

Different Drifters: Disability and Illness in Contemporary U.S. Road Films

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Resumen: El objetivo principal de este artículo es analizar históricamente la representación de la enfermedad en las *road movies* norteamericanas, para examinar cómo la presencia de cuerpos diferentes rompe las expectativas genéricas y conlleva una revitalización del cine de carretera. Tras explorar los motivos del aumento de la representación de personas enfermas en las *road movies*, este artículo analiza la contribución de la presencia de viajeros enfermos al género de carretera en un corpus representativo del periodo 1990-2010: *Una Historia Verdadera*, *A la Vuelta de la Esquina*, *Vivir hasta el Fin*, *Sólo ellas... los chicos*, *a un lado*, *Mi Idaho Privado*, *Homer & Eddie* y *Rain Man*. Se analiza la visibilidad creciente, aunque no siempre positiva en este género, de estas minorías escasamente representadas, y se evidencia cómo la enfermedad aboca a los protagonistas de *road movies* contemporáneas a su marginación, a echarse a la carretera. Estas *road movies* ofrecen una identificación del espectador potencialmente mayor y más positiva y una representación social más democrática, a la vez que suponen una clara revitalización del género.

Palabras clave: cine de carretera; cuerpos diferentes; representación de la enfermedad; visibilidad; revitalización del género.

Abstract: The main aim of this article is to trace historically the representation of illness in the US American road movie exploring how the presence of different, diseased bodies may shatter generic expectations and subsequently result in the genre's revitalization. After exploring the factors accounting for the increasing representation of sick people in the contemporary road movie, a sample of representative road films (*The Straight Story*, *Around the Bend*, *The Living End*, *Boys on the Side*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *Homer & Eddie* and *Rain Man*) is analysed to understand the contribution of ill drifters during the 1990-2010 period. This contribution mainly focuses upon the increasing, though not always positive, visibility of this underrepresented minority in this genre and evidences how illness and impairment may throw social outcasts on a drifting journey. Since the 1990s the road genre is fighting against the discrimination of contemporary US society against ill people on the big screen. In doing so, it offers a potentially wider and more positive viewer identification and a more democratic social representation and, at the same time, shows a significant revitalization as a genre.

Key words: road movies; different bodies; representation of illness; visibility; generic revitalization.

«Fonda and Hopper, both young white men with gas tanks full of cash and a mind-expanding world of time on their hands, don't seem to have as much of a natural birthright to the back roads as the randy pair of HIV-positive misanthropes in *The Living End*, the lost boy of *My Own Private Idaho* and the amateur Cheyenne revolutionaries of *Powwow Highway*» (1994: 16).

This opening quotation by Michael Atkinson explains the change regarding the formula of protagonism that has been affecting the road movie genre since the 1990s. Although the dominant protagonist in American cinema in general and in the early road movies in particular used to be a young, and therefore a healthy, white, heterosexual, American male, the road genre is opening its scope of protagonism to the inclusion of underrepresented social groups and minorities. In the beginnings of the road movie it was not only young independent film directors but especially the young spectator who felt the appeal of the life-affirming, young-spirited energy for which these films were remembered. However, from the 1990s onwards apart from women, it is non-whites, non-heterosexuals and people with different bodies that are carrying out the displacement of this traditionally hegemonic road hero. As Atkinson points out, sick people like the AIDS-infected protagonists in Gregg Araki's *The Living End*, 1992, and the narcoleptic drifter in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, 1991, seem to have a greater right and affinity to set on the road and become protagonists of road movies than the early problem-free, healthy young riders of the genre, represented by *Easy Rider*'s Wyatt and Billy, 1969. Like other artistic disciplines, the cinema has traditionally adhered to a trend whereby disease has been either glaringly absent or relegated to a peripheral position and allotted negative qualities. In an attempt to explain the reasons for their invisibility, Christine Holmlund claims that sick and elderly people are absent from the big screen because identification with disintegrating, ageing bodies jeopardizes narcissistic pleasure, for young and old alike (1994: 43). Likewise, this idea may also be applied to the representation of sick people in general, not only the elderly, so that we may conclude that disease also constitutes a blind spot on the grounds of the film's potential for pleasure response and subsequent viewer identification. The cinematic absence of both ill and impaired people is all the more worrying if we bear in mind Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth's claim that «images may be used as concrete evidence of the actual social relationships that occur in everyday life since images and reality clearly interrelate» (1993: 304) or as Michael Wood puts it: «all movies mirror reality in some way or other» (In Longmore, 2003: 132). The lack or scarcity of images of the ill and impaired may therefore reflect the concealment and silencing of sick people in real life in a youth-oriented consumer society characterized by an obsessive quest for healthy, youthful beauty. As regards disability, Paul Longmore remarks that «when disability issues are addressed or disability experiences are described, they are framed from the perspective of non-disabled people (...). As a result, disabled people are hidden or depicted as passive and inert» (2003: 9). Nevertheless, as Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth conclude, «although familiar images are rooted in our history, they are also subject to change and can be moulded and reconstructed with a view to changing attitudes» (1993: 322), in our case study towards the community of different bodies, may they be ill, impaired or disabled (within the representation of different bodies in the road movie, this essay focuses mainly on sick rather than disabled characters). This is why any representation –in films and other art forms– of ill or impaired people that counteracts both their absence, stigmatization and negative portrayal may function as a step further towards the creation of a positive social identity. Though exceptional, recent films such as *The*

Bucket List, 2007, or *Gran Torino*, 2008, starred by some famous actors over retirement age (Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman in the former and Clint Eastwood in the latter) on the one hand, and *Blindness*, 2008, and Oscar-award-winning *Avatar*, 2009, on the other, seem to give evidence of a timid general cinematic trend to place sick or impaired characters in leading roles. However, despite the significance of their new embodiment and visibility, the portrayal of these different-bodied characters should be analysed more thoroughly in each of these films to check whether it truly runs parallel with a Hollywood effort to reflect them in a positive way. As regards our case study, for the last two decades this trend for the visibility and protagonism of different bodies seems to have been affecting the road genre in a special way. It all started in 1988 with the release of Barry Levinson's Oscar-award winning *Rain Man*, probably the first road movie to give a major dignified leading role to a seriously impaired person, an autistic man called Raymond. This yuppie road film tells the story of a confused car tradesman, Charlie, who happens to share a road journey with his estranged, autistic brother, from whom he selfishly aims to gain his father's inheritance. As Ina Rae Hark remarks, «*Rain Man* offers a critique of 1980s Reaganite yuppie values in the figure of a high flier who is more neurotic than the neurotic» (1997: 204), Charlie, a character strongly contrasted with his brother Raymond. Therefore, *Rain Man* shows that it is the brother who is not impaired that needs a psychological change and that his conversion into a more humane person only occurs thanks to his bonding on the road with his antagonistic autistic brother. Indeed, this road movie does a social good by giving an autistic character visibility through protagonism and, at first sight, seems to portray him in a realistic, positive way. However, a deeper analysis of this film shows that this road movie finally uses this impaired presence as a means to achieve the social reintegration of the non-disabled protagonist, that is, for his own beneficial change into a better person, which finally makes the portrayal of impairment regressive rather than enlightening. All in all, *Rain Man* set the road for a variety of different-bodied drifters to follow throughout a two-decade period, whose portrayal of disease and impairment in a sample of representative road films needs to be examined.

As David Laderman argues in his book *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie*, the representation of minorities like the elderly, women, gays, and people of colour may contribute significantly to the road genre in general:

«Driving the road movie with a senior can become a challenge to the genre itself (...). Like that of women, gays, and people of colour, this elder perspective becomes an outsider perspective within an outsider genre, a fresh revitalisation of the typical young white male point of view of most classic road movies» (2002: 237).

Likewise, together with the elderly, the sick and disabled communities may join this group of underrepresented others that is currently reviving the road genre by expanding its variety of protagonists (both abled and non-abled, healthy and unhealthy), its types of films, which may range from mainstream (*Rain Man*, *Boys on the Side*) to independent road movies (*The Living End*, *Homer and Eddie*) and also by enriching its storylines and themes, mainly framed within the realm of social marginalization.

The main aim of this article is to trace historically the representation of illness and impairment in the genre exploring how the presence of different, diseased and/or impaired bodies may shatter the generic expectations affecting the US American road movie and subsequently result in the genre's artistic and storyline revitalization. In an attempt to achieve this aim different factors accounting for the increasing trend to include the representation of sick and impaired people in the contemporary road movie are examined. Among these we may find the concepts of travelling as an addiction, the association between the physical journey and the journey of life whereby impaired or terminally ill characters set on a last wish fulfilment journey, and the road journey as an escapist experience where the means of transport work as freeing elements for these riders who are trapped in their different limiting bodies. In addition, a sample of representative road movies are analysed in order to understand the contribution of ill or impaired drifters to US American cinema in general and to the road genre in particular from the 1990s to the end of the first decade of the 21st century. This contribution will mainly focus upon the increasing visibility of this underrepresented minority in the road movie, as well as the exposure of their victimization due to their unfavourable condition. Moreover, the main issue at stake here is to understand to what extent these road movies including different-bodied protagonists reflect enlightenment in Hollywood, an effort to change people's perceptions of ill and impaired citizens or, contrariwise, as happened in *Rain Man*, they constitute yet another old-fashioned, regressive filmic characterization of disease and/or disability.

There are different factors that may account for a certain increase in the representation of sick riders in the contemporary road movie. First of all, it is worth mentioning that in his book *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* John Steinbeck offered an early association between the road experience and disease:

«When I was very young and the urge to be someplace else was on me, I was assured by mature people that maturity would cure this itch. When years described me as mature, the remedy prescribed was middle age. In middle age I was assured that greater age would calm my fever and now that I am fifty-eight perhaps senility will do the job. Nothing has worked... The sound of a jet, an engine warming up, even the clapping of shod hooves brings on the ancient shudder, the dry mouth and vacant eye, the hot palms and the churn of stomach high up under the rib cage. In other words, I don't improve; in further words, once a bum, always a bum. I fear this disease is incurable» (1962: 3).

Thus, Steinbeck remarkably describes travelling as an incurable disease in itself and drifters as sick people. This presents a binary contrast between riders, who undergo this kind of travelling addiction, and the average 'healthy', non-addicted settled-down citizens.

Apart from this metaphorical association between illness and drifters, a major factor that may account for a certain increase in the representation of physically unhealthy or impaired riders in the genre is the association of the concepts of disease, old age and decay with the concept of time as an arrow moving relentlessly forward from the past, through the present, to a point in the future (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1993: 8). This symbology resembles the road movie's basic structuring concept of the physical

journey that metaphorically illustrates the journey of life, the trajectory of the arrow. Sick people see their own lives at risk, endangered by disease or close to a fatal end. Thus, the presence of sick characters in this type of road movies may illustrate the last stretch or lap in this trip, that is, in a person's life cycle. Indeed, the threat of death sets people on the road, as though physical flight could parallel escape from illness and its fatal consequences. Although escape is eventually impossible, the journey may provide these terminally ill characters with the opportunity to make a life dream come true or at least enjoy the last days of their lives to the maximum. The cancer-diagnosed characters in *The Sunchaser*, 1996, *Beautiful Joe*, 2000, and *Homer & Eddie*, 1989, illustrate this runaway reaction, as do the HIV-positive leading protagonists in *Boys on the Side*, 1995, and *The Living End*, 1992, and the terminally ill protagonists in *The Straight Story*, 1999, and *Around the Bend*, 2005. By way of illustration, in *The Sunchaser* Michael Cimino pairs on the road a white doctor and his kidnapper, a young but dying Native American Indian convict who wants to find a lake of spiritual renewal before he dies. Likewise, Robin, one of the three marginalised female protagonists of Herbert Ross's *Boys on the Side* (together with a lesbian and a battered wife) runs away from her home, job and past lifestyle in the naïve hope that she will somehow defeat AIDS. This road movie shows how disease shatters escapist dreams and forces its protagonists to settle down and remain static. Remarkably, their detour becomes the whole journey and their internalized quest turns outward to benefit a multicultural utopian community where healthy and unhealthy, gay, straight, and interracial couples form an alternative family. Thus, although the film shows Robin dying before the end credits, it also finally presents people marginalised for different reasons apart from AIDS, as in her case, as happy, fulfilled and fully integrated members of a multicultural utopian community or alternative family. Moreover, this film depicts an exaltation of family values through Robin's reconciliation with her own long-lost mother Elaine on her death bed. Now she is so ill she needs the awakening of such an important mother-daughter relationship, especially to come to terms with her miserable past and with her impending death. Thus the positive portrayal of disease in the figure of Robin is framed within what Sharon Willis describes as «a dream of community that shows a therapeutic agenda, it cures by restoring the community and the travellers to themselves» (1997: 287). Jordan Roberts's *Around the Bend* presents three generations of men who are either ill or impaired: Henry, the sick grandfather who dies at the beginning of the film, Turner, a prodigal father and runaway convict who is himself dying of a terminal disease and whose last days of life this road movie focuses on, and Jason, a resentful son with a physical impairment. Together with a grandson, Turner and Jason undergo a redemptive healing journey along the American Southwest to accomplish Henry's final request to scatter his ashes, a lame excuse to gather the family together at long last. Along the way they face the truth of a family secret: Turner abandoned Jason as a child because he was responsible for his severe limp. But Henry's last wish for family reunion has forced his son and grandson to travel together and get to know each other and finally find peace and forgiveness before Turner dies on screen, which also reflects Willis's therapeutic agenda explained beforehand. As a further illustration, David Lynch's *The Straight Story* tells the story of a dying septuagenarian who embarks

on a lawnmower pilgrimage journey for more than six weeks to make amends with his long estranged brother who has just had a stroke and is also approaching death. As the synopses and the final recovery of the family unit in *Boys on the Side* (at the same time including a family/community of marginalised «others»), *Around the Bend* and *The Straight Story* show, a staple these road movies share is their exaltation of family values. These road movies seem to indicate that the protagonists' main sickness and limitations stem from their family estrangement and that the final healing of family wounds may occur thanks to the bonding, reunion or creation of biological and/or alternative families facilitated by the road journey. Significantly, this is a trend that also appears in other contemporary road movies starred by healthy unimpaired people like *Manny & Lo*, 1996, *Transamerica*, 2005, and *Little Miss Sunshine*, 2006.

A further factor that may explain the presence of ill and impaired riders in this genre is the concept of the road journey as a symbol for freedom. The average road movie protagonist runs away from the constraints of domesticity and humdrum existence. But these riders usually feel trapped in their limiting bodies so they may even prove more liable to experience this call to adventure, a greater eagerness to run away and set on a journey towards freedom, to live life to the full, may that be for the first or last time. As Michael Atkinson points out, the socially marginalised are likely to feel an even greater need for this personal quest or inner search, a basic generic convention in the road movie. Furthermore, in road films the means of transport prevails as an essential iconographic object that encapsulates the protagonist's mastery of technology. Riders are shown to handle cars or any other vehicle adroitly, as if they were artificial extensions of their own bodies. In this sense, given their physical limitations, this type of riders may benefit from the technological help, power and pleasure that a car may offer even more fully than the average healthy, unimpaired protagonist whose mobility is not so reduced. Thus, road movies may present scientific advances within technology in general or the motor industry in particular as improving the reduced mobility, agency and autonomy of these riders since they may enable them to fulfil their last wish in life or at least to have a greater choice of action. Alvin Straight (played by Richard Farnsworth, who was terminally ill himself at the time), the stubborn, dying protagonist in David Lynch's true-story-based *The Straight Story* illustrates this type of rider who is both mobility-impaired and trapped in a sick body. At the beginning of the film a scene at the doctor's surgery after a bad fall makes visible Straight's wrinkled face, his cracking hip and his sagging, unclothed, septuagenarian ailing body. They symbolise the imprisonment in flesh, the vulnerability of human bodies through age and disease, one of Lynch's recurrent fixations that, as Kreider and Content remark, «already appeared in *The Elephant Man*, 1980, *Eraserhead*, 1978, and *Dune*, 1984» (2000: 31). This is an obsession that the road movie now also reflects. The film shows how Straight's limited mobility is complemented by his vehicle, a generically atypical motordriven lawnmower that, together with two walking sticks and a grabber, make possible his heroic odyssey. Furthermore, in comparison to other cinematic genres, the presence of sick and impaired people seems also logical in a genre like the road movie, whose protagonists do not usually hold positions of power but of uncertainty, illegality and grief. Apart from suffering from a disease or impairment, these people may be victimized and

marginalized by the current traditional patriarchal system due to their different condition and subsequent different bodies. It looks as if wandering or nomadism offered the only way out from bigotry to people with different bodies, may they be deformed, disabled or simply sick. If we examine this kind of riders in some representative contemporary road movies, it is usually either protagonists with mental illnesses (and other disorders that affect a person's consciousness like narcolepsy) or AIDS who suffer the worst discrimination in the genre. With the exception of *Rain Man's* Raymond, mentally unbalanced protagonists are often shown as victimized by the system in the road movies of this period. An illustration of these marginalized characters due to a mental disorder are the leads in *My Own Private Idaho*, *Homer & Eddie*, 1989, and *Mad Love*, 1995, who feel forced to flee from an emotionally retarded society that has failed to integrate them satisfactorily. Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* tells the story of two young male hustlers from the point of view of one of them, Mike, the ill and incestuous son of his mother and brother, who is searching for his lost mother. He is a gay narcoleptic boy who depends on the kindness of strangers to be pulled out of the road after his recurrent fits. His narcoleptic episodes on the road during his search for his mother constitute the structuring dividing chapters of the film. Whenever Mike suffers a sleeping fit locations change (from Portland to Idaho and finally to Rome) and the action becomes a parallel, surreal journey of the mind, a road within memory. After all, as Gus Van Sant explains, *My Own Private Idaho* is a film about «looking for home. You may not find one but you keep looking» (In Loud, 1991: 34). Moreover, as Amy Taubin claims, «*My Own Private Idaho* connects the betrayal of familial love with the betrayal of the American Dream» (1992: 83), which forces its alienated protagonists to a vagrant life in the streets and on the road. As this queer road movie suggests, together with homosexuality, Mike's condition is one of the main reasons for his marginalization and subsequent wandering and prostitution. Remarkably, along the way we get a powerful journey of discovery and a more realistic version of disease and homosexuality for the road movie in the 1990s, which also contributes to the genre's revitalization.

Like Mike, Homer, the male eponymous protagonist of Andrei Konchalovski's *Homer & Eddie*, was abandoned by his parents as a child after an accidental brain damage caused by a baseball (his name may refer to either a homer or home run or to the author of *The Odyssey*, allegedly the first journey narrative). This brain-injured simpleton hits the road with Eddie, an escaped mental patient with a fatal brain tumour, to see Homer's long-estranged father before the old man dies of a cancer. Neither of them has a future to look forward to since they have been sidelined by society for crime, poverty, terminal disease and mental disability. Unlike Homer, who represents the truly good soul, always well-intentioned and willing to help, Eddie is a ruthless criminal who vents her anger against the world and even herself (as when she hurts herself by bumping her own head against a mirror). The doctors have only given her a month to live and every time she thinks of this injustice she has an attack of fury which ends up violently, as when she reacts aggressively towards a diner's customers. In spite of their mismatched personalities Homer and Eddie show a liking for each other that grows stronger thanks to the road experiences and encounters they share along the journey. On the road Eddie wants to change Homer's virgin condition so she takes him to a

brothel and gets the money to pay for it by holding up a store. Despite the redeeming love of Homer, who persuades her to see a priest and confess her sins, he cannot save her from herself. Her criminal activities increase, and she winds up shooting people while robbing their stores so that the bad end that was expected from the start comes at last. She becomes «an Obsessive Avenger» against able-bodied people, a negative role that Martin Norden remarks used to be stereotypically given to disabled characters in film, as happened chorally in Tod Browning's *Freaks*, 1932 (1994: 115). Moreover, she embodies Paul K. Longmore's idea that in stereotypical representations

«disability results in lack of self-control. The disabled character thus endangers the rest of society. (...) Violent loss of self-control results in the exclusion of the disabled character from human community. (...) For both monstrous and criminal disabled characters, the final and only possible solution is often death. In most cases, it is fitting and just punishment» (2003: 135).

At the beginning of the film both Homer and Eddie are presented as maladjusted impaired or sick underdogs, excluded from human community in an unfair way. They have both been unlucky in life: Homer by being impaired by a fly ball hit and subsequently abandoned by his parents and Eddie by suffering from a terminal disease and a mental condition. However, the film contrasts the two protagonists' reactions against their black fate with each other and portrays each character accordingly. While Homer assumes his underprivileged situation and seems content and consequently represented very positively by the film, Eddie rebels against it by resorting to meaningless violence and is thus portrayed negatively as Norden's obsessive avenger. Significantly, her aggressive nature is neither justified nor redeemed by a good cause in the film, which makes it difficult for the audience to sympathise with her character. Thus, the end of this road movie presents Eddie's death as the tragic but inevitable outcome that Longmore describes, especially by contrasting it with Homer's final potential integration in society.

Within the second group of discriminated different-bodied drifters we find the HIV-positive road protagonists in *Parting Glances*, 1986, *The Living End*, *Boys on the Side* and *The Trip*, 2002. As happens in Van Sant's queer road movie, the existential search on the road is the core theme in Gregg Araki's *The Living End*. But in this independent queer road film it is AIDS that points to the failure of the American Dream and throws the male lovers, now social outcasts, on a drifting journey. As David Laderman argues, «*The Living End* suggests that aimless, outlaw mobility is the only appropriate response to living with AIDS in a society that seemingly will not help or even have them» (2002: 216). Moreover, Kylo-Patrick R. Hart examines a stereotypical association of AIDS with the city as an unhealthy place of sin, bigotry and entrapment, whereas the country stands for the freedom and the curative power of nature (2000: 68). Accordingly, characters in AIDS road movies, like Nick in *Parting Glances*, Robin in *Boys on the Side*, and Luke and Jon in *The Living End* run away from the city and head for the healing countryside. In addition, Araki's play with light and darkness, with visibility and invisibility suggests both AIDS and homosexuality's hidden condition in the current

patriarchal system. Significantly, the film's end emphasises the protagonists' visibility (we see them embracing on a deserted beach in broad daylight) but also their living condition because, although they fall sick on the road, they do not finally die on screen. As happened in *Homer & Eddie*, *The Living End* presents two antagonistic, maladjusted protagonists who get excluded from human community due to a physical or mental condition. Moreover, it also shows a binary contrast between the two lovers, where Luke, unlike Jon, represents Norden's obsessive avenger, a violent criminal subject to Longmore's lack of self-control (though he is not disabled but sick). Nevertheless, it is very significant that, unlike Eddie in Konchalovski's film, Luke is not finally punished and killed in Araki's film, so despite his negative portrayal as ruthlessly violent, the director finally wants to emphasize his living condition as survivor of the disease (and Jon's too). In her article «Revitalizing the Road Genre. *The Living End* as an AIDS Road Film», Kate Mills explains this hopeful ending:

«Although driven by AIDS their end is living. The road motif symbolizes the movement of gay bodies not only through the landscape, but especially metaphorically forwards into the future when there might be a cure for the disease» (1997: 325).

Likewise, Robert Lang claims that something has changed because the queer road movies of the 90s (such as Van Sant's and Araki's) don't have the conventionally unhappy endings of the gay films of the 70s where gays were sentenced to death because they didn't establish families (1997: 333). In this sense, the title of Araki's film plays ambiguously with two meanings: the living end as the end of life because of AIDS and the opposite, the living end as an end that is «living» or alive, an idea that the film's closure hopefully reinforces.

Indeed, never before had the road been populated by such weak, alienated anti-heroes as this HIV-positive couple, Homer and Eddie, and the narcoleptic protagonist in *My Own Private Idaho*. These road protagonists are all haunted by a state of drifting need, in a life where long-term plans are out of place.

To conclude, before the 1990s we found a healthy able-bodied hegemonic cinematic panorama that was only disrupted by the odd presence of some ailing or impaired secondary token characters present for political correctness. Ill and disabled people were traditionally allotted either a conspicuous absence that reproduced their lack of power in real life or a role as sidekicks to a healthy able-bodied protagonist. Come the 1990s, the road movie opened up its scope of protagonism to the inclusion of people victimized by the traditional patriarchal system, demonstrating that they constitute the real new protagonists of this genre. Together with gender, race, sexual orientation and old age, bad health condition and impairment constitute other factors that create a minority of cinematically underrepresented «others» who may now displace the dominant road hero. This timid trend for their embodiment and visibility challenges the contemporary stereotypical negative associations of unhealthy and impaired people with uselessness, passivity and a social problem that Paul K. Longmore remarks. The presence of ill drifters in the road movie results firstly from this genre's association of the physical journey with the journey of life whereby sick riders get on the road for

their last cathartic trip, usually down memory lane. The trope of the road journey and the mastery of the means of transport as symbols of freedom from the entrapment of either a sick or impaired body also account for the increasing presence of this different-bodied community in the genre. Finally, the presence of sick or impaired riders in this genre may also respond to a need to run away from society's exclusion, from their impossibility to integrate in a bigoted society because of their different bodies, a prejudice existing in real life that these films expose. Thus, we may conclude that ill and impaired protagonists have started to affect the road genre and to contribute to its evolution in different ways. The significance of these different-bodied cinematic representations lies in their function as a mirror of contemporary US society. Like *The Bucket List* and *Gran Torino*, these road movies are firstly democratic in its positioning of the sick minority as protagonists. Moreover, they are no longer sidekicks or characters paired, contrasted and used for the benefit of a healthy non-disabled protagonist. In most cases these films are starred by two drifters who share a marginalized status (one of them at least due to a physical or impairing condition) who build a sort of community or alternative family for themselves (*Boys on the Side*, *The Living End*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *Homer & Eddie*, etc.). Sometimes protagonists even rebuild their own lost family structure (*Boys on the Side*, *The Straight Story* and *Around the Bend*) along a therapeutic journey to their pasts. Furthermore, the presence of these different-bodied drifters also results in the artistic and storyline rejuvenation of the genre. The road movie has both become a fertile genre for a variety of innovative filmmakers of both mainstream and independent features while at the same time, it now shows a wider, richer and more creative range of not only protagonists but also values, storylines and themes. In road movies like *The Straight Story* and *Around the Bend*, whose sick, impaired and old protagonists are very close to death, the journey forwards is really a return to the past, which provides the genre with an uncommon, fresh, flashbacked, rear-view mirror perspective that contributes to the genre's revitalization. Moreover, these road features present the journey as an essential healing element that promotes a further factor implementing the genre's renewal: the generically atypical exaltation of family values, as if family estrangement were the true terminal disease that needed a cure. As regards themes, these films introduce those related to the non-healthy or non-disabled community for discussion, mainly dealing with their marginalization. Thus, *The Living End* for example, concentrates on society's bias against its protagonists on the grounds of homosexuality and AIDS, highlighting the genre's power in the 1990s to blame US American society for this double jeopardy. Likewise, although *The Living End* still shows a traditional association between different bodies and malevolence (Longmore, 2003: 133) in the character of Luke, this road movie also presents violence as one of the main consequences of patriarchal bigotry and homophobia against sick citizens. In addition, *The Straight Story* raises the issues of society's discrimination and stigmatization of the sick, impaired and elderly. This film uses the road movie's conventions as a framework for its story in order to vindicate the value of the average sick, old, US country man who fights for his values of independence and agency despite serious physical decay and limitations. Therefore, the contemporary road movie presents illness and impairment as social factors closely related to marginalization. As *My Own Private Idaho*, *The Living*

End and *Homer & Eddie* show, sick characters, especially those either mentally-disordered or HIV-positive, are maladjusted and therefore socially and physically displaced. Thus, what these road movies are exposing is society's sickness, the lack of integration of different-bodied protagonists in a system that leads them to a vagrant life on the road. Moreover, these sick drifters usually suffer from a double bias. Apart from their different unhealthy bodies and/or or physical impairment, protagonists are victimized for belonging to another minority: in *My Own Private Idaho* and *The Living End* for their homosexual orientation, in *Around the Bend* for being a convict, in *The Straight Story* due to old age and in *Homer & Eddie* and *The Sunchaser* on racial grounds. This genre therefore denounces the sickness of a society whose bias is manifold and that breeds not only rootlessness but also unjustified violence, as the characters of Eddie in *Homer & Eddie* and Luke in *The Living End* show. Unfortunately, as these two road movies show, it sometimes does so by resorting to a traditionally regressive and old-fashioned portrayal of sick and impaired protagonists (Eddie and Luke) as obsessive avengers. Finally, it is also worth mentioning here that, despite their sometimes bleak scene, some of these road movies offer a more hopeful future for their sick or impaired protagonists, since their endings do not sentence them to death, as happens with Homer and with Jon and Luke in the aforementioned titles.

All in all, starting in the 1990s and for the last two decades the road genre has broken its healthy able-bodied bias and is fighting against the injustice and discrimination of contemporary US social structure against ill and impaired people on the big screen. Thus, the contemporary road movie offers a potentially wider viewer identification and a more democratic, positive and hopeful representation of this different-bodied community that may increase respect towards social difference and at the same time gives evidence of its own significant generic revitalization.

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