, and rebellion. The first period, what I term the "founding" period of the road movie genre, includes six films of the 1960s and 1970s: Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), Francis Ford Coppola's *The Rain People* (1969), Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), Richard Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* (1971), and Joseph Strick's *Road Movie* (1974). The second period of the genre, what I identify as that of the "minority" road movie, occurs largely in the 1990s and includes Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (1991), Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (1992), and Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus* (1996). Emphasizing the cinematic worlds, narrative trajectories, and identity politics of the road movie, I argue that "founding" road movies, though usually homogeneous in their portrayals of identity, are significant for later minority road movies because they establish points of rebellion that negotiate between dominant and marginal social relations that minority road movies would later revisit. These minority road movies (re)interpret the generic raw material of the past, tapping into a number of subgenres as well as themes of marginality, freedom, and rebellion, in order to introduce new identities to the genre. Important to the many exchanges between the two periods is the interplay of subgenres; as I will discuss, many of these films borrow, critique, and subvert the generic precedents of the past.

Abrégé

Cette thèse examine deux périodes clés du genre cinematographique des 'road-movies' américains en se concentrant sur les formations identitaires telles qu'elles sont articulées à travers les thèmes de la marginalité, de la liberté, et de la rébellion. La première période, que je qualifierais de période fondatrice du genre 'road-movie', comprend six films des années 1960 et 1970: *Bonnie and Clyde* d'Arthur Penn (1967), *Easy Rider* de Dennis Hopper (1969), *The Rain People* de Francis Ford Coppola (1969), *Two-Lane Blacktop* de Monte Hellman (1971), *Vanishing Point* de Richard Sarafian (1971), et *Road Movie* de Joseph Strick (1974). La deuxième période du genre, que j'identifierais comme celle du 'road-movie' « minoritaire », est produite en grande partie dans les années 1990 et comprend *Thelma & Louise* de Ridley Scott (1991), *The Living End* de Gregg Araki (1992), et *Get on the Bus* de Spike Lee (1996). En soulignant les univers cinématiques, les trajectoires narratives, et les politiques identitaires, je soutiens que les films «fondateurs», souvent homogènes dans leurs représentations identitaires, sont importants pour les « road-movies » minoritaires ultérieurs car ils établissent des points de rébellion négociant entre des rapports sociaux de dominants a marginaux, eux-meme plus tard revisités par les films minoritaires. Ces « road-movies » minoritaires réinterpretent les matériaux génériques bruts du passé, mettant en valeur un certain nombre de sous-genres ainsi que les thèmes de la marginalité, la liberté, et la rébellion, afin d'introduire de nouvelles identités au genre. Le jeu des sous-genres est lui-meme important dans les nombreux échanges entre les deux périodes : je débats que plusieurs de ces films empruntent, critiquent et subvertissent les précédents génériques du passé.

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An Introduction to the Road Movie

The road movie occupies an important place in the cultural imaginary of the United States and abroad and has enjoyed, for a large part of the 20th century, an iconic status as a key cinematic form. Both the road and the car have served as lasting tropes in the exploration of issues of identity and marginality, freedom and rebellion as well as social critique. At its core, road movies ask what happens when one challenges social norms. As film critic Michael Atkinson observes, "road movies have always been songs of the doomed, warnings that once you enter the open hinterlands between cities, you're on your own" (16). These transgressions almost always end catastrophically. However, the road movie is neither static nor predictable. Across its many periods of revision, the road movie has undertaken many itineraries and has explored narratives ranging from stories of personal discontent to politicized displays of rebellion. Through these journeys, we can begin to map the social hierarchies, cultural geographies, and normative boundaries found in the road movie genre.

This thesis examines two general periods in the history of the road movie. Though there are a number of road movies dating as far back as the 1930s, this thesis will focus on the road movie of the 1960s, when the genre comes into maturity (Corrigan 143), and into the contemporary period. I identify the 1960s and 1970s as a period of time in which the contemporary road movie takes root. I will then move to discuss the 1990s, when the genre undergoes a series of tumultuous revisions across the categories of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. I argue that the "founding" period, though quite homogeneous in terms of its portrayal of identity, is significant in that it carves out points of rebellion that negotiate between dominant

and marginal social relations that the later road movies of the 1990s, which I will refer to as "minority" road movies, would comment upon. These minority road movies adapt the generic raw material of the past, tapping into a rich lexicon of subgenres and themes of marginality, freedom, and rebellion, in order to introduce new identities to the genre. Unlike the subjects portrayed in the founding wave of road movies, whose social marginality was constituted not by histories of systemic oppression but by feelings of angst and alienation, the majority of road movies of the 1990s prominently featured women, LGBT subjects, and ethnic minorities. Thus this thesis seeks to examine the founding period of the contemporary road movie of the 1960s and 1970s, the minority road movie of the 1990s, and the many linkages that connect these two periods. Important to these linkages is the interplay of subgenres as films borrow, critique, and reinterpret the generic precedents of the past. This thesis acknowledges the work of more recent road movie scholars with regard to questions of identity, but also acknowledges the work still left to be done on issues of identity and, in particular, minority identities. As a genre steeped in American mythology (and one that has enjoyed and continues to enjoy tremendous popularity), the road movie invites analyses concerned with those identities which are excluded from these narratives of discovery, transformation, and social critique. This thesis is undertaken from a communication studies perspective because the road movie, more than merely a communicative media, deals with questions of mobility – a significant focus of inquiry in media theory, as it pertains to the construction of identity in popular culture. While my approach is attentive to the formal, aesthetic, and generic conditions of road movies, I emphasize a reading which looks for the social in the cinematic worlds, narrative trajectories, and identity politics of the road movie.

In approaching issues of identity through film, I wish to view film as more than simply aesthetic caprice or the play of visual form, and instead consider film's capacity to present what I

identify as a "worlding project." From this perspective, every film proposes a unique set of ontological conditions in which narrative action operates according to the film world's specific set of physical, symbolic, and affective resources. Thus, in querying the status of identity in the road movie, my concern is less with a film's ability to accurately represent real socio-historical events and more about what might be called the subjective qualities of a film itself. More than just the creation of a director or producer, I view a film's narrative project as necessarily containing a subjective world in which intentionality is distributed through the filmmaker, but also through a film's own capacity to occupy a subject position. As Vivian Sobchack observes,

> The film lives its perception without the volition – if within the vision – of the spectator. It visibly acts visually and, therefore, expresses and embodies intentionality in existence and at work in a world. The film is not, therefore, merely an object for perception and expression; it is also the subject of perception and expression (167).

This distinction underwrites an interest that is concerned less with considering the road movie as a sociological text and more with an attempt to read the social that that emerges through film. With this guiding logic in place, I find the idea of a worlding project to be useful with regard to the road movie because the genre views the road as a unique cultural, geographical, and affective space. In dealing with issues of identity, marginality, and the status of minority subjects in the road movie, the aim of this thesis is not to attempt a "watchdog" analysis of identity politics nor, necessarily, to adjudicate the equalities and inequalities of representation within the road movie genre. Instead, I attempt to harness the logic of a worlding project as a sort of case study of the ways in which identity is deployed in a given film or set of films. As narrative and conflict emerge in these worlds to "test" the road rebel according to a particular set of conditions, the

question becomes that of what statements these films are making about dominant and marginal identities on the road.

Another way to situate this study of the road movie is in terms of what Leo Braudy identifies as the "open" and the "closed" film. In writing on the ways in which film organizes perceptions of narrative and space, Braudy identifies the closed film as being one that occupies a totalized world in which its diegetic contents are finite and each character, action, and object serves an instrumental function in the plot. On the other hand, in an open film "the world of the film is a momentary frame around an ongoing reality" (46) in which characters, actions, and objects both precede and succeed the film's narrative present and "[do] not exhaust the meaning of what it contains" (47). We might consider the road movie as an "open film" in that the road promises an ongoing reality characterized by a heterogeneous unfolding of dissimilar milieus while furnishing an often picaresque display of diverse identities. In his review of examples of open and closed films, Braudy makes an explicit connection between the open film and the car in noting that the open film is "concerned with problems of freedom and self-definition, [therefore] trains tend to take a subordinate place to cars" (56). In understanding the film worlds of road movies to be generally "open," we can begin to consider how these films extend beyond a narrative instrumentality, thus enabling a flourishing of digetic potentiality.

A Brief History of the Road Story in Literature and Film

At its core, the road movie is a reinterpretation of the journey tradition in literature. In literature, this history dates back as far as Homer's *The Odyssey*. Through the centuries, the journey narrative emphasizes the experience of travel and the attendant set of challenges, distractions,

and transformations that occur on the road; these become more important than the actual destination itself. *The Odyssey* proposes a general structure for the journey that numerous works would adopt. This structure is characterized by a travel narrative that focuses on adventure as well as a diversity of social encounters. Another important text in the journey canon is Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1564), which is about the adventures of a group of pilgrims making their way to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. Yet another classic journey novel is Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1615), which features an anti-hero protagonist who experiences a series of misadventures as he travels through small towns in 16th century Spain. *Don Quixote* introduces the picarseque narrative, characterized by a satirical social commentary and a preference for exploring social marginality. This would become an important prototype for the road movie especially with regard to the genre's emphasis on themes of marginality, rebellion, and social critique. Drawing on the picarseque novel, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) uses the colorful stories of one woman's life as a way to critique the injustices that have produced her unstable and often marginal existence. Looking at the journey in an American context, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) critiques racial tensions through observations by the novel's protagonist, Huckleberry Finn, as he travels down the Mississippi River with his friend Jim, a runaway slave.

One of the more recent literary texts that would influence the road movie is Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road*. The novel gleefully conflates a number of themes that would recur in road movies in the ensuing decades. Sal Paradise, the protagonist and stand-in for Kerouac, is a college-educated bohemian who, longing to travel West, undertakes a number of trips crisscrossing the United States in the 1940s with his friend, Dean Moriarty. In describing his "road buddy," Paradise recasts his friend's criminality as a celebration of rebellion: "And

[Dean Moriarty's] "criminality" was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the wet wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides)" (Kerouac 7-8). Full of colloquialisms and a stream-of-consciousness rhetoric, Kerouac's highly stylized writing presents an affront to the conventions of literary respectability. In this regard, *On the Road* anticipates the dual innovations of the road movie: firstly, it is novel in that its techniques resemble cinematic uses of editing, cinematography, and soundtrack and, secondly, it expresses themes of rebellion through spatial mobility. And while the novel is far from being overtly political or offering much sociological commentary, Kerouac's vision of American mobility is in opposition to the then prevailing postwar ethic of mass consumption and routinized wage labor.

In the final decades of the 19th century, two key inventions precipitated the emergence of the road movie: the automobile and the moving picture. It comes as no great surprise then there has been a longstanding tradition of collusions between the car and film. Two very early examples of the car in film are Cecil Hepworth's *Explosion of a Motor Car* (1900) and *How It Feels to Be Run Over* (1900). The former is a one-and-a-half minute comedy in which a car carrying four passengers inexplicably explodes, while the later is a one minute film that, as its title would suggest, depicts a car crashing directly into the camera. Though not road movies, both demonstrate that, even in the most nascent periods of cinema, the car can be made to play a major role in film. Moreover, in these cases the car is seen as capable of violence or even as a menace to society. In the decades to follow, film would continue to explore many more aspects of the automobile. Beyond the obvious fact that the car affects so many aspects of life in the 20th and 21st centuries, we might consider the collusion between the car and film as a function of the problems that the car introduces to film. Some of these include, but are not limited to, movement,

contingency, novelty, thrills, the speeding up of narrative, and the possibility of death, either by accident or through the use of the car as a means of suicide.

To map the evolution of the road movie, we might begin with the fugitive crime films of the 1930s and 1940s, which would play an important role in the formation of the "contemporary" road movie of the 1960s and onward. In film noirs such as Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937), Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1949), and Joseph Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1949), flight on the road begins to assume autonomy as a theme as well as a source of visual pleasure. In films such as Ida Lupino's *The Htich-Hiker* (1953), the theme of flight on the road is further explored and, without the use of a back projection, made to appear even more visually compelling. In the 1950s, the rise of films about rebellious youth, such as László Benedek's *The Wild One* (1953), Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and Paul Henreid's *Live Fast, Die Young* (1958) would provide an important strand influencing the road movie genre. Moreover, with their emphasis on restlessness, delinquency, and disillusionment, these films lent the road movie genre thematic elements of defiance and social marginality. From fugitive crime films that use the road, sometimes gleefully, as a mode of escape to rebel films that expressed an irreverent backside to postwar America, the road movie of the 1960s would ultimately draw on the generic innovations of these two cinematic lineages in order to revise the relationship of car to film.

In the wake of the Cold War, the road movie benefited from the coming of the American Interstate Highway System, the stage on which many of road movies are set. Across the multi-decade history of the road movie, there have been many periods of generic revision, but what unites these periods of rebellion is the interconnected system of highways that routes and reroutes each of the itineraries. What I wish to emphasize here is that the road itself is founded on its own historically situated set of ideologies, which coalesced within the Federal Aid

Highway Act of 1956. The project, one of the greatest public works projects in human history, spanning over 42,000 miles and costing over $100 billion (Seiler 71), was a culmination of American defense strategy in the face of Cold War anxiety. As Cotten Seiler argues, "The act of driving became, in this historical context, a sort of palliative ideological exercise that was seen to reverse, or at least to arrest, the postwar 'decline of the individual' and the deterioration of the 'American character' of a heroic and expansionist past" (72). Seiler goes on to review the ways in which the "decline of the individual" was often, in propaganda materials, cast in gender-specific tropes of softness, frivolity, vulnerability, and Momism (78), signifying a national anxiety over the nation's ability to repress the threat of Communism. Though few road movies explicitly address the threat of Communism, road movies from the 1960s onward often addressed the anxieties Seiler outlines by associating the act of driving with an assertion of individuality. Moreover, until the emergence of the gay and lesbian road movies of the 1990s, many road movies were haunted by the "decline of the individual," which was sometimes expressed through anxieties over the possibility of homosexual encounters on the road.

In this thesis, we will examine a number of subgenres which fall under the umbrella term "road movie". Nevertheless, this thesis focuses exclusively on road movies whose primary mode of travel is the automobile (or bus or motorcycle), overlooking others which use forms of collective transportation, like the train or airplane but might still embody many of the characteristic features of the road movie[1]. Among car-based road movies, there are a number of subgenres including the fugitive (or "outlaw") couple road movie, the buddy road movie, and the quest road movie. These subgenres are not exclusive and a number of road movies occupy several categories. For example, *Vanishing Point* is a fugitive road movie, but also a quest road

[1] An example of a non-car road movie is Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959), in which the protagonist travels primarily by train.

movie and even displays some aspects of a buddy road movie. As a matter of practical description, it is worth identifying these typologies of the road movie, however there are degrees of revisionism within each of the subgenres. For example, while Jim Jarmusch's art house road movie *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) is nominally a quest road movie, Jarmusch's film actively works against the completion of the quest, ending inconclusively, and, in so doing, challenges the very narrative structure of the quest.

The Road Movie Literature

Road movie scholarship constitutes a relatively a small body of work and is thus easily identifiable. Film scholars writing on the genre generally acknowledge Timothy Corrigan's chapter "Genre, Gender, and Hysteria: The Road Movie from Outer Space" from his 1991 book *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* as being one of the first sustained attempts to address the road movie as an object of scholarly inquiry (Cohan and Hark 2, Laderman 4, Mills 4). 1991 proved to be a pivotal year for the road movie in several respects. Corrigan's chapter considered the genre's "crisis of masculinity," arguing that what he saw as an inherently masculine genre was struggling to maintain its relevance to a changing society, furiously repeating its generic tropes to the point of appearing belligerent (hence the title, "the road movie in outer space"). Meanwhile, the same year that Corrigan's chapter was published (bereft of any feminist perspective), Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* was released, inverting the masculinist conventions of the road movie by placing two female leads as the protagonists. *Thelma & Louise* had the effect of revitalizing the genre by critiquing, rather than repeating, the masculine tropes of the road movie. In so doing, the film offers a more direct response to

Corrigan's masculine hysteria thesis and, in an unusual turn, the otherwise conservative Hollywood machine provided a more progressive commentary on the masculine history of the road movie at a time when film scholars were only just beginning to build a set of concepts with which to analyze the road movie.

A key aspect of Corrigan's chapter is that it identifies four distinctive characteristics of the genre: 1) an emphasis on the dissolution of the family unit, 2) a narrative whose development is brought about by events acting upon characters, 3) protagonists whose identity become displaced onto the vehicle, and 4) "a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women" (143). The central argument in Corrigan's chapter asserts that, more than any other film genre, the road movie has reached an impasse and, because it is unable to evolve further, the road movie has entered into a period of "generic hysteria" (138). This hysteria is a consequence of road movies having failed to either introduce new narrative structures that reshape and revitalize the genre or express the increasingly heterogeneous social and cultural conditions of contemporary life (138). With this theoretical structure in place, the chapter proceeds with a survey of the "hysterical" road movie through discussions of masculinity in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973), ending with Wim Wender's *Paris, Texas* (1984), which Corrigan characterizes as offering the most blatant evidence of the road movie's hysteria.

The essay also reviews the historical trajectory of masculinity as it is manifest through the road movie. According to Corrigan, road movies of the 1950s represent the male search for self and home, mediating the anxieties of postwar American life. By the 1960s, the rise of consumer culture and the attendant saturation of media images begin to destabilize the very icon of the male road traveler. In the 1970s, Corrigan observes, "the crisis of self has become the

carnival of a male narcissism without subjectivity" (159). In many ways, Corrigan identifies a turning point in the road movie genre. He observes that while masculinity was in crisis, the road movie nonetheless found this crisis a compelling cultural theme. However, Corrigan also points out that this period of hysteria could only be sustained for so long and that the genre would ultimately need to introduce new lines of exploration.

While Corrigan's chapter responds to a longstanding gap in the academic literature on the road movie genre, the work unfortunately reproduces within a scholarly discourse some of the masculinist biases found in the genre. Corrigan's argument focuses specifically on questioning the status of literary genre, that is, the particular mode through which a story becomes coherent. He observes that "[w]hat has increasingly come to complicate film genre as an interpretive category, as well as a production model, is its drive to repeat specific signifying materials, an obsessive drive to repeat in reaction to the *resistance* of cultural history" (139). In other words, because the road movie had outlived its relevance to American cultural realities, the genre had to repeat its "signifying materials" so as to overcome its outdated representations of the social. In arguing for the road movie's incoherence as a literary form, Corrigan ignores the genre's longstanding indifference towards identities outside of white hetero-patriarchy. This methodological limitation, though accurate in terms of diagnosing a masculinity in crisis, forfeits what I view as a larger issue of the genre's insistence on portraying dominant identities in opposition to the increasingly diverse realities of American society.

The first serious work of scholarship to follow the publication of Timothy Corrigan's book is *The Road Movie Book*, an anthology of 16 essays edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, which came out in 1997. Its release marked a significant expansion in the discourse of the road movie genre, adding numerous voices, positions, and interpretations. Not surprisingly,

Corrigan's essay is cited at numerous points throughout the anthology and his argument is both adopted and critiqued by scholars. Numerous road movies released in the six years following Corrigan's original article implicitly challenged Corrigan's assessment of the road movie through their feminist inflections, most notably *Thelma & Louise*. Accordingly, the essays reflect and respond to an already changing genre, one that in many ways had already begun to dismantle some of the normative positions of the road movie, including its masculinist and heteropatriarchal biases. Writing in the book's introduction, Cohan and Hark offer a more appropriate grounding to the road movie scholarship's purpose[2], noting that "[the] road movie provides a ready space for exploration of the tensions and crises of the historical moment during which it is produced" (2) and, moreover, that the road movie is a fruitful genre for scholars because its key moments come shortly after significant historical tumult (for example, *Thelma & Louise* appears at the end of the Cold War and during the first Gulf War). While I hesitate to read too deeply into these films to uncover socio-historical events (I would argue that some road movies have a tendency to obfuscate more than relate their "historical moment"), I agree with Cohan and Hark insofar as the road movie creates a unique substrate of socio-historical investments that are spatially rendered.

Published at a time when film studies was increasingly focused on the politics of identity, nearly half of the essays found in *The Road Movie Book* take up aspects of gender and sexuality. Shari Roberts's "Western Meets Eastwood: Genre and Gender on the Road" offers an insightful historical account of the generic functions that the Western offered with regard to the (re)assertion of American masculinity, the burden of which, she argues, was taken up by the road

[2] Corrigan's essay is an odd "founding text" in that it offers a fairly unenthusiastic forecast for the genre's future. However, as the 1990s would prove, the genre reached new heights of public and critical popularity.

movie. Roberts, like several other contributors in the anthology, also go on to discuss the role of femininity on the road. The issue of gender and genre again appears with Ina Rae Hark's essay "Fear of Flying: Yuppie Critique and the Buddy-road Movie in the 1980s," which introduces a unique approach by outlining the role of the male buddy road movie in restoring the moralism of Reagan-era patriarchal capitalism. In the mid 1990s, a number of gay and lesbian road movies appeared and, accordingly, the anthology features a number of essays addressing the queer road movie.[3] While *The Road Movie Book* offers numerous perspectives on issues of gender and sexuality, only one essay, Sharon Willis's "Race on the Road: Crossover Dreams," deals with issues of race.

The nation is another important theme in *The Road Movie Book*. As several essays suggest, the road movie, in traveling great distances and encountering the various social identities contained therein, is inevitably a statement on the status of nation and national identity. Angelo Restivo, in his essay "The Nation, the Body, and the *Autostrada*," discusses the ways in which the Italian national highway system served to realign previously separate regions of Italy, thus constructing a new identity – that of a national subject. Taking a different turn towards the nation, Barbara Klinger's "The Road to Dystopia: Landscaping the nation in *Easy Rider*" demonstrates the contradictions between counter-culture and American nationalism running through the film. Delia Falconer's "We Don't need to Know the Way Home: The Disappearance of the Road in the *Mad Max* Trilogy," traces changes in the discourse of Australian nationalism in the 1970s and 1980s through the films referred to her in her title. Throughout these essays, and, in particular, in those by Klinger and Falconer, subjects are produced in a triangular relationship between the nation, the road movie, and other prevailing discourses of the period.

[3] According to my count, five feature length queer road movies were released in 1994 and 1995 alone.

The next key text following *The Road Movie Book* was David Laderman's *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (2002), the first full length monograph dedicated to the road movie. *Driving Visions* provides a historical and critical survey of the road movie, beginning with its origins and dedicating a chapter to "rebellion films" of the 1960s, the "existentialist films" of the 1970s, the "postmodern films" on the 1980s, the "multicultural films" of the 1990s and the European road movie. The book's primary argument is that at its core, and across its various historical iterations, the road movie is characterized by a tension between rebellion and conformity. Laderman is astute in developing the approach by Cohan and Hark by extending their analytic frame beyond the exploration of "tensions and crises of the historical moment" to examine recurrent themes of rebellion and conformity as well as marginality and normativity. Laderman also provides a useful three-pronged approach to the road movie genre, arguing that it produces unique cinematic, thematic, and narrative innovations. I find these three general categories to be useful guidelines for the evaluation and comparison of road movies.

While identity politics is not at the heart of *Driving Visions*, Laderman maintains a critical eye on questions of identity as these relate to various categories of "minority," as defined by gender, sexuality and ethnicity. In doing so, Laderman updates the scholarship on a number of road movies by providing a fresh and perceptive critique of what he sees as the white, heteropatriarchal core of the genre, arguing that "[m]ost road movies ... retain a traditional sexist hierarchy that privileges the white heterosexual male in terms of narrative and visual point of view" (20). His critique takes aim at both the masculinist bias of Corrigan's genre argument and the masculinist presuppositions of the genre. Laderman comments that early road movies "often bear patriarchal baggage, which both the feminist and gay road movies of the 1990s explicitly challenge" (21). With the benefit of hindsight, Laderman does not pursue Corrigan's claim that

the road movie was at an impasse due to the hysteria of masculine identity, but instead maps the continuities (and discontinuities) between the more socially conservative 1980s road movies and the more socially expansive road movies of the 1990s, a period he sees as one of significant genre revisionism.

The mid-to-late 2000s proved to be a fertile period in road movie scholarship with two books published in 2006 and one in 2008, each dealing with some aspect of the road movie. 2006 saw the publication of *Crossing New Europe: Postmodern Travel and the European Road Movie* by Eva Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli, representing an interesting and unique contribution to the conversation by approaching the European road movie as a means by which to consider questions of mobility, migration, and transnational identities in the wake of the social, economic, and political transformations of post-1989 Europe. Their study, which spans a wide body of films including the works of Wim Wenders, Aki Kaurismaki, Eric Rohmer, and Werner Herzog, demonstrates the portability of the road movie across national and continental boundaries as well as its narrative capacity to negotiate heterogeneous spatial, national, and cultural differences. While there are no doubt important threads to explore in the (trans)national road movies of Europe, for the purposes of this thesis I will limit my focus to films made in the United States.

The second road movie book to published in 2006 was Katie Mills' *The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving Through Film, Fiction, and Television*. Mills's book is closest in its concerns to this thesis in that she is principally concerned with the issue of identity and the marginalized identities of the road story. Her approach is expansive in that she looks to the road *story* rather than the road movie, the capital-intensive structures of which, she argues, often exclude minority storytellers. Her book considers the road story across all media, within what she calls "the transmediascape" (24), including novels, graphic novels, video games, and, of course, film. The

question she asks is: "How does the road story ... offer certain subcultures at key junctures in American social and technological progress a pretext for revising, remapping, or reimaging the narrative of that group's autonomy and mobility?" (8). Her project is an ambitious one in that she critiques the texts themselves as well as the structures that produce these road stories (such as movie studios) with an emphasis on how dominant media structures (such as Hollywood films) affect the representation of minority perspectives. Compared to previous attempts to theorize and critique the road movie, I find Mills's approach to be the most attentive to the status of women, LGBT subjects, and ethnic minorities on the road.

The most recent contribution to the road movie scholarship is Devin Orgeron's 2008 book *Road Movies: From Muybridge and Melies to Lynch and Kiarostami.* Though Orgeron writes primarily on the road movie, his approach is aimed more generally at the intersection of cinema and transportation across national, historical, and generic lines. The book calls for a nuanced shift in the conversation on the road movie, arguing that "road movies ... extend a longstanding cinematic tradition that posits a hopeless and lamentable mobility in an effort to eulogize or find *stability*" (2). His account of the road movie genre emphasizes the international scope of the genre. Frequently cited as a genre that is "distinctly American," the road movie certainly evokes certain qualities of "American-ness," but this observation is almost always made without great scrutiny. Orgeron asks us to reconsider this statement in the context of European and American cinematic history. Citing Jean-Luc Godard's watershed film *Breathless* (1960) as a key film in his discussion, Orgeron focuses on the complex relationship between classical Hollywood, its influence on European art house film, and its subsequent influence on New Hollywood films. The book concludes with a chapter on new directions, including the films of Abbas Kiarostami, an internationally acclaimed Iranian director of road movies.

Though the road movie genre has enjoyed sustained academic attention since the 1990s, only a handful have traced the evolution of generic and subgeneric revisions through the road movie's various iterations. Likewise, a number of important road movies of the past have been excluded from the scholarship addressing the genre's evolution. Through close readings of canonical as well as lesser-known films, the following chapters will consider how the genre has reinvented itself over three different decades. The first chapter reviews the early set of founding road movies of the 1960s, the second chapter maps the genre's evolution in the 1970s, and, skipping the 1980s, the third chapter considers examples of minority road movies of the 1990s.

Chapter One: The Founding of the Contemporary Road Rebel

Bonnie and Clyde, Easy Rider, and *The Rain People*

The first three films that I will address are important to the genre because they demarcate a boundary within the greater trajectory of road movies, lending a greater degree of specificity to an otherwise loosely defined group of films bearing some relation to the journey tradition in literature. This group of road movies begins with Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), which, as I will discuss in greater length, puts forward a number of critical features that road movies after 1967 would either implicitly or explicitly reference. Another key road movie, made just two years after *Bonnie and Clyde,* is Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), which is significant in that it distills many of the concerns raised in *Bonnie and Clyde*, but clothes itself in a bombastic display of images of "the counterculture." Though I hesitate to read much into any of these films with regard to their ability to represent "a generation" or the various conflations of subcultures implied by "1960s America," what can be found at the core of *Easy Rider* is a world in which the social potency of rebellion is defrayed, constrained, and ultimately punished out of existence. Many film scholars have written at length on both of these films and both are often invoked as case studies in the road movie genre and as having played founding roles in the cycle of films taken to represent "the new Hollywood" (Mills 138). Although it is perhaps an unusual addition to this formative group of road movies, I wish to identify Francis Ford Coppola's *The Rain People* (1969) as an equally important film because, like *Bonnie and Clyde*, it anticipates many of the gender issues that would become so central to the genre's evolution. Moreover, its "quiet rebellion" provides an important counterpoint to *Easy Rider*, expanding the repertoires of the genre to include a rebellion couched in terms of "soft" resistance. For our purposes, these three

films together are important because they locate and inscribe spaces of rebellion onto the road movie genre and, in doing so, provide a broad, yet robust set of points in which dominant and marginal forces, subjects, and histories collide.

While these three films might appear as odd selections given my interest in the categories of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in the road movie, the general themes of identity, marginality, freedom, rebellion, and social critique discussed here will later prove significant as the genre would evolve to include minorities in the 1990s. As I will later discuss, these films offer a great deal of raw material which female road movies, gay and lesbian road movies, and ethnic road movies would appropriate through devices such as pastiche, parody, and allegory. My silence on the more problematic aspects of, for example, the representation of race and sexuality in *Easy Rider* is not an endorsement of its repressively normative politics, but rather the function of a different approach to discussing how claims of Otherness operate throughout the lineage of the genre. Moreover, much of the work of critiquing tokenistic representations of non-normative identities can be found in Laderman's discussions of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider.*

Bonnie and Clyde

While *Easy Rider* is often thought of as the quintessential road movie, *Bonnie and Clyde* predates *Easy Rider* by two years and represents a more convincing origin for the contemporary road movie. *Easy Rider* might appear as a more natural "first" in its depictions of rebellion, iconic shots of highway road travel, and stylistically intrusive cinematographic experimentation, however *Bonnie and Clyde* does more "work" for the genre, being the first to import advents

from French New Wave films back to Hollywood filmmaking. In order to breathe new life into the rebel genre, Penn looked to the work of directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, whose innovative interpretations of American gangster and rebel films appealed to a politically restless generation in France. Penn borrowed various elements from Godard and other *auteur* directors of the French New Wave, including the improvisational techniques born out of independent, low-budget productions. This transatlantic revision of styles, helped along by such films as Godard's *Breathless* (1960) and *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), inspired Penn and others to revitalize American films with new styles of cinematography alongside new thematic concerns.[4] Though there is a history of the road movie that precedes *Bonnie and Clyde*, this chapter begins with *Bonnie and Clyde* because it charged a then loose and indeterminate genre with a sense of specificity and resolve, inculcating nearly every road movie after 1967 with the twin themes of rebellion and automobility.[5]

Bonnie and Clyde takes inspiration from the fugitive (or "outlaw") couple subgenre that includes films such as the aforementioned on-the-run noirs *You Only Live Once*, *They Live by Night*, and *Gun Crazy*. *Bonnie and Clyde* develops the theme of flight from the law by situating the automobile as the key element through which the narrative unfolds. The film also discards film noir's preference for cynicism in favor of an earnest rebellion against the conservative social norms of Depression-era America. The accomplices to this rebellion are, of course, the fugitive couple Bonnie Parker (Faye Dunaway) and Clyde Barrow (Warren Beatty) whose adventures on the road constitute a project that is both personally motivated (a foil to Depression-era conformity) and politically motivated (a populist struggle against conservative social norms).

[4] Both *Breathless* and *Pierrot le Fou* are crime-related stories that make prominent use of the car.
[5] Similarly, Laderman identifies *Bonnie and Clyde* as the first contemporary road movie in part because "the story itself is told through the narrative fabric of automobility" (51).

Scholars have variously discussed how Bonnie and Clyde's rebellion undergoes processes of reinscription into the dominant ideologies of capitalism (Leong, Sell, and Thomas), conformity (Laderman), and the mass media (Corrigan). Less attention, however, has been paid to Bonnie's strikingly assertive role in the film, which works against previous depictions of women on the road. Her becoming an outlaw as well as her general abilities to challenge men and direct narrative flow constitute their own form of rebellion. Though too many aspects of the film and of her character preclude her as a properly feminist archetype, Bonnie nonetheless ordains the film with a sense of rebellion against the conventional roles that women in film held at the time. As Mills points out, part of what makes Bonnie's character a critical subject in the evolution towards the eventual feminist road movie is that she is not reducible to the stereotypical femme fatale (139). Her character influences a number of women on the road who would begin to overturn the masculinist bounds of the genre, including Natalie in *The Rain People*, Janice in *Road Movie*, and, eventually, the eponymous Thelma and Louise.

In the beginning of the film, Bonnie catches Clyde attempting to steal her mother's car. Seeing this as an opportunity to introduce excitement into her boring life in Dallas, Bonnie cleverly intervenes not just by reprimand, but by challenging Clyde to a date. As they walk into town, Bonnie taunts Clyde into action after he shows him her gun. With overtones equating his gun to a phallic object, she says "You wouldn't have the gumption to use it." In both of these scenes, she directs Clyde's actions, placing herself at the center of narrative progression. And, impressed by Clyde's success in robbing a shop, Bonnie lustily advances on Clyde in an act of surprising sexual aggression. At numerous points later in the film, Bonnie also demonstrates her formidable abilities as a wordsmith, markswoman, and as a sort of public relations strategist. In an amusing turn of rhetoric, Bonnie appropriates the media coverage of their heists towards the

creation of their own mythology, in her words and on her terms. She writes a poem, "The Story of Bonnie and Clyde," which the newspapers publish and, in doing so, outflanks Clyde and the rest of the gang as the true "author" of their exploits. After outmaneuvering a pursuing sheriff, Bonnie resolves to extract revenge by taking a picture of the captured sheriff with the gang (comprised of Bonnie, Clyde, Clyde's brother, his wife, and a friend) teasingly posed alongside; the photo appears on the front page of newspapers. However, these bursts of feminine wit and autonomy are quickly and definitely reduced in minor incidents, as when Clyde commands her to change her hairstyle, to which she quickly obliges, as well as in more significant exchanges. Throughout the film, Bonnie often defers to Clyde's authority, allowing him to choose their next destination as well as adjudicating conflicts within their band of outlaws. While one might read the seemingly discontinuous roles that Bonnie plays as schizophrenic, I prefer to think of these conflictual roles as the working out of feminine subjectivity in a diegesis that is staunchly patriarchal (Clyde is, after all, the "head" of this roving family of robbers), yet contingent upon interventions led by a female subject.

While Bonnie, Clyde, and "the Barrow Gang" may succeed in imbuing the road narrative with a strong image of populist rebellion, it is Bonnie who performs a double rebellion against the dominant structures of Depression-era society as well as prevailing standards of feminine subjectivity. However, neither forms of rebellion are able to unseat dominant power structures. Clyde, for example, misrecognizes his desire for money as somehow an act of populist rebellion when in fact it is motivated by a dominant logic of economic advancement. While the film as a whole stakes out important points of rebellion and, importantly, articulates its relation of marginality through uses of the automobile, its underlying tendency towards conformist regression also leaves a lasting imprint on the genre. Bonnie rattles the chains of feminine

subjugation, but does not quite break their hold. Nonetheless, her character succeeds in introducing a new set of precedents that abolish the femme fatale archetype. Thus both Bonnie, the character, and *Bonnie and Clyde*, the film, establish for the genre a prevailing tension between rebellion and conformity that would be repeated in nearly every road movie film to follow.

Easy Rider

Arguably the most recognizable road movie, *Easy Rider* had the effect of further concretizing the road movie genre by harnessing various threads of already existing generic material, from the older themes of escape, rebellion, liberation, and social critique through the socially resonant narratives of the late 1960s counterculture. Through its treatment of the themes of freedom, rebellion, and conformity, *Easy Rider* left in its wake an indelible statement on the narrative potentiality of marginality on the road. The film is both a buddy movie and a quest road movie: after securing a large fortune from a drug deal, Wyatt, who is sometimes referred to as Captain America (Peter Fonda), and his friend Billy (Dennis Hopper) take off on a cross country trip destined for the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans. Mardi Gras, however, serves primarily as a pretext for the larger goal of their travel: to rediscover America. As a film that has been extensively covered in scholarly work (Schaber 34-36, Klinger 179-203, Laderman 66-81, Mills 133-140, Orgeron 101-127), like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider* is a key road movie and one that establishes for the genre important points of negotiation in terms of the abstraction of freedom, the construction of rebellion, and the modes through which rebellion is reintegrated within structures of conformity. Implicitly running through these three themes is also the status of

marginality on the road. Already, we begin to see the generic embers left by *Bonnie and Clyde*, particularly in terms of the tension between rebellion and conformity. However, by virtue of being a quest road movie rather than a fugitive road movie, *Easy Rider* is able to more directly address the concept of freedom.[6] *Easy Rider* owes a great deal of its generic revisionism to *Bonnie and Clyde*, perhaps more than may be immediately evident, but *Easy Rider* nonetheless sets a sort of high water mark for the genre. In the ensuing decades, other road movies would be haunted by the new precedents set by the road trip of Wyatt, Billy, and George road trip through America.

I consider *Easy Rider* to be consciously (and playfully) aware of its points of thematic incoherence. The film is sympathetic to the desire of Wyatt and Billy for freedom in that it provides more than ample occasion for the expression of that freedom; however, it also critiques some of the manifestations of "freedom" that they encounter on the road. One example of this occurs when Wyatt and Billy pick up a hitch-hiker who invites them to visit his desert commune. In a 360 degree shot that captures the faces of commune members at the table, a young man offers a melodramatic prayer. Performed in an affectedly tortured rhetoric, his prayer attempts to be modest, but the overplayed earnestness gestures towards the fatuity of the commune itself. The only scene that would appear to celebrate the utopian ideals of commune life occurs when Wyatt and Billy, both having found girls to hang out with, leave for a nearby bath. Ironically, though, these moments of conviviality occur only when away from the commune. To complicate matters further, in another scene prior to their arrival at the commune, Wyatt and Billy are invited to dinner at a farmer's ranch. The farmer, like the commune members, embodies ideals of

[6] In a sense, one could view *Bonnie and Clyde* as a series of attempts to outrun the inevitable negation of freedom. *Easy Rider*, on the other hand, is a film about the experiences that come with "practicing" freedom.

freedom and independence, but in the case of the farmer, social relations adhere to heteropatriarchal norms. Surprisingly, Wyatt admires the farmer's life considerably more than the life of the commune members, indicating that in spite of Wyatt's countercultural dress, posture, and social ties, he prefers a form of autonomy secured through discipline, conformity, and conservative values.

Perhaps the most "coherent" aspect of the film is the simultaneous alignment of two sorts of transgression: that of social norms, on the one hand, and of cinematic conventions, on the other. The link between these two sorts of transgression becomes a frequent feature within the road movie genre. A mere one and a half minutes into the film, we see Wyatt and Billy snorting coke shortly before deciding to purchase a large quantity, the consequences of which set into motion the entire narrative. Shortly after this scene, we see Wyatt on his motorcycle, pausing to throw away his watch on the ground, at which point the camera jarringly zooms in and out, fast cutting between the watch in Wyatt's hand and then the ground. The transgression of juridical law (as well as dominant social norms) is dramatically and immediately imprinted onto the film aesthetic. This association between rebellious style and rebellious action implies that the film's transgressive content could only be related through a corresponding subversion of cinematic orthodoxy. In addition to numerous experimental cinematographic techniques, such as overexposure, zoom, and sound effects, the film is notable for its many extended driving scenes across natural landscapes. In writing on the use of the automobile, movement, and landscape, Will Straw identifies the phenomenon of vehicular speed in film as setting an important precedent, arguing that these sequences "partake [in a] mannerism and pictoral extravagance" and that car films of the 1960s are "marked by an indulgence in unusual and extended visual effects" (Straw 5). The play of cinematic form, the celebration of motorcycle mobility, and the

elongation of "unimportant scenes" are central components of the cinematic project at play in *Easy Rider*. These "mannerist" road scenes upset the conventions of "good filmmaking" because they unapologetically display excess and are utterly unconcerned with advancing the narrative, mirroring in some way the excessive and marginal subjectivities of the protagonists. The many mannerist road scenes ensure that when Wyatt and Billy are not themselves acting out some form of rebellion in the narrative, the camera comes forward and delights in its own gestures of rebellion.

Another view of the film's investments in extended, mannerist road scenes, one that could reasonably account for the aestheticization of rebellion, might argue that the frequency and duration of these scenes serve as a reminder that freedom for Wyatt and Billy is contingent and literal and will disintegrate as it approaches the social. It would seem that the most redeeming moments in the film occur in this state of literal freedom on the road while the majority of social encounters, often in towns and cities, result in conflict or confrontation. Wyatt and Billy are arrested while at a parade, and are the objects of scorn at a roadside café; finally, their trip to Mardi Gras results in little more than a bad acid trip. This troubled conception of freedom, however, follows the film's logic of contradictions. Though the film celebrates their liberation, it can only be sustained in the bounds of the pure, asocial, affective, and historically cleansed space of the highway. Freedom is literally (and only) the movement of a body across space and time, it is not portable in any conceptual manner nor in any way applicable to the social. Moreover, this freedom is delicate and susceptible to violence at any moment, the reality of which ends up becoming the most brutal aspect of *Easy Rider.* The mere act of riding a motorcycle or having long hair is enough of a crime to merit death.

Alternatively, we might consider the physical and diegetic expansiveness of *Easy Rider* to be indicative of the film's ambitions in terms of its rebellion and social critique. From this perspective, the long stretches of highway and the massive geographical distances that they span become a figurative approximation of the scale of the film's concerns. As they traverse the nation, Wyatt and Billy are unabashedly addressing and challenging America at large. It would appear, then, that the inscription of rebellion onto the vast spaces of the highway demonstrates a certain hubris that takes on the nation as a whole and pushes against its moral boundaries at all costs. *Easy Rider* does not shy away from this project; instead it impels the characters into a disarray of social forces that produce their own expulsion from society (and existence). This outsized and exclamatory vision of rebellion is important in that it further emphasizes the genre's status as a mode of social critique.

The Rain People

The Rain People is an unjustly forgotten road movie that deserves a closer look because it proposes several unique contributions to the genre. In this slightly extended discussion, I wish to review the film in greater detail as it is infrequently examined in the road movie literature. *The Rain People* raises important questions about identity, feminism, and marginality, issues that would reappear at numerous junctures later in the genre. Overshadowed by the histrionics of *Easy Rider*, which was also released in 1969, as well as the seductive banditry of *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Rain People* received a much quieter reception. The tone of the film is comparatively muted, its rebellion is bourgeois, white, and while by no means queer, touches on issues of patriarchy and, in particular, the norms of reproduction. These themes are, appropriately enough,

conveyed in a far more private, introspective, and emotional register than in either *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*, setting a precedent for the genre that was adopted by a number of other road movies, beginning with Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970). The protagonist, Natalie (Shirley Knight), is an unusual road rebel: she is pregnant, newly married, and, from the looks of things, has enjoyed a comfortable suburban life in Long Island, NY. However, she decides to leave her husband early one morning with no destination in mind. Not long after her departure, she picks up "Killer" (James Caan), a hitch-hiking young man who, as we eventually learn, is a ex-college football star whose career was cut short by a severe head injury, which left him mentally disabled.

Stylistically, the film's understated disposition takes its cues from European cinema. In a number of ways, *The Rain People* resembles Claude Lelouch's contemplative car movie *A Man and a Woman* (1966), which similarly employs long, often silent, and introspective shots of characters while they go about pedestrian tasks. *The Rain People* is unlike many road movies in that it does not deliver bombastic performances of rebellion, yet the film proposes a number of novel as well as experimental techniques that would reappear in other road movies (as well as in the New Hollywood aesthetic in general). The film's most notable stylistic device is the unorthodox use of flashback sequences. These shots represent novel uses of the camera in that they systematically relay past events to the viewer as they are called upon in dialog. For example, as Killer gives forth biographical information about his short-lived college football career, we see shots of a football game in progress and, as Killer explains his head injury, we see him as he falls from a tackle, his face bloodied. These flashback shots serve a simple purpose in the logical unfolding of the film, but they also lend the film an abstract dimension that evokes the process of recollection and, in particular, the haunted memories and events that underwrite the

film's narrative present. For Natalie, the film cuts back to a number of shots of her at her wedding, which are juxtaposed to her flight from home. In a particularly dramatic sequencing of past-to-present, we see Natalie dancing with her husband at their wedding ceremony surrounded by family and friends; the film then cuts dramatically to Natalie driving alone through Lincoln Tunnel as she heads to New York City, the concrete ceiling of the tunnel having replaced the crowd that surrounds her and her husband in the previous shot. This blending of biographical information with approximations of the character's memory and consciousness is explored poignantly at the very end of the film when Killer defends Natalie from Gordon (Robert Duvall), a police officer who attempts to rape her. Killer flies into a rage, the power of which is conveyed through a abstract flashback sequence in which the camera, positioned on the field at a football game, shows players violently colliding, the sound engulfed by the violent crash of bodies. These somewhat experimental flashback sequences finesse the cinematic play of form found in *Easy Rider.* Whereas *Easy Rider* deploys a barrage of experimental techniques, *The Rain People* reserves these techniques for more significant scenes. The innovative use of flashbacks here is important in that this device would also be heavily employed two years later in *Vanishing Point*.

Being one of the few road movies (past and present) to feature a woman driver, the film inevitably raises important questions regarding identity. In an unusual move for a road movie, there is no identification between our driver-protagonist and her car. Numerous road movie scholars note that a key feature of the road movie is that the protagonist identifies with his mode of transportation and that character development and subjectivity become a function of this hybrid form (Corrigan 146, Cohan and Hark 2, Laderman 84). But as with Natalie and her station wagon, there is in fact a deep disidentification at play as the station wagon serves as a clear metaphor for the heteropatriarchal and reproductivist demand that follows her throughout her

travel. It is not difficult to anticipate the failure of her journey simply by looking at her car; she paradoxically searches everywhere for liberation in a vehicle whose utility is the very negation of that liberation. The incongruence between driver and car would lead us to believe that the narrative of autonomy and liberation afforded by the road and car is the exclusive preserve of men and that a woman could never hope to enjoy the mechanized autopoiesis that comes so naturally for, say, Wyatt and Billy in *Easy Rider*.

Throughout the film, Natalie stops at phone booths to make calls to her husband. In the first conversation we learn more about her identity, including her name, the fact that she is pregnant (we learn about her pregnancy at the same time as her husband), and her motivations for leaving: she is uncertain about her life as a married woman, a future mother, and the onset of her domestic life. Against her husband's demands, she refuses to return home. What she reveals in the conversation, which is the closest approximation to her statement of purpose in the film, is certainly rebellious: her travel is a refutation of the social expectations placed on her identity as wife, mother, and daughter. She also introduces in the conversation a device that will appear several other times in the film in which she lapses into the third person as a rhetorical disavowal of her identity and, ostensibly, the attendant set of expectations tied to that identity. When she informs her husband that she is pregnant, she says: "she's pregnant ... me ... your wife." Her listless and inarticulate voice hints towards a vacated interiority as if Natalie the wife and mother-to-be has become disembodied from the Natalie that has taken to the road. This questioning of the status of identity also appears earlier when she introduces herself to Killer as "Sarah" in a furtive attempt to borrow a degree of freedom and anonymity from her actual identity. The play of identities here is important in that it anticipates issues of identity that would reappear in later road movies, notably with the character G.T.O. in *Two-Lane Blacktop*.

Whereas the source of heteropatriarchal control emanates via the telephone during the first conversation Natalie has with her husband, that ideological control appears again in a brief shot just after the phone conversation through its rematerialization in the camera and car. Playing again with forms of embodiment (not to mention a novel cinematic composition), the camera is now situated inside the empty station wagon, seeing Natalie and judging her feminine resistance with the full weight of symbolic investments contained in the semiotic materiality of the station wagon. The camera tracks her movement from behind the windshield as she walks away from the telephone booth and towards the car. Following this, the camera changes again to see Natalie dejectedly eyeing "Just Married" decorations that now appear on the car. This short clip is jarringly abstract (in scenes before and after this one, the car does not wear any wedding decorations) as if we have entered Natalie's consciousness, which is at that moment recalling what the station wagon looked like on her wedding day.

On the surface, we might consider Natalie's flight from home and husband as well as her desire for freedom as expressing an assertive feminist position. Yet the film complicates this exploration of feminist potentiality through an insidious alignment between Natalie and Killer. Scenes of conviviality between the two main characters, both misfits in their own way (Natalie escapes the confines of her home, Killer is obliged to leave his college), invite us to view the affinities shared by these unexpected "road buddies" as if they are equals. They share a unique bond even in the most frustrated scenes. For example, Natalie's failure to "make it" with Killer upon the learning that he is mentally disabled eventually turns to frustration. She berates him: "You're a freak, a vegetable, a stupid idiotic idiot." But even in scenes with the coldest invectives, the film would have us understand Killer as a mirror for her own inability to articulate – much less come to terms with – her discontents. While Natalie's autonomy is indeed

a triumph that harbors the nascent feminist intentions inaugurated by Bonnie's character in *Bonnie and Clyde*, the greatest impasse any feminist reading of the film must contend with is the indignity of aligning a feminine subject with a mentally handicapped football player.

Reading both with and against the grain of the film, one can say that the status of feminism is complicated, but a useful distinction might lie in the difference between the ways in which Natalie's character navigates the film's diegesis and the cinematic ways through which the diegesis is rendered. As I have argued, the film does not ultimately deliver a feminist critique; however, Natalie's character contains traits that are seemingly recuperable to a feminist worldview. For example, Natalie is very astute in improvising rhetorical defenses, such as the third person disavowal of the roles she is supposed to play. I view this defense as significant because it demonstrates her identification of the conditions that separate her from the woman she wishes to become. Though this "other" woman has not yet staked out real points of autonomous potentiality, her disavowal of the woman that she is "supposed to be" (the wife, the mother) is at least a step towards the dismantling of a feminine subjectivity marked out in advance by structures of patriarchy, feminine subservience, and reproduction.

Throughout her journey, Natalie is almost always an object of curiosity if not rebuke because she is traveling alone or traveling with a man who is not her husband. The gendered dynamics of travel – and automobile travel in particular – are a source of constant antagonism for women on the road, Natalie being no exception. The most thoroughly explored aspect of the masculine bias of the road comes with Natalie's encounter with Gordon, a motorcycle police officer who pulls her over for speeding. In his initial contact with Natalie, Gordon seems to punish Natalie's autonomy, the speeding ticket becoming incidental (or, as we learn, a pretext for a date). He asks her repeatedly where her husband as if unable or unwilling to accept that a

woman might undertake a long distance trip by herself. He asserts a totalizing control of the situation when Natalie questions the relevance of her husband to the speeding ticket. Eventually, the "policing" of her autonomy becomes recast as a question of her availability. Gordon takes an interest in Natalie, escorting her to where she must pay the fine and buying her a coffee along the way. He asks her more about her trip and she is characteristically reserved; he assumes that she is going to California, to which she accedes. In this moment, even the nature of Natalie's trip (which heretofore was presented more as wandering than reaching some destination) has become determined by a male subject. The masculine bounds of control, interestingly though not surprisingly, have extended beyond the immediate present time and place. At this point, even her escape from heteropatriarchy is determined by a man.

Determined to have an extra-marital affair while on the road, Natalie seems to have found an opportunity with Gordon. In her last conversation with Killer, Natalie flatly tells Killer of her plans for that evening, implying that he should leave as she has a "heavy date." There is a tone of derision, recalling of course that her attempts with Killer were unsuccessful. Her spatial autonomy is now superseded by a sexual autonomy, but one that would characterize her as unfaithful and insensitive given her awareness of Killer's affection for her. This again presents another complication for a feminist read of the film, which would read sexual liberation as immoral. In the final sequence of the film, Natalie ends up at Gordon's house and as they talk about their own lives (it is revealed that Gordon's wife passed away), Natalie insinuates that Gordon sees his deceased wife in her, prompting her again to use emphasize the third person ("You're thinking about *her*.") in yet another refusal to allow herself to become ensnared as a "wife." In what would otherwise be a fairly unredeeming scene, Natalie stands her ground by her stringent refusal to be subjugated as a wife. Natalie decides to leave, prompting Gordon to

assault her and then attempt to rape her. At this point, Killer intervenes, but at the cost of his own life. The association of violence, the police, the road, and the attendant set of gendered dynamics yet again sets another important precedent for the road movie.

Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Rain People* is early to raise the question of female independence; it is also quick to undercut the autonomy of the female road subject. Surely, if we are to accept the premise of this diegetic world and then ask of it what might be the status of femininity on the road, the conclusion yields a rather grim outlook. Unlike Natalie's identities as a wife and eventual mother, the roles of which are socially and institutionally coherent, Natalie's newly found identity ("Sarah") is never really able to realize any of her intentions. Though she is precocious and is able to identify the masculinist biases on the road and in the social roles she is obliged to accept, the film itself is unwilling to authorize her autonomy. I read the film as largely an indictment of feminism because she is presented alongside Killer as a peer and because the various episodes of meaninglessness on the road serve as implicit statements that there is no room for a female road subject and that a woman's life is made coherent only within the structures of patriarchy, domesticity, and the home. However, almost paradoxically, *The Rain People* seems to promise that female autonomy on the road might eventually prevail.

While Laderman finds Natalie's emotional ennui and indeterminate drifting across geographic space to be indicative of a period of genre revisionism that replaces extroverted displays of rebellion with introverted examinations of selfhood, I believe a more accurate reading of *The Rain People* finds that Natalie is precluded from making plans, locating a destination, and bringing forth a steady trajectory of character development (all of which *could* be grounds for a far more reckless and rebellious road movie) because the camera conforms to the diegetic social norms that will not lift its prohibitions on the female subject. Throughout the film, the camera

judges Natalie, intrudes on her (there a numerous close up and extreme close up shots of her in rather intimate poses), and strives to portray her as an object of feminine caprice rather than a subject asserting herself against conservative social norms. Running through (or at odds with) the film is Natalie's struggle to gain control over her life which might be seen as aimless and futile, but the more important question becomes what structures and what modes of control render her project aimless and futile?

As I have discussed, in its first "contemporary" iteration in the late 1960s, the road movie congeals into a more specific cinematic text that is thematically concerned with freedom and rebellion, exercised and told through the condition of automobility. And while *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider* make evident some of the underlying tenets of the genre, I have attempted to provide a reading of *The Rain People* that proposes it as a sort of "third" founding film. Taking up issues of gender glimpsed in *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Rain People* offers a more elaborate, if complex, examination of the feminine road subject. Moreover, the film directly addresses issue of identity, the influence of which would be seen in a number of later road movies beginning with *Vanishing Point*.

Chapter Two: Cynicism on the Road

Two-Lane Blacktop, Vanishing Point, and *Road Movie*

The first half of the 1970s would prove to be a watershed period for the road movie genre, with influential films such as Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), Donald Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970), Richard Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* (1971), Stephen Speilberg's *Duel* (1971), Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), Terrence Mallick's *Badlands* (1973), Joseph Strick's *Road Movie* (1974), and Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975). These films adopt the genre's general interests in identity, marginality, freedom, rebellion, and social critique as found in the founding wave of contemporary road movies discussed in the previous chapter, but these films also explore new lines of inquiry latent in their 1960s counterparts. *Duel* expands on the often masculine ordering of automobility, offering its own pugnacious excesses of aggression. On the other hand, Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* revises the fugitive model with a strong Black Power agenda that attacks normative standards of whiteness and forms of police violence, making it the first road movie (and one of the few) to explicitly address the issue of race.[7] Following themes found in *The Rain People*, both *Five Easy Pieces* and *The Passenger* pursue introspective forms of rebellion against one's own personal identity instead of rebelling against a more broadly construed social milieu. The critically-acclaimed *Badlands* would reinterpret a Bonnie and Clyde-esque fugitive couple model, but lend it strong Gothic inflections while also further exploring the pop culture sensibility found in *Bonnie and Clyde.* Looking beyond the United States, *Goin' Down the Road*, one of the first Canadian road movies, comments on both

[7] I will return to *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* in the following chapter.

the nation and the grim economic realities of the early 1970s. Though also outside of this thesis's purview, the German director Wim Wenders's "Road Trilogy," which includes *Alice in the Cities* (1974), *The Wrong Move* (1975), and *Kings of the Road* (1976), are important contributions to the genre.

Of the films to emerge from this period of generic expansion, I wish to bring attention to *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Vanishing Point*, and *Road Movie,* each of which provide unique accounts of identity by positing the car and the road as productive fields in the formation of identity and social marginality. What sets these films apart from those we reviewed in the previous chapter is that while they are more conceptually ambitious, they are also more cynical. Protagonists in *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider* are earnest and comparatively innocent, if naïve, in their understanding of rebellion. *Two-Lane Blacktop*, on the other hand, invites an allegorical reading of the meaninglessness of such themes as freedom and rebellion while raising questions about the category of identity itself. In a similar vein, *Vanishing Point* plays with the forms through which identity is made coherent while delivering a violent and deeply contemptuous rebellion against civil order. Meanwhile, *Road Movie* includes a strong female character, but, like *The Rain People*, is still far from taking up a feminist position. Moreover, each film proposes a unique diegetic space: *Two-Lane Blacktop*'s world of underground racing is deeply asocial. *Vanishing Point*, with its lone protagonist, exists in a relatively isolated world, yet the film manages to recreate the social through a number of novel cinematic devices. And, in the case of *Road Movie*, its worlding project takes a very specific account of big rig truckers on the margins of capitalism.

Two-Lane Blacktop

Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* is often hailed as a quintessential road movie and a cult classic, much celebrated for its understated and nonchalant plot structure. It is distinct among road movies in that it navigates and expresses its social world through a particularly conservative mode. Two young men, The Driver (James Taylor) and The Mechanic (Dennis Wilson), are underground race drivers who travel from town to town earning their subsistence by betting against other drivers in informal (and illegal) races. Early into the film, The Girl (Laurie Bird), joins them and, not long after, they encounter G.T.O. (Warren Oates), who challenges them to a cross country race to Washington D.C. Though the film operates largely by subtracting the social and constraining the social repertoires and agential capacities of its characters, the film nonetheless provides a novel account of identity and marginalization. Moreover, the film's characters are largely isolated from a heterogeneous public as there are only a handful of scenes that depict a crowd and even these are largely crowds of race car drivers. In this particular social subset, characters are never deeply invested in friendships or other relations outside of the car. The film is conservative, not in a political or ideological sense, but in terms of its interests and animating logic. Encounters with people from outside often precipitate a regression back into the mobile four person community comprised of The Driver, The Mechanic, G.T.O., and The Girl. While we encounter a number of different geographies and forms of sociality, the film does not engage the social as such. Nor exactly does it wholly strive to represent the subculture of underground racing. Instead, the film world of *Two-Lane Blacktop* focuses on just a few people who find themselves situated somewhere in the subculture of underground racing. But while the film depicts a particular subculture, characters like G.T.O. and The Girl are never easily or

concretely interpellated into an underground racing subculture; they exist somewhere out on the far margins of an already isolated world.

The Driver and The Mechanic appear better situated in this racing subculture, but for G.T.O. and The Girl, whose identities are not fixed to racing, their physical presence does not guarantee their membership. In the case of G.T.O., the very rubric of identity must be called into question because he vacillates from character to character, assuming a new identity with every hitchhiker. G.T.O. is by turns a pilot, a test driver, and a race car manager (among others); his character underscores the anonymity of the road and demonstrates how that anonymity is able to furnish conditions of constant renewal. This play of identity references Natalie's character in *The Rain People*, who strategically changes her identity (by offering a new name or distancing herself from her real identity) under the cloak of anonymity that the road provides. Each new name represents an attempt to occupy an identity, but because he never retains any one of these identities for long, he becomes marginalized from identity itself. As for The Girl, her itinerant existence permits her to spontaneously enter the world of The Driver and The Mechanic just as easily as she exists within it. In spite of the ambivalence and permeability of this world, for most of the film these four characters locate themselves somewhere in the interstices of underground racing subculture.

The unsteady and indeterminate identities of G.T.O. and The Girl gesture towards the unsteady and indeterminate world of underground racing. Even roadside services, gas stations, and automobile infrastructure, or what John Urry identifies as the "complex" of technical and social entities that support the automobile (26), are not all hospitable to this form of driving. This world is not accessed through the normative complex of automobility, but through more transient forms like word of mouth. It is precisely in these unofficial geographies (such as inactive

airstrips or highways just outside of town) and in personal knowledge (The Driver "knows a guy" in Ohio or knows where exactly in Arkansas one might find a carburetor rebuilt kit) that *Two-Lane Blacktop* situates its worlding project. The opening scene foregrounds the film's unstable and relational ontology; when The Chevy races against another car along an empty strip of highway the entire event is forced to disperse with bets unsettled when the police arrive. From early on, we understand that underground racing is relationally defined by its defiance of the law and of normative conditions of road travel. The approximate, unstable, and vulnerable qualities of underground racing require that the film shut out the larger social milieu. While G.T.O. may appear to disrupt this rule, his experiences with the exterior social world (via hitchhikers) never result in any significant exchanges that would substantially intrude upon or otherwise upset the race.

The Girl, on the other hand, is more able to inhabit the underground racing world in spite of her most obvious shortcoming, that is, her inability to drive a race car. Therefore, her membership is dependent on successfully locating and occupying a feminine subject position in a nearly homosocial sphere. Her romantic liaisons with both The Driver and The Mechanic represent possible arrangements that would secure her a role in the system of social relations, but this role, which reaches a certain stability when she becomes the object of narrative pursuit, is ultimately abandoned. Remembering that her entrance into the car (and thus the film) is entirely voluntary, her departure occurs just as easily and unceremoniously. The film is not significantly invested in The Driver's pursuit of The Girl; also, her departure does not have a measurable effect or any specific outcome in the film. Significantly, the film ends in a local race not unlike the race at the beginning of the film and both The Girl and G.T.O. are absent, their provisional membership having been revoked.

The few encounters with the "outside" world are often rooted in an identity-based conflict and are reduced to minor episodes that the narrative either expels or appropriates. In Oklahoma, a gay hitchhiker on two occasions makes a pass at G.T.O., who declines his advances. What could have resulted in a longer, possibly violent or otherwise homophobic episode is averted. The scene demonstrates how the film dispenses with instances of social heterogeneity by extinguishing any potential threats that could significantly alter the course of the film. Whereas this scene routes identity trouble out of the narrative, the scene set in a roadside diner in the South is quick to reroute opposing identities (the outsider vs the local) back into the narrative. A local young man challenges the group and asks if they are hippies, unsure of their outsider status, then invites them to the local race as a way to mediate difference through the race. In the logic of the film, there is a sense that all are equal before the race. In a rare moment of subcultural fluency, G.T.O. responds to the young man's question not because he wishes to defend their identity (as not being hippies), but to secure their invitation to a local race.

One could read *Two-Lane Blacktop* as a series of events related in whole or in part to racing; however, it also seems valid to consider the narrative construction as a series of misalignments in the attempt to go racing. The most obvious misalignment is that in spite of the film's efforts to "protect" the race by removing distractions to the race, none of the characters ever make it to Washington, D.C. The failure of a race film to complete a race begs a review of the missed opportunities forsaken in the name of their race. It is unclear, for example, whether or not G.T.O. was interested in the gay hitchhiker's invitation, remembering that after saying "I'm not into that!" he says "This is competition, man, I got no time." And after the implied second sexual advance, G.T.O. repeats "I got no time for sidetracks." Ostensibly, G.T.O. is not disinterested, but prioritizes the race ahead of sexual pleasure. In the absence of the race, he may

have welcomed the hitchhiker's advances, which would have provided an intimacy that eludes him throughout the film. Later in the film, and in the hopes of evading the seemingly endless set of misalignments that beset him, G.T.O. attempts to convince The Girl to join him by suggesting a number of new destinations: Miami, Montreal, Mexico. The list, which is completely random other than the fact that each destination begins with the letter "M," represents a plane of affective optimism that displaces G.T.O.'s series of disappointments onto a hopeful logic of repetition. Like G.T.O.'s repetition of facts and false identities, the narrative ensures that in all likelihood his next set of destinations will produce yet another set of misalignments.

These misalignments and particularly the queer-ness of the scene with the gay hitchhiker could ostensibly function as a pun for the entire film. The contingent qualities of the worlding project that is at play maps surprisingly well onto what Laurent Berlant and Michael Warner have described in another context as a "queer counter-publics." Though *Two-Lane Blacktop* obviously presumes a heteronormative sexual axis, its spatial and juridical ontology exists on the margins of legality and normative instrumentality in a way not unlike a queer counter-public. Berlant and Warner describe this term as "an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation. [It is] typical both of the inventiveness of queer world-making and of the queer world's fragility" (362). In this regard, it might be said that the mircophysics of spatial subordination and the attendant set of creative strategies in response to this subordination (examples include the choice to stay off the Interstate or swapping California license plates for local license plates) are "queer." Given the limited "public" displayed in the generally asocial world of *Two-Lane Blacktop*, I would emphasize the "queerness" of this space while qualifying the "public" here as more modestly denoting a fairly narrow social subset.

Another misalignment occurs when the two parties stop in a small town in search of a replacement part. At this point, the race has been paused and only then does The Driver pursue The Girl. Driving through the town in search of her and with a lesson in driving as a pretext, he flirts with and kisses The Girl. As in G.T.O.'s possible missed connection with the gay hitchhiker, The Driver is not disinterested in her, but prioritizes the race above all else. This misalignment points to a greater rift that demonstrates how incommensurable the world of underground racing is to anything outside of it. Even when The Driver pursues The Girl (with the race now incidental to catching up with her), the bounds of his asocial world prevent this union. His best attempt to convince The Girl to join him – "I figure we go up to Columbus, Ohio, there's a man there wants to sell some parts real cheap" – is firmly rejected. In this instance, The Girl, who is least invested in their world, serves to remind us that whatever it is that binds The Driver, The Mechanic, and G.T.O. together, it is asocial to a fault. The Driver's social ineptitude in navigating social relations outside the world of racing is in stark contrast to his deft social ability to challenge other drivers to race him. The Driver is fluent in what might be thought of as the erotics of the automobile race, including the rituals of engagement between racers, but he is otherwise completely unable to locate forms of intimacy.

Another key misalignment in *Two-Lane Blacktop* is that the nominal premise centers around the subculture of underground racing, which is fundamentally at odds with the narrative's cross country race. This is clear from the opening and closing scenes, which are both races and serve as explanations for how The Driver and The Mechanic subsist. We learn early on that the Chevy is purpose-built to run quarter-mile races and yet the film places quarter-mile racers driving a drag spec car on a cross country race. This logical misalignment runs in parallel to a greater misalignment in identity. Their marginal subject position allows for unlimited geographic

mobility, but all of these physical places become non-places in the sense that they will all foreclose any potential for social intimacy. In a heavy-handed way, the lack of character names reminds us that the price of mobility (and the alleged promises of freedom) is the loss of a real social membership. In keeping with *Easy Rider*'s sense of freedom as being only literal, *Two-Lane Blacktop* similarly comments on the meaninglessness of rebellion and the emptiness of pure mobility. Underground racing is loosely organized, haphazardly orchestrated, and though extant in towns throughout America, it remains an informal practice rather than a predictable institution. Misalignment in the lives of these racers becomes the predictable effect of a subculture whose structure is necessarily unpredictable.

At a roadside I, The Girl tunelessly sings The Rolling Stones's song "Satisfaction," an apt choice for the film. The word "satisfaction" returns later when G.T.O. picks up two hitchhikers, military servicemen on leave. Interestingly, in this instance G.T.O. plays on the narrative by reversing it, explaining that he won the G.T.O. using a The Chevy he claims to have built up himself. Full of false pride, he tells them "That'll give you a set of emotions that'll stay with ya. Those satisfactions are permanent." This scene demonstrates not only the jealousy he feels toward The Driver and The Mechanic, but also his presumption that their subjectivities as underground racers are wholly formed, stable and also desirable, not realizing that satisfaction for The Driver is in similar ways constantly out of reach. The general lack of satisfactions in the film (even when The Chevy beats a competitor, there is never any celebration) indicates that the many misalignments are not detours towards an eventual triumph. For all the film's efforts to conserve and contain the mobile, underground sites of racing, there is only the promise of more road travel that will inevitably be isolated from exchanges with the social. Life at the margins offers no refuge from emptiness or alienation much less any permanent satisfactions.

Vanishing Point

Whereas *Two-Lane Blacktop* presents a narrowly defined social catalog, *Vanishing Point* reveals an entirely different social experience of the road. While there is only one main character, the film is resolutely expansive in cataloging the social and, unlike *Two-Lane Blacktop*, includes diverse cultural, spatial, and temporal accounts that point far beyond the interior space of the car. Kowalski (Barry Newman), the protagonist and only main character, is a car delivery driver who is tasked with driving a car from Denver, CO to Frisco, CA. Shortly into the film, a motorcycle policeman pursues Kowalski, but he refuses to pull over. The rest of the film follows Kowalski as he evades the police in a violent, high-speed chase to California. Though Kowalski is often alone, the film references various aspects of his past, allowing the film to create a complexly heterogeneous social catalog that consciously posits public displays of tolerance and unity alongside displays of systemic injustice and violent bigotry. It is with this social landscape that *Vanishing Point* deploys the road and the automobile as productive fields in the formation of identity and marginality.

Though often billed as one of the great car chase films, a more productive reading might de-emphasize the film as a chase and consider *Vanishing Point* as a set of entry points in considering the various purposes of the automobile. As we saw in *Easy Rider*, there are many extended scenes of gratuitous driving pleasure that far exceed their narrative responsibilities, but these scenes are never just about the immanent pleasure of reckless driving. From early on, we become aware of how the car as an object provides a way to mediate other projects. Kowalski's nominal motivation to drive to Frisco is instrumental in nature as it is his job to deliver cars. This

task, however, is overtaken not long after Kowalski brazenly attempts to assault a police officer on a motorcycle, turning the car into a weapon. We later learn that the vehicular assault is motivated at least in part by Kowalski's past experience as a police officer. In this case, the car can also be viewed as a tool or resource that mobilizes a particular form of resistance.

Issues of identity are presented in a novel way because of the relationship that forms between Kowalski and local radio host Super Soul (Cleavon Little). Because Kowalski is alone in a car for most of the film, his lines of dialog are limited, however Super Soul's seemingly psychic ability to perceive and "see" Kowalski's actions (aided by intercepting police radio reports) allows him to speak on behalf of Kowalski. In this complex assemblage, Kowalski's reckless driving tactics constitute a sort of spatial-political discourse, which is monitored and reported by police and consequently intercepted by Super Soul, who then narrativizes and broadcasts the content of Kowalski's "driven message" to an audience of listeners. Super Soul embellishes Kowalski's story, describing him as, "the super driver of the golden west ... the lone driver ... our soul hero in our soul mobile." In addition to these functions, Super Soul's voice, broadcast through the radio and picked up in Kowalski's car, also has the effect of redrawing the forms through which identity is presented such that the radio becomes the voice of the car. One particular shot shows Kowalski outside the car, facing its front with Super Soul on the radio, as if the radio were the voice of the car and the car were directly addressing Kowalski. These assemblages, which rely on the car and the infrastructure that administers and works alongside the car (namely the radio), are productive in terms of identity-making because without Super Soul's narrations, Kowalski is not a hero so much as a simple fugitive.

The play of roles and forms in the construction of identity is important for the purposes of our discussion in that the film is questioning the category of identity itself. Somewhat akin to

the consideration of identity through G.T.O.'s character in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, identity here is slippery in that a single character varies not only his role, but also the form through which a given role is made coherent. The film begins with Super Soul as an eccentric radio personality in a small town, but, as the film progresses and Super Soul learns about Kowalski, he takes on the role of a mystic "seer"-cum-narrator as well as an advocate for Kowalski. And, as Laderman accurately points out, Super Soul serves as a sort of "buddy" for Kowalski. As the film progresses, Super Soul sheds his role as a radio show host and pursues with great concern the developments of his buddy's flight from the police, ignoring his responsibilities as a host. Moreover, in the scene described in the preceding paragraph, Super Soul's physical identity is displaced onto the car itself. This scene, perhaps more than any other road movie, explicitly equates a character's identity with the car, seamlessly mechanizing the process of characterization.

As the film assembles Kowalski's history through a series of police records and flashback sequences, we begin to understand more about his identity. Drawing on the technique of flashback as seen in *The Rain People*, *Vanishing Point* similarly employs these cuts to relay biographical information. From these accounts, we learn that Kowalski is haunted by the accidental death of his girlfriend and deeply troubled by his experiences as a police detective. One cut back into the past reveals that Kowalski intervened on behalf of a young woman when his partner attempted to sexually assault her and at later points we learn that he was dishonorably discharged, possibly for speaking out against the police department, but he is otherwise celebrated in newspapers as a "hero cop." We also know that he is a Vietnam War veteran and has had an unpromising career as a motorcycle and race car driver. And, obviously, in the film he becomes a fugitive and an outlaw, though the film's sympathetic rendering of his biography

would compel us to consider his "marginal" identity a consequence of his past, perhaps as a veteran unable to stabilize his life in the years following his return from duty. As the film's audience, we access this privileged information, but Kowalski's audience – that is, the interested and sympathetic public in the diegesis – perceives his rebellion in more generalized terms and through Super Soul's vivid accounts of the "soul hero."

As a fugitive on the run, Kowalski's story is inscribed onto a richly textured American cultural and symbolic space. Super Soul's language readily invites us to draw on the imagery of The West to emphasize Kowalski's existential desire for freedom. What was once the symbol for freedom in the American West and in particular the Western genre, the horse, is now a car (Roberts 61). The road and the car provide material forms and resources for evasion, but they also connote important significations that inscribe him as mythically defiant, facilitating his populist celebrity with the public. Kowalski's actions and Super Soul's words both command audiences of all ages and have the effect of galvanizing segments of the public. As Super Soul assures him, "people are wishing you well on your getaway." Though Kowalski must largely be contented with the assumption that Super Soul's real-time narration of his journey creates supporters and fans, one character, a man on the motorcycle, actually finds Kowalski and provides him with assistance, making tangible the linkages that connect Kowalski to Super Soul to the social.

However, Kowalski is hated by the police as well as by the more conservative segments of society. Similarly and by extension, Super Soul also polarizes society between those who love him for his vivid and bombastic personality and those who hate him for being African American and having access to power through his radio show. Super Soul, along with his African American radio show producer, suffer the deleterious realities of racial hatred when four

armed white men break into the radio station and viciously beat the two men. This attack is clearly aimed at silencing Super Soul (one of the mob members says "I'm gonna shut your big black mouth.") and, considering his ties with Kowalski, is in some way also a blow to the prospect of multiculturalism or, at the very least, the prospect of interracial buddies. Unlike *Two-Lane Blacktop*, with its attempts to foreclose conflict, *Vanishing Point* is frank in its portrayal of identity-based conflict.

A surprising exception to the film's general liberalism, however, occurs in a brief, but reactionary scene in which two gay hitchhikers ride with Kowalski. Their exaggerated personalities and sartorial flourish are in stark contrast to the gay hitchhiker seen in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, whose identity is subtly performed in practice rather than in an exaggerated display. The couple attempt to rob Kowalski at gunpoint, but Kowalski laughs off their attempt and swiftly ejects them from the car. For all its problems, this get-what-they-deserve logic reifies the assumption that the road is a place where one encounters people on the margins. This departure from the film's otherwise sympathetic perspective of minorities seemingly essentializes gay men as pathetic misfits and aberrations of society. The film repudiates queer-ness and in doing so demonstrates, in contradistinction to the queer counter-publics found in *Two-Lane Blacktop*, that it occupies a comparatively stable ontology whose subject positions across spatial and geographical lines exist in a dominant public sphere.

As I have tried to demonstrate, *Vanishing Point* offers a rich account of the social. Its organization of information is conducive to what Bruno Latour calls keeping the social "flat." The film is astute in arranging information, particularly with regard to constructing those parts of Kowalski's history that inform the chase. As Latour observes, "any given interaction seems to *overflow* with elements which are already in the situation coming from some other *time,* some

other *place,* and generated by some other *agency* " (166). This logic is particularly germane to the way the film cuts back to the past to supply specific details that directly contribute to the chase rather than attempting to furnish a biographical trajectory (the "overflow"). Kowalski does not offer his background in dialog, but his interiority comes forward to direct the film by referencing his past and leading us back to different times, places, and agencies. This method of accounting for relevant information is able to measure relative scale by only connecting two relevant events and dispensing with what Latour calls the "well-ordered zoom " (185). The sequencing of shots in the film, though at times chaotic in switching from the present to the past, produces a historically situated narrative that advances through the present action of characters while still providing an account of the antecedents of these actions. *Vanishing Point* is constructed through social, spatial, and technological relays and in spite of his literal isolation inside a car, Kowalski is deeply immersed in a social nexus. This balance of the social in a car and on the road contrasts with *Two-Lane Blacktop*, which is beleaguered by its social catalog and consciously presents its narrative as starkly ahistorical, isolated, and thus more intentionally allegorical.

Both *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Vanishing Point* provide useful points of entry in discussing lines of marginality and the category of identity on the road and in the car. That *Two-Lane Blacktop* does not correspond to Latour's call for the social to remain "flat" in the ways that *Vanishing Point* does is not necessarily reason to defer to *Vanishing Point* as offering a more accurate or productive read of identity and marginality. In fact, *Two-Lane Blacktop* presents interactions that work to constrain those other times, places, and agencies which Latour speaks of. *Two-Lane Blacktop* offers a bleak opinion of its unfeeling and diminished social world, expressed in the narrative as well as through its distinctly gritty, minimal, and understated

camera style. However, G.T.O.'s character offers a complex and thoroughly indeterminate position that goes somewhat beyond what is traditionally understood as "marginal." Through his character, the film is able to question the problematic of identity itself, an issue left untouched by *Vanishing Point*. This question is perhaps only reached by subtracting away the social. In this manner, because *Vanishing Point* closely approximates our own world, its analogous scale makes it in a sense less ambitious because it articulates its world more at parity to our own. *Two-Lane Blacktop*'s magnification of a small and thoroughly ambivalent world provides an allegorical distance that allows the film to further experiment with notions of identity and marginality.

Road Movie

Unlike *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Vanishing Point*, which are cited in the road movie scholarship (as well as popular literature) as indisputably canonical road movies, *Road Movie* is overlooked by existing road movie scholarship. Though perhaps not the most revolutionary road movie, the film is nonetheless unique in that it revises the quest model to address both the status of the female road subject and, in an unusual turn, corporate capitalism. Unlike previous accounts of the road, *Road Movie* sees the road as a site of circulation, a space on which labor is performed, and a passage in the circuits of corporate capitalism. Disillusioned by their previous experiences driving for large conglomerates, the protagonists, two truck drivers and business partners, resist the hold of corporate conglomerates by operating independently while Janice, a prostitute who accompanies the truckers, provisionally transcends her role as a prostitute by ultimately directing the narrative. However, each of the three characters enacts a form of rebellion that ultimately pits

one against the another, resulting in catastrophic results. Thus *Road Movie* exhibits the common duality of rebellion and conformity found in many films of the genre. Though it is not quite as influential as, for example, *Bonnie and Clyde*, I nonetheless wish to bring attention to *Road Movie* because it belongs to the wave of road movies that feature a strong, though not feminist, female character and because it is unique in addressing the journey as labor and the road as an important space for capitalist circulation.

Drawing on some of the precedents set forth by *Two-Lane Blacktop* (released three years prior), *Road Movie* is similar in that much of the film occurs in a car (or, to be precise, in a big rig truck), features a woman who must locate a feminine position in a masculine world, and tasks the female character with an instructive role. The film begins with an unnamed woman (Regina Baff) at a truck stop where Gil (Robert Drivas) and Hank (Barry Botswick), owners and drivers of a big rig on their maiden trip to deliver cargo in Chicago, pick her up after a brief discussion on a destination and negotiate a price for her company along the way. It is implied that she will provide sex in exchange for money and a ride to Chicago. Though Gil and Hank have experience driving trucks, they were employed at large freight corporations and this is their first run as an independent operation (pejoratively called "gypsies"), which, as we learn, is unorthodox for truckers and earns them scorn from truckers employed by large corporations. As independent truckers, they shoulder greater liabilities and must hustle to outbid large corporations in order to secure work. Both truckers comport themselves in a manner that make them appear as veterans, but the reality of their new status as independent truckers (and thus capitalist underdogs) requires the very set of skills that, as it turns out, the prostitute possesses. The trope of "hustling" here connotes the imperative to compromise one's corporal or emotional well being so as to secure financial resources. For the truckers, whose livelihoods depend on

bribing, conning, and currying favor with suppliers and distributors, hustling becomes unhinged from its conventional understanding as a sexual exchange, but is nonetheless about earning a living by illicit means. Thus the film makes a clear equation between characters; both prostitute and trucker must hustle either literally or as a condition of independent, non-corporate labor.

After a disagreement with Gil, in which he beats the prostitute after she asks for more money, the prostitute retaliates by tampering with the truck's refrigeration system, destroying the cargo of frozen meat. Gil and Hank eventually discover the spoiled meat and attempt to find a replacement cargo to deliver. Their first attempt is unsuccessful and, to make matters worse, they are mugged by a group of thugs. The prostitute, who carries a folding knife, comes to Gil and Hank's defense. But with their money now stolen, the prostitute must offer what cash she has to tide over Gil and Hank so they might locate a new cargo load and pay her for her services. After getting mugged, they regroup at a bar where Gil attempts to reassert his position as leader, offering the prostitute unsolicited advice on what to do with the bloodied knife. Then, rather intrusively, he asks her "How long you been carrying a thing like that?" The question is coded to ask how long the woman has been a prostitute, to which she retorts, "I can take care of myself better than you can." In an interesting reversal, the prostitute protects the truckers from physical harm and lends them her money. The prostitute's repertoire of skills, instincts, and experience acquired as a prostitute allows her to outflank the comparatively inexperienced truckers.

The prostitute then proposes to the truckers that she knows someone who could secure a new load of cargo, but that it is likely to be stolen goods. They agree and she steps outside to make a phone call to arrange the details; it is at this point, a full forty minutes into the film, that we learn her name, Janice. Only once she has proved herself influential in the story and thus the narrative direction is she formally identified, the film being notably loath to accord her a formal

membership. However, at this point, Janice's influence is clear and places her in the company of characters such as Bonnie of *Bonnie and Clyde* and Natalie of *The Rain People*; these women are rather poor candidates as feminist models, yet, importantly, they exert narrative agency. *Road Movie* is perhaps more regressive in that all social relations are bound by contractual arrangements. Gil and Hank are dependent on one another as business partners and Janice, who has yet to be paid, is tethered to Gil and Hank's luck in securing the next load of cargo. Though, as independent truckers, Gil and Hank attempt to gain independence from corporate trucking conglomerates, they are unable to extricate themselves from the influence of capitalism. And though Janice may at times appear earnestly concerned for the success and well-being of the two truckers, the sincerity of these acts can never overcome their function as hastening the execution of a business transaction. So while Janice may indeed act in an instructive role towards Gil and Hank by showing them how to navigate the underground networks and social margins that are endemic to capitalism, she always stands to benefit from her actions.

In addition to querying gender norms on the road, *Road Movie* also offers an account of how industrial capitalism shapes the highway and, in particular, the marginal lives that subsist off the uneven spaces of capitalist accumulation. As Gil and Hank's luck sours from the loss of cargo and the mugging, they are compelled to enter the criminal underworld secured by way of Janice's connections with an illegal freight operator. Accordingly, shots of highway landscape take on a more threatening appearance. Instead of the picturesque, we see images of factories, refineries, and pollution. These objects mar the landscape; exhaust billows from riverside factories as heavy industrial equipment strips away a forested expanse. While these are sites of industrial production, they are also part of the same industrial complex, both legitimate and illegitimate, of which Gil, Hank, and Janice are now a part. When the trio arrives to pick up the

cargo of stolen goods, Janice speaks to a woman seated amid cans of food and boxes of dry goods where she conspicuously packages heroin for resale. The equation between household goods and illegal commodities implies that all are subject to processes of capitalist accumulation and are undifferentiated as they pass through circuits of infrastructure.

Both the prospect of autonomy for the feminine road subject and the attempt to exist independently of corporate capitalism are grim. Though Gil and Hank begin optimistically, their horizons of possibility as marginalized, independent truck drivers funnels them towards catastrophe. *Road Movie* certainly acknowledges these rebellions, but, following the genre's rather pessimistic fate for rebels on the road, the film remind us that the inevitable spaces of marginality will envelop even the best attempts at autonomy. In one of the most cynical ending sequences of its time, Janice sabotages the parked big rig by releasing its brakes. Hank chases after the big rig and is able to jump aboard as it speeds down a hill, but the truck careens into an embankment before he is able to gain control of it and he is killed in the accident. Janice, fearing retribution from Gil, quickly flags down an oncoming car on the highway and is driven away, again submitting herself to the cruel, if familiar, space of the road.

Two-Lane Blacktop, Vanishing Point, and *Road Movie* together explore different aspects of the post-1960s road movie. While still part of what I would identify as the genre's "founding" period, road movies of the 1970s are unified in their pessimistic assessment of freedom and rebellion. While *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*, for example, invite us to understand the violent deaths of Bonnie, Clyde, Wyatt, and Billy as casualties of an unjust or belligerent state, the films we have just discussed acknowledge the necessarily faulted conditions of the road in terms of its capacity to support a truly free or rebellious subject. However, rather than revise the road narrative in ways that would avert or further critique the death of the

rebellious road subject, these films paradoxically maintain the narrative and diegetic conditions of the road and the rebel archetype along with rather predictable consequences. These cynical reinterpretations acknowledge the necessarily faulted promise of freedom on the road, yet stubbornly return to the road with a renewed contemptuousness. Driving scenes in *Vanishing Point*, for example, are considerably more violent and nihilistic than the sincerely peaceful and joyous scenes of highway cruising found in *Easy Rider.* With this set of films, thematic and cinematic forms of rebellion continue to be key features of the genre and, though they may critique dominant structures of power, authority, and patriarchy, these forms of power are largely unvanquished.

Chapter Three: The Minority Road Movie

Thelma & Louise, The Living End, and *Get on the Bus*

While the 1980s produced a number of road movies, even the most memorable and critically acclaimed films struggled to circumvent what Corrigan identifies as a generic impasse. Citing Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas* (1984) as an example, Corrigan asserted that by the 1980s the contemporary road movie was at odds to differentiate itself within what by then had become a crowded canon that had seemingly exhausted itself of subject matter (139). Generally speaking, we might think of films of this period as divided between mainstream road movies, which saw the rise of the buddy model[8], and art house road movies, which were either made or deeply influenced by the European *auteur* tradition and often employed an ironically slow and static camera style to depict the once frenetic movement on the road.[9] For the purposes of this thesis, I will hasten our discussion directly to the 1990s because the road movies of the 1980s set comparatively fewer precedents for rebellion and social critique. Overall, Hollywood sought to extend the shelf life of the road movie by introducing a buddy pair (rather than the predictable outlaw couple) while art house road movies emphasized aesthetic critiques of the genre. Consequently, both Hollywood and art house films generally offered a less fruitful engagement with issues of identity and subjectivity.

As discussed in the introduction, 1991 was an important year for the road movie genre. Corrigan's essay on the road movie coincided with the release of Ridley Scott's critically

[8] Key examples include John Hughes's *Planes*, *Trains and Automobiles* (1987), Martin Brest's *Midnight Run* (1988), Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988).
[9] In addition to the aforementioned *Paris, Texas*, Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) and *Down by Law* (1986) are key examples of the 1980s art house road movie.

acclaimed and highly controversial *Thelma & Louise*. The film offered just the right antidote for a genre seemingly loath to reinterpret the masculine themes of its historical past: a female road movie featuring two women as outlaws who take to the road, inverting the predominantly masculine ordering of the road movie and thus revitalizing the genre from a feminine and feminist point of view. *Thelma & Louise* signaled a new era in the road movie genre and one of concerted experimentation. While still maintaining the rebellious edge from the founding films of the 1960s and 1970s, this period saw the flourishing of road movies focused on minorities, including women, sexual minorities, and ethnic minorities. Beginning with Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), the queer road movie saw tremendous popularity in the 1990s with films such as Greg Araki's *The Living End* (1992), Stephan Elliott's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), Herbert Ross's *Boys on the Side* (1995), Beeban Kidron's *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* (1995), to name a few. A number of these queer road movies portrayed transgender identities, which expanded the politics of gender beyond the categories of man and woman to encompass the fluidity between these categories. This period would also follow up on the emerging ethnic minority road movie that began with the American Indian film by Jonathan Wacks, *Powwow Highway* (1989) and continued with Bruce Beresford's *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), John Singleton's *Poetic Justice* (1993), Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus* (1996), and Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* (1998). In addition to exploring narratives of ethnic and racial minorities on the road, these films also commented on the assumptions of whiteness on the road, a topic that had been largely ignored in previous decades.

Running through these minority road movies are familiar issues of marginality, freedom, rebellion, and social critique, but what sets these films apart from their generic antecedents is a renewed imperative to critique and rebel against dominant social norms. These road subjects,

unlike the predominantly white, straight, male road subjects of the past, often hold specific reasons for their rebellion that might express the existential malaise of the past road movies, but ultimately place the most emphasis on issues of multiculturalism, identity-based oppressions, and independence in the face of historical forms of marginalization. Looking at *Thelma & Louise*, *The Living End*, and *Get on the Bus* as case studies, this chapter seeks to answer the question why some filmmakers of the 1990s interested in creating minority stories turned to the road movie from among the many possible genres. I selected these three films because they pioneered their respective subgenres by referencing while also subverting key features of the 1960s and 1970s road movies. In addition to subverting the generic precedents of the past, these films also propose distinct worlding projects. As I will discuss in greater detail, both *Thelma & Louise* and *The Living End* suggest a putative social world, but present characters whose response to various forms of oppression in these worlds result in a hyperbolic rebellion. In many ways, these responses exceed the ontological bounds of their diegesis, resulting in the enactment of resistance through fantasy narratives. *Get on the Bus*, on the other hand, creates a compelling binary between exterior and interior social worlds as configured through their mode of travel – a coach bus.

Thelma & Louise

Arguably the most recognizable road movie of the past twenty years, *Thelma & Louise* set off a maelstrom of controversy regarding the film's unapologetically feminist revision of the road

movie.[10] Some celebrated the film for its feminist critique of issues such as domestic violence, rape, and sexist police practices while others found its displays of feminine violence and masculine buffoonery to be antagonizing to men and advocating for reactionary violence (Leo 192). Moreover, some feminists challenged the argument that the film could in fact be understood as truly feminist, arguing that *Thelma & Louise* simply appealed to men because it starred two attractive, gun-toting women while placating women with its shoot-em-up attack on patriarchy (Roberts 63). Road movie director Gregg Araki derided *Thelma and Louise* as "[acting] just as brainless and obnoxious as men" (qtd. in Mills 322). Sharon Willis, on the other hand, finds that "The protagonists take to the road not to escape socially coded notions of the feminine, but rather to flee patriarchy and its effects on their lives" (Roberts 63), a view which I largely accept. However, my purpose here is not to argue that *Thelma & Louise* makes all the "right" revisions of a problematic genre, but rather to situate the film within a trajectory of subgeneric commentary as a way to gauge the how the film identifies and negotiates the masculinist assumptions of the genre.

In delivering a markedly feminist critique to the traditionally masculine bias of the genre, *Thelma & Louise* had the effect of reifying the genre as a whole, demonstrating that the structure of the road movie itself contains the capacity for self-critique. In addition to the formation and reformation of identity and marginality, the film retains key concerns of the genre including freedom, rebellion, and social critique. Categorically speaking, the film references several of the subgenres we have covered, including the fugitive/outlaw couple model as well as the quest model. However, none of these subgenres are simply adopted at face value; each undergoes a process of revision that aims to unseat the privileging of masculinity and patriarchy. Thelma

[10] The film continues to garner attention and was the subject of a recent anthology titled *Thelma & Louise Live! The Cultural Afterlife of an American Film*.

(Geena Davis), an unhappy housewife, and Louise (Susan Sarandon), a malcontent waitress, are two friends who leave town to embark on a weekend vacation. When they stop for drinks at a roadside bar, the film quickly escalates into a fugitive road movie when Louise shoots and kills a man who attempts to rape Thelma in the parking lot. Fearing that the police will not believe that they acted in self defense, Thelma and Louise evade the police and, at every turn, break more and more laws in order to outrun the police and, as the film seems to suggest, forms of patriarchal control.

Issues of identity and identity-making on the road are a key theme in the films we have discussed and certainly *Thelma & Louise* is no exception. As the pair evade the police, they commit a growing list of crimes that correspond to their changing identities that begin as housewife and waitress and progress towards that of outlaws. As their situation becomes dire and they resort to more crimes, their manner of dress and composure begin to reveal a particular ease and aptitude for the life of an outlaw. The otherwise childish and indecisive Thelma adopts a strikingly confident persona. At the start of the film, the "pre-outlaw" Thelma is naive and passive, taking direction from Louise and offering little in the way of strategy. However, after she holds up a convenience store, Thelma begins to assert herself, emerging as the leader of the pair. An otherwise sloppy and disinterested housewife who does not seem to excel in any particular area of her life, Thelma as a road outlaw finds her calling: "I feel like I just got a knack for this shit." And, ultimately, it is Thelma at the end of the film who suggests to Louise that they attempt suicide rather than submit to the police.

We can also map the evolution of identity, from oppressed and unfulfilled women to assertive heroines, through manners of dress. At the beginning of the film, both women dress in conventionally feminine attire; however, after a hitchhiker steals their money and their situation

becomes grim, Thelma and Louise begin to renounce their feminine style of dress. Louise throws her lipstick away and trades her jewelry for a cowboy hat. And, as the pair encounter (and punish) men on the highway, they collect a token from each incident. For example, when they hold a police officer captive, Louise asks for the policeman's gun and sunglasses, then wears both in triumph as well as an appropriation of semiotic material coded as masculine. And, after humiliating a lewd truck driver, Thelma grabs his hat and wears it in a similar act of reappropriation. Moreover, Thelma and Louise eventually discard their skirts and dresses in favor of jeans and t-shirts, thus dressing as much as "acting" like the rebellious men of their generic antecedents. Victoria Sturtevant, in writing on the status of gender in *Thelma and Louise*, identifies the performance of masculinity as drag, noting that "male drag must break down the apparent naturalness of male masculinity and point up the extent to which it is a constructed and performed set of norms and behaviors, a process at odds with the dominant cultural view that masculinity is biological, unconstructed, and therefore unperformable" (Sturtevant 56). This performance of masculinity is significant in that it both acknowledges and overturns the normative ideologies of gender that have more or less underwritten the entire genre's canon.

As a fugitive road movie, *Thelma & Louise* makes specific references to films like *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Vanishing Point*. These films view the police in terms of individual encounters, but at the same time police action also takes on symbolic and associative connotations that, to Thelma and Louise, represent the violence of male patriarchy on the road and in society at large. This precedent appears in *Bonnie and Clyde*, in which the police do not exactly act in a juridical capacity as the final scene so vividly displays. The band of police intent on catching Bonnie and Clyde are characterized by an extra-judicial disregard for the procedures of justice and, as a result, come to represent the conservative social forces that suppress a couple

whose love for one another exceeds the bounds of dominant social conventions. *Vanishing Point* likewise portrays the police in an abstract manner as Kowalski never directly confronts the police. In fact, Kowalski is not a real fugitive (the car is legally his to drive); thus there are no criminal charges against him other than his vehicular infractions. And while we are given clues to Kowalski's motivations, no single account properly explains his contempt for the police and thus we are invited to read his battle with the police as being a confrontation of forces between conservative social values against what would appear to be an existential desire for freedom. What the fugitive model offers *Thelma & Louise* is a set of precedents to "use" the police as an apparatus of control that can be allegorically rendered beyond their nominal functions. *Thelma & Louise* borrows from *Vanishing Point* a similar belief in dying for an ultimate freedom, however, the struggles leading up to that freedom are considerably more politicized. With respect to criminal charges, Thelma and Louise are only wanted for questioning for much of the film and, on paper, the police are merely doing their job by investigating their closest lead. However, the police become a primary target of Thelma and Louise's critique of patriarchy. In challenging the police, they also implicitly challenge a wide set of social and cultural biases that, according to the film, condones spousal abuse, violence against women, and rape. In a heroic display of masculinist excess, the film's closing sequence includes a battery of police cars that close in on Thelma and Louise. At this point, the police are abstracted as a force that represents the social repressions that strive to constrain female subjectivity.

While the buddy model might seemingly apply to the film, the outlaw couple subgenre also provides another set of precedents for *Thelma & Louise* to comment upon. As a couple, Thelma and Louise share in a deep, albeit non-sexual intimacy founded on their friendship as well as on their self-education as "outlaws." The outlaw model maps well onto *Thelma & Louise*

in that they are literal outlaws who embrace their newfound aptitude for criminality, but they are also figurative outlaws in the sense that they are marginalized from dominant social values. Their shared experience of marginalization in patriarchal society binds them together as a couple. For example, Thelma and Louise astutely comment on the dual notions of "outlaw" in a scene in which a police officer pulls them over for speeding. As Louise is being processed for arrest, Thelma intervenes, pointing a gun at the police officer and ordering him into the trunk of his police car. Whimpering, the officer begs for his life for the sake of his family, to which Thelma responds "You'd better be sweet to your wife. My husband weren't sweet to me look how I turned out." Their crime is an act of outlawry insofar as it is a criminal infraction, but it is also coded as a critique of masculinist state order from the position of a marginalized subject, that is, an outlaw of society.

For a film that critiques serious social ills (not least of which include forms of abuse), *Thelma & Louise* is surprisingly joyous and finds many occasions to display the pleasures of its characters. Its numerous driving sequences recall the beautiful highway scenes in *Easy Rider* or the reckless joy in *Vanishing Point*, both of which posit the act of driving as its own form of pleasure. As I discussed in reference to *Easy Rider*, the only "purpose" of the film's extended highway scenes, other than the display of driving pleasure, is that they perform a cinematic rebellion. *Thelma & Louise* adopts a similar pleasure-rebellion approach to its extended driving sequences in that they are as much about the affective revelry of movement as they are about reappropriating the gendered politics of the highway through forms of pleasure. Pleasure becomes a political act in which the activity of laughter, for example, becomes a strategy in the face of oppression. It signals feminine comfort in spaces that were once antagonizing to women. Instances of laughing, singing, and even sightseeing represent a reclamation of the traditionally

masculine space of the highway. And, as Thelma and Louise begin to adopt their newfound status as outlaws, a new source of pleasure emerges through the overturning of masculinist orders. Within a relatively brief period of time, Thelma robs a convenience store, holds a police officer at gunpoint and locks him into his own police car, and, together, Thelma and Louise shoot at a lewd trucker's tanker truck, causing it to explode. All of these crimes are subversive acts of humor which, as Sturtevant describes, show "what it might feel like to laugh explosively, to laugh in such a way as to experience that laughter as freedom" (Sturtevant 47). Indeed, part of *Thelma & Louise*'s originality as a road movie is that it is a refreshingly "fun" movie. Few other road movies contain as much joy, humor, and pleasure as *Thelma & Louise* and fewer utilize these responses as resistance.

Almost every road movie we have discussed in the preceding chapters (with the exception of *Two-Lane Blacktop*) ends with the violent death of at least one protagonist and *Thelma and Louise* is no exception to this generic precedent, however, it offers a nuanced version of the road movie death. On the surface, *Vanishing Point* seems to bear the most similarity in that Thelma and Louise, like Kowalski, are being chased by the police (unlike, for example, Bonnie and Clyde, who are technically ambushed by police). Kowalski's desire for freedom is literal; he endeavors to evade the police, but beyond that his intentions are vague and represent an inchoate set of grievances that might (or might not) relate to his experiences as a Vietnam War veteran, a police officer, and a lover in mourning. In spite of *Vanishing Point*'s violent rebellion, excessive displays of expenditure, and spectacular crash sequence, there is no real agenda. *Thelma & Louise*, on the other hand, desires freedom in the face of a specific set of repressive social conditions, including systemic police repression and domestic abuse. Moreover, *Thelma & Louise* harnesses the highly charged forms of rebellion found in the generic raw

material of the past, but directs these energies towards a specifically politicized purpose that culminates in martyrdom. When Thelma and Louise decide to drive off the Grand Canyon instead of surrendering to the police, Hal (Harvey Keitel), the sympathetic detective who is seemingly earnest in his attempt to help Thelma and Louise, chases after them in a knowingly futile attempt to save them. He waves his hand as he runs, ostensibly the hand of patriarchy that must, if only symbolically, attempt to regain control of the female subject. However, in a significant moment of feminine reclamation of the road movie, Thelma and Louise passionately embrace one another before their "affirmative suicide" (Laderman 185), claiming for themselves a form of freedom that was previously the preserve of disaffected white male road subjects.

In a review entitled "Toxic Feminism on the big Screen" John Leo, a writer responding to *Thelma & Louise*, bemoaned that, "we are led step by step to accept the nihilistic and self-destructive values that [Thelma and Louise] come to embody. By the time this becomes clear it is very difficult for moviegoers, particularly women, to bail out emotionally and distance themselves from the apocalyptic craziness that the script is hurtling toward" (qtd. in Leo, 191-192). While Leo's essentializing moralism is regrettable, what is even more important to dismantle here is the notion that the film is a clarion call for violence. It is surprising that many responded literally to the film as being "immoral" or even fascistic (Schickel 193) when in fact the film operates in a hyperbolic, playful, and phantasmic order. For the purposes of this thesis, *Thelma & Louise* presents an excellent case study not simply because it is a tipping point in the genre's revision of patriarchy, but also because it oscillates between the categories of drama and humor, representing a diegetic space not quite at parity to our own world. *Thelma and Louise* stages a response that taps into bombastic and superlative registers in a way that invite us to think about, rather than enact, their rebellion. The problem of femininity at odds with masculine

society in the film is absorbed in and resolved through a self consciously cinematic world. The final scene, for example, is a highly formal freeze frame of Thelma and Louise driving off the Grand Canyon. We never see them crash, we are only left with the soaring image of the two heroines in their convertible, suspended in the air and transcendent. If the film had more realist ambitions, certainly we would have been obliged to view the ensuing carnage. Instead, the film calls attention to its own production of cinematic iconicity, which operates in the realm of fantasy.

The Living End

Released a year after *My Own Private Idaho*, *The Living End* is part of the first wave of queer road movies. These films are significant in that they explore new territory while also addressing latent anxieties over masculinity and homosexuality that had haunted the genre for years. Though it has received considerable attention in the road movie literature, the film nonetheless bears attention here for its complex exploration of identity politics as well as its astute, meta-cinematic commentary on generic form. *The Living End* blends elements of the fugitive model with the outlaw couple model to explore as well as revise classic road movie themes of identity and marginality as well as freedom and rebellion. However, these themes are recast specifically in terms of characters who are not only gay, but also HIV positive. Unlike *My Own Private Idaho*, which introduced gay protagonists to the road movie genre through a peripatetic narrative about the life of young hustlers, *The Living End* adds the problem of HIV as a guiding impetus that lends the queer aspect of the film a greater specificity. Rebellion in the film is fueled by a sense of alienation from mainstream society, but unlike the vague existential malaise that troubled road

movie protagonists of earlier periods, this alienation is real and is caused by a bodily malaise. Consequently, the HIV aspect of the film lends new urgency to what would otherwise be a predictable fugitive/outlaw couple road movie. While the protagonists, Luke (Mike Dytri) and Jon (Craig Gilmore), are in love, committing crimes, and on the run just like *Bonnie and Clyde*, they take to the road in a way that no other road going character had heretofore experienced. In the opening shot of the film, we see a young man in broad daylight spray painting "fuck the world" on a wall while listening to loud metal on his headphones. In a highly stylized shot, we see the man is drunk and throws himself around violently, with repeated shots of him swinging an empty whiskey bottle into a clearing. He is the very image of middle class irresponsibility. As the film progresses, we learn that this man, Luke, is something of a nomad and a hustler who drifts aimlessly and is usually drunk. Luke is often seen writing graffiti on public walls with messages like "I blame society." After a series of incidents in which he steals a gun and kills three homophobic thugs, he comes across Jon driving home and forces his way into Jon's car, demanding that he drive him away. After a night together, they become lovers but because of Luke's penchant for confrontations, exacerbated in no small part by his use of a stolen gun, they flee their native Los Angeles, heading first for San Francisco and, after Luke commits more crimes, they simply find themselves on the run.

In *The Living End*, responsibility and irresponsibility are central concerns. In fact, even in the opening credits sequence, director Greg Araki does not simply appear as such; instead, his credit reads "An irresponsible movie by Greg Araki." On the surface, it would appear that the film's reinterpretation of the outlaw model specifically in terms of "irresponsibility" would be redundant, however this motif becomes important in charting Jon's character development in terms of how he perceives responsibility. Unlike Luke, who holds society responsible for his

HIV positive status, Jon sees himself as responsible for having contracted HIV. But as the narrative progresses, Luke instructs him on how to negotiate the world through acts of irresponsibility and, in doing so, formally ordains Jon as an outlaw. The morning after Luke and Jon meet one another, both aware that they are HIV positive, Luke offers a sort of manifesto for the film, arguing that, "I realize we've got nothing to lose. Fuck work. Fuck the system. Fuck everything. Don't you get it we're totally free? We can do whatever the fuck we want to do." Though Jon is reluctant to wholly accept Luke's antagonistic philosophy, he eventually comes to adopt aspects of Luke's irresponsibility by allowing himself to submit to chance and to a frenetic romance on the road. As with previous road movies (notably *Easy Rider*), freedom and rebellion become mutually dependent on one another but in this case the relation is more nuanced: living with HIV allows one to arrive at a worldview that validates a radical form of rebellion that has the effect of ensuring freedom.

The Living End has affinities with *Thelma & Louise* in several ways. Just as Thelma and Louise enact a form of rebellion that is in opposition to middle class propriety, the reproductivist norms of heteropatriarchy, and notions of "wellness," Luke and Jon similarly pursue freedom and rebellion as a way to dismantle these normative logics of social organization. Moreover, the violence that comes with the pursuit of freedom and rebellion in the two films mirrors one another in that both deploy a fantasy of violence couched in a quasi-reactionary logic. In a repressive society that is culturally, institutionally, and spatially coded as heteropatriarchal, both women and gays are in some respects aligned in their struggle for social and literal spaces of autonomy uncolored by heteropatriarchy. And like Thelma and Louise, who, after locking up a policeman in the trunk of his own car drive off with a newfound sense of purpose, Jon similarly undergoes a moment of transformation. Thelma's revelatory moment comes when she says to

Louise: "You know, something's crossed over in me and I can't go back, I mean I just couldn't live." Jon, while on the phone to a friend back home, says "It's like nothing is the same anymore, everything has changed. No, I'm not on ecstasy." However, where *Thelma & Louise* ends and where *The Living End* continues is in the ways in which violence is depicted. *The Living End* is decidedly more explicit in its depiction of brutality, which includes a number of murders. While Thelma and Louise extract many forms of revenge, these acts are played out in spectacle and through a hyperbolic distance. Luke murders at least four people and, unlike Thelma and Louise, he kills spontaneously and as a condition of his avowed philosophy of irresponsibility whereas Thelma and Louise only commit crimes as they are necessary. But the most significant feature that sets *The Living End* apart from nearly every road movie is that Luke and Jon defy the road movie's precedent of death as both are still alive by the film's end, thus offering yet another inversion of the genre through its "living end."

In addition to commenting on and revising the generic precedents of the fugitive and outlaw couple, *The Living End* offers an intelligent meta-cinematic commentary that is handled through Jon's character, a movie critic and perhaps not surprisingly, a fan of French New Wave films. There are several references to Godard in the film, including a *Made in U.S.A.* movie poster that hangs in Jon's apartment. Like the theme of responsibility, the meta-cinematic inflections offer another measure with which to chart Jon's eventual absorption into the film's logic of rebellion. At the beginning of the film, Jon is supposed to submit to his editor an essay for publication on film, but his responsibilities, which also include Jon's habit of making journal entries in a voice recorder, are forgotten as the trip consumes more and more of his life. As Mills observes, "What's at stake, as the film makes clear, is that Jon learns to leave his responsible rut and shed his self-incriminating response to testing HIV-positive" (197). Jon's love for film as a

critic becomes transformed into a lived reality in which he is allowed to break out of his position as a bourgeois observer and enter into a flourishing of diegetic potentiality through the fantasy of staring in his own road movie. These displays of rebellion, in terms of the actual representation of violence as well as a commentary upon and revision of cinematic history, demonstrate that the road movie genre had indeed undergone a new phase of repoliticization. In contrast to films like *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*, both of which display the freedom to drive as largely futile endeavor, *The Living End* insists on the freedom to drive, even if it is aimless, as being a necessarily political act that sees the road as a way of life. In the closing sequence of *The Living End*, the film affirms its rebellious and politically-charged attitude by ending with the following caption: "Dedicated to Craig Lee (1954 - 1991) and the hundreds of thousands who've died and the hundreds of thousands more who will die because of a big white house full of Republican fuckheads." Though unabashedly juvenile and somewhat incoherent, this caption stays in character with the film, leaving us with a reminder of some of the political dimensions that fuel the film's insistence on gay "irresponsibility."

Get on the Bus

One of the relatively few road movies dealing specifically with issues of race and ethnicity, Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus* (1996) stands out as another highly innovative road movie. Unfortunately, the film has been ignored by much of the road movie scholarship in spite of the fact that it proposed a radical revision not just for the ethnic road movie, but for the road movie in general. Released on the first anniversary of the Million Man March, *Get on the Bus* follows the journey of a dozen African American men traveling from South Central Los Angeles, CA to

the Million Man March in Washington, D.C. The film's most significant revision of the road movie is that it features a large cast with no single protagonist. Though some characters have larger roles than others, the dozen characters in the film create their own social space on the road, distributing plot and character development across a diverse group of African American men. Unlike many road movies, *Get on the Bus* harnesses the democratic, social, and public character of bus travel to create a diegetic space that largely inheres to the African American community that emerges as the group makes their way across the United States. As we have seen, most road movies focus on one or two protagonists undertaking a car (or motorcycle) journey which somehow responds to, critiques, or attempts to escape from a heterogeneous social. In these modes of travel, the social is understood to exist outside of the car. *Get on the Bus*, on the other hand, defies this assumption of the road movie by reconstructing while also critiquing the social as it is manifest by the dozen bus riders headed to the Million Man March.

Get on the Bus draws on the precedents on two older road movies: Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) and the aforementioned *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. These two films are polar opposites in nearly every way, but they nonetheless influence aspects of the film in terms of structure and content. Capra's film, one of the very first road movies, employs a number of different forms of transportation, though the bus is the most important. Fleeing the confines of her life as an heiress, Ellie (Claudette Colbert) travels by bus and, for the first time, experiences a heterogeneous array of characters and freely commingles with a broad spectrum of people previously excluded from her sheltered life. The bus and the social microcosm that it contains are borrowed in *Get on the Bus*. Van Peebles's film, on the other hand, is an independently produced Black Power film that emphasizes solidarity in the face of white oppression. It is one of the first road movies, if not the first, to focus on ethnic minorities and

was required viewing for all Black Panther Party members (Strausbaugh 256). *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is a unique road movie in that its protagonist, Sweet Sweetback (Melvin Van Peebles), must travel on foot rather than by car, a commentary on the socio-economic conditions of African Americans in Los Angeles in the 1960s. *Get on the Bus* adopts a similarly militant approach to African American identity. Moreover, it resembles Van Peebles's film in that they were both made quickly and on a shoestring budget (Mills 200). *Get on the Bus* merges a politically potent statement on the imperative to heal the African American community with a bus travel narrative that contains a diverse and often internally contentious social group. This specific combination of thematic and formal structure compels the film to address the difficult and often conflicting work that comes with organizing political action with and across a broad social spectrum. Just as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* stars "The Black Community" in its credits, *Get on the Bus* offers a slice of African American life to stand for their community at large.

Much like other influential road movies, *Get on the Bus* is a stylistically innovative film. As I have already mentioned, it borrows an unorthodox, multi-protagonist structure that functions as a microcosm for society and even at times generates its own internal picaresque explorations. In addition to this, Xavier (Hill Harper), a UCLA film student who takes his camera on the trip, acts as a stand-in for Spike Lee.[11] Xavier's character allows the film to give proper introductions to each of the bus riders; as Xavier interviews each person, we glean information about each person's life as well as their reason for going to the Million Man March. Each person's response is seen through a simulation of Xavier's video capture such that the film frequently cuts from the dominant perspective to that of Xavier's camera. In addition to this

[11] In an amusing, if narcissistic, moment, the bus driver sarcastically makes reference to Lee when he sarcastically calls Xavier "Spike Lee Junior."

camera-within-a-camera technique, there are also a series of shots that are taken with a yellow tone and are intentionally granular in appearance. These shots only occur outside of the bus, which I interpret as a cinematic technique that serves to denote the boundaries of this mobile community as well emphasize the exceptional space that the bus and its riders create. When outside of the bus, we often see the world through the distinctly stylized lens as if to signal the realities of the putative social and not African American society. However, this cinematic interior/exterior logic is reversed when the bus is pulled over by white policemen in Tennessee who search the bus, with evidently no probable cause, for drugs. At this point, the boundaries of the exceptional space of the bus are breached. Referencing the blue of a siren, we see formal shots of the men inside the bus with a granular blue tone, signifying that society outside has encroached on and tainted the otherwise autonomous, if utopian, space of the mobile community. The highly stylized shot, which captures the faces of the men, also highlights the sense of humiliation and anger over the institutional practices of racial profiling that are part of the African American experience on the road.

As we have seen in many road movies, identity (and the ways in which identity is formed) is a recurrent theme and, not surprisingly, *Get on the Bus* takes this as a primary concern. At the very beginning of the film, we see a father and son bickering over how they should address one another. The father, Evan Sr. (Thomas Jefferson Byrd), insists that his son, Evan Jr. (De'aundre Bonds), address him as "Dad." As we learn later, Evan Sr. has been estranged for his son for a number of years and their story arc largely consists of Evan Sr. attempting to gain the respect of his son who, meanwhile, insists on being called "Smooth," a self-ordained nickname, rather than "Junior" or "Evan." Another character, Gary (Roger Guenveur Smith), is a police officer who is half black and half white and, because of this,

becomes the target of ridicule and scorn, particularly by Flip (Andre Braugher), who alleges that Gary is not "black enough." This issue opens up a series of questions, largely raised through arguments about the nature of African American identity. Flip initially does not believe that Gary has a place on the bus and, in effect, that he does not qualify to be part of the mobile community that is headed for the Million Man March. Flip, however, saves his greatest wrath for Randall (Harry Lenix) and Kyle (Isaiah Washington), a gay couple whose presence on the bus is a point of outrage for a number of the men. Randall and Kyle receive a number of homophobic insults, which have the effect of further deepening the divides that beset this mobile community and, metaphorically, the African American community as a whole.

Perhaps the most intricately rendered portion of the film dealing with identity occurs when Wendell (Wendell Pierce) joins the bus midway through the trip. Wendell, as they eventually learn, is a smooth talking car salesman, proud Republican, and champion of the "self-made man." He blames African Americans for their widespread poverty. Moreover, Wendell frequently addresses the men on the bus as "niggas" which Jeremiah (Ossie Davis), an elder and the group's guiding figure for the journey, questions. "When you use that word that way," Jeremiah asks, "are you talking about you too or just about the rest of us, it seems like that's the only word you know. If you were to take that word and turn it over, you would find kings and queens." Shortly after, Wendell is forcibly removed from the bus in no small part because Wendell addresses his peers as "niggas" in an accusatory manner rather than, for example, a gesture of reclamation or solidarity. As Jeremiah astutely points out, Wendell's success along with his insistence on calling every African American a "nigga" is to rhetorically shed himself of the signifier (his blackness) so as to disassociate himself from what he views his blackness to signify: laziness and failure. In Wendell’s words, "If it don't fit, you must acquit." Just as Evan

Jr. attempts to reclaim an identity that disassociates himself from his father, Wendell similarly attempts to adjust his own identity while on the road. As we have seen with other road movies, being amongst strangers and under the cover of anonymity, one's identity is subject to contingency and malleability. However, what sets *Get on the Bus* apart from, for example, *The Rain People* or *Vanishing Point* (both of which address the malleability of identity) is that the fluidity of identity is deployed as a way to query a racial and ethnic category that undergoes processes of politicization. *Get on the Bus* does not merely act out latent 1960s counterculture anxieties nor nurse a bourgeois existentialism. Instead the film raises complex questions about identity because the film views it as a necessary step towards consensus-based organization in the face of institutional inequalities.

Though *Get on the Bus* eschews a number of commonalities of the road movie genre, it does follow the convention of emphasizing the journey over the destination. In fact, Jeremiah suffers a heart attack when they reach Washington, D.C. causing about half of the travelers to forfeit going to the Million Man March in order to be with Jeremiah at the hospital. What we come to realize, however, is that these men have already grappled with the key issue of the Million Man March, that is, the need to work through longstanding social issues plaguing African Americans. In their journey, which strives to encapsulate the African American community within the space of the bus, they identify their differences, but also share in moments of brotherhood, solidarity, and joy. The once estranged Evan Jr. and Evan Sr., whose story recalls the high incidence of African American single parent households, come to better understand one another. Before Jeremiah passes away, he instills in Xavier an appreciation for traditional African culture, expressed through his beloved djembe drum. During their travels, Jeremiah teaches Xavier to play the drum and in doing so secures a lineage of cultural cohesion

as the young Xavier comes of age. And, lastly, Gary makes the difficult choice of arresting Jamal (Gabriel Casseus), a gangster turned Muslim activist and community leader, who Gary believes must still pay for the criminal misdeeds of his youth in spite of his reformed adulthood. Appropriately, the only scenes of the Million Man March in the film are borrowed from documentary and news footage. This editing technique offers a sense of distance from the event, reminding the audience that for the men on the bus, the "true" Million Man March occurred in their journey to Washington D.C.

Following the precedents laid out by *Thelma & Louise*, which included the revision of a number of subgerneric forms, films like *The Living End* and *Get on the Bus* similarly identified points of appropriation by commenting on the generic styles of past road movies, thus expanding the genre's capacity for social critique along lines of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. As with their 1960s and 1970s counterparts, the road movie of the 1990s demonstrated its ability to furnish a productive field of potentialities in terms of identity and marginality, freedom and rebellion while still maintaining a commitment to interrogating prevailing social norms. As we have seen, *Thelma & Louise* is a richly textured amalgamation of latent issues of femininity found in *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Rain People*, and *Road Movie* rendered in part through reinterpretations of such films as *Easy Rider* and *Vanishing Point*. Referencing *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider* as well as Godard's 1960s revisionist gangster films, *The Living End* similarly brings together an innovative strategy of appropriation to address issues of sexuality. Lastly, *Get on the Bus* demonstrates that while some precedents were adopted from the road movie catalog, the road movie is itself able to generate a number of original interventions on its behalf and on behalf of racial and ethnic minorities. The film cleverly dispatches cinematic experimentation towards a complex of issues relevant to African American subjectivity, while also commenting

on the genre's presumptions of whiteness, an issue that through the decades had been overwhelmingly ignored.

Chapter Four: New Directions

In writing on the role of genre in film, Boris Tomashevsky argues that "[the] demarcation is always historical, that is to say, it is correct only for a specific moment of history" (qtd. in Chandler 4). Indeed, this is accurate of the road movie genre, which has constantly evolved through the decades by remapping trajectories of identity, marginality, freedom, and rebellion. As we have seen, the founding wave of road movies located key points of negotiation between rebellion and conformity that 1990s minority road movies would revisit. Borrowing on thematic precedents from the outlaw and fugitive models, road movies of the 1990s installed minority characters in place of previous disaffected rebels, lending these stories a new urgency. Given the generally homogeneous set of identities presented in founding road movies, most of the characters are white, straight, and male, the minority road movies largely succeeds in suppressing the generally heteronormative, patriarchal, and sometimes xenophobic baggage of its past. *Thelma & Louise*, for example, makes evident the gender biases of the road through an updated fugitive couple pairing. *The Living End* also updates the fugitive couple model by tapping into the queer subtext that had haunted road movies like *Two-Lane Blacktop* and *Vanishing Point*. And, in the case of *Get on the Bus*, the ethnic road movie draws from a more obscure canon of road movies while also pioneering its own set of innovations.

Though we have only reviewed three road movies from the minority road movie canon, many more road movies about women, LGBT subjects, and ethnic minorities would emerge throughout the 1990s. The revival of the road movie in the 1990s demonstrates that this period of revision was not merely an ironic revival not a minor reinvention of a dying genre, but proof that

the road movie, in its constant reinventions, is indeed a durable genre. It is perhaps because the road movie, by default of being an "open" film predicated on the journey tradition, has always been able to promise the possibility of change, the anonymity that comes with travel, and a new canvas on which to imagine a new identity. These exceptional spaces found on the road are cinematic incubators in which identity and identity-making come into confrontation with prevailing social values, forms of state control as well as a diverse array of people at the margins of society. These features have made the genre particularly well-suited for rebels, critics, and the marginalized.

In the years following the rise of the 1990s minority road movie, a new crop of road movies have emerged. Unlike their predecessors, these films predominantly refocus the road movie back to more conventional or "normative" identities. For example, few road movies of the 2000s address issues of queer identity and only a couple focus on women or ethnic minorities. Compared to the assertive identity politics of the previous decade, road movies of the 2000s are generally less socially concerned, less politically demanding, and, in the case of art house road movies, less urgent in tone and style. Art house road movies such as Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny* (2003), Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005), Kelly Reichardt's *Old Joy* (2006) and *Wendy and Lucy* (2008) can be characterized by a slow, deliberate, and sometimes static aesthetic that self consciously calls attention to the now stilled, rather than the traditionally restless, road movie. More mainstream road movies of the 2000s, like Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous* (2000), Alexander Payne's *Sideways* (2004), Jonathan Dayton's *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), and Sam Mendes's *Away We Go* (2009) seem to have stabilized the genre's core structure in ways that allow these films to seamlessly explore fairly traditional narratives such as coming-of-age adventures, midlife anxieties, and families in transition. As if reeling from the raucous

genre bending revisions of the 1990s, these films may still have traces of rebellion, but a rebellion that is knowingly circumscribed by broader and decidedly conservative themes like maturity, marriage, and family.[12] In terms of generic form, many of these films (especially the art house films) emphasize the formal and aesthetic problems of the road movie genre. In this regard, the films of the 2000s resemble the two main trends that characterized the 1980s road movie: successful, if somewhat banal, road movies (some mainstream, others independent) appearing alongside European-influenced art house revisionist road movies.

In the shift away from road movies about identity politics, new questions inevitably emerge: do the road movies of the 2000s defer questions of race and ethnicity, gender, and sexuality or, having already queried these issues in the 1990s, do these films presume a post-racial, post-feminist, post-queer world? A road movie like *The Brown Bunny*, for example, occupies the normatively gendered spaces of the road, seemingly ignoring the gendered precedents undone by films like *Thelma & Louise*. The protagonist, a lonesome professional motorcycle driver haunted by the memory of an ex-lover, meets a number of women on the road, asking each of them to join him on his road trip to California only to leave them at the last moment. In a somewhat similar regression, *Broken Flowers* follows a wealthy, aging Don Juan-esque character who learns of the existence of a son, prompting him to visit a number of ex-girlfriends from his past in order to determine who the boy's mother might be. We might fault *Sideways* for its complicit portrayal of masculinist theme of sexual infidelity, I would also call attention to the racialization of sexuality through Stephanie (Sandra Oh), the only non-white character in the film. The prevailing shift towards a normative reordering of identity in these films seems to signal either a more normative reclamation from the comparatively progressive

[12] For example, for all its womanizing misadventures, *Sideways* is ultimately just a last gasp of promiscuity before one of the protagonists settles down and gets married.

handling of identity on the road in the 1990s or a conflation of post-feminist, post-queer, post-racial assumptions. One of the few exceptions to this trend, however, is *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) and its follow up, *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* (2008). These films, also belonging to the stoner comedy genre, feature two Asian American protagonists, Harold (John Cho) and Kumar (Kal Penn), whose picaresque road journey explicitly subverts a number of Asian stereotypes. Like the ethnic comedy road movies *Powwow Highway* and *Smoke Signals*, the Harold and Kumar series demonstrates that, while sporadic, the fusion of comedy, ethnicity, and the road may yield further explorations in the future.

One of the most recent art house road movies of the 2000s, *Wendy and Lucy* proposes a number of surprising reinterpretations of the genre. In closing, I wish to bring attention to this film as a possible indication of new lines of exploration within the genre. *Wendy and Lucy* posits a novel road buddy pairing: a young woman, Wendy (Michelle Williams) is joined by Lucy, her beloved dog. Wendy has left her native Indiana to drive to Alaska in search of work. The film itself occurs midway through the trip, in Oregon, and follows a series of disappointments in which the cash-strapped Wendy is caught shoplifting and is held at the city jail while Lucy is left alone. Upon her release, Wendy finds Lucy missing and the rest of the film follows Wendy as she struggles to track down Lucy. Through Wendy's travails, it becomes evident that she does not have the resources to adequately care for Lucy and so while she is finally able to track Lucy down by the end of the film, she decides to head for Alaska without Lucy, leaving her in the care of a benevolent stranger. In the final sequence, we see Wendy as she resumes her journey to Alaska by train hopping with the intent to earn enough money in Alaska so that she might return to retrieve Lucy and take her back home, wherever that may ultimately be. Though *Wendy and Lucy* emphasizes the traditional road movie theme of personal autonomy, it is not couched as an

ambitious rebellion against social norms but merely as a struggle to survive and find work. Categorically, the film is aligned with female road movies such as *The Rain People*, however, *Wendy and Lucy* only vaguely acknowledges the gendered ordering of social space without making this a key concern. If indeed *Wendy and Lucy* is responding to any macro-level conditions, it would simply be the difficulty of finding work in post-2007 recession America. In this sense, the film's social critique, once a key feature of the road movie, is vague and largely apolitical.

Though *Wendy and Lucy* appears sparse in composition and patient in its sequencing, the film seems to signal either a disinterest in the narrative possibilities that arise between a driver and car on the road or possibly even the obsolescence of this traditional fusion. In a significant break from road movie conventions, Wendy's car breaks down a mere 20 minutes into the film, taking this road movie out of the car and unfolding mostly on foot. The film gestures towards two major renovations of the genre. On the one hand, there is a distinct minimalism that runs through the many scenes of Wendy alone as she navigates the town through pedestrian acts, like walking to the supermarket to the pound and back, rendering an intimate character study that seems only to require some pretext so as to allow the film to enact its vision of aesthetic formalism. On the other hand, the film's intimate portrayal of prosaic misalignments that map Wendy's descent (from a hopeful traveler to an indigent train hopper) allies itself with tenets of the neorealist tradition. An infrequent bedfellow to the road movie, this blending of genres signals new lines of potential evolution for the genre. With the exception of Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954), few road movies have adopted neorealist concerns. While *Wendy and Lucy* demonstrates the viability of such a direction, it is also significant to note that a critical component of this film's neorealism requires that Wendy's car breaks down.

Through several decades and across many periods of revision, the road movie genre has consistently provided a cinematic space through which to consider life at the margins. During the founding wave of road movies in the 1960s and 1970s, the decision to take to the road is often done so willfully, seeking either excitement, fortune, or simply freedom. However, as the genre developed, especially with regard to the minority road movie of the 1990s, the road rebel shifts from one who seeks out the marginal spaces of the road to one who, because of various social or historical processes of marginalization, is compelled to take to the road in flight, resistance, or some combination of the two. Taking *Easy Rider* as an example, Atkinson points out,

> Fonda and Hopper, both young white men with gas tanks full of cash and a mind-expanding world of time on their hands, don't seem to have as much of a natural birthright to the back roads as the randy pair of HIV-positive misanthropes in *the Living End*, the lost boy of *My Own Private Idaho*, the amateur Cheyenne revolutionaries of *Powwow Highway* (16).

Atkinson is right to put these films in dialogue; however, whereas he views the minority road story as being a more "natural" fit for the genre, this thesis has attempted to illustrate how minority road movies both evolved and in many ways benefited from a set of generic precedents through which to contest dominant and often oppressive forms of exclusion. From founding road movies on through minority road movies and into the present, narratives of rebellion have provided a set of primary sources for other road rebels to cite, annotate, and appropriate towards their own narratives of redemption.

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