

Univerzita Karlova v Praze
Fakulta humanitních studií



The Road Movie: A Window on American Culture

Bakalářská práce

Autor: Jan Noháč

Vedoucí práce: Daniel Shanahan, Ph.D.

Praha, 2009

Prohlašuji, že jsem práci vypracoval/ samostatně s použitím uvedené literatury a souhlasím s jejím eventuálním zveřejněním v tištěné nebo elektronické podobě.

V Praze dne 19.2.2009

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podpis



*How does it feel
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?*

– Bob Dylan

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Daniel Shanahan, Ph.D., for his great guidance, positive approach and patience. Also I would like to thank Karina Kottová for her constructive criticism and support.

Introduction

In the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard made a trip to the USA to travel, observe and learn about the country. In a book of thoughts and impressions written during his journey, he explains that he does not look for America in any particular physical place. Instead, he looked for it "...in the speed of the screenplay, in the indifferent reflex of television, in the film of days and nights projected across an empty space, in the marvelously affectless succession of signs, images, faces and ritual acts on the road..." (1994, p.5). The cinema and the road are good starting points for understanding American culture, he says, because:

Here in the US, culture is not that delicious panacea which we Europeans consume in a sacramental mental space and which has its own special columns in the newspapers – and in people's minds. Culture is space, speed, cinema, technology. This culture is authentic, if anything can be said to be authentic (ibid., p.100).

Baudrillard's definition alone might get us interested in one characteristically American genre of films: the road movie. As Cohan and Hark (1997) observe, the genre connects all four features that Baudrillard mentions, since it employs the art of *cinema* to tell stories about people who use *technology* to travel at high *speed* across the vast *space* of the country.

This essay concerns two entwined topics and the road movie is one of them. The other one is American society, or more specifically the tension or friction between some of its distinctive attributes. The claim is that road movies reflect certain features characteristic of American society and that, in turn, analyzing the films can help us understand the society. Thus the main focus is on the relation between the road movie genre and certain typically American socio-cultural phenomena.

We will investigate films produced in America over the four decades of the existence of the genre. Of course a lot has happened in the last forty years in terms of both cinema and the United States. However, the extent of this

essay does not allow us to examine the changes and shifts that occur over time and that may have already altered the society slightly since this or that particular film was made. Instead, we will try to concentrate on phenomena that are timeless to some degree and that are still relevant today.

Almost by definition, road movies foreground the dialectics of opposing social forces which have been at work within American culture for decades or even centuries, forces, that often remain unnoticed in the daily life of the people, though they shape the characters and the environment they live in. These forces are for various reasons embedded deep in the society and submitting them to closer inspection, we begin to see the polar nature of American culture. Throughout the essay, we will focus on three major dialectics: mobility and stability, nature and culture, individualism and conformity.

We will consult literature from the realm of social science and film theory and employ an interpretative technique, similar to the approach of literary criticism, when discussing the films.

In their work *Background of American Literary Thought*, Horton and Edwards (1967) suggest that we can learn about a society if we interpret its literature. "In general...literature tends to reflect the dominant tendencies of its era and to grow out of the moral, social, and intellectual ferment impinging upon the sensibilities of literary men" (p.1). They claim that more than anywhere this is true in America. During the nation's development, older European cultural patterns were consciously adapted to the conditions of a frontier civilization. There was a relationship between the everyday life of ordinary people and the forming of their government and institutions. An average man was "unusually aware of the role he was playing in history" (ibid., pp.1-2).

But literature is not the only art form that bears imprints of the social milieu. Rudolf Arnheim, a theorist of art and cinema, emphasizes the relation of artistic process to the workaday world, stating that "...the exalted kind of seeing that leads to the creation of great art appears as an outgrowth of the humbler and more common activity of the eyes in everyday life." Arnheim calls vision "a creative activity of the human mind" (1969, quoted in Andrew, 1976,

p.37). A work of art may be an expression of the artist's capability to perceive, transform, generalize, organize and represent. Nevertheless, "we mustn't forget that expression begins in the world...the artwork expresses both the artist and the world," says Andrew (1976, p.38), explaining Arnheim's theory.

There is an analogy between film and literature in that the reality is present in the work to some extent, and so is the maker's subjective view of it. If we interpret film, we can bring into light features of the social environment in which it was made. The intention of this essay is neither to try to explain American society, nor to give any description of it as a whole. This essay is intended to point out that the road movie genre can provide us with a lot of information about the culture because it portrays typical situations, inner frictions and struggles characteristic of the society. It is intended to point out that an examination of the genre is bound to reveal phenomena transcending the walls of a cinema, or a lecture hall in a film academy.

A separate chapter is devoted to the examination of each of the above mentioned dichotomies in the context of both American culture and the road movie genre. Where does the strong sense of wanderlust, which is so apparently present in the films, come from? How come the road movie can celebrate pristine wilderness and shiny metal monsters in the same shot? And why is rebellion of the heroes constantly confronted with conservatism, why is there a shadow of conformity hanging over each rebellious act? This essay attempts to answer similar questions by discussing the dialectics of mobility and stability, of nature and culture and of individualism and conformity. However, before we proceed to scrutinize how these dialectics are captured in the films and what significance they have for the culture, let us concentrate on the road movie genre itself and outline its main features.

The Genre

First of all we should attempt to do what many theorists of the cinema keep forgetting: actually define the road movie. In an introduction to *The Road Movie Book*, probably the first, and in any case an essential anthology of essays and articles devoted to the subject, Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (1997) note that many important studies of genre omit the road movie altogether. They themselves say it portrays “peculiarly American dreams, tensions, and anxieties, even when imported by the motion picture industries of other nations.” They observe that, however popular and significant the road movie has been throughout the history of American cinema,

there has not yet been much sustained inquiry into what precisely qualifies a film as a road movie, how the genre relates to the social and cultural history of the United States, or how its inflection alters when carried over to a non-American landscape (1997, p.2).

A general definition of the road movie genre can be found, for example, in Susan Hayward's *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*:

Road movies, as the term makes clear, are movies in which protagonists are on the move. Generally speaking, such a movie is iconographically marked through such things as a car, the tracking shot, wide and wild open spaces. In this respect, as a genre it has some similarities with the Western. The road movie is about frontiersmanship of sorts given that one of its codes is discovery – usually self-discovery... Generically speaking, the road movie goes from A to B in a finite and chronological time”(2006, pp.335-336).

This description provides us with a starting point. However, the definition is still quite broad and it suggests that the road movie is more or less some sort of a modern Western in which a car substitutes for the horse.

It is true that the road movie inherited a great deal from the Western, and in terms of narrative there is perhaps even more that both genres

inherited from the tradition of journey narrative in literature, spanning almost three millennia from Homer to Jack Kerouac: A hero sets off in quest of knowledge or adventure, or maybe just runs away from something. The places he travels through are usually new for him, and so are the people he meets. Whereas in a home setting one's ability to critically observe is generally blunted by how familiar things are and how connected one is to the local culture, the novelty of every experience and the lack of social ties on the road stimulate a critical attitude.

Road movies often revolve around cultural critique just as many classical works of journey literature and some Westerns do, but thinking of Don Quixote, Pantagruel or John Wayne behind the steering wheel does not provide us with an accurate image of the genre. The Western, as well as Depression-era Hollywood movies and post war film noir, are considered to be but predecessors, in spite of the fact that some of them take place on the road. Some authors such as Cohan and Hark (1997) even use the expression "road film" for films shot before the 1960s, as opposed to "road movie" for those made after (p.5).

The prevailing opinion is that the first true road movies are *Easy Rider* and/or *Bonnie and Clyde*, which entered the cinemas in the late sixties. What is it that makes them first specimens of the road movie as a distinct genre? Precisely the explicit presence of an explosive mixture of antagonistic powers, the very same powers that are characteristic of American society.

The traditional Hollywood genres usually operate with the tension-release pattern. The end provides us with some satisfactory resolution such as a homecoming, a reconciliation or a triumph against all odds. The early road films fall into that scheme. As Cohan and Hark put it, "the majority of road films made before the 1960s more successfully imagined an ultimate reintegration of road travelers into the dominant culture." (ibid.) As opposed to this, the road movie usually heads for an inexorable crash, one of the main points being that it is not possible to reconcile the conflicts it portrays in a simple compromise. The ending is either bitter or even more often open, leaving us with an unresolved feeling. Characters tend to find themselves outside of society, alone, alienated, their dreams turning out to be illusive,

their effort futile.

David Laderman, the author of *Driving Visions*, the most extensive study on the genre available, emphasizes that in road movies, modernity in terms of representation and transportation meets traditional values of the settings and people. He uses the term modernist,

(...)to characterize the road movie's engine of visionary rebellion and cultural critique(...)Perhaps the most important and immediate formative feature of the road movie's modernist engine is the countercultural unrest of late-1960s America – a historical moment that may be characterized as modernism's last gasp as it transforms into postmodern culture (2002, pp. 4-5).

The critical, rebellious attitude is not what makes road movies *sui generis*, since it is by no means a novelty. What is truly unique is the tension, the constant presence of the opposite pole. For instance, the road movie celebrates rebellion, yet it also portrays conservatism and conformity, sometimes consciously, criticizing or ridiculing them, very often unknowingly, in between the lines. To give just one example, the main characters - the drivers – who struggle against conservative values almost always represent the most conservative stereotype of a white, heterosexual and male hero. Laderman observes that “the overt concern with rebellion against social norms is constantly undermined, diluted, or at least haunted by the very conservative cultural codes the genre so desperately takes flight from.” (p. 20)

Very similarly, road movies celebrate the immaculate beauty of American nature on the one hand, but they worship metal monsters that invade it. They favor the dynamic over the static, which they often ridicule, yet they sentence the perpetually moving heroes to painful ends. They call for change and progress, but display strong nostalgia for the past.

Thus it is not just the travel, just the automobile, or just the revolting attitude that makes the road movie special, but the constant presence of the opposing elements. The sparkling tension between the poles illuminates the productive conflicts that America embraced throughout history and used to fuel

its own growth. It is as impossible to separate these conflicts from the past of the country as it is to reconcile them. To a certain extent, road movies seem to be independent of their makers in that, even where an unambiguous message is meant to be conveyed, even where a black and white image of reality is meant to be drawn, the final work contains innumerable shades of gray. The conflicts at the core of the genre predetermine it to mirror the culture, often to an unintended extent.

The resulting picture is surprisingly accurate and profound. As Cohan and Hark (1997) remark, so far the relation of the road movie to the US social and cultural conditions has been described insufficiently. For us this relation is crucial and this essay is devoted to its examination. The first phenomenon that strikes us when watching a road movie might be the strong sense of wanderlust that drives our characters on their journeys. Let us investigate where it originates.

*For we cannot tarry here,
We must march, my darlings, we must bear the
brunt of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O pioneers!
O you youths, Western youths,
So impatient, full of action, full of manly
pride and friendship,
Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping
with the foremost,
Pioneers! O pioneers!*

- Walt Whitman

The first dialectics we are going to examine is that of mobility and stability, the dynamic and the static. Let us begin with an anecdote which took place in a class of mixed European and American students.

After the screening of Mike Nichol's *The Graduate*, a discussion about the ending scene took place. We see Elaine (Katharine Ross) who, having runaway from the altar, jumps on a random bus with Ben (Dustin Hoffman), a romantic interest of hers. The two exchange looks, not really knowing what they are doing or where they are going to. The end. The European students were confused: This is not really a happy ending. Their future is uncertain, who knows if they love each other or ever could, and what a blow for their family relationships! And, after all, where the hell are they going? The bus was an allegory for the Europeans: they are leaving their past with all they ever knew and had behind, and heading for what? Some hopes? They are everything but safe. The Americans were pretty clear in their opinion: A happy end! They have run away, they are leaving on the bus, it's all good! The Europeans were concerned: "Do they know where they are going? " "Who knows", said the Americans, "but they're on the road!"

The implication was obvious: the couple are moving towards new future. In front of them is a fresh start, a new opportunity, an adventure. The positive fact of being on the move overshadows any concern about having some destination or being able to realize what they hope for. To start revealing the roots of this typically American sensation, let us first discuss the most influential American post-war work of journey literature, which preceded the birth of the road movie genre by roughly a decade.

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, first published in 1957, tells the story of two buddies who restlessly ramble across the country. The book, which is considered an essential influence on road movies, is one big colorful celebration of mobility, of travel for travel's sake. The narrator, Sal Paradise, describes the journeys of Dean Moriarty, a modern mythical vagabond whom Sal deeply admires because of Dean's spontaneous nature. He is the prototype of a person Sal is interested in:

...because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes 'Awww!' (Kerouac, 2000, p.7).

In Kerouac's novel, such "burning" seems to inevitably include crossing the country frenetically from East to West and back, never resting, always looking out for new adventure. The ones who are "mad to be saved" spend their lives on the road, because that is where they hope to find salvation.

A couple of pages later, when Sal first hits the road to join Dean, he and a random guy he meets hitchhiking are given a question by a man searching for workforce: "'You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?' We didn't understand his question, and it was a damned good question" (ibid., p.20). A damned good question indeed, addressing the core feature of the novel which most notably marks it off from the European tradition of journey literature.

Unlike most classical works of the old continent, in Kerouac's novel the journey, in both figurative and literal sense, is separated from the notion of having a destination, and emphasized over it. Whereas in the European tradition self-discovery is a common incentive that sends protagonists on the road, here it seems to be more of a consequence than a motive. Wanderlust is omnipresent, motion is good on its own, it needs no justification. There is an urge to keep moving, which, as we will see, is a heritage of the phenomenon of the frontier. Kerouac brings it into the extreme, capturing it as an almost animal instinct.

Though it is rarely so obvious, this urge continues to influence people's minds, a good example being our mixed class. In David Laderman's words, in America "the journey narrative is given particular nuance and character. The very birth and adolescence of America seems crucially founded upon the notion of the journey, which thus becomes an essential feature of American cultural identity" (2002, p.7).

The view of American history being determined by such a notion was articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner, an American historian, who was the first to emphasize the great importance of the frontier: "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (Turner, 1894, p.197). Turner explains that on the Atlantic coast, institutions evolved along the lines known from Europe. Society and its representative government experienced linear progress, changing from a primitive, industrial one, with no division of labor, into a manufacturing civilization. A different development occurred on the continually advancing western frontier. There the process of evolution periodically repeated itself, happening again and again in each new territory.

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character (ibid., p. 198).

As the frontier advanced, America parted company with the European influence and tradition, giving birth to all that is truly American. The frontier promoted democracy, individualism and family values against collectivism. Anti-social tendencies manifested themselves in strong antipathy to control.

From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance...and these traits have, while softening down, still persisted as survivals in the place of their origin, even when a higher social organization succeeded. The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom-these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier... He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise (ibid., p.206).

The Turner thesis sheds light on powers that set the wheels of our silver screen drivers in motion. The constant urge to be moving, the notions of mobility as liberation and stability as oppression, the dream of a fresh start. They all have their roots in the experience of the frontiersmen, in their thrills and desires which are still pulsing in American veins, and pulsing faster when an eye is cast on the horizon.

In American popular culture, the legacy of the frontier has remained present and highly attractive throughout many decades. To cite two examples from different areas, we can mention the massively successful *Star Trek* TV

series. The first sentence of every episode gives away the gimmick: "Space, the final frontier." The audience is hooked: there is a frontier, a new opportunity to be who we really are. Restless pioneers, inventive craftsmen, expanding warriors, free individuals wandering beyond all limits. Or rock music: after the death of Elvis and Johnny Cash, the torch of the American hero-rock-star is carried by Bruce Springsteen. The name of his most critically acclaimed album speaks for itself: *Born to Run*. "...These two lanes will take us anywhere/ We got one last chance to make it real/ To trade in these wings on some wheels/ Climb in back/ Heaven's waiting down on the track...", sings The Boss in the first track, *Thunder Road*. If you want to live for real, you have to keep moving, stay faithful to your mercurial American temperament. The opening line of the title track goes: "In the day we sweat it out in the streets of a runaway American dream." The dream moves at about 90 mph. What keeps us from reaching it? Stability: "Baby this town rips the bones from your back / It's a death trap, it's a suicide rap/ We gotta get out while we're young/ 'Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run." (Springsteen, 1975)

These are just two manifestations of how the frontier continues to live in American culture – sometimes explicitly, sometimes in disguise, the frontier ethos still shapes the 'character of American life' and again and again reinforces the bipolarity of the dynamic and the static. The frontier itself vanished more than a century ago, but the road continues to fulfill its function, capturing "the essence of the American Dream by incorporating all that which the frontier has symbolized for the history of the United States' development..." (Shari Roberts, 1997, p.66). The limits of geography didn't turn out to be as big a threat to the culture as Turner had feared. The important thing is that there still is space and technology, the two things that enable Americans to experience the 'perennial rebirth' and 'fluidity' of American life that Turner spoke about:

As long as we can move somewhere and somehow, it doesn't matter if the geographic frontier is closed...Indeed, even as Turner spoke at the Chicago World's Fair, canny entrepreneurs were developing two seductive opportunities for regenerative movement:

automobiles...and African-American based popular music would take over where Turner's West left off (Belasco, 1980, p.263).

On the road, the traits of American intellect that Turner described come to their own. The coarseness and strength of the driver multiplies by the horse powers under the hood of his vehicle. The masterful grasp of material things allows him to control the car with nonchalance, while his acuteness and inquisitiveness gives direction to his quests. The restless, nervous energy, the dominant individualism works for good and for evil every time the gas pedal is hit. But there are rules, laws, traffic lights. On the screen, where nothing is impossible and every limit can be pushed, the heritage of the frontier, working elsewhere as an inconspicuous catalyst of thoughts and attitudes, suddenly appears in the spotlight.

We have already mentioned that there is some level of affinity between the road movie and the Western. We can understand this affinity better when we keep the phenomenon of the frontier on mind. The Western makes the frontier its explicit content by telling stories that mostly take place on the edge of the hitherto known land. The road movie largely describes wanderlust that survives in the people as an echo of the frontier. It is only logical that some of the features of the Western genre were "inherited" by the films that interest us – Laderman considers the Western film to "...function in a sense as the road movie's grandparent" (2002, p.23). In her essay "Western Meets Eastwood", Shari Roberts (1997) points out that in both Westerns and road movies "...frontier symbolism is propelled by masculinity and a particular conception of American national identity that revolves around individualism and aggression....In the transference from the Western to the road film, the frontier becomes the road, the horse becomes the car, and the hero becomes a desire, perhaps Quixotic, for heroism" (pp.45, 66).

This itchy feeling which Roberts calls a Quixotic desire makes a fundamental difference between the genres. In the nineteenth century, there still was the static East and the dynamic West. The poles were separable. By the mid twentieth century the continent had long been explored and settled. Those who feel the compulsion to travel work their restless energy off roaming

the land with a higher or lower concentration of ranches, towns, cities – stability everywhere. Tension arises inevitably, since the travelers are likely to feel trapped in a stable setting, and the locals tend to feel intruded or endangered by mobile strangers. The volatility of their existence seems to be somehow irritating and sooner or later someone usually attempts to enforce the end of their journey.

A clash of values occurs: the myth of an individualist “pioneer tramping with the foremost” which is conditioned by mobility on the one hand, the ideal of prosperous community which requires stability on the other. The road movie hero is torn and estranged, trying to reach for the future with one foot in the past, not belonging anywhere, hoping the road will answer the questions of his confused heart. The car (or motorcycle for that matter) is liberating and imprisoning him at the same time. It allows him to move at his own chosen direction and speed, but it makes him dependent on gas stations and repair shops. And sooner or later he has to acknowledge that his dynamic nature is not all that free – it is subject to rules and laws. The opposition of mobility and stability represents the two historical modes of development, the perennial rebirth on the frontier and the linear continuation in settled areas. The literal frontier is gone, its figurative meaning survives in the myth of the road. The big visions remain, but when you chase them, they might vanish with the morning mist. The road movie captures an ancient conflict in a modern coat. The hunger for heroism carries over, but can it be satiated? The place of big deeds is occupied by existential angst.

The ways road movies capture the dialectics of wheels and walls vary. In literature on the subject we can find a universally recognized differentiation between two groups of films. It breaks the often complex incentives down to two simple reasons for being on the road. The characters travel either because they choose to or because they have to. Laderman explains: “The genre's deliberate rebellious impulse is conveyed primarily through two narrative pretexts: the quest road movie (descending from *Easy Rider*) and the outlaw road movie (descending from *Bonnie and Clyde*). Quest road movies emphasize roaming itself...Outlaw road movies emphasize a more desperate, fugitive flight from the scene of the crime or the pursuit of the law...both types

link transgression and liberation with mobility" (2002, p.20).

Despite the fact that the traveler obviously feels different than the fugitive, they are in tune with each other concerning our dichotomy. Things are good when they move, there is tension when they halt. A good example of this can be found in *Easy Rider*, the quintessential road movie. The film tells the story of Billy (Dennis Hopper) and Wyatt 'Captain America' (Peter Fonda). After managing to sell a big amount of cocaine, the two head towards New Orleans, planning to enjoy Mardi Gras. Billy and Wyatt are free spirits challenging the establishment and rigid social norms. They ride Harley-Davidson motorcycles through majestic landscape, looking for freedom and adventure. Billy eventually mainly wants to retire and enjoy the money, but Wyatt is concerned with more existential questions. The original *Easy Rider* poster reads: "A man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere..." Where was America supposed to be, where did Captain America hope to find it? Not in New Orleans, nor any other particular place, but on the road. Wyatt wants to experience the true freedom by invoking the spirit of the frontier.

At the time of its release, *Easy Rider* was breaking new ground in the art of filmmaking, having visionary ambitions, praising youth and change. Yet we find traces of nostalgia for the frontier and the past in general. "This used to be one helluva good country," says George (Jack Nicholson), an alcoholic lawyer that joins Billy and Wyatt for a part of their journey. In *Shaking the Cage*, a making-of documentary, Dennis Hopper says: "The movie was like a Western to me. I thought of Wyatt as Wyatt Earp and I thought of Billy as Billy the Kid. It's a couple of guys who, rather than riding horses, are riding motorcycles." But the inhabitants of the towns and settlements they ride through show a lack of comprehension of their roving attitude and there is tension in the air even when the buddies stop to rest alone.

Being on the road equates with being free in *Easy Rider*: Billy and Wyatt experience freedom and joy while riding through the country and nervousness or hostility while staying put. In a couple of campfire scenes they have a conversation before hitting the sack. These scenes are famous for the anxiety they evoke. The very first one already establishes the contrast – the lighthearted day is gone, a strange tension intrudes on Wyatt and Billy's

evening. "You're pulling inside. You're getting a little distance tonight," says Billy. "Well, I'm just getting my thing together," goes the reply. This vibe reoccurs and escalates every time the two pause their ride. Sometimes it is Wyatt, sometimes Billy, but one of them is bound to feel nervous, strangely claustrophobic. Mobility liberates Wyatt and Billy, stability oppresses them.

In *Vanishing Point*, a movie that starts as a quest and gradually inclines towards the outlaw scenario, the dichotomy is powerfully emphasized in the very beginning and then again at the end: we see Kowalski (Barry Newman), the main hero, driving at a breakneck speed when the camera freezes at a stop sign filling nearly the whole screen. A few seconds later, we see the ultimate embodiment of the mobility – stability conflict: a road block.

The DVD cover sums up the film: "One man races against time...against destiny..against the road...Barry Newman stars as Kowalski, the last American hero. He's the lone stranger-a modern cowboy in a white Dodge Challenger.." This description barely needs any commentary. Again we see an inheritor of the frontier banging his head against a cage of oppressing stability. Kowalski accepts a bet and obsessively tries to win it by driving from Denver to San Francisco in a day and a half. A blind black man keeps company with him, though he is not physically present in Kowalski's car. The man is Super Soul (Cleavon Little), a DJ on the local radio. He makes Kowalski famous by praising his rebellious character and giving him moral support and advice on air.

We can sense it is not only the bet itself that is at stake, but something much more important and internal to Kowalski. A feeling of freedom and independence, perhaps. Super Soul says that Kowalski is "...the last American to whom speed means freedom of the soul." Again motion is liberation, and the faster Kowalski goes, the freer he feels. He barely stops at all, besides an occasional break to pop some amphetamines or refill the tank. When he sees his vision is sure to be thwarted, he prefers death. With an undefeated smile on his lips Kowalski drives into the roadblock at full speed.

In the outlaw couple branch, the disturbing quality of stability is obviously strengthened by fear of getting caught, which permanently forces the couple to move on. Even in such setting, it is not just self-preservation that compels the heroes to embrace mobility as their lifestyle. There is passion

involved and we don't have to dig deep to find it.

Like in *Bonnie and Clyde*, where driving maintains its romantic flavor even when death is catching up. The film draws on the story of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, two actual gangsters who were robbing stores and banks in the 1930s. In an early scene, we see Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) in her room. Soon we sense her wings are trimmed by the stable nature of her everyday life, she feels trapped in her routines, she is craving change (in that particular shot, the visual effect of the iron bars of her bed is making a clear point – Bonnie is in a prison cell of her own life). Enter Clyde (Warren Beatty), the criminal, the driver, the liberator. As in *On the Road*, having wheels equals being free. Bonnie joins Clyde and accepts the lifestyle he offers: robbing banks, driving furiously, escaping the norms of the society.

After robbing a few places on their own, Bonnie and Clyde start taking people on board. C.W. (Michael J. Pollard), a gas attendant, is the first one who joins them. Clyde's brother (Gene Hackman) and his wife (Estelle Parsons) follow. A gang is established and the list of Bonnie's and Clyde's criminal offences grows longer and longer. They are constantly on the move, but it does not take long until the police are hot on their heels. Soon it becomes clear that a bitter end is inevitable and death a matter of time. A stark contrast - the blue sky of a couple weeks of freedom is soon to be forever overcast with the blackest cloud of all. Despite the hints of fatality, the audience still feels that on the road (and on the run), Bonnie and Clyde have lived more intensely, more real than ever before. We can therefore say that in this respect the film celebrates mobility.

On the other hand, there are also parts where *Bonnie and Clyde* assumes a critical attitude toward mobility and where an element of disenchantment is present. This notion is conveyed mainly through the character of Bonnie, who gets tired of the fugitive status. After about the half of the film the constant motion stops satisfying her. "At first, when we started, I thought we were really going somewhere, but this is it, we're just going," she says. Just going, the words that make Jack Kerouac's characters feel free, echo here with a negative ring. Laderman comments on this:

Especially in its latter segments, *Bonnie and Clyde* articulates the dialectical ambivalence toward mobility that appears in most future road movies. As the seductive sheen of mobility fades, life on the road wavers between two tonalities: freedom from futility and the futility of freedom (2002, p.56).

The sensation of finally being born a few days before dying also occurs in Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*. The film is centered on two women who want to escape their worries for a couple of days and spend a weekend together out of town. They are both unhappy with their domestic situations: Thelma (Geena Davis) is married to an aggressive tyrant and Louise (Susan Sarandon) is in a relationship with a man who desperately fears commitment. After enjoying the first few hours of the ride, they stop for a meal and a few drinks. Thelma gets a little tipsy, starts flirting with a man and is almost raped. Louise saves her, having returned from the bathrooms and threatening to shoot the guy. He lets Thelma go, but continues to regale both of them with insults and sexist remarks. In a fit of disgust and anger, Louise shoots him dead. Louise is determined not to go to jail, and so the two women start to make their getaway.

The road helps them to strip off the garments of their changeless static lives. Forced to leave their grueling everyday reality behind, Thelma and Louise reinvent themselves during the attempt to flee the country. Again the same contrast: when they drive all is good, every time they stop something goes terribly wrong. They get robbed, give themselves away with a silly mistake or simply have bad luck. The final metaphor is more pompous and Hollywood-like than Kowalski's fatal stop sign and the two bulldozers blocking the road, but it conveys the same message. Every road ends, mobility is unsustainable. Louise hits the breaks and the car halts at the edge of a cliff. Behind the two women is an army of police, in front of them happens to be the "goddamn Grand Canyon." Their choice is death over stopping. "Let's keep going," says Thelma and they drive into the gaping depth of the canyon.

The films that in the end make mobility more favorable than life itself exaggerate the fact that in road movies, to keep going is of higher value than

to get to any particular place. This essential feature of the genre mirrors a cultural phenomenon caused by the persisting power of the frontier ethos. In America, the journey is more sacred than any destination.

But, hark! There is the whistle of the locomotive – the long shriek, harsh, above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony. It tells a story of busy men, citizens, from the hot street, who have come to spend a day in a country village, men of business; in short of all unquietness; and no wonder that it gives such a startling shriek, since it brings the noisy world into the midst of our slumbrous peace.

- Nathaniel Hawthorne

A fast shiny automobile amid beautiful landscape. A driver (anti-)hero on a voyage through wilderness: spinning chrome wheels carry him through plains and valleys, his engine roars and the faint smell of gasoline mixes with fresh air. He has not come to conquer or rape the landscape. He is rather here to pay homage. This classic snapshot, the most characteristic visual symbol of the road movie genre, is dripping with irony. A man on the run from civilization and technology, comfortably nestled in a leather seat of one of the countless wonders of Detroit industry.

In a more or less direct fashion, every road movie ponders upon the relation of nature and technology: another typically American conflict of values. In 1964, Leo Marx, professor at the MIT, published a study on the contradictory attitudes toward nature and environment in the United States. On the one hand there is the ideal of living in harmony with the virgin landscape, on the other hand the affirmative nod given to the progress of industry, which allows people to accumulate wealth and live in comfort. In his book *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx (2000) calls the phenomenon the main conflict of the culture.

Ever since the continent was discovered, there has been a tendency to romanticize and idealize American nature and countryside. The pastoral ideal of withdrawing from the world and beginning a new life in harmony with nature, so popular in the classic times, was suddenly attainable in the green

landscape of a virgin continent. The worship of nature and countryside has been used to define the very meaning and identity of America for centuries and still influences the imagination of the nation greatly. "Soon the dream of a retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy was removed from its traditional literary context. It was embodied in various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society" (Marx, 2000, p.3). The pastoral ideal, adapted to the conditions of the New World, emerged as a distinctively American social theory and subsequently transformed when industrialism arrived. According to Marx, the ideal still shapes American view of life, and to understand how, we have to examine "the interplay between the literary imagination and what happens outside literature, in the general culture" (p.4). To do so, Marx distinguishes between two kinds of pastoralism – one being popular and sentimental (general culture) and the other one imaginative and complex (literature).

The sentimental kind is often more of a subconscious urge than of an articulated thought. The flight from the city, the longing for a more natural environment leading to a preference of suburbs to city centers is one of the outer manifestations of such sentiment. The root of pastoralism is the American yearning for a simple, harmonious life closer to nature. We can trace the persisting power of such dreams in the choices of leisure activities, vastly showing a preference for the out-of-doors ones (Marx mentions the wilderness cult, camping, hunting, fishing, picnicking and gardening as examples).

The mass media sense this kind of thirst for virgin landscape as well and do not hesitate to quench it, hence the TV westerns and the abundance of outdoor magazines. And advertising copywriters, Marx notes, know that Americans will buy the products (cigarettes, beer, cars) they can associate with a rustic setting rather than the ones associated with an urban lifestyle. Quoting Freud and Ortega y Gasset, Marx concludes that sentimental pastoralism is fostered by an "urge to withdraw from civilization's growing power and complexity. What is attractive in pastoralism is the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural" (p.9).

On the other hand there is the high art. The same motive of running

away from society into an idealized landscape is present strikingly often, observes Marx. At the starting point, there is the same nostalgia for simple life in harmony with nature. But the same impulse generates different perceptions and states of mind. "While in the culture at large it is the starting point for infantile wish-fulfillment dreams, a diffuse nostalgia and a naïve, anarchic primitivism, yet it also is the source of writing that is invaluable for its power to enrich and clarify our experience." (p. 11) On the example of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The American Notebooks*, Marx shows the difference: what starts the same (an escape from the world) is changed by an abrupt introduction of a machine (in this case a train). The presence of modern technology in the heavenly garden leads into a more complex state of mind and points to a deep-rooted contradiction within American culture. There is the pastoral dream, but there also is technology demanding acknowledgment (in Hawthorne's book by the shriek of a whistle) and thus forcing the observer to admit the existence of a reality which is to such dream alien.

Marx researches mainly literature, but visual arts capture the theme as well. In her essay *Images of the American Dream*, Joy S. Kasson claims that "Artists are the image-makers of a culture. Through their art they transmit values and symbols of cultural unity. Nowhere is this more true than in America, where Crèvecoeur's "new man" explored virgin territory and forged experimental forms of social organization" (1974, p.186). Kasson shows how painters summed up the experiences of American settlers and "tapped the deepest reservoirs of America's self-image" (p.187) by depicting adventurers heading westward into the depth of an untouched landscape.

"The landscape itself tells the story. Fresh and bright, cleanly-defined in the crisp air, bursting with lush vegetation and stretching off into the distance in rich fields and green trees, it is the very image of the New World," (p. 187) says Kasson when speaking about Thomas Cole's *The Voyage of Life: Youth*, one of the most popular painting of the mid 19th century. "*Youth* summed up a long tradition of utopian expectation in the New World, stretching back to the earliest settlements." (p. 188)

The communion between the individual and nature, such is the subject of another famous painting Kasson mentions, Thomas Doughty's *In Nature's*

Wonderland. The man in the painting feels small compared to the vastness of nature and its great powers which he respects, he is a pilgrim searching for answers nature has to offer. But this ideal of a solitary life in the midst of forests and mountains is a utopia. The landscape is not infinitely spacious, and a longing for a lonely romantic destiny is driven by a sentiment similar to Marx's naïve popular pastoralism. "The American always imagines he is alone on the continent, but he is in fact a member of a community" (p.191), says Kasson.

Kasson stresses that ironically the nature was most celebrated when it started to be destroyed:

...glorification of the wilderness in American art and literature peaked at the very time when, in reality, this landscape was rapidly being destroyed by expanding settlement, the building of canals, railroads, and towns. The same generation which celebrated wilderness cheered on the march of progress" (pp. 191-192).

The machine entered the garden and art soon reacted, describing its arrival while still maintaining a pastoralist orientation. Currier and Ives' lithograph *Across the Continent; Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* captures the strong contradiction. In one part of the painting, the beauties of nature are pictured: we can see the misty mountains, woody lowlands, the delta of a river. On the other part, there are the fruits of man's effort, wooden houses forming a picturesque village, trees being cut down, well-dressed people meeting each other. In the middle, a steaming train separates the two parts with a force almost brutal, the railroad tracks being a hitherto edge of the advancing settlement. The civilization produces clothes and food, gives land to the settlers and destroys the dream of a virgin land with the same motion.

In America of the mid nineteenth century, as the power of the machine was growing, democratic ideals and progress of technology were considered to be connected. Hugo A. Meier explains:

American technology and American civil and intellectual liberty, in the

eyes of representative spokesmen, were marching hand in hand in these years of rapid national growth....Indeed, it was in the stress on usefulness that technology proved to be a catalyst, blending the ideas of republicanism with the rising democratic spirit in the early national period (1957, p. 292).

The social conditions in America – equality, social mobility, freedom – fostered progress in technology. As Alexis de Tocqueville (2004) noted, the ambitious peoples, seeking changes in their never-satisfactory status, would embrace every invention leading to facilitated production and increased wealth. The technological progress, itself a product of democratic social conditions, in turn became an instrument of promoting the very same conditions by contributing to the ideal of the greatest good for the greatest number. The situation was very different to the one in the Old World, where the bounds of tradition, the old structures of monarchy and aristocracy, made the general acceptance of technology much slower and more painful. In Europe, the advance of industrialism was accompanied by demonstrations, labor opposition, fear of unemployment. In America, the situation was different:

“...as faith in industrialism took deeper root in the United States, technology and the ideal of democratic economic opportunity were ever more often equated...This strong willingness in America to accept the introduction of machinery with such surprising good will...perplexed European observers” (ibid., pp.299-300).

The influence of the classic pastoral ideal, imported from the Old world, was strengthened in America by its seeming attainability. Compared to European peoples, the forming of American national identity was more crucially influenced by a feeling of admiration for nature. At the same time the ideals of freedom and equality and the progress of technology fostered each other's advance, and the changes brought about by the introduction of the machine were accepted without much hesitancy.

Soon people started to take the fruits of industrialism for granted. By the

1920s automobiles became generally accessible and the facilitation of individual transport started to trigger significant changes in the social geography of the country. In an essay concerning the spatial transformation of American culture which started taking place after cars became available to the general public, Joseph Interrante notes that the amount of cars owned by Americans rose from 450,000 to 23 million between 1910 and 1930. The phenomenon of living in suburban areas emerged as a direct consequence of the "automobilization" of the nation. By 1922, 135,000 suburban homes were dependent on automobile transportation. By 1940, there were 13 million people living beyond the reach of public transport, fully dependent on cars. This number continued to grow steadily (Interrante, 1980, pp.93-95). Interrante notes that "What began as a vehicle to freedom soon became a necessity" (p.100). Americans, so proud of their majestic landscape, became wholly reliant on nature's enemy: the car industry.

If we want to understand the culture, we should not think about nature and technology as two separate phenomena. What is typically American is the presence of the machine in the garden. Even where the machine dominates, even where there is no green, the ghost of the garden is still present, hovering above the concrete and the tar and shaping the American psyche. And even in the vast open landscape, the machine changes people's perception. All American road movies capture this dialectics to some extent.

In 1960s, the decade the road movie emerged as a distinct genre, there were two prevailing modes of depicting nature in the media, roughly corresponding to Marx's sentimental and complex pastoralism. A good example of the first one is *National Geographic* magazine. Extensive essays full of colorful photographs celebrate the sites of pristine wilderness, the tough beauty of the desert, the snow peaked mountain ranges. Barbara Klinger points out the ideological subtext of the articles, which is not surprising given the Cold War was in full swing. *National Geographic* conveys patriotic messages by supplying readers with photographs of ideal nature. It serves the purpose well, since it appeals to the popular pastoralism of the people and reminds them of the glorious past of the frontier. In her essay "The Road to Dystopia: Landscaping the Nation in *Easy Rider*", Klinger observes that in

National Geographic "Essay after essay attempts to demonstrate that the United States is still a frontier" (1997, p. 187). Other mainstream media printed along similar lines of describing "America the beautiful" (Klinger mentions for instance a collection of photographs capturing various splendid regions of the country, published in *The Saturday Evening Post*; *ibid.*, pp. 184-192). This portrayal of American nature as spotless and virgin avoids areas invaded by machines, infrastructure and uninspired architecture.

But there is also another viewpoint, closer to the idea of complex pastoralism. Referring to the 1960s counterculture vocabulary, Klinger calls it "Amerika the ugly" (*ibid.*, pp.192-199). The presence of the machine in the garden is not silently neglected, quite the contrary: it is put on display in a straightforward fashion. This perspective suggests the frontier is closed and the machine gains more and more power over the defenseless land, and also over the people. "Of all of the media forms of the 1960s, PopArt provides the definitive critique of the romanticism of vehicle, the road, and the US landscape" (*ibid.*, p.194). Rejecting the "aura of romantic tragedy" of James Dean's and Jayne Mansfield's deaths and the "overly romanticized Hollywood depiction of road catastrophes," PopArt artists produce a series of removed images. Andy Warhol most notably engaged in the deconstruction of the myth.

Warhol devoted himself to death and disaster imagery. Warhol silk-screened and painted a series of car crashes from newspapers photographs between 1963 and 1964...[these images] deglamorize the mythos of the car crash as a romantic end to youthful rebellion by depicting the banal gruesomeness and grotesquery of highway accidents (*ibid.*, p.195).

The main point driving Klinger's essay is that *Easy Driver* captures both "America the beautiful" and "Amerika the ugly." In the movie, the landscape is portrayed in two opposite ways. The beauty is to be found in the West, which is also the site of great history, a place where people still can feel free, where the frontier is still "alive and well...," *Easy Rider* "embraces the Western landscape in...ecstatic terms" (*ibid.*, p.190). Ugliness reigns in the South.

While the West symbolizes the frontier and all its figurative meanings, the portrayal of the South can be seen as the film's indictment of American civilization as a whole. Here the American dream of freedom has been distorted into an empty rhetoric, a profane sentiment of faded colors, which translates into practice as an almost fascistic rejection of anything different or truly free.

The famous long shots of "easy riding" through majestic landscape, almost spilling with an intense sense of freedom and lightheartedness, take turns with tense or hostile scenes when civilization or technology crosses Billy's and Wyatt's way. The pristine beauty of Western wilderness is gone, what a surprise for the two riders when George tells them that here in the South "...they got this here, see, scissor-happy, beautify-America thing goin' on 'round here. They're tryin' to make everybody look like Yul Brynner. They used rusty razorblades on the last two longhairs..."

The second half of the movie with its portrayal of ugly industry, boring small towns and the apocalyptic ending evoke the standpoint of Pop Art. One of Warhol's famous works that Klinger refers to is called *White Car Burning III*. The very last shot of the movie shows us what could be called *The Motorcycle Burning II*. After having killed Billy, the rednecks return and shoot Wyatt, who is on his way to bring help. The motorcycle catches on fire. We never get to see Wyatt's hurt body. An exceptionally long shot, taken from a helicopter, follows. The camera zooms out of the scene and we see beautiful green landscape around the road, the bank of a river, trees everywhere. In the right bottom of the screen the burning machine is getting smaller and smaller. Black smoke is rising up. The last thing we see: the destroyed machine destroying our view of the garden.

In terms of visual representation of the country, the first half of the film assumes the affirmative attitude characteristic of the mainstream media of the time. The second half is critical in the way typical for the counterculture and the PopArt movement. Klinger comments on the contradicting treatment of road and landscape in the film:

Easy Rider's relationship to the two major national discourses of its

time – the traditional and the transitional – reveals that what has appeared to be its clear generational message, its advocacy of the hippie and its denunciation of the society, is fraught with inconsistencies and ambiguities... *Easy Rider* thus invokes both affirmative and critical visions of 1960s America, making it more a measure of its times than either its original or later audiences could imagine (ibid., p.199).

The presence of both the conservative and the rebellious, the affirmative and the disapproving attitude in *Easy Rider* only confirms the theory of the road movie engine being fueled by conflicts, often offering both conservative and rebellious views.

The explosion at the end and the following long shot of the scenery resolve the “machine in the garden” situation in accord with the tendency prevailing in American literature. Let us quote Leo Marx once more:

The ending of *The Great Gatsby* reminds us that American writers seldom, if ever, have designed satisfactory resolutions for their pastoral fables. The power of these fables to move us derives from the magnitude of the protean conflict figured by the machine's increasing domination of the visible world. This recurrent metaphor of contradiction makes vivid, as no other figure does, the bearing of public events upon private lives. It discloses that our inherited symbols of order and beauty have been divested of meaning. It compels us to recognize that the aspirations once represented by the symbol of an ideal landscape have not, and probably cannot, be embodied in our traditional institutions... The outcome of *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Huckleberry Fin* is repeated in the typical modern version of the fable; in the end American hero is either dead or totally alienated from society, alone and powerless...And if, at the same time, he pays a tribute to the image of a green landscape, it is likely to be ironic and bitter (Marx, 2000, p.364).

Before Kowalski hits the bulldozers at the end of *Vanishing Point*, he leaves the road one last time and drives through the bushes. But he sees he has no chance of escape. The machine got hold of him and eventually destroyed him. He returns to the road and hits the gas. His death in the final explosion does not strike us as heroic, most of all it displays futility, hopelessness. By definition, road movies always meditate on the relation of human individuals to nature and technology. In doing so, they portray a conflict rooted deep in American culture. Just like most American writers, the makers of road movies have not found a satisfactory way of reconciling it.

Individualism vs. Conformity

*You've been with the professors
And they've all liked your looks
With great lawyers you have
Discussed lepers and crooks
You've been through all of
F. Scott Fitzgerald's books
You're very well read
It's well known*

*Because something is happening here
But you don't know what it is
Do you, Mister Jones?*

- Bob Dylan

We have now prepared the ground to address the most crucial dichotomy in the road movie genre. An overwhelming majority of road movies are propelled by the struggle between rebellion and conformity. A small symbolic example of such struggle is captured in a famous scene from Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces*.

The main focus of the film is Bobby (Jack Nicholson), a complicated character who leads a rebellion against his father. Refusing to be a musician like everybody else in the family, Bobby exchanges the career of a pianist for a job in an oil rig. He is a man of obvious talent and intelligence, but has no sense of direction or purpose in life. He lives with his girlfriend Rayette (Karen Black), a pretty waitress whose demeanor ranges from unpretentious to silly. Rayette constantly demands attention, and when she learns that Bobby is getting ready to go up North to see his ill father, she insists on coming alone.

During the drive Bobby, Rayette, and two hitchhikers they picked up stop to get a breakfast in a roadside diner. Bobby is trying to order his omelette the way he likes it, but he is facing an insuperable obstacle: a waitress sticking to the rules of the house. After being told they don't make side orders of toast at

the place, Bobby instructs the waitress to bring him his omelette with a chicken-salad sandwich from the menu. He tells her he wants no mayonnaise, no butter and no lettuce in his sandwich. "Anything else," asks the waitress. "Yeah, now all you have to do is hold the chicken, bring me the toast, give me a check for the chicken-salad sandwich and you haven't broken any rules." The omelette dispute goes on for a few more seconds before the waitress tells Bobby and the others to leave. "I'm not taking any more of your smartness and sarcasm," she says. In a fit of anger, Bobby sweeps four glasses of lemonade off the table and the next thing we see, they are in the car. One of the hitchhikers praises him: "Fantastic that you could figure that all out and lie that down on her, so that you could come up with a way to get your toast! Fantastic!" "Yeah well I didn't get it, did I," replies Bobby.

There are two meanings you can read into the sequence. More obviously, it can be considered a small rebellion against authority, an attempt to call for common sense and win a marginal battle against the machinery of consumerism. Trying to find a way of getting what he wants, Bobby is fighting against convention. At one point, the waitress stresses that she has not made the rules. She passes the responsibility, trying to leave Bobby defenseless: she does not make the rules, she is not allowed to make exceptions, yet she is the one he has to deal with. From this viewpoint, the scene is an indictment of cold and dehumanized bureaucracy, which can annoy people's lives even on a small scale of a local restaurant, let alone big offices and institutions. But if we look at things from a different angle, we can question Bobby's behavior as well. The tantrum he throws seems a bit disproportional to the situation. After all it is just a piece of toast. In a way Bobby acts like a spoiled child who insists on being given a favorite toy. He just has to have his way. This corresponds to the overall picturing of Bobby's complex character in the film. He is a frustrated, confused and quick tempered man.

On the one hand there is a waitress nonsensically refusing to bring a piece of wheat toast to a customer, on the other hand there is an adult man unable to deal with a minor inconvenience, flipping his lid over a detail he should have nonchalantly overlooked. Is the scene a critique of a system that disregards human individuality? Or is it also a subtle critique of a self-centered

individual, who is unable to accept that he is a member of society and as such he needs to make a concession from time to time? Is it a critique of conformism or exaggerated individualism? This banal anecdote displays ambiguity which is present throughout the film. Bobby ran away from his family, he refused to fulfill the fate they designed for him. Everybody expected him to become a piano virtuoso and he had the best prospects. But Bobby, though undoubtedly talented, did not have enough passion and feeling for playing. Rather than conforming to the vision of his family and living a comfortable lie, Bobby rebels and is stuck with a blue-collar existence. We see a man struggling to be independent, to make free choices and not to yield to the pressure of the surroundings.

There is again a different view though, which in a number of scenes shows Bobby as a selfish individual, incapable of having feelings for others, incapable of bearing responsibility. His rebellion does not lead to happiness, just like it did not lead to toast. But is he unhappy because the society enforces conformity, or because he is too obsessed with himself? There is an almost tangible tension in *Five Easy Pieces* between rebellion and conformity. The movie is very intricate, impossible to explain in a simple fashion. There are two big powers working against each other, one pulling an individual towards a self-reliant way of life, the other towards examples and stereotypes.

The conflict between these two powers takes root in the ambiguous nature of American individualism, one of the defining traits of the culture. In *Habits of the Heart*, R. N. Bellah et al. emphasize that individualism is an essential element of the national identity:

Individualism lies at the very core of American culture. We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious. Our highest and noblest aspirations, not only for ourselves, but for those we care about, for the society and for the world, are closely linked to individualism (1985, p.142).

The cornerstone of modern individualism was formed during the struggle against the authority of monarchy and aristocracy, its basic principle being formulated by John Locke: the individual is prior to the society. Locke's theory has been enormously influential in America ever since. It changed its shape during different stages (Bellah et al. mention for instance republican, utilitarian, expressive), but continues to be insisted upon as an indisputable value. In spite of their description of individualism being so fundamental and deep rooted in American society, Bellah et al. note only a few pages later: "There has been a long-standing anxiety that the American individualist, who flees home and family leaving the values of community and tradition behind, is secretly a conformist" (ibid., p.148). Though much less spoken of, conformism is present. It is a significant social force which molds the sacred and autonomous individual. How can this be?

In order to function, every society has to insure some level of conformity from its members. American society is no exception. Not only does the great emphasis put on values related to individuality not prevent conformity from existing, in fact it fosters it. It was Alexis de Tocqueville, the very man who famously described American individualism and gave it its name, who noticed that conformism is not some independent rivaling force but actually the other side of the same coin. The ties between generations are loosened, the meaning of tradition diminished. There is no 'enlightened' ruler or class. "In most activities of the mind the American relies solely on the unaided effort of his own individual reason" (Tocqueville, 2004, p.483). But naturally, one looks around for something he can support his opinions and decisions with. The common opinion ends up being "the only guide left to individual reason" (ibid., p.491). Therefore its power is bigger in a democratic society than it could ever be anywhere else. Where everybody is free and has equal conditions, no individual can force his opinions upon another. However, because of that same equality, it naturally seems to the individual that the majority should be in the right most of the time. Tocqueville notes that the "mind of all" puts "the intelligence of each" (ibid.) under high pressure and concludes: "In the United States, the majority takes it upon itself to provide individuals with a a range of ready-made opinions and thus relieves them of the obligation to form their

own" (ibid., p.491). Conformism follows as a natural result of individual freedom. As far back as the 1830s, Tocqueville started an ongoing debate about the ambiguity of American individualism.

In *America as a Civilization* Max Lerner (1967) notes that despite the stress on the uniqueness of individuals, American culture shapes them constantly by forces lying below the surface. Compared to others, is American culture restrictive or permissive? Lerner says both. It is left to the individual to make his own choices concerning his private and professional lives, based on his personal preferences. But the consequent impression of nearly absolute freedom is partly illusory:

This degree of freedom of choice leads some observers to count America as the most permissive of societies. Yet there is some constriction under this deceptive aspect of extreme freedom. From birth to death there are pressures molding the individual in the direction of "what is expected." The major and minor goals for individual striving – to succeed, to have a job, not to waste time, to do and not to dream – are pounded into him. The fact of his freedom of choice makes it more imperative for him to choose rightly, not aimlessly or heretically. Thus again he is torn between seeming freedom and the persistent process of social molding (p.545).

Lerner proceeds to explain that the American individual has all the freedom to choose what he wants to become, but society has little patience with those whose choice is marginal. They are not persecuted, but their divergence is anxiously hidden and their eccentricities are expected to be pursued privately. In practice, the most common attitude when dealing with people on the margin of the culture is what Lerner calls "reluctant neglect" (ibid., p. 547). In short, it is left upon the individual to design his own life, but while doing so, he is under high pressure to conform.

Furthermore, Lerner observes how conformity became connected with the concept of pursuit of happiness, deeply embedded in American thinking since the eighteenth century. Most Americans are likely to define their aim of

life in accord with this concept, to be happy is a common life goal in America. Lerner notes that William James' nineteenth century conception of happiness as the "agreement" of a man's inner life and the outer conditions of his life "came to be translated into adjustment, and the idea of adjustment was taken over by vocational guidance counselors, personnel experts, and scientific managers, and interpreted as making one's life effective within a society of business and money values" (ibid., p.694). The pursuit of happiness, one of the most treasured rights of the individual, ironically got confused with the pursuit of conformism.

Another social thinker, David Riesman, considers the development of consumerism in the US society to be related to the change of its orientation from production to consumption. He observes that with this shift came a change in the way society ensures conformity from individuals. Since the Renaissance and the Reformation, in Western societies conformity was secured mainly by what Riesman (1961) calls inner-direction. The individual navigated himself through life according to an inner set of values, which was implanted by parents and other authorities early in the individual's life. He was "directed toward generalized but nonetheless inescapably destined goals" by, in Riesman's words, a psychological gyroscope (p.15). In the period of transitional growth, when population was growing and means of production were changing dramatically, the main concern was the material environment.

Riesman argues that an important shift of priorities occurs in societies of abundance. Material conditions are for the first time in history satisfying to the majority. People are less concerned with survival and more with other people. A new, more flexible psychological mechanism is needed in order to succeed in the world of complex relationships. It has to guide the individual through a fine social network and it also has to be "capable of 'wasteful' luxury consumption of leisure and of the surplus product" (ibid., p.20) As a consequence of social and economical conditions (recruitment from Europe, no feudal past, highly developed capitalism; ibid.), the new type of character first emerged in America. Riesman calls it other-directed.

Other-direction causes people to embrace more socialized behavior for professional success and personal adaptation. Rather than receiving a

“gyroscope” from authorities in his childhood, the individual finds a source of direction in his contemporaries. These might be people he knows directly, by hearsay or from the media.

The goals toward which the other-directed person strives shift with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remains unaltered through life. This mode of keeping in touch with others permits a close behavioral conformity...through an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others (ibid., pp. 21,22).

In *The Culture of Narcissism* Christopher Lasch (1980) argues against Riesman's opinion that Americans have become more sociable and cooperative, stating that “...they have merely become more adept at exploiting the conventions of interpersonal relations for their own benefit” (p. 66). Paraphrasing Riesman, conformity guides an individual through social networks, and in consequence it motivates individual choices. Paraphrasing Lasch, a pursuit of one's happiness motivates an individual to act in conformity. In any case, we might argue that American individualism today is more ambiguous than ever. The freedom to govern one's own life on a private level is paid for by passing the governance of the public sector on to a vast apparatus of experts and bureaucrats. It is stressed that the self is free of cultural influence and that one is fully responsible for one's own fate. In practice though, the weight of this responsibility is such that all the available freedom is rarely used for more than choosing from a few patterns to conform to. It is the most treasured privilege to freely define one's own individuality, but the process of self-definition for the most part consists of selecting one of the 'life-projects' approved by the society. It is not easy to break away from this pattern. Striving for fulfillment of your individual potential is a praiseworthy effort. But if you do not seek approval of your peers and do not navigate yourself through social networks accordingly, you are likely to experience disapprobation. In short, in America there is an extremely strong and deep rooted belief that individual freedom is the most elementary human

right, yet there is an equally strong pressure on the individual to conform.

In this light, we might better understand a conversation that George and Billy have in *Easy Rider*. It takes place by a campfire after Wyatt and Billy, accompanied by George, have experienced strong displays of hostility from the inhabitants of some Southern city. George tells Billy:

"They're not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to them."

"All we represent to them is somebody who needs a haircut."

"Oh no. What you represent to them is freedom."

"What the hell is wrong with freedom, that's what it's all about."

"Oh yeah, that's right. That's what it's all about. But talking about it and being it, that's two different things. It's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. ... They're going to talk to you and talk to you and talk to you about individual freedom. But they see a free individual, it's going to scare them..."

Easy Rider makes the friction between individual freedom and conformism in the society its explicit content and so do other road movies.

In *Five Easy Pieces* Bobby rebels against the oppressing expectations of his family. Bonnie and Clyde try to escape the conventions of their stale life, rebelling against conservative authorities and sympathizing with the working class. *Vanishing Point* glorifies rebellious Kowalski as the last true hero, associating speed with freedom. Super Soul dubs him "the last free soul on the planet," having "the blue meanies after him." *Thelma and Louise* rebel against discrimination and male chauvinism.

Gus van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* tells the story of two male hustlers and their friendship. Mike (River Phoenix) is a fragile gay man who suffers from narcolepsy. He was abandoned as a child and has been obsessed with finding his mother ever since. His friend Scott (Keanu Reeves) helps him with trying to track his mother down, and Mike eventually falls in love with him. But Scott is heterosexual and he gently refuses Mike when he declares his feelings. We learn that Scott rebels against the expectations associated with the role of a

heir to his father's business. He exchanges the life of a tycoon's son for the life of a prostitute, being more disgusted with the hypocrisy of the high society than with selling his own body. Another story of rebellion. We could continue to come up with more examples, but there is no need.

It is quite evident that most road movies deliberately deal with rebellion of one kind or another, mostly through making it a substantial part of the narrative. An individual dreams of fulfilling the promise of freedom and becoming truly independent, but finds out people constantly expect him to adjust and compromise. He realizes he is suffocating in the world of written and unwritten rules, torn between who he feels he is and who everybody else wants him to be. And so he decides to lead a smaller or bigger rebellion against the norms of the society. A rebellion which is, with a very few exceptions, bound to be defeated. In case the rebel does not give in, he mostly ends up being ostracized, alienated, or dead. Bobby leaves everything behind and gets a ride to Alaska, abandoning his girlfriend at a gas station without a single word. He is utterly lost and lonely. Scott betrays his true friends, puts a tuxedo on and starts spending his money. Wyatt and Billy are shot and Kowalski dies in flames. Road movies often celebrate rebels and sympathize with them. They sometimes portray them as heroes, sometimes as criminals, martyrs, lost souls or restless vagabonds. Most of the time, though, they let rebels receive hard blows.

Continuing in the tradition of journey literature, road movies often serve as vessels of cultural critique. They criticize the society by suggesting that its conservative and restrictive norms issue an ultimatum to free-minded independent people: conform or perish. But the tension that inevitably follows is not the only level on which rebellion and conformity collide in the films. Another conflict takes place behind the scenes, so to say. As we said, the road movie makers often seek to criticize conformism and conservative values. But while criticizing them, the makers themselves very rarely manage to steer clear of their effect.

And so *Easy Rider* in its nostalgia for the frontier also celebrates traditional values associated with it. An example might be the scene in which Wyatt and Billy have lunch with a rancher and his family. Wyatt appreciates the

way these people live, making an admiring comment seconds after the rancher instructs his silent Mexican wife to serve them, treating her almost like some maid. "The lifestyle Wyatt admires – and that he himself embodies, to a degree – bears within it cultural and historical baggage full of patriarchal and imperialist oppression," observes Laderman (2002, p.79). We have already mentioned the contradicting ways of portraying landscape, which works once as a patriotic propaganda, once as sharp cultural critique.

Bonnie and Clyde takes place in the South, a part of the US inhabited by a substantial amount of black people. But the film avoids their presence, with a few exceptions in which they remain silent and do not do anything. Blacks are portrayed as completely unimportant to the exciting stories of our beautiful white couple. In *Five Easy Pieces*, the main ambiguous element is Bobby's character alone. But the film also makes an inconspicuous, cynical judgment of the counterculture through the way it portrays two representatives of it - the hitchhikers. They are depicted as comical figures with a little touch of insanity.

In *Vanishing Point* there is also a scene in which the driver – Kowalski - takes two passengers on board. This time they are not activists, they are homosexuals. From the first moment the movie mocks them. There is a "just married" sign on the back of their car. One of them has a pink shirt on and speaks in a silly voice which is an exaggeration of the "queer voice" stereotype. They accuse Kowalski of laughing at them and even though he denies it, he indeed seems to be amused. In the end they pull out a gun and announce that "this is a stick-up." Kowalski bursts out laughing and easily pushes them out of the car one by one, barely slowing down. They are detestable feminine caricatures of men, while Kowalski is the cool manly hero. The very same film that celebrates free spirit and rebellion against all norms turns out to be strictly conservative in its view of homosexuality.

David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* both celebrates and mocks rebellion throughout the movie. The main character – Sailor – behaves like a rebel, but at the same time gives an impression of being posing to some extent. The film contains racist and sexist remarks and jokes, and probably the only values that get away without being pilloried are those connected to family. The ending scene turns the road movie premise upside down. The main character – Sailor

– is running and jumping across cars to reunite with his wife and son. The automobile – symbol of mobility – is humiliated in a traffic jam and Sailor stomps over hoods and tops to reach his family – the symbol of stable life and perhaps the most traditional value of all.

The road movie genre mirrors a conflict of individualism and conformity, two phenomena significant for American culture. We can analyze the clash on two levels. Firstly, road movies deliberately concern individual rebellion and describe how it permanently struggles against the tendencies which try to force individuals to conform to widely acknowledged standards. The second level of conflict occurs within the rhetoric of the films. Most of them express a preference for the rebellious elements, yet they usually bear traces of conformist thinking. The conflicting forces seem to be embedded so deep in the culture that it is virtually impossible for the makers to completely rid themselves of their influence.

Conclusion

"Toss me a cigarette, I think there's one in my raincoat."

"We smoked the last one an hour ago."

So I looked at the scenery, she read her magazine

And the moon rose over an open field.

"Kathy, I'm lost," I said, though I knew she was sleeping.

"I'm empty and aching and I don't know why."

Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike:

They've all come to look for America

All come to look for America

All come to look for America

- Paul Simon

We have seen that the road movie genre captures some complex forces and phenomena typical of American culture. First of all, road movies convey a sense of wanderlust. There is always a feeling of wanting to go around the next bend. In this constant urge to keep moving, the surviving elements of the frontier ethos manifest themselves. As Frederick Jackson Turner (1894) first explained, the continually advancing Western frontier substantially influenced American character and gave it some of its most distinctive traits. One of them is the notion that mobility has a liberating quality. In contrast, stability tends to feel oppressing. When the frontier is long closed, the association of motion with freedom inclines people to go on the road and drive across the country, often without a direct aim. When they have to stop or are stopped, there is a mounting sensation of unease in the air. The road movie genre captures the tension between mobility and stability in a very direct and convincing fashion. Wyatt and Billy in *Easy Rider*, Kowalski in *Vanishing Point*, Thelma and Louise in the eponymous film and many other road movie characters experience the intoxicating feeling of being free when they drive and the disturbing and constricting sensation of being trapped when they halt.

Also, road movies display the complicated way of perceiving nature and

technology in America. The road movie driver's machine is always in the garden and the garden the films admire always has the machine right in its center. Without the powerful machines or the majestic landscape, the existence of a road movie is almost inconceivable and so is the existence of America as we know it today. We can never understand the complex state of mind that Leo Marx (2000) refers to if we consider American nature or culture separately. What is of utter importance is the fact that the machine and the garden are always there together, entwined and inseparable. Even when one of them is not physically present at the moment, it still affects the American psyche. This complex duality, which is often at work in a less noticeable fashion, is made explicit by the road movie genre. The genre brings into light the clash of values which Marx calls "the root conflict of our culture" (2000, p.365), that is to say the contradicting attitudes towards the natural environment and highly developed industry.

Finally, the road movie's narrative core is propelled by the struggle between individualism and conformity. American culture is based on the belief in the sacredness of individual. Bellah et al. (1985) emphasize the importance of individualism and note that to the Americans, a violation of individual rights is more than wrongdoing, it is sacrilege. The road movie genre by and large focuses on stories of people who feel that their right to be free individuals has been violated. They try to live their lives according to their own choices and beliefs and feel oppressed or limited by the society – by its expectations, norms or restrictions. Thus they decide to lead a rebellion against such limitations. Consequently they face a strong power which often thwarts their effort: conformism within the society. American individualism and conformity turn out to be two sides of the same coin. In America people are free to make their own choices and judgments. There is no powerful person or class or institution that would force them to accept certain opinions or attitudes. People naturally look around themselves for some guidance or support of their thoughts, and since the public opinion is the only guide left, they often conform to it.

The dialectic of individualism and conformity plays itself out powerfully in the films. There are the heroes that fight for the rights of the individual and

there is the conformity that incessantly undermines their effort. This conformity sometimes strikes from the outside, like when Wyatt and Billy are ostracized in *Easy Rider* because of their dissimilarity, sometimes the characters bear traces of conformism within themselves, like when Wyatt shows signs of patriarchal thinking or when Kowalski turns out to be a homophobe in *Vanishing Point*. We dare to make an assumption that the makers do not always intent to portray a complicated character full of inner psychological contradictions when it comes to rebellion and conformity. It seems more likely that sometimes the makers are immersed so deep within the dichotomies that exist in the culture that it becomes very hard for them to distance themselves completely from their influence. One way or another, road movies picture the constant struggle of two forces: the application of the belief that everybody should decide for themselves and the pressure on individuals to conform.

The notion of the journey is crucial for understanding the American temperament. The ideal of accommodation to nature importantly influenced both American public thinking and art, and so did the entrance of the machine into the garden. The duality continues to be highly relevant, as it still shapes the American mind. The indisputable emphasis on the individual constitutes the grounds of American cultural identity, yet conformist thinking is very powerfully present. All these phenomena are minutely recorded in road movies. The road movie genre is a window on American culture. A window through which we can see what has fueled American development and growth for centuries: productive conflicts of values.

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