

BEYOND THE VANISHING POINT: SPACE, LANDSCAPE, AND SHIFTING
IDEOLOGIES FROM THE WESTERN TO THE ROAD MOVIE

By

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From the early Western to the contemporary road movie, *Beyond the Vanishing Point* investigates the use of space and landscape within the two genres, marking the ideological shifts from the early Western to the late road movie. By analyzing the Western's three foundational myths, (1) manifest destiny, (2) domestication of an unpopulated and untamed frontier, and (3) the justification of the genocidal Indian Wars of the 19th century, this study charts how the post-1968 Western and the American road movie work to challenge and subvert these myths. Additionally, the road as narrative device is examined outside of the two genres, providing a comparative analysis between the road's narrative use in the Western, the road movie, and beyond. Films central to this study include (in chronological order): Charles Barton's *Wagon Wheels* (1934), Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948), Anthony Mann's *Winchester '73* (1950), Anthony Mann's *Bend of the River* (1952), Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968), Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), and Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006).

CHAPTER 1 POINTS OF DEPARTURE

The American road movie's antecedents might well be traced to the literary traditions of the voyage narrative, "which in turn often reflects an ideology of expansionism and imperialism... best summed up by the term 'manifest destiny.'" (Laderman 41) American literary traditions from Mark Twain and Henry David Thoreau to John Steinbeck and Jack Kerouac evidence early versions of the road novel, a genre only one step removed from its celluloid counterpart. As André Bazin writes, "the filmmaker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, at last, the equal of the novelist." (56) *Huckleberry Finn* and *On the Road* provide obvious foundations for the American road movie and travel (or empire) narratives persist throughout the American experience.

On the Road nevertheless perpetuates a western travel/frontier literary tradition... as a mode for critical social observation but also for conquest. In other words, *On the Road's* idealism becomes haunted by the very norms the followers of the book sought to alter. (Laderman 42)

The inescapability of industrialization becomes a concern for many American authors of the 19th and 20th centuries. Thoreau writes in *Walden*, "the whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard..." (105) and while he questions the implications of empire, he just as often ventures into town for the amenities it provides him.¹ Similarly, in Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), it's no longer the sounds but the very locomotives themselves that prove inescapable as they invade the film's frame.

¹Thoreau was reluctant to admit this fact in *Walden*.

As the twin protagonists trace their route across the continental U.S., the train repeatedly penetrates the landscapes and cityscapes they encounter.

The narratives that repeat throughout the American road movie echo Thoreau's concerns. Protagonists in Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969), Richard Safarian's *Vanishing Point* (1971), Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), and Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (1991) attempt escape from the confines of modern society, only to end in annihilation. As the driver (James Taylor) in *Two-Lane* asserts, "you can never go fast enough." These road films signal an ideological shift within American culture, where the dominant American ideologies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries seem to give way to the realities of empire, industrialization, and mass consumption. The road movie as genre provides a space for critical response to these dominant ideologies.

While Thoreau and his celluloid successors may have been critical of American industrialization and empire, the first "road movies," collectively referred to as Westerns, ideologically conform to notions of American expansionism, the domestication of the frontier, and the genocidal tendencies inextricably linked to both. That these first road movies often lacked roads only meant the on-screen characters had to forge them on their own, with wagon trains and fierce determinism their primary tools.

The Western's Foundational Myths

This study works from the premise that the road movie acts as a direct extension of the Western, a reflection on its landscapes and open spaces, its character "duels," its "taming of the wild frontier," problematizing the foundational myths the Western hoists itself upon. These two uniquely American genres, by the very nature of their settings and landscapes, implicitly address fundamental elements within American culture. By

either mythologizing or confronting “the land of open spaces,” both genres situate themselves within the same physical (and political) space.

This study argues that the American road movie generally works in counterpoint to the early American Western, subverting the Western’s ideological elements while retaining many of its aesthetic qualities. The landscapes of the American west and the visual representation of space become important parallels between the Western and the road movie. Suggesting a “u-turn” as metaphor for the two genres seems appropriate, where the road movie plays out on the same road, with the same landscapes, but in a decidedly different ideological direction—a shift reflected in the road movie’s inversion of the early Western’s east-to-west movement. But where the early Western pushes westward to uncharted territories, the road movie’s typical easterly movement covers terrain which has been thoroughly mapped, suggesting the inescapability of empire.

The American road movie as genre materializes as a response to certain tendencies within both standardized Hollywood filmmaking practices and the dominant ideologies of the early and mid 20th century. While this shift occurs over an extended period of time, this study suggests John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* (1968) and the larger social-political framework of the Vietnam War as an ideological point of rupture, where dominant American filmmaking practices shift in significant ways.

An investigation of the early Western suggests that the road movie’s narrative and visual patterns generally work in counterpoint to the early Western, specifically in terms of narrative structuring, certain visual motifs, and the privileging of the American landscape over interior or urban spaces. The early and sustained popularity of the Western through the first half of the 20th century only seems to cement its status as a

genre that uniquely resonated with the dominant ideologies of their contemporary audiences.

The mass popularity and commercial viability of the Western arises early on in the cinema's history and continually proves itself as a genre capable of mass appeal.

By 1910, 20 percent of American pictures were westerns... American producers had found a type of film they could call their own, a truly national genre which proved a continuing hit with the public and for which foreign imports could not substitute. (Buscombe, 88)

Part of the irreproducibility of the Western certainly stems from its uniquely American landscapes which could not be easily recreated outside of the United States. As Jean Mottet asserts, "location is not some undifferentiated and insignificant stretch of land, subjected to the vagaries of sheer indifference. Instead, it represents itself as the disclosure of a specific form of landscape." (65) However, the earliest Westerns were actually shot in the east and the late "Spaghetti Westerns" in Europe, suggesting the interchangeability of the "Western" landscape.

The ideologies which inform the early Western are perhaps more "American" than its landscapes—spaces that signify not only American culture but also implicitly acknowledge the removal of the Native Americans who inhabited these spaces. The foundational myths of the early Western directly reflect the dominant ideologies of late 19th and early 20th century American culture, and the Western provides the framework for further popularizing these ideologies. The Western as genre comes to be defined not by its landscapes but the narrative and ideological elements which these films seem to share. The early Western's foundational myths can be broken down into three specific categories: (1) manifest destiny and its complex relationship with various forms of

empire, (2) domestication of an unpopulated and untamed frontier, and (3) the justification of the genocidal Indian Wars of the 19th century.

The Western has perhaps done more than any other genre or artistic form to entrench key foundational myths into the American ethos. For example, D.W. Griffith's *The Massacre* (1912) and *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (1913) incorporate all three of the Western's foundational myths into a single narrative. *The Massacre*'s protagonists marry and have a child (the importance of domestic life), head out west (manifest destiny) and the wife and child become the only survivors of an Indian attack by taking shelter beneath the mass of dead bodies (justification of genocide against an inherently evil enemy). These foundational myths proliferate throughout the Western and remain virtually unchecked for more than half a century.

Defining the American Road Movie

A cinema without roads could hardly have existed in the 20th century and beyond. The cinema's first images prefigure the modern roadway, with the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895) marking the first in a long line of films that focus on the (rail)road. This early film provides both the foundational myth for the cinema—the notion that spectators were truly alarmed by the coming train and escaped from the theatre—and prefigures the dangers that the road would come to signify in the cinema. As the following press report from the first Lumière show in Britain illustrates, “in common with most of the people in the front rows of the stalls, I shift uneasily in my seat and think of railway accidents.” (Christie 15)

The railroad, and its successor, the modern roadway, share a long cinematic history of creating paranoiac spaces that work toward alienating individuals from their environment. Such is the nature of roads; they invade spaces, lay the literal groundwork

for commerce, travel, and empire, and ultimately destroy the landscapes they tread upon. Where the roadway condenses time and space by providing a conduit for accelerated travel, it also allows for the homogenization of the landscapes it endlessly bisects. This post-empire landscape becomes the foundation the American road movie ultimately emerges from.

Films set within U.S. territories involving one or more characters traversing American roads and highways can be considered “American road movies.” By this simple and inclusive definition, it becomes possible to think of these films as existing in dialogue with each other and as part of a uniquely American genre. And while the Western exists as a genre confined to the realm of fiction, it seems possible to at least consider non-fiction films within the American road movie genre. While Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1968), and Monte Hellman’s *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) offer archetypal examples of American road movies, Bill Brown’s experimental essay film, *The Other Side* (2008) and Harrod Blank’s documentaries, *Wild Wheels* (1992) and *Automorphosis* (2008) seem intent on exploring American landscapes in similar ways. John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), Jules Dassin’s film noir, *Thieves Highway* (1949), and Wim Wender’s *Paris, Texas* (1984) are less apparent examples of American road movies, but no less relevant, since these films not only involve characters traversing across American landscapes, but also confront the foundational myths firmly embedded in the early Western.

As is the case with Dassin’s *Thieves Highway*, certain genre films, from film-noir and gangster films to romantic comedies might also be considered as road movies. Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934), Edward G. Ulmer’s *Detour* (1945) and

Arthur Penn's *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967) make interesting intersections with myriad American landscapes that become central to the more explicitly charged American road movies like *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane*. It becomes useful to consider films such as Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1971), John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1975) as road movies that substitute roadways with rivers, functioning in ways that parallel both the Western and the American road movie.

Charting a Course

This study works in two primary ways: (1) it generally attempts to work chronologically from the early Western to the road movies that follow in order to chart the ways in which certain visual and narrative patterns evolve over the 20th century. By focusing on key films within the two genres, certain patterns emerge and this methodology attempts to analyze both their formal and ideological significance. (2) By analyzing films firmly outside of the Western and road movie genres, and from a variety of time periods and national cinemas, certain tendencies become evident, specifically how the road is utilized as a narrative device and a visual element within dominant filmmaking practices.

In Section Two, *The Western and Empire: Wagon Wheels* (1934), an analysis of Charles Barton's *Wagon Wheels* presents all three of the Western's foundational myths within a single narrative (manifest destiny, domestication of the frontier, and justification of the American Indian Wars). *Wagon Wheels* utilizes many of the visual motifs and narrative devices that come to define the early Western, and this section lays the groundwork for later sections on the road movie.

In Section Three, *Road Markers & U-Turns: mapping out the Western and the road movie*, Westerns such as Howard Hawk's *Red River* (1948) and Anthony Mann's *Bend of the River* (1952) offer structural similarities to their earlier counterparts and analyses of scenes from these films illustrated how space gets utilized to achieve certain ideological ends within the genre. Later Westerns such as Nickolas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) and John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) begin to push the genre in directions that signal the contemporary American road movie and its subversion of the early Western's foundational myths. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* usher in the era of the American road movie while reflecting on their roots in the gangster film and the Western, respectively.

Section Two and Three of this study focus on the early Western, mapping out the genre's foundational myths before linking them to the Westerns of the 1950's and 60's and the subsequent American road movies that ultimately subvert these myths. With respect to the Western, this study works toward making theoretical connections between the Western and the American road movie, intent on investigating the unique ways in which these American genres operate, and ultimately come to represent the dominant ideologies of their time.

Section Four, *Dead Ends: all roads lead to your worst nightmares*, examines films firmly outside of the Western and road movie genres in order to investigate the role of the road as a narrative device within a larger network of filmmaking practices and time periods. The road generally provides a paranoiac space where its travelers find themselves in increasingly dangerous situations. Alfred Hitchcock's, *Psycho* (1960), and

F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) provide archetypal and cross-genre examples of the road as conduit toward impending doom and annihilation.

Rivers replace roadways in Werner Herzog's *Aguirre; Wrath of God* (1971) and John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972); though as a narrative device, rivers remain firmly entrenched within the road-to-annihilation paradigm. By examining films firmly outside of the road movie genre, certain cross-genre visual motifs and narrative elements become evident. As iconography represented across multiple genres, the road carries certain meanings that function beyond the framework of a single genre.

Section Five, *(Birth) Canals: migration, and dystopia in Alfonso Cuarón's Children of Men* (2006), offers a counterpoint to the road-to-annihilation, where a dystopian world—and the road its protagonists travel upon—ends in the possibility of utopian hopes for the future of humanity. The road in *Children* functions as spatial allegory for the womb, and characters overcome the dangers of the roadway-as-birth-canal in order to reach the ocean—a space freed from the confines of landscapes, cityscapes, and roadways.

Section Six, *Head on Collisions: analysis of the duel within the two genres* investigates the role of the duel within both the Western and the road movie. The Western utilizes two kinds of duel, where characters either attempt to kill or injure each other through an annihilation duel, or prove their superior gunplay skills through a competitive but less dangerous prowess duel. The road movie often utilizes the cross-country race as a spatial representation of the Western's gun duel, where a central character pits himself against another racer, or against society itself.

Both prowess and the threat of annihilation become important elements within the road movie's race-duels, with characters who must exhibit exceptional skill behind the wheel in order to escape or outrun an opponent. The race-duel often pits the central character or characters against society itself, but the relative strength of society and weakness of the individual often results in annihilation for the protagonists.

Section Seven, *Annihilation and the Spatial Sublime in Two-Lane Blacktop (1971)*, offers close analyses from a number of scenes in Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971). As a counterpoint to James Barton's *Wagon Wheels*, *Two-Lane* utilizes a number of key elements that come to define the road movie and subvert the foundational myths explored in Sections Two and Three. *Two-Lane* offers an archetypal example of the American road movie and its final sequence functions as metonym for the entire genre—simultaneously confronting notions of American empire and westward expansion, domesticity and homesteading (stasis), while also utilizing (or adapting) many of the visual motifs so firmly established in the early Western.

CHAPTER 2 THE WESTERN AND EMPIRE: *WAGON WHEELS* (1934)

Based on the Zane Grey novel and a remake of Otto Brower's *Fighting Caravans* (1931), Charles Barton's *Wagon Wheels* (1934) utilizes the three primary foundational myths that define the early Western. This section outlines how these elements function within *Wagon Wheels* and makes connections with later Westerns that operate in parallel ways. This section also explores how the Western's iconography—specifically the open landscape and the wagon wheel—serve important ideological ends by visually emphasizing one or more of the Western's foundational myths. Additionally, *Wagon Wheels* makes an appeal to authenticity by placing its narrative within a specific time and place—a narrative device familiar to the Western genre throughout its history.

The three foundational elements as they pertain to *Wagon Wheels* are: (1) the film opens with a call to empire and manifest destiny. These concerns are explicitly addressed before the wagon train departs for Oregon. (2) The Indian attack on the wagon train as it crosses the river posits the Indians as an extension of the landscape (an extension that must be overcome) and effectively dehumanizes them, thus justifying the genocidal tendencies of American culture. (3) The film's final scene completes the narrative arch, providing domesticity and marriage as a means of transforming the characters from displaced to domesticated—the Western implying a future utopia that never comes to pass.

Claims to Authenticity and Manifest Destiny

The Western often frames its narratives within explicit times and spaces—the effect being one of this is how it was rather than this is one interpretation of how it might have been. By establishing a specific time and space, the genre often makes an implicit

claim towards authenticity, as if the events portrayed in the film—fictional as they may be—could have actually occurred. With the exception of a road-centric film like Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), the film's "precise specification of date and time reinforces the suggestion that what we are about to view is no ordinary fiction," but a visual representation of a world that could be our own. (Rothman 251) The road movie generally inverts the Western's claims to authenticity, relying less on an appeal to real historical moments or places in order to frame its narrative.

An appeal to specific times and spaces functions as a narrative device from the earlier Westerns such as *Wagon Wheels* to later Westerns including Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948) and Anthony Mann's *Winchester '73* (1950). *Red River* opens with a shot of a leather-bound book entitled "Early Tales of Texas." Its opening page frames the narrative in 1851 and provides the details for Thomas Dunson and Nadine Groot's departure from St. Louis to California. Three weeks into the journey, they find themselves "near the northern border of Texas" and the subsequent shot reveals the wagon train, presumably three weeks into the westerly journey, on the Texas border. The wealth of details in the opening sequence all work towards providing a framework which suggests that the narrative which is about to unfold actually occurred. The inscription of the account in the book only further suggests a documented historical account of actual events.

In *Winchester '73*, Dodge City, Kansas provides a historical space complete with the real-life sheriff, Wyatt Earp. The centennial, July 4, 1876, provides an explicit time frame from which the narrative departs. Custer's Last Stand, having occurred only one month prior, acts as an additional historical marker the characters reference throughout

the narrative. The title of the film itself suggests a claim to historicity—the narrative built around the 1873 Winchester rifle, famous as “the gun that won the west.” That the Winchester rifle central to the narrative is the rare “1 of a 1000”, only adds to the film’s claim of authenticity.

Once *Winchester’s* characters venture outside of Dodge City, diegetic space becomes increasingly mythological; the film’s starting point provides a claim to authenticity that wanes as the narrative progresses. The Western often operates within this framework, departing from a point of historical authenticity and ending in the mythologized space of the American west. *Wagon Wheels* is unique in that it opens and closes in historically framed spaces, but the whole of its narrative unfolds within the mythologized space of the American frontier.

Wagon Wheels opens with a close-up of a poster that reads, “James K. Polk for President.” Polk’s one-term presidency clearly frames the narrative in 1844, as westward expansion nears its apex. Polk platform championed westward expansion and his Democratic Party asserted the United States had a “clear and unquestionable” claim to Oregon. This opening shot establishes the core foundational elements for *Wagon Wheels’* narrative, as the settlers heading to Oregon personify the dominant ideology of 1840’s U.S. culture.

From the opening shot of the poster, the camera tracks out and pans right to a man addressing the large crowd: “Oregon, 2000 miles from where we’re standing tonight. A land of new hope and a glorious future for the thousands who will settle there and make it a part of these United States of America.” The crowd cheers. The orator provides a voice for Polk’s presidential campaign, and the cheering crowd confirms the

popularity of his platform. *Wagon Wheel's* opening scene prefigures John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939), with similar ideological effects. As the editors of *Cahiers du Cinema* argue, *Young Mr. Lincoln* opens with a claim to authenticity—introducing Lincoln as the real-life candidate—before fictionalizing the pseudo-historical events that follow. (503-504)

Wagon Wheel's opening dialogue additionally outlines the early Western's archetypal east to west movement, as 2000 miles from Oregon firmly places the characters in a space east of Oregon (they'll be departing from Independence, Missouri). *Wagon Wheels* begins and ends with claims to historicity, though the arch of its narrative functions in the mythologized frontier of the west, where the harsh elements must be overcome by individual ingenuity, Indians must be defeated, and a domestic lifestyle ultimately achieved once the protagonists reach Oregon.

The Wagon Wheel and Landscape

The wagon wheel functions as a visual motif throughout the film (Figure 2-1A), providing a metonym for the wagon train itself, that “circles up” in order to set camp or as a defensive maneuver in the event of Indian attack. Civilization encompasses the space within the enclosed wagon train and the space outside embodies all that is dangerous in an untamed frontier. The wheel, given its inherent purpose, suggests movement and forward progress both for the wagon train and the film's westward-bound protagonists. As the wagon train sets out to Oregon, the erudite Abigail Adams recites, “Oregon bound the tide of humanity sweeps westward. Nothing can stop these wheels rolling, rolling. Our destiny lies with us, out to empire.”

The landscape shots of the wagon train bisecting the landscape project empire both spatially (westward) and temporally (as the wagon train moves toward the

horizon)—the landscape-wagon train composition intimates the wagon-railroad-highway-scapes that become commonplace in future Westerns and road movies (Figure 2-1B). This composition further emphasizes the depth and spatial reach of the American



Figure 2-1. Wagon wheel and wagon train from Charles Barton's *Wagon Wheels* (1934). A) The wagon wheel allows for both spatial and narrative progress. B) The wagon train heads west.

landscape, as the wagon train wanes into the horizon before disappearing at the edge of the frame, suggesting the long journey ahead. As Edward Buscombe asserts:

landscape then becomes an obstacle which has to be overcome... conquest of the terrain is emblematic of the achievement of the individual in overcoming personal trials and is analogous to the wider victory of capital in subjugating nature. (104)

Once the westward movement becomes established, the settlers must overcome the challenges that face them on their journey. But like bad weather or difficult terrain, Indians appear seemingly out of nowhere and at most inopportune moments, threatening the survival of the film's protagonists.

Indian Attack

The Indian threat exists throughout the film's entire narrative and reaches its apex in the film's penultimate scene. As Abigail Adams—who keeps a journal of the westward journey—writes earlier in the narrative (perhaps the evidence needed to recount this

“true” story?), “roving bands of Indians continue to attack us day and night as we toil miserably up the long eastern slope to the Rocky Mountains.” The Indian attack at the river works to justify the genocidal Indian wars not so far removed from the time period when these early Westerns were produced, fulfilling the early Western’s tendency to vilify Native Americans.

As the wagon train begins crossing the river (Figure 2-2A), the presence of the Indians is made evident at the wagon train’s most vulnerable point, midway across the river (Figure 2-2B). The river provides the ideal natural flank for the attacking Indians,



Figure 2-2. Indian attack on the wagon train, *Wagon Wheels* (1934). A) The caravan crosses the river. B) The Indians observe undetected.

preventing the wagon train from easily escaping eastward once they cross the river. As the wagon train “circles up” on the Western bank of the river, the Indians begin their attack. The Indians begin the battle with a clear tactical advantage, having both the element of surprise and an elevated vantage point in their favor. From the elevated position, the Indians wait for the settlers to begin crossing the river, and their descent signals the beginning of the attack. The enclosed wagon train comes to represent “civilization” and to venture outside of the circle means almost certain death at the hands of the uncivilized enemy. During the battle, a woman ventures outside of the

wagon circle only to be rescued by a male settler, who sends her back into the safety of the interior as he battles the attacking Indians.

As the battle unfolds, Abigail refuses to take up arms, only returning fire after her friend is killed in a volley with the attacking Indians. Abigail's character prefigures the journalist in John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968) whose pacifist politics parallel Abigail's. Both characters represent "educated" outliers who refuse warfare against the American Indians and North Vietnamese, respectively, only to take up arms in the heat of battle once their enemy is more fully dehumanized.

One of the settlers yells, "if they get across the river, the whole caravan will be wiped out," rousing the wagon train's lead scout, Clint Belnet (Randolph Scott) to swim back into the river, hatchet into an oil barrel, and ignite the oil from a safe distance. The resulting explosion leaves a black wall of smoke in its wake, preventing the Indian forces from multiple points of attack (Figure 2-3A). With the Indian forces split, the caravan routes the remaining forces only after the Indian chief is killed. The remaining Indians retreat north into the wilderness (Figure 2-3B) and the caravan celebrates



Figure 2-3. The battle at the river, *Wagon Wheels* (1934). A) Oil saves the caravan from annihilation. B) The Indians retreat.

victory. Interestingly, the lifeblood of the automobile (oil) becomes equally necessary for the horse-powered wagon train's survival—the explosion Clint sets off saving the wagon train from likely annihilation.

Domesticity and the Homestead

The wagon train reaches Oregon in the next scene, and the landscape shots of the wagon train bisecting otherwise uninhabitable desert landscapes (Figure 2-4A) gives way to a fertile forest-scape complete with great redwoods. The tall trees suggest an abundance of natural resources for domesticating the frontier and building a homestead (Figure 2-4B).



Figure 2-4. Crossing the mountain and reaching Oregon, *Wagon Wheels* (1934). A) The wagon train reaches Oregon with the Rocky Mountains in the background. B) The wagon train crosses the forest.

The narrative has yet to fulfill its promise of domestication between the unmarried women with the unmarried men—a union that the final scene ultimately provides.

Abigail agrees to marry the illiterate Jim Burch only after he writes her father in Indiana to ask for his approval, and Clint Belnet agrees to marry Nancy Wellington, taking on the fatherly duties for her only child. Just as the film opens in an interior space, safe from the dangers of the frontier, the narrative closes in a similarly safe interior space.

The young boy who has inherited a father forms his hands into a “church and steeple”

suggesting yet another “civilized” interior space and marriage for his mother and newfound father.

Wagon Wheels provides an interesting case study since it utilizes all three of the early Western’s foundational myths within a single narrative. The next section investigates later Westerns, charting the ideological shift from the foundational myths of the early Western to their eventual subversion in the road movie. By investigating the landscapes, spaces, and iconography of the Western, the next section charts how the road movie utilizes these elements in order to achieve its antithetical ideological ends.

CHAPTER 3 ROAD MARKERS & U-TURNS: MAPPING OUT THE WESTERN AND THE ROAD MOVIE

It would be difficult if not impossible to clearly delineate the time periods when certain dominant tendencies begin and end within the Western genre, or to mark the period in film history when the road movie emerges as its own genre. In many ways, the road movie acts a continuation of the Western genre, simply steering certain genre elements into different ideological territory while utilizing many of the Western's key narrative and visual elements. The landscapes largely remain the same; it is the temporal shift from the typical late 1800's Western to the road movie's contemporary setting that affects mise-en-scene. Automobiles stand in for horse and covered wagon. Stick shifts replace six-shooters. Paved highways bisect the same landscapes cow paths once crossed. As the title of this section implies "u-turns" suggest a way of understanding the road movie as genre, continuing along the same road with the same landscapes, but in a different direction. This section suggests key films, or "road markers," where significant or notable shifts occur within the two genres.

Of the three primary foundational myths generally present within the early Western, one or more are often utilized in many subsequent Westerns, from John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) to John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968). Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948) places emphasis on notions of empire, Anthony Mann's *Bend of the River* (1952) focuses on domesticity and future utopia, and virtually all Westerns before Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) portray Native American cultures as an extension of the landscape, even "sympathetic" representations failing to portray the social-political complexities of Native American cultures.

Perhaps because of *Dances with Wolves* radical and sustained departure from the dominant ideology of the Western genre, its narrative elements seem to be more qualitatively associated with a dramatic period piece set in the west rather than a Western proper. Similarly, Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) utilizes the iconography, landscapes, and certain narrative elements of the Western, but its significant inversion of the genre's foundational myths suggests a post-modern period piece more in line with the dominant ideology of its contemporary audience. This ideological shift occurs over a number of decades, but John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968) marks a major rupturing point where the shift in dominant ideologies becomes most apparent. The Western's model for empire, genocide, and domestication failed to resonate with contemporary audiences once these narrative elements were applied to the people of Southeast Asia.

Shifting Ideologies

By mid-century, the Western begins to shift its concerns primarily towards the drive for empire, with domesticity or the settling of the frontier and the genocidal tendencies towards Native Americans taking on less pronounced roles. The earliest Westerns often limit the role of women to the domestic home-scape, where child rearing and domestic duties represent the boundaries of their existence—a paradigm that begins to give way in the late Western before being partially subverted in the road movie. Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* (1954) provides an important counterpoint within the Western and Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (1991) offers the first road movie to seriously revise the subservient role women play in both genres. Proto-capitalist antagonists often replace the Native American antagonists, the cowboys v. Indians

paradigm giving way to the white man (hero) v. white man (villain) paradigm, or the duel.

From the era of the Vietnam War onward, the American Western takes on a much darker tone, where protagonists face grave circumstances that no longer operate within the classic “cowboys and Indians” paradigm. Ironically, John Wayne’s role in John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956) prefigures such an ideological shift, where the film’s protagonists no longer function as surrogates for American dominance, but flawed individuals facing complex problems without clearly-defined solutions—what Robin Wood would call an archetypal incoherent text because it doesn’t know what it wants to say. (47) John Wayne’s *The Green Berets* (1968) marks the touchstone film that lays the groundwork for this major ideological shift.

In a letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson, Wayne requests support from the Department of Defense arguing that Americans as well as those abroad need a better grasp of why Americans belong in Vietnam. He writes, “the most effective way to accomplish this is through the motion picture medium.” (Suid 56) It was Wayne’s self-professed super-patriotism that motivated him to finance much of the film through his own production company. *The Green Berets* was backed only partially by the U.S. Department of Defense, charging Wayne’s production company \$18,623.64 for what Congressman Benjamin S. Rosenthal believed might have amounted to a million dollars worth of services. (Smith 126-128) In addition to the subsidized M-16s, mortars, flamethrowers, tactical air support, helicopters and 3,800 man-days of military personnel, the D.O.D. provided shooting locations at four different army posts, including

Fort Benning, Georgia, where the pine forest backdrop as substitute for the jungles of Vietnam proved as plausible as the film's politics.

The Green Berets presents both an American Western in the tradition of the post-*Stagecoach* (1939) archetype, it also represents the key political outlier of its era, with the distinction of being the only major motion picture to narrativize the Vietnam War while the war was still underway. The film's representation of national identity hoists itself primarily on the mythical notions of American dominance and divine selection (the two ideological concepts amalgamated into manifest destiny and applied as euphemism for genocide of the American Indian). As Scott Nygren asserts, the film's final shot is, "symptomatically infamous for its concluding sunset over the ocean, a scene that could obviously be shot only in the United States, and not in Vietnam." (154)

The American Western that made John Wayne an icon of rugged American individualism pits the gun-slinging protagonists against the "invading" enemy, initially embodied by the American Indian. These American myths went largely unchallenged until the era of the Vietnam War. The Western genre provided the necessary vessel for such ideologies, permitting these myths to project themselves into the 20th century as an inextricable component of the American ethos. *The Green Berets* offers the last ill-fated attempt at such notions of national identity, where the agrarian peasant of North Vietnam replaces the American Indian as the catalyst for national cohesion against a common enemy.

By 1968, as the Vietnam War wages on, the unsophisticated archetypes of the Western genre become grotesque anachronisms of earlier American conquests. The

Vietnam War and its representation in *The Green Berets* unwittingly facilitates the destruction of these old archetypes and furnishes new ones in their place.

The post-*Green Berets* Westerns evidence a major ideological shift in the portrayal of Native Americans. Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue* (1970) and Robert Aldrich's *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) offer early examples of Hollywood's revisionist portrayal of Native American history.² Tom Laughlin's neo-Western hybridization, *Billy Jack* (1971) provides the strongest personification of the Western's reworked outlaw hero protagonist. The chief protagonist, Billy Jack, a character first introduced in the motorcycle film, *Born Losers* (1967), is a returning Vietnam veteran with both Anglo and Native American ancestry, thus combining the Vietnam War, Native American history, and European-American conquest into a single anthropomorphic characterization. *Billy Jack* and similar counter-culture films pave the way for this new American Western, where the outlaw hero eventually replaces the pre-Vietnam Western hero.

This transformation reaches its apex with Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990), where Native Americans are portrayed as individualized, respectable protagonists and Union military forces as villains harboring overtly racist ideologies. (Kilpatrick 125) When Lt. Dunbar (Kevin Costner) attempts to bridge the cultural divisions between the ever-expanding American empire he represents and the self-sustaining culture of the Sioux, he is eventually mistaken for an Indian and taken captive by the Union forces he serves. In effect, even his perceived racial superiority can not save him from captivity; simply acting like an Indian warrants imprisonment.

² In addition to John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), his *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) similarly prefigures this ideological shift.

The metamorphosis from Western hero to outlaw hero reaches its apex when Lt. Dunbar joins his Sioux counterparts in the killing of his Union captors as they attempt to cross a river. Such a bold action implicates American society as the perpetrators of injustice against the film's protagonists, justice being temporarily met with the defeat of the Union forces. As Ten Bears, chief of the Sioux states to Lt. Dunbar in their final exchange, "the man the soldiers are looking for no longer exists. Now there is only a Sioux named, Dances With Wolves." Ten Bears, like the film's entire diegesis, exists as a manifestation of Sioux culture by uniquely non-Native American authorship. As such, Ten Bears' dialogue reflects American society's desire to be accepted by the culture it once sought to destroy. The Vietnam War provides the extra-cinematic catalyst that contributes to such desires, as U.S. military policy in Southeast Asia shatters the illusion of automatic American dominance over indigenous peoples.

As *Dances with Wolves* illustrates, the portrayal of brutality that previously dehumanized the American Indian (massacre being the operative term for such scenes), now serves an entirely antithetical purpose. The Indian attack in Charles Barton's *Wagon Wheels* (1934) comes full circle as *Dances with Wolves*' white protagonist joins the Indian attack on the white soldiers. Such a radical ideological shift reflects the significant reworking of the genre's representation of myth in order to reflect parallel shifts in the dominant ideology of American society.

Women Strap-On the Six-Shooter and Take to the Road

Women typically play on the margins of both the Western and road movie genres, with few exceptions. Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* provides an early example of the decidedly non-domestic role for a leading woman, with Joan Crawford's Vienna rivaling the ferocity of her gun-slinging male counterparts. As Vienna states from her perch at

the top of the stair, to the townsfolk who attempt to threaten her position of power, “down there I sell whiskey and cards. All you can buy up these stairs is a bullet in the head...” Vienna’s independence from male dominance provides a rare inversion of the prototypical Western woman and sets the stage for Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Monte Hellman’s *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) before culminating in the total inversion of the male-dominated Western with Ridley Scott’s *Thelma & Louise* (1991). But with few exceptions, Joan Crawford’s Vienna and her cinematic progeny remain outliers within male-dominated cinematic genres. The opening scene of *Bonnie and Clyde* offers a counterpoint example to the domestic roles women typically fulfill and the film as a whole lays the groundwork for the ideological foundations of subsequent road movies. Bonnie presents a self-reflexive individual both aware of her domestic trappings and unwilling to accept them, characteristics which come to define the genre’s anti-hero.

Bonnie and Clyde opens with a close-up of Bonnie’s lips covered in red lipstick. The close-up fetishizes her lips and the red lipstick further sexualizes Bonnie’s fragmented body. The camera pans right as Bonnie turns her body and the focus racks revealing a medium shot of Bonnie looking at her reflection in the mirror. By avoiding a cut from the close-up of the lips to the medium shot of Bonnie, the continuous shot with its two distinct compositions suggests a woman intent on breaking out of her objectified existence.

In the third shot, the bars of her bed frame her naked body in a seemingly inescapable domestic home-scape (Figure 3-1A). Bonnie pounds her fists against the bed’s brass bars as if they were the literal bars of her prison cell. Her frustration becomes clear as her domestic trappings confine her to the enclosed bedroom. The bed

and its brass bars further suggest reproduction, child rearing, and an altogether submissive, sexualized posture.

Bonnie looks out of her bedroom window and discovers Clyde attempting to steal her “mama’s” automobile. The window further bisects her body and suggests the caged individual (Figure 3-1B). The empty bird cage in the corner of Bonnie’s bedroom, the painting of a home on her closet door, the sewing machine that obscures her naked body in a subsequent shot, the toy dolls which suggest children and child-rearing, and the diegetic sound of birds chirping only further codifies Bonnie’s caged, domestic existence.



Figure 3-1. The opening sequence from Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). A) Bonnie imprisoned by the home-scape. B) Framed within the window frame.

Clyde has just been released from jail; by every patriarchal standard he is a free man. Bonnie’s prison knows no spatial bounds, as societal constraints prevent her from achieving a legitimate and sustained independence. The lure of the road, and of breaking out of her domestic home-scape, propels the narrative toward its violent ending. This desire for open spaces and an escape from domestic life becomes one of the fundamental narrative elements of the road movie. This desire to escape societal constraints helps define the anti-hero since the protagonist’s desires go against the

society they are inextricably linked to. Clyde's freedom is the kind of freedom deemed acceptable by society, but Bonnie's desire cannot be allowed for it undermines the very fabric of society. The anti-hero's desire to escape the rules of society provides the primary myth the road movie founds itself upon.

In the rare instances when women do function outside of the home-scape, they are chastised—even killed—by male authority figures. Law enforcement agents ultimately ambush and gun down both Bonnie and Clyde, and Bonnie's cinematic offspring, *Thelma & Louise*, share a similar fate at the hands of male authority figures. The problem of the female protagonist—which is a problem that the road movie has the potential of addressing—is that all male figures are male authority figures.

Bonnie, Thelma, and Louise share the same problem, with similar outcomes. As Thelma drives her 1966 Thunderbird over the Grand Canyon, the film's final freeze frame suggests a fairy-tale like ending—Thelma and Louise escaping a patriarchal world not fit for them. However, if the laws of gravity continue beyond the film's final frame, the women die a fiery death at the bottom of the canyon. As Marita Sturken suggests, "While Thelma and Louise are in motion and on the run, the primary men in the film are stationary and house bound." (41) If the domestic roles are temporarily reversed in *Thelma & Louise*, the male domination over female independence ultimately exerts its power over these women by the film's final frame.

The character credited simply as "the girl" in *Two-Lane* hitches a ride with the film's protagonists and informs them she was headed for the Grand Canyon, but that her ride kept "getting high" and pulling over. The Grand Canyon functions in both *Two-Lane* and *Thelma & Louise* as a feminine anti-landscape, with its deep ravine

suggesting an internalized vaginal space free from the “western road as the territory of men and machines...” (Sturken 37) *Two-Lane*’s “girl” refuses—in the lexicon of the Western—to “settle down” with any one man and manages to escape punishment from the society she exists within, but even her final exit comes as the back-seat passenger on a motorcycle whose course is set by an unknown man in an unknown direction.

The girl’s exit on the backseat of the motorcycle plays as allegory for virtually all women in the road movie—back seat passengers in a genre written, produced, and directed by predominantly white male authorship. That these on-screen women collectively subvert the early Western’s domestic roles comes at a heavy price, even within the American road movie. The roles women fulfill in both the Western and the road movie generally parallel one another, with the few noted exceptions. Women in both genres are most often absent or relegated to the periphery and the hyper-masculine spaces of the rugged Western frontier and the interior space of the “muscle” car relegate women to subservient roles when they are present. Kenneth Anger’s car-centric *Kustom Kar Commandos* (1970) seems to suggest that the big engines and interior spaces of the hotrod function as hyper-masculine, overtly homoerotic spaces. But as G.T.O. states to the hitchhiker (Harry Dead Stanton) who attempts to sexually satisfy him on their long drive through the desert, “this is competition, man. I got no time.”

Confronting Domesticity in *Two-Lane Blacktop*

Two-Lane’s characters subvert notions of domesticity and stasis in two primary ways: (1) These characters exist as nomads, traversing American landscapes without a particular destination. When these characters do decide on a particular destination, they systemically fail to commit to any one plan. Their goals go against the dominant goals of

society at large. (2) The protagonists repeatedly perform domestic roles in order to intentionally deceive individuals who represent dominant ideologies. They are aware of their opposition to society at large, which characterizes them as prototypical anti-heroes.

The first instance of this deception occurs when “the driver” (James Taylor) poses as the girl’s husband in order to deceive the police officers who have pulled over, G.T.O. (Warren Oates) The driver’s role as husband lends credibility to his claim, “he [G.T.O.] was weaving all over the road, scared my wife about half to death...” Like the threat of Indians raping and killing a woman, the threat of a dangerous driver suggests women in contemporary society perform the same role as would-be victim at the hands of an uncivilized danger who acts outside of society’s rules.

Once G.T.O. catches up to the group, he responds in kind: “I had those cops eating right out of my exhaust pipe. You blew the whole thing. I had a police escort across state line because my wife happens to be having a set of twins.” This repeated reference to marriage and child-rearing reflects on the anti-hero’s awareness of the dominant culture’s ideals—ideals these nomadic individuals reject and “perform” when it plays to their benefit. In this instance, G.T.O.’s chameleon-like nature, picking up “one fantasy after another” projects itself onto the girl, the driver, and the mechanic, who G.T.O. imagines as his wife and twin sons.

In a later scene, when the group sits around a table in a diner, a local racer accosts them. The racer asks, “say, you all wouldn’t be hippies would you?” G.T.O. dutifully responds, “No, sir. I take care of these boys myself,” implying his role within the patriarchal family unit, as if they were sitting around the dinner table at “home.” He

continues outlining the group's family connections, stating, "they're hometown boys. John is married to Mary over there and Davis is his brother. We're a big family but we know how to keep it together, you know what I mean?" Again, the family unit represents a stable force that gives credibility to the otherwise motley crew.

The irony of these scenes is that these characters ultimately bond in what could pass as a kind of counter-culture family unit. The mechanic assists G.T.O. with his carburetor problems, and the driver attempts to teach the girl how to drive stick shift (perhaps addressing her inability to plot her own course). The conventional domestic roles of the early Western get reworked in *Two-Lane* and subsequent road movies to reflect these counter-culture characters and their resistance to notions of "settling down."

Cowboys, Indians, and the Enemy Within

The late Western effectively shifts from the inherently evil Indian antagonists to antagonists that come from within North American culture, representing dueling individuals in the quest for capitalist-modeled profits and the expansion of empire. In effect, the antagonists are no longer outside of the dominant culture, nor are they characterized as being racially inferior. The gun duel functions as the primary way of resolving conflicts between two or more conflicting characters. Racial superiority is replaced with gun-slinging capabilities, which put spatial reach and accuracy to the test. Howard Hawks' *Red River* offers an archetypal example of this new paradigm.³

Red River posits Tom Dunson (John Wayne) as the prototypical capitalist who values the written contract above all else and is willing to literally destroy his competition

³ Both *Red River* and *Bend of the River* were two films discussed extensively in Turim's Fall 2010 Filmic Spaces seminar and my analysis follows from these meetings.

(via the duel) in order to gain supremacy as a cattle rancher. Dunson's desires work in parallel with the nation's larger call to empire and later, capitalist enterprise.

Red River announces itself, in fact, boldly. It is a film about the issues of empire. It is a film about the territorial expansion of one society by the usurpation of land from others, and the consequences arising therefrom... the issues *Red River* raises of empire and markets were also central issues of American economic power and expansion after World War II... (Sklar 169)

As Dunson states in the opening sequence when he breaks away from the wagon train to begin his own capitalist enterprise, "I signed nothing. If I did, I'd stay." In effect, "the enemy" becomes anyone who stands in Dunson's path to profit, and these enemies are clearly defined by Dunson in both word and action. After Dunson's surrogate son, Matt (Montgomery Clift), challenges Dunson's authority, Dunson replies, "I'll kill ya." No idle threat coming from Dunson, who has already gunned down seven Mexican vaqueros and a mutinous cattle hand who challenged his land claims and his authority, respectively. Clearly, Dunson's murderous tendencies are not limited to notions of racial superiority, as evidenced by his killing of the cattle hand and his attempt to track down and kill his own son. Dunson reads the Bible over the corpses of his victims before giving them a "decent burial," linking Christianity with capitalism in a uniquely American framework.

Dunson's claim of landscape ownership represents the Western's (and early capitalism's) concern with landscapes as a necessary means of production and capital—the cattle requiring land in order to reproduce and ultimately produce profits. Offering a counterexample, George Stephen's *Shane* (1956) subverts these capitalist notions of owning landscapes in order to profit by them. Shane plays the reluctant hero who ultimately comes to the aid of the small-scale farmers in order to confront the large-

scale rancher-capitalist—these late Westerns presupposing that Native Americans no longer have a right to exist within these spaces.

Where *Red River* positions Dunson as the hero-protagonist, the narrative seeks to legitimize his murderous actions. Later Westerns like *Shane*, Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1969), and a host of similarly structured Westerns position the capitalist as the villain who impedes upon the greater good of the society at large. It is often the rail(road) and the landscapes bisected by the railway that typically serve the villain's personal gain. In terms of ideological aims, these anti-capitalist Westerns hint at the possibility of the road movie's emergence.

Where the cowboys & Indians paradigm is largely replaced by the same-race hero v. villain duel, and women begin to exist outside of the early Western's predetermined domestic roles, even the Western's drive for empire becomes challenged before the road movie more fully subverts all three of these foundational myths. Anthony Mann's *Bend of the River* (1952) posits a group of characters who desire to escape the east and the capitalist model left in its wake, heading first to Portland, Oregon before attempting to settle their own utopian community free from the empire to the east. With Charles Barton's *Wagon Wheels* (1934), Portland was still a place to be settled in the mid 1800's, but by the late 1800's, when *Bend* takes place, Portland has become a thriving boomtown.

Glen McLyntock (Jimmy Stewart) clearly outlines the desire to escape empire when he states, "Missouri and Kansas was like this when I first saw them. Good, clean. It was the man who came in to steal and kill that changed things. We mustn't let it happen here." This east-west development suggests the inability to escape empire, and

Bend of the River's final shot ends with the settlers exiting the frame screen right as they enter the imaginary landscape that will become their utopic settlement free from the problems of the east. Here, exiting screen-right reads as a return east (if we read the film frame like a map). Of course, this imaginary landscape remains just that, as the west becomes the homogenized landscape of the east—what becomes a chief concern of the road movie.

This shift away from glorifying empire and the ownership of the landscapes reaches its apex in the road movie, where protagonists attempt to escape empire and its endlessly bisected landscapes. That these characters typically invert their movement heading from west to east only heightens their desire to escape the inescapable—a desire that typically ends in annihilation for the protagonists (Appendix A). Road markers in the late Western evidence this self-destructive tendency; *Shane* (1956) and George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) prefigure the myriad road movies that end in annihilation for their protagonists. As the next section suggests, the road carries a long cinematic history of delivering its characters to nightmare landscapes that often end in annihilation.

CHAPTER 4 DEAD ENDS: ALL ROADS LEAD TO YOUR WORST NIGHTMARES

Roads can be dangerous places; they are disproportionately dangerous in the cinema. This section investigates the road as narrative device across national cinemas, genres, and time periods in order to reveal an intertextual web of paranoid nightmare landscapes that doom drivers, passengers (spectators), and pedestrians alike. And while the roadway and the spaces they lead to can be considered paranoid by the relatively safe spectator who views them, for the on-screen characters who traverse these roadways, these spaces actually lead to living-nightmare scenarios—the threat of annihilation just a frame away.

Front Seat Passengers and the Road to Annihilation

A distinction must be made between the on-screen characters oblivious to impending annihilation and the spectators who have no control over the progression of the narrative. The spectator can escape the cinema, but even then, the narrative does not change its course, nor does the real world promise safety. A paradox exists for the spectator, as their own existence outside of the cinematic apparatus (crossing the street for example) proves far more lethal than the on-screen spectacle of annihilation. In essence, the spectator becomes a front-seat passenger, looking out the windshield (the film screen) as these paranoid spaces turn into very real nightmare landscapes for their on-screen surrogates.

These paranoid spaces prevail in the road movie but develop much earlier, primarily in the horror genre. This section aims to draw out the intertextual relationship between these road-to-annihilation landscapes, with the purpose of placing the American road movie within a historical context whose antecedents exist well beyond

the boundaries of the genre. An analysis of horror films ranging from F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) provides early versions of the road-to-annihilation that become prevalent in the road movie.

F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922)

F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, provides an early instance of the road that leads to nightmare landscape, *Nosferatu*'s hillside castle deep within the Carpathian woods functioning as an archetypal paranoiac space. The protagonist's travel "across these woods—macabre with mists, shying horses, wolves, and eerie birds—proves but an innocent prelude to the adventures awaiting him in *Nosferatu*'s castle." (Kracauer 77) Sent to make contact with Count Orlock, the real-estate clerk leaves the inn via horse and carriage but his drivers only take him so far. Their knowledge of where the road leads prevents their continued travel.

As they cross the first bridge in the sequence, the film tint shifts from a warm pinkish-red hue to blue, coded in the silent cinema as night—in this context, even impending danger. The river bisects the landscape, and crossing the bridge allows the clerk to penetrate deeper into this increasingly paranoiac space. At the point where the horse and carriage will go no further, the clerk travels on foot, crossing yet another bridge, thus delving even deeper into the unknown (Figure 4-1).

Spatially, the landscape exists as a series of concentric circles, with the bridges functioning as penetrable membranes, each crossing bringing the clerk closer to the forest's nightmare nucleus—*Nosferatu*'s castle. The narrative soon leaves the castle, following the clerk back to the assumed safety of his home, though it is the road that sets this narrative on course toward increasingly nightmarish spaces. *Nosferatu*

provides an early example of the road-to-annihilation, where characters traverse the road as a means of penetrating increasingly dangerous nightmare landscapes.

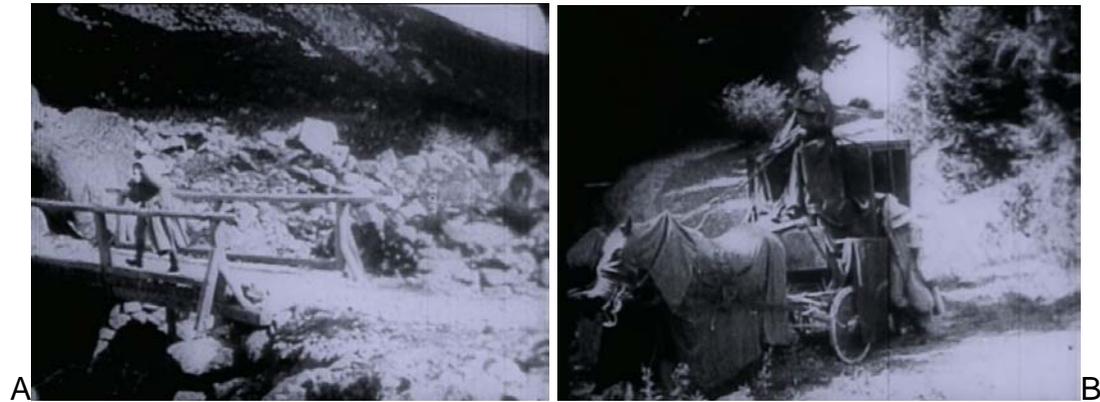


Figure 4-1. The encounter with Count Orlock, *Nosferatu* (1922). A) The clerk crosses the bridge. B) Count Orlock arrives and the clerk enters the carriage.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960)

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) ushers in the era of the *slasher* sub-genre, and from the film's first shot the road leads the protagonist to annihilation. *Psycho*'s narrative reliance on the roadway, the automobile, and the roadside motel prefigures the road movie in significant ways. These elements are not only central to *Psycho*'s narrative, they function as prominent visual elements throughout the film, from the opening shot to the final frame.

The opening montage delivers a set of cityscape shots overlooking Phoenix, AZ, each shot dissolving into the next as the camera pans to the right. A one-way road in the first shot bisects the cityscape; the same road appears in the second shot. The automobile's movement away from the camera codes the roadway as a means of escape from the city (Figure 4-2).

As Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) arrives to work in a subsequent scene, the audio/visual emphasis on the road persists, this time with Hitchcock himself situated in

the frame as Marion crosses his path (Figure 4-3). The sounds of horns honking and street noise continues after the camera focuses on the interior of the space.



Figure 4-2. The emphasis on the road begins with the first shot in *Psycho* (1960).

Marion's boss arrives at the office escorting an offensive client who immediately accosts her. The client brags of the \$40,000 in cash he's carrying while simultaneously making sexual advances toward Marion. The lamp on Marion's desk gets framed in such a way as to imply the client's erect penis (though the wad of cash he waves in Marion's face goes limp). Marion functions as a femme fatale here as she'll soon leave town with the client's cash.



Figure 4-3. Marion crosses Hitchcock's path as he looks on, facing the road.

As Marion exits the space, the camera tracks her movement until it frames the landscape painting she crosses on her way towards the door (Figure 4-4). The camera fixes on the landscape painting, framing the painting in a static shot as Marion exits the frame. Marion desires escape into the pastoral landscape framed within the confines of

her office; just two scenes later, her automobile reaches a similar landscape. It is no accident the office painting frames a river and not a road as it's central focus; Marion's car will ultimately sink below the surface of the murky bog with her body in the trunk.

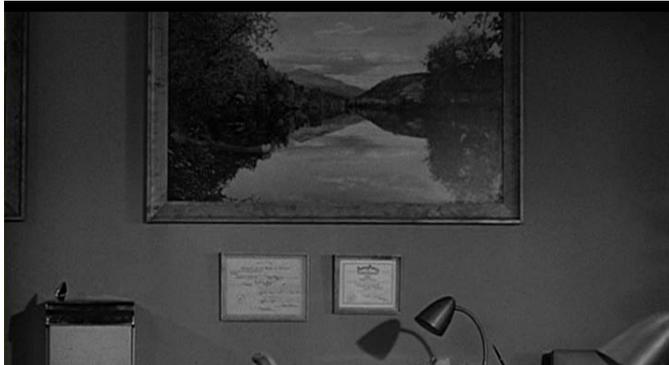


Figure 4-4. The landscape Marion will soon encounter. The river foreshadows her eventual submersion into the bog.

At the Bates Motel, when Marion makes small talk with Norman over what will become her last meal, Norman asks, “where are you going?” Marion responds, “I’m looking for a private island.” Her automobile comes to be equated with her “private island” as Norman pushes her car into the bog and waits for it to sink below the surface. As the automobile submerges slowly and stalls out before disappearing beneath the surface, Marion’s island is temporarily achieved. In the film’s final shot, Marion’s vehicle rises from the depths, not like a Phoenix, where the film opens, but a dead (Marion) Crane, where the film ends.

Overemphasis of the shower sequence ignores the narrative device it is predicated on—the road. Marion’s escape relies (1) on the road as a means of escape, (2) on the used car dealership as a means of concealment (Marion trades in her automobile for another), (3) on the roadside motel as a temporary “safe house” (which in the cinema is almost never safe), and (4) on the shower to provide the final space

that leads to the protagonist's annihilation—in this case the narrative literally going down the drain as the camera follows the stream of blood down the tub.

Marion's attempts to use the roadway and the automobile as a means of escape fail on every count. (1) As she leaves town, her boss sees her stopped at an intersection. He is surprised to see her since Marion claimed much earlier she was going home because she wasn't feeling well. (2) The police officer follows her to the auto dealership and sees her trade in her old car for a new one, thus preventing her from successfully remaining anonymous. (3) The Bates motel proves anything but safe, as the psychotic caretaker, Norman Bates, has already killed at least two women before Marion becomes the third. (4) The shower in her motel room, ostensibly a private and safe space, becomes the scene where Marion is murdered.

Throughout the narrative, Marion positions herself in front of mirrors at moments where the ethics of her decision might prevent her from embarking on her road trip. Before she leaves town, the mirror in her room offers a moment for reflection. Again in the restroom of the used car dealership, when Marion takes out the seven hundred dollars for the trade-in, she has a chance to reflect upon what she is doing and possibly return to Phoenix with all of the money. Finally, in the lobby of the Bates Motel, her body gets framed in front of the mirror at the side of the counter; it is her last chance to get back in her car and return to Phoenix. In the bathroom of her motel room, there is no mirror to reflect upon; Marion has run out of chances. The absence of a mirror additionally reflects Norman's "good" side. He doesn't want to see the murderous deeds he performs in the role of his overprotective deceased mother. But it is not the shower that kills Marion so much as the landscape and its inclement weather. Marion's

motivation to pull off the highway and check into the Bates Motel comes from a heavy rain which prevents her from driving any further. The rain additionally prefigures the shower scene and the watery grave Marion eventually succumbs to.

The road is a dangerous place, and in Marion's case it is the inclement weather that baits her into the motel. In Jules Dassin's *Thieves Highway* (1949), a faulty rear axle leads to Ed's death as he runs off the hillside and burns alive in the truck's wreckage. In Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1975) the traveling teenagers run out of gas along the highway, find a gas station purportedly out of gas, and follow the sound of a gas-powered generator to the house where Leatherface ultimately kills them with a gas-powered chainsaw. In Robert Mitchum's *Thunder Road* (1958) Lucas Doolin dies in a car crash as he attempts to escape the authorities. The road-to-annihilation comes to be relied upon by literally hundreds of genre films (Appendix A).

Rivers as Roadways

Treatment of roadways in the cinema as conduits towards annihilation (and in rare instances, inversions on this movement) project themselves both into past and future worlds. Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: Wrath of God* (1971) chronicles an army of Spanish conquistadors as they travel on foot via pathways and rivers, bisecting landscapes as they progress (Figure 4-5A). What are the early conquistadors if not the founders of empire in the "new world," their trails forerunners of the modern roadway? As Aguirre comments to the priest who accompanies the expedition—after most of the men have died along the way, "if we turn back now, others will come. And they will succeed! And we'll remain a failure! Even if this land only consists of trees and water, we will conquer

it! And it'll be milked dry by those who follow us. My men measure riches in gold. It is more..."

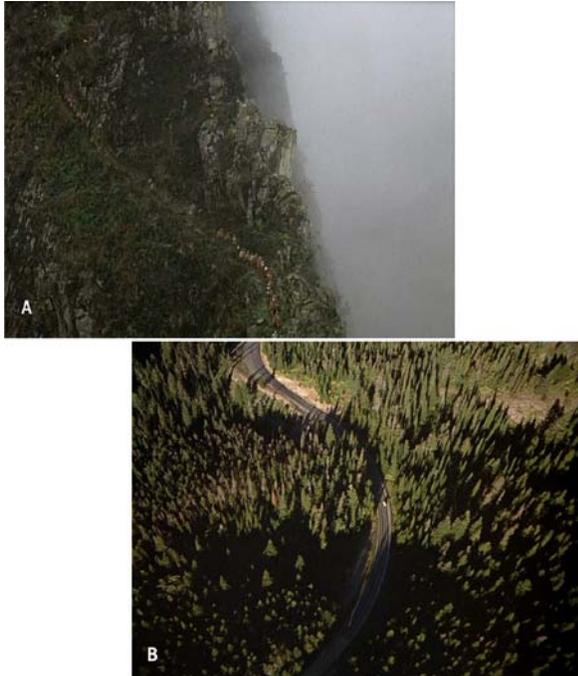


Figure 4-5. Pathways and roadways from the opening sequences of *Aguirre: Wrath of God* (1971) and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), respectively. A) The trail leads to annihilation in Werner Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God*. B) A similar road to annihilation in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980).

The characters in Boorman's *Deliverance* begin on a road trip to a river, and the bulk of the narrative chronicles their "vacation" from the suburbs of Atlanta. Bobby (Ned Beatty) brags early on about losing his virginity in the backseat of an old Chevy, referencing the nostalgia of the automobile and the American road, but backwoods sodomy and murder ruin both the nostalgia and the masculine escapism of a weekend getaway without automobiles. As the survivors finally reach the end of the river run, the rusted-out Chevy perched at the edge of the river recalls Bobby's nostalgic sexual exploits (this time without the nostalgia). As the survivors finally leave town in the automobiles they arrived in, the Sheriff warns them never to return—and while the

characters need no such warning, their leaving town does not promise psychological escape from the living nightmare they have experienced.

Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, provides total destruction of the landscape (and all the humans who inhabit it) in the film's final sequence. While Lt. Willard and the saucier escape the final air strike, what does physical survival mean for individuals who have lost their minds? While the protagonists survive in both *Deliverance* and *Apocalypse*, these characters suffer spiritual deaths at the hands of the landscapes they encounter. The rivers in these films offer a metaphysical destruction of hyper-masculinity and the horrors of war, respectively, positing the film's characters into deeply troubled futures where their place in society becomes an unknown.

Alternative Futures

Alfonso Cuarón's verge-of-the-apocalypse offering, *Children of Men* (2006) uses rivers and roadways in ways that both adhere to and depart from the road-to-annihilation paradigm. Roadways in the film provide the on-screen characters a number of variations on the annihilation theme. The film's protagonist, Theo, is attacked on the street and kidnapped via an unmarked van; his ex-lover is later shot through the windshield of an automobile as they attempt to escape a murderous (motorcycle-equipped) gang; military transports escort Theo and his party to "refugee camps," presented as modern-day concentration camps complete with visual references to U.S.-occupied Iraqi prisons—paranoiac nightmare landscapes that reference both historical and contemporary precedents and project these spaces into a not-too-distant future.

Children follows in a long line of post-apocalyptic road movies, but its treatment of waterways offers an inversion of the road-to-annihilation theme. The film's final sequence utilizes a subterranean canal as a means of escape from the impending

destruction of the city (via airstrike ala *Apocalypse Now*). Theo leads a young mother and child—precious passengers in a world where humans can no longer reproduce—down the (birth) canal and out to the ocean; the new world was once on the other side of the sea, and so it is once more in Cuarón's future dystopia. Their small rowboat traversing the subterranean canal plays as metaphor for new life being birthed literally towards *Tomorrow*—the name of the medical ship they intend to rendezvous with. While the cityscape gets bombed into rubble, the ocean provides temporary refuge and a hospitable space where human existence has a chance to sustain itself.

That the majority of these films exist firmly outside of the road movie genre and across a great span of time evidences a larger cultural anxiety with roadways and the landscapes they tread upon. The road movie as genre simply makes these anxieties more explicit, with characters who clearly desire some form of escape from societal constraints but ultimately fail to achieve these ends.

CHAPTER 5
(BIRTH) CANALS: MIGRATION AND DYSTOPIA IN ALFONSO CUARON'S
CHILDREN OF MEN (2006)

Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) presents a dystopian world where human beings have been infertile for eighteen years, the world's global capitalist economy has fallen into ruins, and only Great Britain stands as a quasi-functioning sovereign state. As a result, a mass influx of refugees converge on Great Britain "after escaping the [world's] worst atrocities," where they are criminalized, imprisoned, and transported to refugee camps. In a world where infertility has ostensibly affected everyone, Kee, a "posh black English girl" and her inexplicable pregnancy represents an obvious key to the survival of the human race. Theo Faron, a middle aged white man and one-time political activist turned bureaucrat, functions as the film's reluctant hero, ultimately leading Kee and her unborn child to the coast where they plan on rendezvousing with the clandestine Human Project. This section investigates how the spaces and landscapes within *Children's* overarching diegesis function as spatial allegory for the womb, with the possibility of total rebirth for the whole of humanity.

Mapping the Movements: Toward a Logic of the Nightmare

The geography of *Children* and its use of space and movement can be broken down into four distinct categories: (1) the film's landscapes, cityscapes, and roadscape and their architectonic disunities (what we could call labor pains); (2) the privileging of the roadway, railway, and canal as a means of travel (what we could call a fluid, interdependent system of birth canals); (3) the multitude of vestibules (or metonymic wombs) and their inverse, the tomb; and (4) the reliance on movement and migration as a necessary means of survival (the goal being eventual birth).

The film's opening scene takes place within the confines of an urban coffee shop where a crowd has gathered around the image of a television newscast. The spectators learn of the death of Baby Diego, the last person born eighteen years prior. Cuarón borrows this narrative device from director Paul Verhoeven, whose science-fiction films, *Robocop* (1987), *Total Recall* (1990), and *Starship Troopers* (1997) utilize the framework of a television newscast in order to deliver both expository information about the "world" the spectator has just entered and to simultaneously critically engage the spectacle within the spectacle.

Theo enters the coffee shop and pushes through the crowd to the front counter. This friction of "pushing through" becomes the first within a series of sequences where Theo pushes through similarly confined spaces. Theo ultimately leads Mirriam and Kee to a daring escape from the safe house. He literally pushes the car to life, Mirriam popping the car's clutch and yelling "push, push" as Theo struggles in the mud. These moments intimate Theo's eventual role as deliverer of Kee's baby, but perhaps more importantly, his metaphysical "birthing" of Kee and baby Dylan through the subterranean birth canal and into the ocean (during the film's final scene).

As Theo waits for his coffee, the news reports of the death of Baby Diego, recently murdered by an angered fan after Diego refused a signature and spit in the fan's face. Baby Diego's death confirms society's complete and total divorce from the natural life cycle, the last person ever born effectively being murdered. Diego's name reads as an anagram: "go die," or "i.e. god," the death of Diego symbolizing the death of god and of any omniscient being. With the omniscient creator symbolically dead, humanity is

likewise no longer authored, no longer inscribed into the future, thus doomed to erasure and annihilation.

Baby Diego's death similarly represents the spectator's inability to dream within the spectacle, since the celebrity represents the surrogate mobile cell of individual freedom—a freedom the worker, housed either in the factory or the corporate womb of the cubicle, cannot experience. As Debord asserts, “[c]elebrities exist to act out various styles of living and viewing society—unfettered, free to express themselves globally. They embody the inaccessible result of social labor...” Diego's death results in the paralysis of the individual, the inability to even imagine expressing one's self globally.

Theo, however, isn't at all interested in the television spectacle of celebrity and surrogate self-expression. He takes his coffee and leaves, again pushing through the crowd as he births himself out into the busy city street. The last image of Theo in the coffee shop frames him directly below the surrogate image of Baby Diego—the spectacle within the spectacle. This composition of Theo and Diego produces a conflict of space in the Eisensteinian sense, as the image of the last child born conflicts with Theo's role as deliverer of new life into the world. This moment also reflects on the natural cycle of death and life—an equation that would have a new life come into this Earth as a previous life is lost. Theo's passing through the doorway foreshadows such a return to this natural life cycle.

As Theo births out of the allegorical womb of the coffee shop, the heavily trafficked roadway intimates notions of the birth canal, its bustling cars and rapid pace suggesting that travel through these passages will prove difficult, even dangerous. Once Theo reaches a safe distance, a bomb explodes within the coffee shop, presumably killing

everyone near the blast, inverting the symbolism of the coffeehouse space from womb to tomb—the womb literally becoming the tomb of humanity’s aborted future.

The Orwellian geography of the film presents the cityscape as a space of spontaneous terror and alienation. At any moment a bomb might explode, a kidnapping ensue, or some form of violence break out. As bullets and bombs explode, bystanders retreat into the fractured walls and doorways like sea anemones that retreat from a passing threat. As Theo’s ex-lover, Julia states in their first meeting, “this is the world we live in now...”

The logic of space and movement within *Children* follows the logic of the nightmare, where nothing is as it appears and movement is often motivated by paranoid tendencies. The government-issued drug, Quietus—in a nod to Richard Fliescher’s similarly dystopic film, *Soylent Green* (1973)—is administered not to alter one’s perception of reality, but to destroy one’s perception of reality—by committing suicide. This inverted logic gets repeated throughout. The presumed safety of the “safe” house becomes a space of impending death; the safety of Jasper’s secluded cabin ultimately becomes compromised; the imagined safety within the automobile becomes the space where Theo is kidnapped and where Julia is ultimately killed. These spaces invert notions of the life-giving womb into life-taking tombs. The paradox of the landscape is that it reveals itself as anything but stable, where the relative instability and danger of the ocean provides safety and salvation for Kee and her newborn child.

Similarly, the diametric relationship between the bomb and the womb is established in this first scene and revisited throughout, into the final sequence. The bomb links to the State, the inverted logic of the nightmare again revealing itself. The

coffee shop explosion is ultimately blamed on the Foojies—a “terrorist organization”—when in fact the State executes these terrorist acts while placing blame on their political enemies.

Jasper’s newspaper cartoons pinned up in his cabin suggest that the image of the stork delivering newborns might be replaced by the storks getting bombed out of the sky. Jasper later tells a joke about the Human Project, with all of its scientists sitting around the dinner table pondering the riddle of infertility. The punch line gets delivered in the form of a question when one of the scientists responds, “I haven’t the faintest idea, [as to why humans are infertile] but this stork is quite tasty, isn’t it?” These playful hints at the womb-bomb inversion come to a head in the film’s final birthing scene when the city gets bombed to rubble—again by the State—as Theo and Kee escape to the ocean via the subterranean (birth) canal. Theo’s ability to successfully move through the myriad spaces he encounters ultimately prevents his certain death in numerous instances, all toward the final movement outside of the womb—of eventual birth.

These movements from womb to birth canal and their inversions work in architectonic disunity, implying the impermanence of the space the characters exist within—the womb is, after all, an inherently ephemeral space. The womb relates to the ocean in numerous ways, both spaces not simply bodies of water, but the ocean as the primordial womb of all life on Earth.

Additionally, these architectonic disunities can be described as “labor pains” suggesting the eventual rupture of these diegetic spaces—whether they be roadscapes or cityscapes—into what will become the un-inscribed surface of the ocean in the film’s

final sequence. In effect, these disunities give way to the fluidity and unknown future of the ocean, which ends at the medical ship, Tomorrow.

The opening sequence firmly links migration and movement to survival. Inversely, stasis signifies death, the patrons perishing in the explosion. Following *Children's* logic, one could even go so far as to say viewing too much television is hazardous to one's health—the bomb only taking the lives of those gathered around the newscast. Theo's ability to successfully move through the spaces he encounters ultimately prevents his certain death in numerous instances, all toward the final movement outside of the womb—of eventual birth.

In the second scene, Theo's work environment depicts a series of cubicles—or corporate wombs—and the computer screen interface as umbilical cord to the spectacle of the outside world. Workers mourn the death of Baby Diego as they watch news reports over their computer screens. The dehumanizing nature of isolating the human being within the smallest cell of corporate worker space—the cubicle—further suggests a worker-object existing within a womb-turned-tomb, of being buried alive.

The next scene places Theo within the metonymic womb of the commuter train as it moves along the railway. His attempts at sleep are thwarted by vandals outside as they throw rocks at the passing train. Theo's desire to sleep is interrupted in every instance except the final one—his death in the final moments of the film. We see Theo rising from bed as his alarm clock stirs him. When Theo first meets Kee and her midwife Mirriam in the automobile, he claims he'll sleep but Kee wakes him shortly thereafter. It is his inability to sleep at the safe house which ultimately saves his life and propels the narrative in an unexpected direction—away from the purported safety the Foojies' safe

house. In effect, Theo “sleeps when he dies.” He must continue moving in order to survive and sleep means stasis, stasis means death.

Theo exits the commuter trains and walks along the city sidewalk, where he passes by fenced-in migrants existing in paralysis along the city sidewalk and guarded by police-state soldiers and their dogs. The refugees become yet another spectacle within the spectacle for the spectator-citizen to observe. The immigrant’s stasis functions as symbolic death, the abortion of the human being’s propensity for physical and spiritual exploration replaced by the perverse sidewalk spectacle.

The following scene introduces the automobile as an inversion of the womb. The automobile operates within the road-to-annihilation paradigm, where impending danger and even death result once Theo and his party utilize the automobile. In effect, the attempted birth from the city to the seaside is obstructed by the automobile itself, as a group of bandits descends on the travelers, obstruct the road with an enflamed automobile, and kill Julia in the attack. Roads are inherently dangerous spaces within the cinema and *Children* proves no exception.

Whether it be the explosion of a faux “terrorist” bomb in the first scene, the kidnapping on the city street that Theo becomes victim to, the open-air imprisonment of refugees on the city sidewalks, or any number of life-threatening scenarios that Theo and his party inevitably encounter, this endless threat of impending physical danger exists throughout the diegesis and confronts the logic of the physical world. Space within *Children* exists not in architectonic unity—as part of a greater whole—but as a series of alienating and disconnected cells where the threat of death is only a frame away.

The Dystopian Spectacle

Children alludes to the possibility of a new human history, one that radically subverts the dominant cultural and economic paradigms of the present. Cuarón's nightmarish landscape suggests a radical rethinking of our relationship to the Earth much in the same way that a nightmare reflects on the fears and repressed desires of the subconscious mind. What is ultimately at stake within *Children* are two qualities that reflect on the human species: (1) our insatiable desire—or arguably need—to migrate and (2) our unpredictable even ineffable capacity for love.

If there were a single subconscious desire within *Children*, it would be the desire to break out of the dystopian nightmarish landscape and create a perfect inversion of it. Only by the logic of the nightmare would Theo, Kee, and Miriam decide to break into prison (the refugee camps) in order to escape the very oppressive forces they paradoxically succumb to. The monster becomes society itself, and in order to subvert it, Theo and Kee must confront it, navigate through its passages, and ultimately pass through it. If the spectacle is the heart of unrealism (Debord), then the heart is where Theo and Kee must go in order to confront the nightmare of the spectacle, and the heart of modern society is allegorically represented by the immigrant prison, where human beings become objects for authority to exert power over.

Tomorrow, (Tomorrow): It's Only a Frame Away

The first image of the final birthing sequence frames the wall of the subterranean canal, revealing the painting of an airplane. The notion of the bomb as a means of inverting the womb comes to total fruition in the final scene as the jet bombers descend on Bex Hill. Theo has learned through Sid's inside military information that the army plans on bombing the refugee camp, killing untold numbers in the process. So as Theo,

Kee, and her baby begin traveling down the subterranean canal toward the un-inscribed ocean and Tomorrow, they are inversely escaping the cityscape and its palimpsest of inscribed histories—of yesterday.

The bomb literally births itself out of the belly of the mechanized beast—the friendly stork of lore replaced with the ominous flying war machine that delivers death and destruction to entire cityscapes. The airplane has long been the greatest machinery of destruction both in warfare and in the cinema. Leni Riefenstahl's use of aerial photography in that most infamous of propaganda films, *Triumph des Willens* (1934), delivers Adolf Hitler from the sky like the Greek Gods descended upon their subjects.

The worst horrors of the 20th century were birthed from these flying mechanical wombs. The world would never be the same after August 6th 1945, when the Enola Gay—the warship perversely named after Lt. Colonel Paul Tibbet's own mother—dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima. The atom bomb delivered a horror both humanity and the cinema alike have yet to come to terms with. From Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1949), to Sidney Lumet's *Failsafe* (1963), the bomb represents the ultimate nightmare within the society of the spectacle, a horror so great that to experience it means total annihilation. As the twentieth century delivered an era of mass production, along with it came mass destruction. The spectacle of “shock and awe” existed long before President George W. Bush coined the term, and *Children's* final scene represents a visual amalgamation of that spectacle.

Theo and Kee's small vessel holds the future within it, as it heads toward that rendezvous with the medical ship, Tomorrow. As Theo pulls along the rope, this act represents the last remnant of umbilical cord connecting the trio to their terranean

history—to land. Their subterranean (birth) canal represents the mediated space between the old world and the “New World.” It is a healthy birth out into the ocean, head first, avoiding the jagged edges of the vagina, and its teeth—the vagina dentate implying that the womb they are escaping is a dangerous one not to be penetrated. As Theo and Kee float in the ocean, the fog obscuring their future, the blood at the bottom of the boat intimates birthing fluid. Kee naturally assumes it is her blood. It is not. Theo functions here as surrogate mother. The blood is his. Kee and Baby Dylan are his act of love, birthed into the future. His wounds take his life and Kee is left to float in the unknown future of the ocean, until—like a “happy accident,” a random act of love—the medical ship, Tomorrow, appears.

So for *Children of Men* to end here, with the bombers flying overhead on their way to deliver their bombs over the city, is to reflect on the worst nightmares of the 20th century and beyond and the greatest hope for Kee and her newborn infant. They are survivors and tomorrow is at this final moment literally within reach. The horrors of the past become a nightmare from which they escape once they are birthed out of the subterranean canal and into the ocean. The ocean is a new beginning; it cannot be inscribed upon thus it has no memory; its surface tells no history; it is the primordial womb of all life on Earth; to look directly into the surface of the ocean is to see the rippled movement of one’s own reflection—the ocean consumes the reflection, thus consuming the past.

The new world was once reached by crossing an ocean, and the dreams of empire and riches end in a spectacle of death and destruction. Only through a subversion of these westward movements, through an easterly movement—Easter offering the dawn

of new light, the Christian belief in rebirth, the birth of Kee's child positing a literal savior—can a new beginning be achieved. Here, in the sublime ocean where all life once existed within the womb of the eternal sea, Kee and her child are literally birthed towards tomorrow. Love is the spark that Kee, Theo, and their rendezvous with tomorrow brings—the fleeting hope for the survival of the human race; hate is the inferno of the burning cityscape, and it is an inferno with a long history. The ocean offers a return to the womb, eventual rebirth. What the film's final frame provides is the hope of un-inscribed future, of utopian possibility, and of alternative future histories. What will the Tomorrow deliver?

CHAPTER 6 HEAD ON COLLISIONS: ANALYSIS OF THE DUEL WITHIN THE WESTERN

As the road movie develops out of the Western, the duel becomes a primary narrative device that links the two genres in important ways. As the early Western's cowboys v. Indians paradigm gives way to the late Western's hero v. villain paradigm, the duel becomes increasingly relied upon within the late Western, either as a means of displaying individual prowess or as a means of conflict-resolution between two or more adversaries.

The prowess duel and the annihilation duel come to the fore in the late Western, and the following two sections contend that the road movie transforms both versions of the duel into important parts of the genre, in the form of the drag race or cross-country race, which functions as a prowess duel that replaces six-shooters and bullets with eight-cylinders and automobiles, and with the annihilation duel that pits a driver against an ostensibly endless landscape. The bisected landscape and the empire left in its wake serve as a monolithic space that consumes anyone and anything that opposes it. Thus, the driver v. landscape duel typically ends in annihilation for the driver and his or her passengers.

Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) presents an important instance when both the prowess and annihilation duels amalgamate into a single duel—the film's final scene pitting the driver both against his racing opponent (the prowess duel) and against the road-scape itself (the annihilation duel)—delineations that will be carefully examined in the next section of this study. The prowess duel and the annihilation duel can be separated by a specific set of criteria as follows:

The Prowess Duel

The prowess duel pits two or more competitors against one another in order to test the skill of the duel's participants. In this scenario, the participants are not rewarded for doing their opponent(s) physical harm; they are rewarded for displaying a set of skills superior to their competitors. This type of duel typically reflects the individual's mastery of his six-shooter or rifle. Speed, spatial reach, and overall accuracy are the primary skills put to the test.

Anthony Mann's, *Winchester '73* (1950), offers an archetypal example of the prowess duel, with a diverse group of frontiersman descending on Dodge City, Kansas in order to test their sharp-shooting skills as they compete for the rare "1 of a 1000" 1873 Winchester rifle. The two central characters, Lin McAdam and Dutch Henry Brown, prove their superior marksmanship and the town's competition ends with these two men facing off against one another. In this instance, the winner gains possession of the rare rifle, but more often reputation and social status are at stake. At one point during the competition, Dutch Henry Brown points his unloaded rifle at Lin McAdam; the threat of an annihilation duel becomes a reality in the film's final sequence when the two men attempt to kill each other.

Howard Hawk's *Red River* (1948) delivers a prowess duel between Matt and Cherry Valance, where the two men show off their sharp shooting skills in order to assert dominance over the other (Figure 6-1). The men begin the duel by examining the quality of each other's six-shooter and compete using the other man's gun—an exchange which carries obvious homoerotic undertones. As they shoot a tin can in the distance, their speed, accuracy, and spatial reach gets put to the test. The duel climaxes with the pistols—having been fully discharged—returned to their respective

owners. After the prowess duel takes place, enemies often become friends, as is the case with Matt and Cherry.

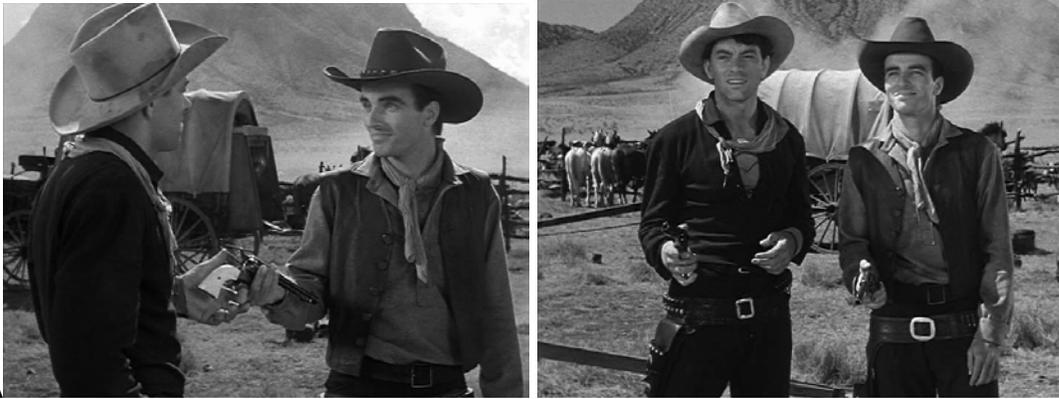


Figure 6-1. Prowess duel in Howard Hawk's *Red River* (1948). A) Matt and Cherry exchange pistols. B) The men engage in a prowess duel.

Two decades later, Sergio Leone's *For A Few Dollars More* (1965) depicts a prowess duel in a scene that pits Clint Eastwood's man-with-no-name character against Lee Van Cleef's Colonel Mortimer (Figure 6-2). Cells A, B, & C of Figure 6-2 illustrate the sharp-shooting prowess of Clint Eastwood's character, as he repeatedly shoots the hat out of the reach of Colonel Mortimer. Cell D illustrates the point where those skills fail him—the shot kicks the dirt up just short of the hat, implying the point where the man-with-no-name has reached the limits of his accurate spatial reach. In Cell E, Colonel Mortimer can finally pick up his hat and in Cell F he accepts the challenge offered him—that of shooting his opponent's hat. In cell G, the hat on the head becomes the target, and in cell H, the gaze and accepting defeat, as Colonel Mortimer's spatial reach exceeds his opponent's. Cells I & J illustrate Colonel Mortimer's superior speed and accuracy as he continues to shoot the hat in midair—a feat his opponent did not even attempt. Cell K, Colonel Mortimer's erect pistol barrel signals his phallic superiority—his barrel is in fact longer than his opponent's, which gives him a decided advantage. Cell L brings the competitors together for a drink, their hats and gun-belts

disrobed and placed alongside each other; enemies become friends. Where these duels often end in male comradeship—often with homoerotic undertones—the annihilation duel produces entirely antithetical results.



Figure 6-2. Prowess Duel Sequence from Sergio Leone's *For a Few Dollars More* (1965)

The Annihilation Duel

The annihilation duel typically pits two characters against one another with the intention of either disarming or outright killing their opponent. Because these duels often leave one or more of the film's principal characters dead, and because of the heightened dramatic effect these sequences produce, these scenes most often take place within the final or penultimate scene of the late Western. Anthony Mann's *Winchester '73* (1950) and Howard Hawk's *Red River* (1948) both end with annihilation duels, although in the latter, the duel is ultimately suspended via outside intervention. *Red River's* final duel lacks a key element in order to be considered a true annihilation duel—the participants must harbor irreconcilable differences that code them within the binary hero v. villain paradigm. These duels cannot take place between friends, or even ambivalent participants; thus, *Red River's* final annihilation duel becomes nothing more than an empty promise of conflict, thwarted by last-minute intervention.

Winchester 73's annihilation duel poses an interesting relationship to landscape, where the duel works in both horizontal and vertical space, as opposed to the conventional horizontal plane utilized by the typical annihilation duel. "Great height is always important in Mann, a clue to the reach and conflict of his characters on the one hand, the transcendent forces of justice which they defy on the other." (Kitses 70) Lin McAdam's initial disadvantage of low ground becomes a decided advantage as the mountainous landscape closes in on Dutch Henry Brown, decreasing his mobility as he takes cover on the mountain (Figure 6-3). As with the prowess duel, the annihilation duel utilizes speed, accuracy, and spatial reach, but these skills are used to disarm or kill the opponent.

The binary nature of the duel, its narrative importance to the late Western, and its privileging of speed, accuracy, and spatial reach all coalesce to produce a narrative framework that the road movie comes to rely upon. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), arguably the first fully formed American road movie, intimates this proto-race-

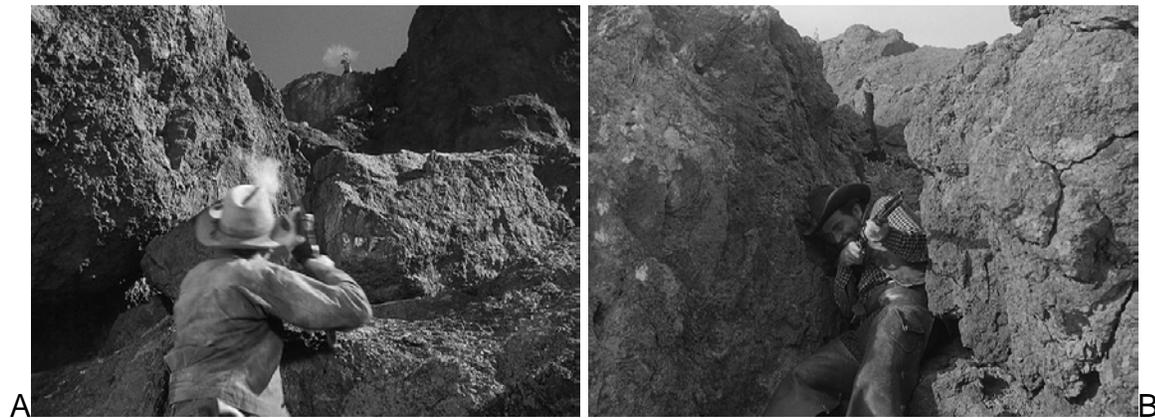


Figure 6-3. Final annihilation duel from Anthony Mann's *Winchester '73*. A) The vertical space of the annihilation duel. B) Dutch Henry Brown pinned down by the landscape.

duel apparatus, with the duo resorting to both guns and the automobile to face off (or escape) their enemies. *Bonnie and Clyde* ultimately ends like virtually every American road movie that follows it—with the annihilation of the film's main protagonists (Appendix A). Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) spells out this notion of the duel with the film's two main protagonists named after the Western's real-life gunslingers Wyatt (Earp) and Billy (the Kid). The film's final scene displays every characteristic of the Western's annihilation duel, with the motorcycle-riding protagonists facing off against rural Southerners and their pickup truck in a two-lane, head-on annihilation duel. Naturally, the duel ends in death for the protagonists since they're unarmed. And while gunplay remains on the periphery of the road movie, persisting into late road movies like Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and Gregg Araki's *The Living End* (1992), more

often, the duel relies on the speed and spatial reach of the automobile over the Western's reliance on the gun.

The Race-Duel

The spatial relationship between automobiles and roadways functions as an analog to the Western's duels, where two or more opponents project their speed, accuracy, and spatial reach onto one another. The road functions as a binary system of motion where between any two points there are always exactly two possible directions of movement. To move in any other direction outside of the two (or more) lanes of the highway means to veer off the road, which often results in death. In the road movie, automobiles ultimately replace the spatial reach of bullets as they speed toward each other (or past each other) separated only by the broken white line—a line that gives the illusion of a solid divider once enough speed is attained. The white line provides the necessary division between opponents, and the road a horizontal means of measuring the speed and spatial reach of dueling racers. Thus, the race-duel functions as the road movie's version of the late Western's prowess duel.

The road movie's race-duel typically pits its anti-hero protagonists either against opposing drivers in what essentially functions as the prowess duel, or against the indefatigable bisector of American landscapes—the road itself. The latter race-duel typically ends in annihilation for the protagonists, the road's anthropomorphic status within the duel providing a non-living, and thus, un-killable opponent. The road movie's protagonists are often defined as anti-heroes because (1) of their counter-culture, “outlaw,” status and (2) their opponent's posture within the dominant culture, typically as either agents of law enforcement, or individuals that accept the rules of society.

In *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the “stock car” racer, G.T.O., represents everything the two protagonists oppose—the homogenization and commodification of North American culture and spaces. G.T.O.’s vehicle exists as a consumer product—a brand that defines the user. As G.T.O explains to one of the hitchhiker’s he picks up, “five-hundred pounds of torque, whatever that means. It’s all in the folder right there in the glove compartment.” G.T.O.’s very name is branded by the “G.T.O.” model Pontiac he drives. Here, the cowboys v. Indian paradigm is replaced with the commodified consumer car, so named after the Ottawa Indian, Pontiac, famous for leading a siege on Fort Detroit in 1763. *Two Lane’s* “Pontiac” is of course not an Indian, but an eight-cylinder Detroit muscle car.

As the driver confronts G.T.O. in their first on-screen meeting at a roadside filling station, he states, “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you. Course there’s lots of cars on the road like yours. They all get to look the same. They perform about the same.” Inversely, the protagonist duo’s hotrod is frankensteined out of rare and home-made parts. The vehicle is so radically different than any other Chevy like it, that the gas attendant is inclined to ask, “where’s the gas tank at?” For the driver and the mechanic, their automobile is a finely tuned instrument requiring constant attention.

Where the road serves as the physical space where the race-duel takes place, its importance within the road movie extends well beyond the physicality of the race-duel. The road functions as an icon for American empire—as a point of departure not only for the on-screen characters, but for the road movie’s critique of the foundational myths of the early Western. What the road fundamentally provides is the annihilation of space—specifically landscapes—by continually bisecting and homogenizing the landscapes it

connects. Thus, as with the final shot of *Bend of the River*, empire ultimately projects itself beyond physical landscapes and onto imaginary spaces. This critique of empire becomes the chief concern of the road movie, and the road itself the locus where this critique unfolds. By offering close analyses in a number of scenes from Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop*, the next section investigates how the road movie uses space and landscape in order to achieve these ends.

CHAPTER 7
ANNIHILATION AND THE SPATIAL SUBLIME IN *TWO-LANE BLACKTOP* (1971)

The Road

Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) opens with an invisible landscape, shrouded in the darkness of night. Along a two-lane highway, drag racers prepare their vehicles as the spectators look on. The location is presumably outside Los Angeles, California (as a gang member's jacket indicates). For Hellman's protagonists, "California is not the beginning of a new life but instead represents the end of the road for the American Dream." (Ireland 476) Hellman's narrative seems to take off where the early western lands—at the edge of the continent, where the idea of American expansionism meets the reality of the ocean. *Two-Lane's* opening evidences perhaps the primary difference between the road movie and the western—with the road movie there are no spaces left to map. Hellman's characters reference dozens of place names throughout their journey, along with their desire to travel to these places. But their inability to escape the confines of society reflects in the well-mapped cities and towns they reference, which offers no escape from the seemingly endless grid of the map.⁴

As the race is set to begin, the driver sits in his primer-gray Chevy parked alongside his racing opponent's car. Two lights flash—a red and a green—and the driver (James Taylor) sends his hotrod disappearing into the night. From the darkness and the unknown comes the illuminated and familiar—that unmistakable figure of authority, the police. The illegal race is immediately thwarted, authority exerting its power over these outlaw racers. The driver makes a sharp u-turn, and stops to pick up his partner-in-crime, the mechanic, before leaving the scene of the crime.

⁴ There is only one scene in *Two-Lane* which makes use of a map, and its presence is brief.

Two-Lane operates within many of the Western's narrative patterns, and Hellman himself directed a pair of Westerns before *Two-Lane*. The film's opening sequence closely parallels the narrative pattern of *Winchester '73*'s opening prowess duel. Though the driver has won the opening drag race, thus demonstrating his competence and superiority behind the wheel, he and the mechanic have lost the two-hundred dollars staked on the race's outcome—effectively stolen by authority's intervention.

As Lin McAdam has the "1 of a 1000" rifle that is rightfully his stolen by Dutch Henry Brown and his gang in the opening of *Winchester '73*, *Two Lane*'s protagonists here suffer a similar fate. The marked difference between the two films is that Dutch Henry Brown's taking of the gun is illegitimate and does not have the backing of society or the law. The police in *Two-lane* act under the guise of legitimized authority, with both the approval of society and the backing of the law, signaling an ideological shift from the Western's narrative structure to the road movie's, where the protagonists are the outlaw figures.

Winchester '73 opens with a prowess duel and ends with a vertical-axis annihilation duel as McAdam and Brown duel from varying points on the mountain; *Two-Lane* follows a similar pattern. From the opening prowess duel, the film ultimately ends with an annihilation duel on an airstrip (suggesting a similarly vertical-axis duel) where the driver, his '55 Chevy, and the film frame itself literally burn up in a final freeze frame. In *Winchester*, the hero figure defeats the villain, fulfilling his desire for revenge and reclaiming the rifle that is rightfully his. In *Two-Lane*, the driver runs out of time, the film ends, and the stilled frame destroys him.

Two-Lane's characters are outlaws within an outlaw hotrod culture as they continue to seek out and lure in unsuspecting opponents. As the mechanic states to the driver as they cruise past a series of hotrods, "listen, all we got to do is rope one." The mechanic's dialogue suggests the men are outlaw cowboys, essentially attempting to steal cattle by "roping" one in. Their racing victories bring the much needed monies that fund their easterly trip and sustain their physical existence, but these character's are motivated by something greater—restoring their relationship with their engine and the landscapes they exist within.

Breathing

As the group drives along the open highway, the mechanic comments to the driver, "she don't seem to be breathing right." As the narrative progresses, the mechanic continually adjusts the carburetor's jets, checks the valves, and listens for clues as the engine idles and revs across the highway. Their out-of-tune engine reflects on their imperfect relationship to the road and landscape, and a society out of tune with its environment. While the mechanic refers explicitly to a deficiency with their engine, the duo's imperfect relationship to their engine functions as synecdoche for American culture's drive to conquer the landscape. Westward expansionism ends in consumer culture, roadways, and a seemingly endless network of towns and cities that turn landscapes into cityscapes.

The engine functions as the literal life-giver to the automobile, the heart and soul that animates the vehicle, and the duo is reliant on the engine for their own ability to traverse the highway. The mechanic repeatedly refers to the hotrod as "her," but his relationship to the car seems less anthropomorphic and more like a cowboy and his horse. He seems to care for the vehicle in the same way that McAdam's partner in

Winchester 73, High Spade Frankie Wilson, cares for their horses. Wilson suggests to McAdam that they ought to stop for the sake of the horses, but McAdam urges them to continue through the desert. The internal combustion of the engine functions as metaphor for the duo's own survival—the horses dying in the desert, like the engine failing, would lead to physical and spiritual deaths, respectively. The race against G.T.O. for “pink slips” further amplifies the duo's need to push their hotrod to its limits, and at peak performance. But as the duo's various plans and destinations give way to their nomadic existence, the one concern of theirs that remains throughout is their desire to restore the engine's ability to breathe right.

This notion of “breathing right” works in opposition to the asphyxiation that threatens the protagonists—a threat that results from the endlessly bisected landscapes they exist within, and the enclosed cabin space of the automobile (Figure 7-1). The automobile and its “cabin,” suggest that the frontier has run out of immobile landscape-spaces to domesticate. The domestic lifestyle championed with the early Western gives way to the nuclear family of the 20th century, where the automobile's cabin serves as a mobile fragment of domesticated space—“a home or a bed on wheels.” (Dick 23) The driver, the mechanic, and later, the girl, attempt to escape stasis and domestication by heading east along the highway, in an attempt to restore a balance to their relationship with American landscapes—to discover opens spaces where they can escape physical and spiritual suffocation.

Immediately after the mechanic voices his concern with the engine's breathing deficiency, a long-shot of the landscape is revealed, with the duo's 1955 Chevrolet cutting across the landscape in a left to right motion (coded as west to east if the film

screen is read like a map). The implication here is that a balance will be sought between the driver/mechanic duo, the road, and the landscape—space to breathe in. Hellman’s characters are suffocated, the automobile itself like a metal coffin and the landscapes their endless cemetery. No matter how fast their flat-black frankensteined hotrod traverses the open highway, these twin protagonists cannot escape the inescapable; their annihilation duel against the American roadway ultimately ends in annihilation for the driver and the world he exists within.



Figure 7-1. The enclosed space of the cabin becomes mobile in the road movie.

Annihilation, the Duel, and the Final Sequence of *Two-Lane Blacktop*

Two-Lane's final scene opens with the road perfectly bisecting the landscape (Figure 7-2). From the film's opening shot, to the final sequence, it is the road—or more abstractly, the blacktop—that functions as the visual centerpiece of the film. Its framing in the final scene only further codifies its significance. The perfectly bisected roadway suggests the possibility of the duel, with the left and right lanes creating a conflict of space that suggests two opposing sides. The composition implicitly seems to be asking, "What exists beyond the vanishing point?" where the spatial reach of the camera's eye fails to see further. This is the question the driver has sought an answer to throughout the entire narrative.



Figure 7-2. The airstrip and the painted lane separator open the final sequence of *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971). A) The painted lane separator perfectly bisects the frame into two equal parts. B) The camera tilts up revealing a long shot of the landscape.

The driver's ambivalence about where the road will take him becomes evident in the final third of the film. He claims that after reaching Washington D.C. he will head to Florida. Later, he contradicts himself, stating he will head to Columbus, Ohio to purchase some parts a man has to sell. These two geographic locations are not arbitrary points on a map, but logical continuations of the west to east movement, the wish to revert back to a time and place before empire was fully achieved. American empire begins in Florida, where the Spaniards become the first Europeans to claim the entire continental U.S. as their own. And of course, Columbus is not merely a city in Ohio but the conqueror who first staked his claim to all American landscapes. The driver, however, cannot undo the history he is inextricably linked to, setting himself up for the annihilation duel that unfolds in *Two-Lane's* final sequence.

That the final race-duel takes place on an airstrip only heightens its meaning, the horizontal tendency of the annihilation duel attempting to function in horizontal-vertical space, as with the final duel in Anthony Mann's, *Winchester '73*. Of course, the automobile cannot escape its horizontal limitations (except in freefall), but the airstrip suggests a final attempt for the driver to escape the confines of the space he exists within—ascension being the primary purpose of an airstrip (landing is contingent on

take-off). What the airstrip and the overall visual realism of the film cannot provide (escape), the cinematic apparatus will ultimately deliver in the film's final frame.

Just before the final race-duel begins, the mechanic regulates the timing belt as the spectators gather around him to admire the finely tuned machine (Figure 7-3). The mechanic's purpose comes to fruition as he brings the engine to its full potential restoring the engine's ability to breathe right. The automobile at once becomes an extension of his own being as the engine can only achieve perfection through the mechanic's highly specialized skills. This scene unfolds as a literal "gun fight;" the mechanic's timing gun pointed directly at the heart of the engine. After completing his duel with the engine, the mechanic closes the hood. His narrative purpose has been exhausted. The mechanic walks around the front of the car, revealing the driver behind the wheel, and the mechanic exits the frame for the last time. The final race-duel can begin.



Figure 7-3. The mechanic leans over the engine as spectators gather behind him.

Two-Lane's final race-duel amalgamates both a prowess duel and an annihilation duel into a single race-duel. The driver positions himself and his '55 Chevrolet against the driver of the black El Camino in what functions as a prowess duel. A prowess duel

opens the film, and ultimately, closes it. In effect, our characters have completed an odyssey, or perhaps they've gone nowhere, ending in the same space where they have begun.

The annihilation duel culminates in this scene as the driver duels against the road itself, as he attempts to escape its limitations on the airstrip. The road, however, is indefatigable, never-ending (appearing to continue beyond its own vanishing point), and as such unconquerable. The road results from continued expansion and development—an intricate navigational system that the driver cannot completely grasp nor conquer. The driver becomes consumed by the endless highway, unable to out-maneuver or out-speed its vastness.

In the final shot of the sequence, the driver speeds off. The shot delivers an over-the-shoulder perspective from within the hotrod as it speeds down the airstrip. The spectator is here situated as back-seat passenger. The film's soundtrack has completely faded out and the shot begins to progress in slow motion. Time stands still for a brief moment before it disappears; the final moments before total annihilation. The freeze-framed shot literally burns up, destroying the indexical nature of the camera-produced image and destroying the materiality of the film itself—total annihilation (Figure 7-4). The road (and empire) destroy the driver and his quest for space to breathe in. The cinematic apparatus, like the driver's quest for freedom, can only exist in a state of perpetual motion. Once the frame becomes static, it burns up. And the problem of empire that proves inescapable for the driver is that there is no freedom beyond the vanishing point, only more of the same.



Figure 7-4. In the final sequence of *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), the image literally melts away.

APPENDIX: ROAD MOVIES THAT END IN (OR NEAR) ANNIHILATION FOR ONE OR MORE OF ITS PROTAGONISTS

- *Thieves Highway* (1949): protagonist's faulty truck runs off the highway while attempting to deliver apples to the market in San Francisco.
- *Thunder Road* (1958): protagonist's automobile is sabotaged by law enforcement which causes a deadly roadside crash.
- *Psycho* (1960): Marion Crane checks into the Bates Motel where Norman Bates murders her.
- *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967): both protagonists gunned down at a filling station by law enforcement.
- *Easy Rider* (1969): all three protagonists gunned down by rural southerner.
- *Midnight Cowboy* (1969): one of the protagonists dies on the bus while en route to Miami, Florida.
- *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971): chief protagonist annihilated while drag racing in the film's final frame.
- *The Vanishing Point* (1971): protagonist runs into a road block set up by law enforcement.
- *Thelma & Louise* (1991): protagonists run their automobile over the Grand Canyon.
- *The Living End* (1992): while the protagonist ultimately survives, his attempted suicide suggests annihilation.
- *My Own Private Idaho* (1992): the protagonist suffers a seizure on a deserted two-lane highway that renders him unconscious.
- *Children of Men* (2006): Protagonist dies by gun wound once he reaches the ocean.
- *The Road* (2009): protagonist dies while traversing along the post-apocalyptic road.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Georg Koszulinski received his M.A. from the University of Florida in the Spring of 2011. His films and videos have screened at museums, film festivals, and microcinemas worldwide. Notable screening spaces include the Anthology Film Archives, Harvard Film Archive, Ann Arbor Film Festival, PDX Film Festival, The Florida Experimental Film Festival, and the UK's National Media Museum. His documentaries, *Cracker Crazy* (2007)—a found footage collage film which suggests an alternative history for the Sunshine State—and *Immokalee U.S.A.* (2008)—an observational documentary chronicling the experiences of migrant farmworkers and their families in the U.S.A.—garnered numerous awards including a "Notable Video of the Year" nomination from the American Library Association, and top honors from numerous international film festivals. Both videos air regularly on the Documentary Channel.