

Film and Photo: The Road and the City in Pop Culture

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According to Richard Sennett, true public space is where we confront difference, where we territorialize position, where heterogeneity is the rule rather than the exception. In this nation of fractured cities, racial animosity and self-prioritization, the road might be considered America's only truly public space. The largest built work in the history of the US, today there are 56 miles of roadway for every single man, woman, and child, 770 cars for every 1000 citizens.¹ Yet, the road is also an institution of mythology that holds within it the legacy of Steinbeck and the lunacy of O.J. Simpson, the death of James Dean and the birth of NASA. It is a paradox – blamed for both inner city destruction and exurban sprawl, yet also the protagonist for the dreams of numerous photographers, filmmakers, and authors as well as every cross-country driver who sets out on Eisenhower's 42,500 mile network in search of some version of introspection, communion or autonomy.

This paper proposes that the understanding of the road as an evolving public space might be analyzed through select pairs of iconic visual artists



Dorothea Lange, *U.S. 54 in Southern New Mexico*, 1938

and authors. This began with an interest in two strikingly similar road images by Robert Frank and Dorothea Lange – both shimmering black and white lines of road, stretching to the infinite horizon towards a seemingly better future. Separated by twenty years, however, the Lange image is a depression-era expression of the second wave of western migration ala Steinbeck and *Grapes of Wrath*, whereas the Frank image is the frame for post-World War II suburban rebellion ala Kerouac and *On the Road*. Though the images are visually and spatially similar, these pairs pose very different questions about the road as public space in America. As does *Easy Rider* – the road film that first establishes the road as a place of occupation for the permanently marginalized and a place of conflict between the marginalized and the mainstream – important aspects in the evaluation of what 'public' truly means.

Spanning the post-Vietnam era following *Easy Rider* all the way to the new millennium, a complicated collaboration results in the final pairing of *Crash* and *Crash*. The J. G. Ballard text and Cronenberg film of the same name create together a disturbing vision of the road as a stage for confronting the homogeneity of suburban existence. These visual/textual pairs explore the transition as the road goes from epic and exterior to paranoid and interior, as the country goes from majestic and agrarian to post-industrial and introverted.

THE EVOLUTION OF QUEST

The road in literature and film is often tied to its role as the symbol of quest. In the simplest works, moral risk lurks just beyond the roadside, and the strength of the subject to continue undeterred along the road to redemption is the key to sal-

vation. From the classical Christian perspective, *Pilgrim's Progress* is the most direct example; it clearly lays out the path of redemption from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City as a symbolic journey along the 'King's highway'. Christian, the book's protagonist, needs only to continue in motion and avoid distraction to ultimately reach salvation. His earliest transgression is that of immobility – falling asleep when he should have continued on – resulting in the temporary loss of his sacred scroll, his ticket into the promised land. When shifting this model to its earliest filmic interpretations, the role of Christian often transcends the quest of the individual to represent the transformation of a people. Says Bennet Schaber in his essay 'Hitler Can't Keep 'Em that Long':

[F]or the prewar road film, this dialectic is given explicitly within the rhetoric of the Biblical Exodus: the Walls of Jericho tumble in *It Happened One Night*, the Colorado River is transformed into the Jordan when the Joads cross into Canaan – California in *The Grapes of Wrath*... Hence the story, the fable of a few finite lives to and for whom 'it happened...,' links itself to the infinity of the people, the universal project of its emancipation.²

In these films, the quest is one of redemption and the road is a temporary condition, a transitional state from despair to salvation. Here the road plays host to a populace *made* marginal by the turning of their circumstance, rather than the choosing of their ideology. The one point perspective of the road is assumed to end at the intersection with the golden horizon, at a promise clearly fulfilled.

Jack Kerouac's quest in *On the Road* wraps up into a tight literary ball all the angst and joy of the post-World War Two (but pre-Vietnam era) exploding youthful nomad and his search for the extremes of the perfect love, the perfect adventure, the perfect authentic experience all achieved through the perfect road trip. Kerouac, Sal, and Dean are certainly believers in that particular quest, but rather than the one-point perspective version culminating in a singular revelation, it is a back and forth and back and forth searching for an elusive philosophical truth that inevitably leads to further uncertainties – a series of lines forever crossing. The destination then is but a pause rather than a fulfillment, and the emphasis of the quest here shifts from the end of the line to the line itself.

The position of Kerouac's novel in the transformation of the road's symbolic status is critical. Capturing a post-war restlessness with the newly emerging conformist suburban ethic, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty together span the space between Schaber's stories of 'exodus' and those of 'apocalypse'.³ Sal is the college boy, temporarily on leave from his 'normal' life to taste the liberating space of the road. Dean, though, is *of* the road – a permanently restless figure gathering Sal and a host of others in a storm cloud of liberating philosophical energy and instability. Dean prefigures the emerging questions of the new road economy: marginalization as a permanent state of existence; resulting from dissatisfaction with the conservative social expectations of domesticity and the restrictive limitations of authority; expressed through experimentation (though masked still in the 1950s) with sexuality and mind alteration; and speed as its own liberating force.

In 1956, the year before *On the Road* was published, American President Dwight D. Eisenhower passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act that would lead to the construction in the following decades of his integrated cross-country system of high-speed roads. Not the intimately scaled textured rural roads of Steinbeck, or the 'holy white line' of Kerouac, these roads were based on Hitler's autobahns and sold to the American public as a necessity for war preparations. The formalization of a nation-wide interstate network is one factor that contributed to the loss of a road public. In the pre-war mentality, to be on the road was to be in the presence of the people, whereas after the 1950s the road held within it brand new combinations of opportunity and fear, scale and occupation.⁴ In its origins, the interstate system held an ancient dilemma – on the one hand, it opened possibilities of tourism, consumerism, and commuting not previously available to the average American, while on the other fueling a cold war paranoia supported by such terms as 'mobilization' and 'evacuation'.

Dennis Hopper picks up on these emergent threads of paranoia, big business, and authority and creates in *Easy Rider* the road film that shifts the quest and stretches the limits of marginality present on the road. Where Kerouac's Dean is a version of an innocent wanderer, occupying the periphery of society through his then non-traditional ideas of family and finance, Wyatt and

Billy are anti-authority outlaws, using the freedom and marginality of the road as a space of individual experimentation through long-term occupation. Rather than riding west, to some version of a promised land, they are leaving the west and heading south – fleeing the exodus for the apocalypse. Yet their journey – a further shift of significance from the emphasis on termination to the emphasis on line – takes them through a kind of smorgasbord of social and moral options, all representing the widening zone of the marginal character, all rejecting what would have been considered mainstream living.⁵

Easy Rider mirrors a thread in American culture that had gone beyond restlessness to outright rejection. The questions Dean Moriarty had pre-figured for a generation were reshaped to be those of self and identity through the psychic ramblings of Billy and non-committal openness of Wyatt. George Hanson's merciless beating summons a presence of evil not previously seen on the road, that of violent and aggressive hatred of the other. This hatred shadows the extent of their journey, transforming the road into a kind of battleground between the freedom they hope to represent and the menace of repression and discrimination that seems to await in various guises at every turn. Wyatt's and Billy's increasing alienation in the presence of this newly menacing road turns dystopic and the finale's annihilation (of character and of quest) truncates this line with a violent slice.

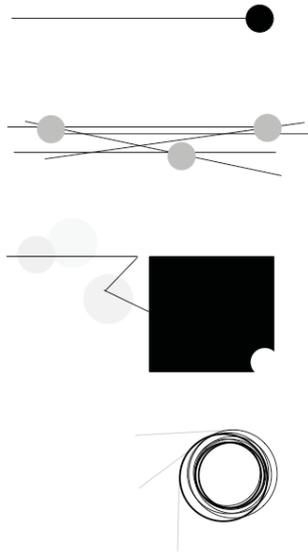
Throughout this lineage, the road itself emerges with a greater presence. The Joads were on the road in temporary respite, following its trajectory in search of transcendence through a simple honest living and a solid domesticity, but in no way merging with its presence. Kerouac's characters are clearly *of* the road, particularly Dean, as he becomes it, then extracts himself from it, only to rejoin it – and resist it – again and again with a kind of wild addiction. Wyatt and Billy choose the rebellious life and in that way choose the road and their full-time marginal status as a way of anti-establishment existence. Their long-term presence symbolizes an affront to the authority figures of law and the homogeneity of the suburban status quo (as well as southern discrimination) and erupts in a conflict where the latter's attempt to greedily reclaim the 'public' road results in an apocalyptic sequence that situates the presence

of evil as a character to contend with in this democratic space.

In each of the prior works, the marginal space of the road is progressively expanding, but in *Crash* it implodes – both spatially and morally – and the marginal space, previously shared, inverts from edge to center. The road in *Crash* is not only the site, but the co-protagonist with the automobile; even the activities that do not take place literally on the road are aspects of the road refigured. For example, James's and Catherine's apartment is but an extension of the freeway edge where the balcony with traffic view is primary and the bed is a poor substitute for the backseat; the airport is the liminal space between the ground-road and the sky-road; the parking deck is simply the road on pause. Rather than an exploration of the shared space between marginal and mainstream of the previous examples, *Crash* exists in the stretched boundary of a new gray area; there is no public here – the characters and their road exist entirely in this introverted and dangerous realm of self-indulgence.

Unlike the quests stretching for the horizon, Cronenberg's view of the road is never perspectival, but exists in one of three two-dimensional versions – the aerial view as sprawling, pulsing pattern; the side view, where the line of the road supports and extends the speeding projectile blur of the automobile; and the night time view, where the road (like the car and the body) is seen as glittering, splintered, and fragmented.

If we represent the quest of the Steinbeck/Lange road as a thin line, a one point perspective leading to a single destination, then the Frank/Kerouac road would be a thickened series of lines (the journey gaining significance over the destination), criss-crossing with only minor emphasis on the end points. The Hopper road is an erasure, a reoccupation of the line west in reverse which results in a deep groove, finally puncturing the page. The *Crash* quest, however, is a circle. Their road protagonist is literally the ring road on the edge of the city, the barrier that demarcates the zone of the characters' centered marginality. But it is also a narrative and a psychical circle – a quest which repeats upon itself *ad nauseum* until, ideally, the character is tossed from the orbit like a jettisoned projectile into immortal death. *Crash*



is an exercise in perverse repeat and re-invention – how many ways can the body and the car collide, the husband and wife fail to communicate, the prostitute pleasure the Christ figure? Ballard's lists of combinations are lyrical yet endless.

The numbness of *Crash's* primary characters is often attributed to the homogenous suburban consumer society of their context, the automobile being a prime object in this materialistic system. Ballard certainly supports that hypothesis in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, a series of lists that makes all things part of the vast market economy – particularly people. Fame is people made culturally consumable, and the death of fame – the accidents of James Dean and Jayne Mansfield in particular – are central to Vaughn's project which ideally culminates in Elizabeth Taylor's car crash death orchestrated as a result of impact with his own convertible Lincoln. The killing of fame is either the killing of consumerism, or its most drastic and blatant exploitation.

In each case, the changing nature of the road quest and the relationship between the marginal and the mainstream within the public space of the road reflect the evolving urban/suburban settlement patterns of twentieth century America. Dorothea Lange's direct documentary images present a land-based occupation at risk due to unanticipated environmental shifts and the newly emerging

technologies of the tractor, government aid programs, and the great numbers of workers these combined 'modernizations' phased out of farming. This *American Exodus* (as the noted book of her works is titled) displaced not only a population, but with the coming of the second world war, an ideology of family agrarianism and homesteading that became generally obsolete. By the time Jack Kerouac pens the introduction for Robert Frank's *The Americans* in 1958, we are clearly a society entrenched in the prospects of a new American Dream. The completion of the first Levittown also occurs in 1958, and by 1960 twenty million Americans have abandoned their previous rural or urban lives for that of the suburbs. The windshield as Frank's recurring frame anticipates that future, as does the slightly nostalgic look down that New Mexico highway. Where Lange's image captures the full width of the road and the horizon as a destination, Frank has stepped slightly to the right of the center line and off in the distance is the mad force of the full auto age on its way to confront us. The hallucinogenic emotional roller coaster that pervades *Easy Rider* translates both the discontent of the Vietnam entanglement and the confusion of 'progress' that invaded under the guise of 'urban renewal' in the cities of the 1970's. New Orleans, which features prominently in the film, is a vision of both historical wistfulness and diverse urban decadence, a glorification, though not all optimistic, opposite the kind of moral propositioning that ultimately destroyed so much inner city fabric and left a blankness not unlike the sanitized road at the film's end. *Crash* is a kind of Stepford Wives gone wild for the turn of the millennium, a response to the inauthentic, over-commercialized, and ragingly capitalistic options of the 1980's and 90's. Their refusal to submit to an anesthetized life requires the characters to create an intensified urbanity at the core of the suburban condition, an option that, though not sexually-based, seems to be emerging somewhat in the active subcultures of dense suburban immigrant communities.

It's the sense of touch.

Any real city you walk, you know?

You brush past people, people bump into you. In LA, nobody touches you.

We're always behind this metal and glass.

It's the sense of touch. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other just so we can feel something.

Crash, Paul Haggis

What is the shape of the twenty-first century city and how is its symbolic quest emerging in the popular culture of film and photography? The 2005 version of *Crash*, unrelated to the Cronenberg or Ballard original, shows the contemporary quest as a knot of entangled diversity, conflict, and reluctant interdependence. It begins in trauma, then separates, segregates, moves backwards in time to dissect us from each other. In this *Crash*, the car is a fought over symbol and the road a contested space. In this city, there is no single road of quest, but an interlocking grid, intersections of risks and, hopefully, rewards. We are looking to be saved from the world of the former *Crash* and its vacant, irrepressible variations; this *Crash* desperately and painfully seeks security, sanity, humanity.

This particular quest has resulted in two antithetical (and not particularly optimistic) options – one, the militarized, privatized, and segregated city as explored in the numerous case studies of Michael Sorkin's edited volume, *Variations on a Theme Park*; two, the sanitized, white-washed, and isolated suburb of New Urbanist fame as showcased in *The Truman Show*. What this third *Crash* reminds us, and what writers like Mike Davis and Michael Sorkin reinforce, is that the road quest of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century has forked, forcibly segregating the quests of the mainstream and the marginalized. For many left on the fringes of the newly desirable center city or isolated outside the economic walls of the far out fake town, their branch of the road quest is becoming more and more of a tragic dead end.

Yet, popular culture continues to respond to the changing landscape through the reproduction of the quest as a postmodern spatial and social construct. Films like *Babel* cross cultural, economic, racial, and territorial boundaries through the road trip archetype. And *Little Miss Sunshine* is nothing if not representative of the idea that the quest is still not reserved for the sane, the straight, or even the living. In both films, the multiplicity of actors and their alternative quests continue to add diverging and converging lanes to the space on the road devoted to the non-mainstream. Catherine Opie's photographic work is of particular note as well. Along with her portraits of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender couples, she is famous also for her images of highways. These

hazy, ethereal, beautiful silhouette portraits of urban identity ask again the question of the role of the road in the city – both as literal form and symbolic figure. Maybe this is the entry for further inquiry, and even for urban action.

The symbols of our collective identity are worth dissecting. As they are appropriated in the visual and textual products of our popular culture they both reflect our values and reshape them. As we read back who we are, we either see ourselves, or resist the identities presented to us, or a little of both. In regards to the evolving public space of the road, maybe it is time to reimagine who we are as drivers, both collective and individual, both real and symbolic. How and why we agree to participate in the massive social project of the road is rarely if ever studied when considering the way we participate in the massive social project that is the city. But we do participate, in greater numbers than ever before, and it works, generally, against the better logic of a million simultaneously and perpetually speeding motion machines. We can hope that our co-existence on the road may serve as a model for our co-existence in the city and that the multitude of quests, no matter how divergent, can come together, lane by speeding lane, in a respectful and gloriously messy combination of trajectories.

ENDNOTES

1. data according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics database, 2002, <http://www.transtats.bts.gov/>, 18 May, 2005.
2. Bennet Schaber. 'Hitler Can't Keep 'Em that Long', in *The Road Movie Book*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 23.
3. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds. *The Road Movie Book* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 6.
4. Schaber, 19.
5. Lee Hill. *Easy Rider*, (London: bfi publishing, 1996), p. 46.