

## *Easy Rider* and the Conventions of the Road Movie

Carmen Indurain Eraso

*'Some day I'd like to see some of this country we're travelling through'.*

This spontaneous, 'out-of-the-hat' comment made by the protagonist of Nicholas Ray's early Road Movie *They Live by Night* (1948) is a good illustration of the fact that, despite their apparently simple storyline –some character(s) moving from point A to point B– Road Movies bear a deeper insight, differing substantially from mere travelogues in their distinctive concept of movement. This character's complaint suggests that in Road Movies the journey along a given road does not constitute an essential ingredient to get to know a foreign culture or a distant location in depth. Their ultimate aim is not the reaching of a particular destination either, but the 'journeying', the travelling process, the being and experiencing 'On the Road' or, as Cervantes wrote in *Don Quixote*, 'Vale más el camino que la posada, mi fiel Sancho' (Cueto 1995:130-133). However, this simple plot framework allows for the widest range of possibilities in terms of wandering protagonists, road happenings and unforeseeable meetings between strangers, therefore resulting in the Road Movie's rich and varied corpus. And it is not only this new genre's versatile and prolific history, but also its sometimes blurred and overlapping borderlines with other film genres that makes its analysis and classification somewhat complex.

This paper intends to analyse the most relevant traits of this new film genre by examining what has become the foundational Road Movie: Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969). The point of departure will be the study of the genre's main influences and the complex blending of cultural and historical factors from which Road Movies derive, all of them analysed through Hopper's film.

Road Movies such as *Easy Rider* are direct heirs of the Western in the first place. They not only share the travel narrative (either by car or on horseback, its essence is the same) but also their main characters' eagerness to move, through which they both represent an important part of US American national identity, though each in its own way. The stereotype of the Western hero is that of a tough mobile male superpatriot who travels from the East towards the West, so far coinciding with the stereotype of the early road hero. Mobility, action and maleness are closely related

in Westerns and early Road Movies. They both identify gender with the active/passive dichotomy allotting mobile action to the male and inert inoperation to the female. Thus, men portray action-taking dynamic characters while women remain their static, faithful spectators. As Shari Roberts states: 'What ultimately links the Road Movie to the Western is this ideal of masculinity inherent in certain underlying conceptualizations of American national identity' (1997:45). Female characters are scarce and deprived of narrative depth, mainly relegated to one of these two peripheral roles: either as weak 'plot-triggers' or as 'sex-providers'. Women in Westerns and the early Road Movies on the border with the gangster genre such as David Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1948), Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* (1941), etc., follow this first role, acting as Roberts' explains as 'a foil to the laconic, macho, male actor' (62). They mainly appear in lesser roles as necessary elements for the male hero's personal evolution and enhancement and for the existence of a traditional romantic love story. Already present in the Western, this romantic love story on the move will prove fashionable throughout time. As Kathleen Rowe Karlyn states in her article "Gas, Food, Lodging": 'Both the Western and the Road Movie romantize movement, freedom, the open road the quest for the new' (1998:176), a romanticism which will be recurrently found until our days in such recent road features as *Something Wild* by Jonathan Demme (1985), *Wild at Heart* by David Lynch (1991), *True Romance* by Tony Scott (1993), *Natural Born Killers* by Oliver Stone (1994), *Mad Love* by Antonia Bird (1995) or *Feeling Minnesota* by Steven Baigelman (1996). Remarkably enough, from the late 60s and up to the 80s women in Road Movies will be either significantly absent or relegated to accidental roles as 'sex-providers' rather than 'plot-inducers'. At this time, Road Movies still show this quintessential maleness, but the romantic element isn't present any more. Men portray full protagonists this time leading lives of total debauchery and showing a significant preference for male relationships. And if one Road Movie stands out as showing male presence as a priority, that is *Easy Rider*: Like other films of the genre, it presents truly credible characters on a journey whose realism empowers the film to impact on the audience. Two women motorcyclists on a journey of drugs and sex would have exerted too extravagant and unbelievable an effect for that period, depriving the film of its genuine, fundamental realism, which accounts for the prevailing maleness of this film and of early Road Movies in general. Therefore, while some 'existentialist' Road Movies presented a lonesome male protagonist (*Radio On* by Chris Petit, 1979, *Vanishing Point* by Richard C. Sarafian, 1971 and *Out* by Eli Hollander, 1982), the vast majority of them kept *Easy Rider's* stereotype of the male 'buddy' pair, already present in early popular comedy productions in such 'couplings' as Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby in the 'Road to' series, and especially George Maharis and Martin Milner in the successful TV series Route 66. Renewals of Dennis Hopper's masterpiece underwent a fruitful period all along the 70s: *Two-Lane Blacktop* by Monte Hellman (1971), *Backroads* by Phillip Noyce (1977), *Sitting Ducks* by Henry Jaglom (1980), etc. However, the useful presence of the duo for practical reasons of storytelling, mainly to keep the dialogue going and to build intimacy and

plot conflict, would finally fade away. It was exactly at that moment when the appearance of two men on their own, without women, started to suggest homosexual connotations, that the Buddy Road Movie's prosperous story started to decline. From this moment onwards the male duo on the road would only be feasible in those later films either overtly presenting a gay leading couple (eg: *My Own Private Idaho*, Gus Van Sant, 1991, and *The Leaving End*, Gregg Arakis, 1992) or two male protagonists sharing some kind of 'family' tie: *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988) and *A Perfect World* (Clint Eastwood, 1993). The fall of the male buddy couple would mark the beginning of the decline of male presence in this genre, but it would still take some time before we could speak about female Road Movies, that is, Road Movies in which women are represented as full protagonists.

Apart from maleness, another trait shared by the Western and the Road Movie is their reinvention of the 'American Dream' through the travel narrative in the best pioneer style. The East represents the corruption of the town and the so-called 'feminine' static domesticity and regressive old values while the West stands for the freedom and the opportunity of open spaces, a new start in a fair world. However, this 'American Dream' in Westerns is usually associated with a sense of communal search, the journey's main aim being to redefine the community through a new start in one of these unexplored open spaces. In these films, a miniature community is shown to initiate a new life, with the prospect of a home and family in the horizon. Conversely, *Easy Rider* does not celebrate the ideals of populism but of individualism, of inserting individuals in a traditional conservative society as previous Road Movies up to the 1960s did. Early Road Movies of the 40s and 50s such as *Detour*, *High Sierra*, *They Live by Night*, etc., show the same journey towards the future as *Easy Rider*, but this time resulting from a desperate need to escape rather than from an inner urge to respond to what Joseph Campbell named the 'Hero's Call to Adventure' (1993:5). Their protagonists are always on the opposite side of the law: usually convicts, gangsters or bank robbers running away from the police but paradoxical though it may seem, doing so in an attempt to become regular citizens. Despite the fact that Wyatt and Billy could not be considered law-abiding subjects either, since they deal with drugs and are on the whole 'illegality-prone', their main reason for getting on the road is not that of escaping from justice, but searching for freedom. A freedom which in this case refers to the liberation of the inner spirit or soul through the rejection of patriarchal society's established values. All these road films show the riders' inability to integrate themselves in the society of their time, which, following the policy of compensating values, will punish them ruthlessly with the film's tragic ending. Unlike Western heroes, Hopper's 'easy riders' inherit society's harsh and unfair punishment ending in brutal killing, which will arouse the audience's sympathy towards them. As a matter of fact, this film's depiction of American society is very critical, since it represents integration in this new American reality as impossible. As Steven Cohan remarks:

*The Road Movie genre is defined by its repeated positioning of conservative values and rebellious desires in an often uncomfortable, even depoliticised dialectic. As a result, the Road Movie genre has repeatedly worked, first, to set in opposition two contrasting myths central to*

*American ideology, that of individualism and that of populism, and second, to use the road to imagine the nation's culture either as a utopian fantasy of homogeneity and national coherence, or as a dystopic nightmare of social difference and reactionary politics (1997:3).*

The characters in *Easy Rider*—Dennis Hopper himself as Billy and Peter Fonda as Wyatt, also nicknamed 'Captain America' (allegedly named after legendary Western figures Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp)—set off in search of the 'real' America only to find out the aforementioned 'nightmare of social difference' and sheer intolerance which is briefly depicted by their own crude comment on their nation: 'We blew it'. Or, as the film's 1969 advertising campaign had already forecast: 'A man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere' (Klinger 1997:179). Remarkably, despite their confessed lack of roots and their liberal nature, these characters also show the patriotism characteristic of the Western hero. They still adhere to the traditional nationalistic features to be seen not only in their names but also in their costumes: Billy's pioneer-styled leather fringe jacket and Wyatt's helmet emblazoned with the American flag, also present in one of the Harley Davidson's petrol tank (noticeably, their cache for the money made out of a big drug deal). Nevertheless, all these US American symbols will not help relieve the dramatically increasing hostility from local citizens they will come across along their journey. Following some early happy encounters located in the idyllic images of countryside scenery, where we witness the couple socialize with a hospitable family in a ranch, two fellow wanderers thumbing a lift and even an inviting hippie commune, the realm of the city (represented by the old regressive values of the South) rises as an antagonistic duality. It is in this demonized South that Billy and Wyatt meet discrimination, violence and even their own coldblooded murder. They are first of all jailed for participating in a local parade, insulted at a café after gaining some girls' attention and later on attacked at night in an ambush. During the latter, a friend of theirs (George, a hitcher played by a young Jack Nicholson) is murdered after premonitorily forecasting the true reasons for the tragedy to happen: 'You represent freedom to the rest of the people, they are scared of what you mean to them. They only talk about it but they're not free'. Soon after this remark he is irrationally killed, followed by Wyatt and Billy, shot by some 'rednecks' from a pick-up-truck simply because they have let their hair and sideburns grow. This proves the film's representation of the latent existence of a class and generation conflict and of the fact that America's conservative society was the actual hidden enemy to fight against once the so-called 'American Dream' had become an 'American nightmare'. As Barbara Klinger successfully explains in 'The Road to Dystopia' (1997:181), *Easy Rider's* reading of America is rather gloomy:

*The film juxtaposed 'America the Beautiful' with 'Amerika\* the Ugly': the pristine wilderness of the landscape, representing the great potential of the country's historical past, with the profane sentiments of its fascistic and bigoted inhabitants, threatening the very foundations of democracy in the present.*

*(\* Amerika, as the alternative press coined the US in the late 60s, stood for the fascist repressive government of the time, best exemplified by the nation's imperialistic engagement in Vietnam, the violent treatment of protesters and puritanical attitudes towards sexuality).*

After the Western, a second great influence to be found in *Easy Rider* and in the whole Road Movie genre is the vocation for uprooting marginality and rebelliousness initiated in the 50s by the Beat Generation. This was a literary movement whose circle of leading poets and writers experienced an enriching exchange with other 'avant guard' musicians, painters, sculpturers, filmmakers, etc. of the period and whose main ideal was the rejection of society's established values through 'un nuevo concepto de vida: el movimiento continuo. Su patria eran sus coches, sus amigos y la carretera' (*Babelia* 1995:7). Jack Kerouack's emblematic *On the Road* (1957:133) corroborated the aforementioned concept of continuous movement. The partly autobiographical novel-chronicle of this Beat Generation narrates the initiation journey through different routes and mental states (Route 66 being the legendary one) of two friends: Dean Moriarty and Jack Kerouack himself, in a nightmarish introduction to sex, dope, rock and road where this later acts as a metaphor for the inner search. Vividly depicted by his own words is the main character-author's lure to get on the road: 'Dean and I saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there' (Kerouack 1957:138). Reviving *On the Road's* metaphorical 'opening of the oyster', *Easy Rider's* protagonists hit the road towards something new and different they believe the unknown future will provide them with. Like Jack and Dean, they accept with an active attitude the challenge of discovering their 'Promised Land', of taking the choice of moving so as to make things happen rather than wait statically for them to come up, thereby recovering the association between mobility and action inherited from the Western, which will recurrently be present in the Road Movie genre. As Kevin Costner explained to his young hostage copilot in Clint Eastwood's Road Movie, *A Perfect World* (1993), the car represents a time machine, the road ahead the calling future and the road behind the bleak past, aimed to be forgotten:

*This car is a 20th century time machine, I'm the captain and you're the navigator. Up there, that's the future, back there is the past. If life moves too slow and you want to protect yourself into the future, you have to press the gas, right here. If you want to slow it down, you step on the break here. This is the present. Philip—he says stopping the car.*

The protagonists in *Easy Rider* and *On the Road* will share this adventurous, daring attitude essential to achieve their personal quest for freedom from restrictive traditions, mores and social norms through the experiencing of the joys of life and the celebration of nature. Significantly, a male buddy couple will star in both cases. *On the Road's* protagonists are young wandering men with a concern for literature and a craving to live new experiences, including those of a sexual kind. And here comes the 'only-reason-for being' of women in this novel-manifesto of the Beat Generation-sex. As it happens with women in Hopper's film, female characters in this novel suffer from the excesses of the male, are abandoned and proposed polygamous relationships, but never included meaningfully in their initiation journeys. Their only role will be that of remaining together in the static realm of the home in the best Western style, thus allowing for full male protagonism.

In addition, whichever the setting of utter degeneration might be (both stories locate a culminating scene for the heroes' excesses in a brothel) and whatever the

origin of the delirium (mainly alcohol in *On the Road* while fashionable LSD and drugs in general in *Easy Rider*), both films overtly present such controversial issues as sex and drugs in a way which would have been unthinkable before their time under the Production Code 'regime'. This code, implemented in the studio system in 1934, was greatly repressive, rejecting the excesses of the Jazz Era and forbidding the depiction on screen of graphic violence and sexual suggestiveness unless severely punished by the film's end, and dictating the 'sanitized' content of US motion pictures for the next twenty years. But for the introduction of the MPAA's rating systems in 1968, *Easy Rider*'s pioneering permissiveness regarding the graphic representation of sex and violence would not have proved possible. Unlike the Production Code, this system did not proscribe the content of films but merely categorized them according to their appropriateness for young viewers, hence allowing for sexuality to be treated with a maturity and realism unprecedented on the American screen. This innovative change in the film industry's conditions of the time coincided with a critical historical period in the U.S.A. After the Cold War the Golden age of political and cultural upheavals would be the sixties. Some illustrations of the former included the black and the women's liberation movements, the civil rights and youth activism, but especially the social distress resulting from the US involvement in 'The War', which for this generation referred to the Vietnam War rather than the II World War. Barbara Klinger explains this time of change in "The Road to Dystopia":

*While the Cold War continued to provide the incentive for nationalistic sentiments stressing diversity, unity, and democracy throughout the 1960s, by the end of that decade massive civil unrest in the form of the Vietnam War protest, the radical youth movement, race riots, and the black liberation movement, as well as the assassination of political figures such as Malcom X, Robert and John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, dramatically enhanced the instabilities of the Cold War era by questioning the democratic claims that had traditionally served as the basis of national identity. (1997:185).*

After the Beat Generation had changed the tone of the American post-war culture and the mid 60s 'flower-power' had taken their message over, inheriting Jack Kerouack's piece of writing as a priceless manifesto, their new emblem to worship now could be no other than Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*. This film was made at a turning point in US film history when Hollywood recruited such directors from the rival medium as Robert Altman, Arthur Penn or Sam Peckinpah in an attempt to attract members of the first 'TV Generation' into movie theatres. These directors' unprecedented exploitation of political and social consciousness in such films as Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968), Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Altman's *M.A.S.H.* (1970) and Hopper's *Easy Rider*, attracted the youth market to cinemas in record numbers. Hopper's road feature's first triumph was its presentation of an essential trait shared by U.S. Road Movies in general:

*A Road Movie provides a ready space for explorations of the tensions and crises of the historical moment during which it is being produced. Key moments in the history of the Road Movie tend to come in periods of upheaval and dislocation, such as the Great Depression, or*

*in periods whose dominant ideologies generate fantasies of escape and opposition, as in the late 1960s (Cohan and Hark 1997:2).*

Therefore, although at first sight it might come as a surprise that the story of two alienated motorcyclists 'chucking it all' and setting off on a mad discovery of life's excesses should achieve such incredible success, it would exactly be this potential for presenting and questioning the nation's culture and identity that would turn Hopper's film into a generational landmark: 'because *Easy Rider* synthesized so many mainstays of 1960's youth and popular cultures it had more than a fair chance of being immortalised by those whose interests it seemed to represent' (Klinger 1997:180). The film's faithful depiction of the reality of its time which awakened the current rebellious spirit of the young generation of the 1960s, together with the country's traditional allure of the road resulted in its overwhelming success. This reigning spirit among Americans is clearly explained by Michael Atkinson:

*Come the 60s, the reckless joyride became the most authentic, expressive and rowdiest way for a generation of self-exploring Americans to redefine their territory and thumb their noses at their parents (1994:17).*

Hence, as Rex Reed remarks: 'by taking up where Kerouack and Lawrence Lypton and all the Holy Barbarians left off, Fonda and Hopper have produced the definitive youth odyssey of the 1960s' (1971:233). But the film did not only achieve financial profit (it returned \$50,000,000 on a \$375,000 investment which led producers to saturate the market with low budget youth culture movies, only a few of which attained limited distinction). Its undeniable popularity made it 'a sign of its times', to be seen not only in its new coinage in the English Language denoting:

*(esp. U.S.) Someone who wanders from place to place (esp. on a motorbike) without settling and trying to lead an uninvolved life; sb. who takes advantage of what society, a situation, etc. offers but without contributing himself (Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English 1983).*

but also in 'George Bush's 1988 proudly noting that the US had made a successful recovery from the excesses of the 'Easy Rider' society' (Klinger 1997:179).

To conclude: after analysing the two main influences in an archetypal early Road Movie like Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, we first of all reach the conclusion that this film does not only share with the Western its travel narrative. Mobility, action and maleness are common to both Western and early Road Movie heroes. They unquestionably portray full male protagonists showing an eagerness to move whereas women remain in secondary roles either as weak plot-inducers in romantic heterosexual couples (in Westerns and the early Road Movies of the 40s and 50s) or as sexual-tools-of-the-trade of the male (in Road Movies from the late 60s onwards). Apart from maleness, the portrayal of the stereotypical hero includes a certain nationalistic content in both cases. However, this patriotism representing US national identity is clearly negative in *Easy Rider*, since it concentrates on the depiction of a highly biased society in which the American dream of hope and freedom in a new West is totally shattered. Unlike Westerns, this film's brutal ending illustrates patriarchy's punishment for the protagonists' conscious refusal to become

regular citizens and therefore, presents escape and freedom as a mere temporary illusion. This revolutionary element of detachment from patriarchal society's dictum was already present in Jack Kerouack's *On the Road*. *Easy Rider* has inherited this novel's extreme, ludicrous exploitation of the joys of life through the intense experiences that the road offers, namely those excesses involving sex, drugs and alcohol. Wyatt and Billy emulate Jack and Dean's celebration of nature, their search for the freedom symbolised by the American vast extensions of desert landscape, fleeing from unfulfilling humdrum existences happily integrated in a traditional US American community. Furthermore, Hopper's film follows *On the Road's* presence of the male buddy couple, thus keeping the Western's prevailing maleness.

In addition, cultural and historical factors, together with the state of affairs of the film industry in the turning point between 1967 and 1969 also contributed to the film's great success. The introduction of the MPAA's rating system allowed for an unprecedented revolutionary depiction of graphic scenes of sex and violence while the reigning social unrest facilitated the representation of a negative and controversial view of American patriarchal society through the characteristic realism of the genre.

All in all, *Easy Rider* constitutes a canny but pessimistic exploitation of the sociocultural prevailing mood, its greatest success being its ability to represent realistically the counterculture of its time which rejected established traditional values.

## Bibliographical References

- ATKINSON, Michael 1994. "Crossing the Frontiers". *Sight and Sound*. Vol. 4, Issue 1, 14-18.
- COHAN, Steve and HARK, Ina Rae, eds. 1997. *The Road Movie Book*. London & New York: Routledge.
- CAMPBELL, Joseph 1993. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. London: Fontana Press.
- CUETO, Juan 1995. "Road Movies". *Cinemanía* 11, 130-133.
- EL PAÍS 1995. "La Nueva América: 1950-1965, y la Cultura Beat". *Babelia* 212, 6-9.
- HARK, Ina Rae 1997. "Fear of Flying". In Cohan and Hark, eds., 204-229.
- KEROUACK, Jack 1986 (1957). *On the Road*. New York: Penguin.
- KLINGER, Barbara 1997. "The Road to Dystopia". In Cohan and Hark, eds., 179-203.
- MALTIN, Leonard 2000. *2000 Movie and Video Guide*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* 1983. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- REED, Rex 1971. *Easy Rider. Big Screen, Little Screen*. New York: Mac Millan.
- ROBERTS, Shari 1997. "Western Meets Eastwood". In Cohan and Hark, eds., 45-69.
- ROWE KARYLN, Kathleen 1998. "Allison Anders's *Gas Food Lodging*: Independent Cinema and the New Romance". In Evans P. W. and Deleyto, C., eds. *Terms of*



*Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*. Edinburgh U.P., 168-187.

ABSTRACT

This paper concentrates on the basic traits of an archetypal early Road Movie like Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*. The contrastive analysis of the genre's major influences: the Western and the Beat Generation's philosophy as seen through Jack Kerouack's *On the Road*, together with the study of some influential cultural and historical factors will clarify *Easy Rider's* condition as a male Road Movie, its harsh criticism on US patriarchal society, its fascination with the depiction of sex and violence but especially, its overwhelming success.

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta las características fundamentales de una película de carretera temprana pero emblemática como es *Easy Rider* de Dennis Hopper. El análisis comparativo de las principales influencias del género: el 'Western' y la filosofía 'Beat' a través de *On the Road* de Jack Kerouack, junto con un estudio de los factores históricos y culturales aclarará los orígenes de la naturaleza predominantemente masculina de esta película, su dura crítica contra la sociedad patriarcal norteamericana, su fascinación por las escenas de sexo y violencia, etc., pero sobre todo, explicará su indiscutible éxito.