

BA Thesis Report
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„The Road Movie: A Window on American Culture“
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This thesis is an attempt to demonstrate how conflictual elements present in the „road movie“ genre of American film reflect conflictual elements present in American character and culture. It asserts that the genre is thus a valuable tool for analyzing features of American life that can, at least on the surface, be confusing and difficult to understand. In this attempt, the thesis is both successful and, in many respects, admirable.

In contrast to many such attempts to identify features of culture and the arts which are emblematic of the society from which they spring, this thesis clearly defines the genre of the „road movie“ – as distinct from the larger category of „road film“ – and it cites clear support for basing a cultural interpretation on cinema. The thesis demonstrates an ability to work with some of the more important analyses of American character and culture – Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*, Horton and Edwards’ *Backgrounds of American Literary Thought*, de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* and Reisman’s *The Lonely Crowd* among them – and it uses their conceptualizations well. Moreover, it avoids one of the most common pitfalls in European analyses of American culture: facile criticism of American shortcomings.

All too often European comments about American society and culture reveal a (sometimes almost subliminal) defensiveness: the magnitude of American influence can lead an analyst to debunk the shortcomings of American character and culture, whether on social, political or artistic grounds. Criticism of racism, rampant materialism, „cowboy diplomacy,“ and the like are substituted for a careful examination of the undercurrents of American values and character; harangue is often substituted for close analysis. The truth is that American „shortcomings“ – of which there are many – generally reveal a deeper set of unresolved conflicts which lie below the surface of American life, often invisible to Americans themselves, but which contain keys to understanding both American life and equally confusing aspects of contemporary existence which transcend national boundaries and cultures.

Perhaps this thesis’ greatest strength is that it begins with two valuable premises: 1) that conflict is what lies at the heart of the road movie, and 2) that this makes the genre a truly illustrative vehicle for analysis of important features of American life. Moreover, at the same time the thesis makes its analysis in such a way as to avoid another common pitfall: the reliance on such static devices as „post-modern“ categorization and terminological simplification to „box“ elements of conflict which are actually very fluid and dynamic. The argument and the analysis in the thesis represent an existential coming-to-terms with the elements it has undertaken to examine; it operates on the level W.B. Yeates calls „the rag and bone shop of the heart,“ and it does so without becoming sentimental, sensational or self-indulgent.

If there is a shortcoming to the analysis, it lies in the fact that, near the end of the thesis, when individualism is discussed, it moves slightly in the direction of

attempting a too-neat picture, *à la de Tocqueville*, of the „two-sided coin“ of individualism and conformity. De Tocqueville’s basic insight – that people drift towards conformity because individualism’s demands are too great – is a valuable one. But, while it is no fault of his, de Tocqueville failed to recognize the fact that the ongoing conflict between the two could help generate great energy, reative and destructive, both of which have characterized American life from its beginnings, and which have accellerated in their impact over time. Certainly the great works of the American Renaissance – Hawthorne, Melville, Poe, *et al* – reveal, not a slipping from individualism to conformity, but a titanic struggle between the demands of individualism and those of democracy. So too with the road movie: though the pendulum may have swung more in favor of conformity with the advent of modern mass culture, the feature of real importance demonstrated by the genre is the ongoing unresolved – perhaps even unresolvable – conflict between self-realization and conformity, between values based on individualism and those based on democracy, both of which have deep roots in American character and culture. It is conflicts like these which contribute to the energy, the restlessness and the explosive force which the genre so aptly portrays.

There are other, minor matters in relation to which the argument might be improved. For example, the identification of Bruce Springsteen as rock music’s torch-bearer reflects an opinion not everyone would agree with; the author would have been better advised to point to the road and automobile tradition in rock music that includes Chuck Berry, Brian Wilson, Paul Simon, Bob Seger, Springsteen and others to make his point.

But the achievement of the thesis is very substantial all the same. It presents a „first-person“ confrontation with the road movie and, building on solid conceptualizations by important commentators, it succeeds in uncovering the deeper features of American life which the genre is built upon. Moreover, it is written in a style that is smooth and almost completely free of grammatical or lexical errors. The level of English writing of the thesis is comparable with that one would expect from a student of a major university in the US; in a condensed version in might even be acceptable for an American Studies journal in Europe. Given that it is the work of a non-native speaker of English, that only makes it that much more admirable.

The author is to be congratulated for his work.