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*Theory Culture Society* 1995 12: 53
DOI: 10.1177/026327695012001003

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>> Version of Record - Feb 1, 1995

What is This?
Romancing the Road: Road Movies and Images of Mobility

*Ron Eyerman and Orvar Löfgren*

**Putting Yourself in the Driver's Seat**

Every now and then when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only real cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and then drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas. To relax, as it were, in the womb of the desert sun. Just roll the roof back and screw it on, grease the face with white tanning butter and move out with the music at top volume, and at least a pint of ether.

This is Hunter S. Thompson's (1973: 19) version of a well-known American daydream: hitting the road. It may surface, albeit in less spectacular form, in the everyday life of the most stable family man or woman: in the middle of a traffic jam with the windows closed to keep out the fumes and the country music in the cassette-player to dampen the frustration, the impulse to take the next exit and leave it all behind, the bills, the noisy kids, the overbearing boss, can hit any person in modern society. This spontaneous impulse, which almost always is repressed as soon as it appears, is pre-programmed and builds on a cultural matrix that has been created through exposure to generations of American writers, artists, musicians, film-makers and advertising agents.

The dream of ‘hitting the road’ and the weightless life along the way has, in other words, a long cultural history. It draws upon an image of a constantly changing United States of America, on the move somewhere, and is composed of a specific iconography and aesthetic. This is a landscape one meets not only in films, but in Elmore Leonard’s crime stories, Sam Shepard’s plays, Levis ads, television soaps. It can also be uncovered in the short stories of Raymond Carver, Richard Ford and Jayne Anne Phillips, to name three authors who have contributed to a genre that could be called

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the 'road-story', which is both influenced by and has influenced movie-making.

This is a world which has been transcribed, pictured and set to music over and over again, a mediascape, where different genres are in constant dialogue. The experienced media consumer need only shut his/her eyes and the pictures roll past like sounds out of a roller-piano: gliding top down cars with sun-scorched leather seats and music blasting (with or without faces filled with Thompson's illegal smiles), sleazy motel rooms watched over by jaded clerks dressed in worn T-shirts, the TV crackling in the background. The gas station 'in the middle of nowhere', the bare hotel room and dingy bar, the corner cafe and the tired, motherly waitress are an America that Edward Hopper has already put on canvas in the period between the world wars. The road movie emerged out of this wide cultural constellation to become one of the most powerful forces of its reproduction.

In the following we will look at the making of the road movie genre, a film genre within a genre (cf. the discussion in Carroll, 1985; Berger, 1992). We will discuss how the genre was created, its mental and material roots in nineteenth-century America, how it became institutionalized and fitted with its specific scenes, roles and scripts, as well as how these formulas have evolved in conjunction with a changing social and cultural context. As Hollywood film, road movies articulate particular values and longings that have resonated with audiences around the world, but particularly those in the United States.

This resonance has its basis in the ways freedom and social mobility have been linked to physical mobility as themes in North American culture, or at least that part of it which Hollywood has attempted to represent. A series of questions evolve out of these considerations: if the road movie is particularly American, why have European directors been so fascinated by this genre and why are they finding an audience across the Atlantic? Taking a few Swedish examples as our basis, we look at what happens when the road movie is transplanted into a different social and cultural context. This comparison brings us to a final discussion of how media images of hitting the road can tell us something of the very different ways in which the rhetoric, as well as the experience, of social mobility work in Sweden and in the USA — differences which make it very difficult to produce a Swedish road movie.
On the Way to the Future
The journey as a metaphor for life itself is not an especially American invention, the *homo viator* motif has a long European history, but the Americanization of this type of narrative in the road movie format is the consequence of the way specific conceptions concerning the freedom and the function of the road were construed in the United States. The freedom to move upward and outward, is one of the most central and persistent images America has of itself, helped along of course by the representations of Europeans and others. ‘If you don’t like it here, go somewhere else’, was a cry heard very early on in American history; the phrase always contained the sense of possibility, the positive, within its negative instruction.

Throughout the history of the United States the means as well as the ends of mobility — not to speak of the real possibilities — have steadily changed, from the cautious expansion of the colonial period to the land rushes of the nineteenth century. Alongside the westward-moving wagon trains, slavery, the Civil War and uneven industrial development created great migrations along a south–north axis. Black Americans took the A-train from southern farms and plantations to northern industrial cities. The old slave song, ‘Many thousand gone’ referred not only to those sold on the trading blocks, but also those thousands, soon to be millions, who had abandoned rural southern poverty for a new start in the north. As Paul Oliver (1960) reveals in his classic study of blues music, for African-Americans it was the train that symbolized both the hope of a new life down the road and the means of escaping the restrictions and pain of the present, not the automobile. The road, even for relatively well-to-do African-Americans was an unsafe and unwelcome environment. In his autobiography, Chester Himes (1971) recounts how, even as a successful author driving a new car, he was forced to travel straight across the country, from New York to California, without stopping. As a black man he was an unwelcome guest in the transit culture along the highway.

The Mother Road
For the white majority, it was the car not the train, that came to symbolize the modern dream of mobility, and it was not the rhythm of rails, but the sound of rubber on asphalt that set the mind to hummin’ freedom’s song. This is why essential elements in what has been called the American Dream are captured as a part of the history
of the road. And there can be no doubts about which road one ought to take.

'The Mother Road', 'Main Street America', 'Will Roger's Highway', 'The Symbolic River of America', US Route 66 goes by many names, but whatever one calls it, it seems to have more lustre than any other highway in the world. It begins symbolically enough in Grant Park, Chicago and slowly twists and turns through old industrial cities and towns to the wheat and prairie lands of the American mid and southwest towards what had been called America's future, Los Angeles. The road goes through Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, out to meet the Pacific in Santa Monica, California. Route 66 opened in 1926, the same year Henry Ford symbolically lowered the price of his mass-produced Model-T.

The country's wide open spaces shrank as airplanes, radio-waves and most of all, automobiles, shortened the distances between the coasts. Pre-depression America was a nation where speed and mobility were glorified, in all possible ways. 'America is the world's fastest country' was how Paul Morand put it in 1929. America was on its way to being reshaped by the automobile already in the 1920s, a time when the private car was still a rare luxury item in Europe. In 1923, for example, the state of Michigan had more registered automobiles than Great Britain and Ireland combined (Jakle, 1990: 294).

Route 66 took the newly mobile through lesser known territory — as the first part of a movement, physical as well as cultural, that slowly shifted the nation's focus in a southwesterly direction, towards southern California and, a little later, towards other sun-belt states like Arizona and Texas. D.H. Lawrence was only one of many Europeans who took to roads of the southwest in search of an authentic, native America in the 1920s.

A few years after the opening of Route 66, the future-oriented optimism of the 1920s, as well as the backward looking search for native roots, was broken by severe economic depression. The economic collapse revealed the holes in the Horatio Alger myths of rags to riches. At the same time however, the American dream was given new nourishment by the advent of the highway: out there were new possibilities for physical — if not social — mobility. While the 1930s were a time of great unrest, of political and social fragmentation, one could still hope that a better life — or at least a temporary job — lay just beyond the next curve of the road.
American mythology had always linked freedom to mobility, but now, in the 1930s, movement itself became a symbol of hope. In the midst of economic depression, of breadlines and urban despair, the road seemed to offer a way out, and the possibility of a better life. The hopes and fears that the road symbolized were reflected in popular mythology in figures like the hobo, the travelling minstrel, con-man, cowboy, circus acrobat or itinerant union organizer. Folk singers like Woody Guthrie seemed to combine all these roles in their lives as well as in the songs they made popular. Going down the road, symbolized not only a way out, a going to and a getting away from, it represented possibility, risk and romance. The road and, at the same time, those who lived according to its rules, the throw of the dice, the chance of a new start and the ever-present danger of failure and even death on the unknown highway, were invested with all the symbolic power that the frontier and the frontier's men carried for earlier generations.

The risk and the hope that the road symbolized was expressed most clearly in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Published in 1939, it told the tale of the family Joad's fortunes as they moved from Oklahoma to California along 'the Dustbowl Highway', as Route 66 came to be known during the Depression. Thousands of desperate individuals followed the same route as Steinbeck's Okies, westward in search of a better life. Woody Guthrie watched them pass by and, in 1934, wrote one of the most popular songs of the era to commemorate their migration:

...so long it's been good to know yuh,
This dusty old dust is a-getting my home
And I've got to be drifting along.

**Get Your Kicks on Route 66**

The economic expansion that followed the allied victory in the Second World War only increased the flow of traffic towards California and the fulfilment of the American Dream. In 1946, Nat King Cole recorded the hit song 'Get Your Kicks on Route 66' and, in the good time of the post-war, the trip west had more the flavour of adventure than flight.

The American Century, as the post-war period was labelled by contemporary enthusiasts, created new 'outsider' roles, for those who didn't quite feel at home among the Levittowners in the suburbs. The drifter and the hipster were glorified in the poems
and stories, as well as the lifestyles, of 'Beat' writers like Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac in the 1950s. In their writings an important precondition for the road movies' power of attraction was constituted: its ambiguity. The road, whatever the route, north-south, east-west, was always open, but was always equally filled with risk as well as hope.

Jack Kerouac's best selling novel *On the Road* (1957), gave literary form to the myth of the road's liberating potential that reached a new, primarily young, mass audience. Kerouac captured the great sense of relief that marked post-war American society and culture, a need to make up for time lost at war, a need to consume, as quickly as possible, all the good things that life had to offer. The adventure and excitement the road seemed to offer included ethnographic expeditions to that other America along the wayside that might soon be disappearing in the new mass society. This was the America of the field hand and the migrant worker, colourful ethnic minorities, hobos, pimps and whores — the America of film directors like Jim Jarmusch and, significantly, Wim Wenders and Aki Kaurismäki, as we will soon see. After the war, it was again possible to push the accelerator to the floor and leave all that was petty and bourgeois behind, a feeling that was to become one of the standard cliches of the road movie:

‘Whoee!’ yelled Dean. ‘Here we go!’ And he hunched over the wheel and gunned her; he was back in his element, everybody could see that. We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move. And we moved! We flashed past the mysterious white signs in the night somewhere in New Jersey that said SOUTH (with an arrow) and WEST (with an arrow) and took the south one... (Kerouac, 1957: 133)

The gang was on the way toward adventure encapsulated in a little coupe, walled in by the night with the radio blasting away they were shielded from the pettiness of everyday life and liberated by the anonymity of the road. Life seemed suddenly so simple.

The purity of the road. The white line in the middle of the highway unrolled and hugged our left front tire as if glued to our groove... (1957: 133)

The cult-like reaction to Kerouac's book led William Burroughs to dryly remark that after 1957 *On the Road* 'sold a billion jeans and a million espresso machines and sent countless youths out on
the road'. A television series called *Route 66*, with a Kerouac look-alike in the leading role, was one of the most popular in the early 1960s.

**The Nostalgia of the Road**

While all this was occurring in the realm of fantasy, the real Route 66 was being transformed into a lonesome by-way. The Eisenhower years may have been boring and conservative as far as politics were concerned, but they oversaw a radical transformation of America's inner spaces. More super highways were built than any other time in American history, the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 provided for 41,000 miles of freeway, and internal migration, from south to north and from east to west continued unabated. As the industrial centres of the northeast were being transformed into a 'Rust-belt', a 'Sun-Belt' was emerging out of the deserts of the southwest, as more and more of those fleeing that sinking ship settled down along the new highways through Texas, New Mexico and Arizona.

Route 66 found new life as a symbol of life on the road, a mixed bag of drama and nostalgia. When the road signs along its now deserted path were finally hauled down in 1977, demand for them was so great that the state penitentiary in Pontiac, Michigan was commissioned to produce thousands more as souvenirs. Route 66 was transformed into a bit of Americana, recalling not only the call of the road, but also a simpler way of life. Michael Wallis's bestseller *Route 66 — The Mother Road* (1990), one expression in what has become a great outpouring of nostalgia, begins in this way:

...life begins at the offramp. Away from the superslab, you can still order a piece of pie from the person who baked it, still get your change right from the shopowner, still take a moment to care and be cared about, a long way from home.

The book develops a classical polarization between the tourist and the real traveller, a rhetorical pastiche on superficial and genuine experience of past and present, which itself has a long cultural history. A road culture was soon constructed, where old gas pumps and motel signs were transformed from kitsch into antiques, country stores into living museums, and where car travel itself became an adventure saga of magical quality. Here one traverses not so much
a landscape as a text with idyllic reference to scenes, memories and expressions. Today the ruins of Route 66 are social history, and yet one more example of the extreme uncontemporariness that permeates American culture.

In southern California one can find newly built drive-in restaurants which are exact replicas of those popular in the 1950s, following a wave of period-nostalgia helped along by the film American Graffiti (1973). Waitresses wear the hairstyles and the clothing typical of the period, in order to enhance the experience of reliving a fondly remembered past. In small towns in New Mexico however, it is still possible to drive in at the Sonic Happy Eating diner and order a hamburger through a rusting outdoor microphone. Here the waitress is unlikely to be aware that she represents a forgotten epoch, a piece of cultural history.

The Pre-history of the Road Movie
The transformation of Route 66 reveals how fluid the patterns of mobility and road mythologies are in America. Out of these constellations, fluid as they may be, have emerged that film genre we know as the road movie. It is not by chance that so many road movies use scenery, atmosphere and props taken from Route 66.

Exactly when the road movie was established as a Hollywood genre can be debated. A German bibliography which aims at being comprehensive (Heinzlmeier et al. 1985) lists 254 films spanning the years from 1932–84, but this includes all types of film where the road or the automobile plays some part in the action — from racing car movies and motorcycle gangs to the 'Trucker Western', where tractor-trailer drivers replace the cowboy in the role of the lonesome rider. We have chosen instead to limit ourselves to films where the road and the journey (most often in an automobile, but sometimes with other means of transport as well) have a central function, either in the form of a moral discourse, a tale of personal development, or as a reflection of society itself.

From such a perspective, the genre was institutionalized during the 1960s and 1970s, but with roots that stretch backwards and branches that spread sideways to include what are usually referred to as 'buddy-movies', gangster films and, of course, the Western itself. Among the precursors, John Ford's Grapes of Wrath (1940) deserves special mention. The film, released just one year after Steinbeck's bestselling novel, brought together in the stark social realism that marked the period the central myths around which the
genre would coalesce. Fleeing depression and drought, Houston’s Okies packed into their beat-up jalopy and, along with hundreds of other migrants, headed off to the Californian Eden. Stripped of all their possessions, as well as the niceties of society, the road offered a chance to recast the dice of life. Even if we know the outcome from the beginning, the Joads, representing an entire generation, face the risks of the road with innocent expectation. As such, the film is as much about unexpected experiences along life’s highway, as it is about the tragic result. Anything can happen on the road — and usually does.

As a film, *The Grapes of Wrath* was in many ways unique. In the 1940s and 1950s one has to look elsewhere for the roots of the road movie. The Western is, of course, one obvious ancestor, and perhaps especially John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939), often called the first modern Western (see Short 1991: 183ff), which was released just one year before *The Grapes of Wrath*. Here, as a mixed bag of characters travel west, sharing the confinement of the stagecoach and facing ordeal after ordeal, new sides of their personalities are revealed. This process of revelation, and redemption, would become classic themes in the road movie.

Another source of influence is the post-war gangster film, where the automobile played a central role in escaping authority, was then at the peak of its popularity as a genre. In films such as *Detour* (1945), *Desperate* (1947), *Gun Crazy* (1949), *Drive a Crooked Road* (1954) and *Highway Dragnet* (1954) we find several key ingredients of the road movie: escape, freedom, danger, risk and a form of automobile fetishism.

**Travelling Social Criticism**

‘A man went looking for America and couldn’t find it anywhere . . .’ was the opening motif for *Easy Rider* (1969), probably the most discussed road movie of the socially critical 1960s (cf. Quart and Auster, 1984: 95ff). The search for America began in California, what earlier travellers had seen as the pot of gold at the end of their rainbow, and moved backwards in cultural time and space towards the ‘real’ America, the heartland in Louisiana. What the easy riders discovered was that it was not all Mom and apple pie out there in the small towns and villages of the rural countryside, but rather hippie-hating rednecks. The message was clear, and even more clearly expressed by Peter Fonda, who both directed and starred in the film, in an interview in *Rolling Stone* (1991):
My movie is about the lack of freedom, not about freedom. My heros are not right, they're wrong. The only thing I can end up doing is killing my character. I end up committing suicide; that's what I'm saying that America is doing.


Common to most of these films is that they are about escape, from the claustrophobia of petit-bourgeois life, from corruption and injustice and from an intolerant 'normality'. These films reflect a time of great social unrest, associated with the rising criticism of the Vietnam war — the period from the Tet offensive to the fall of Saigon (1968–75). Here road movies served as sources of easy identification between dissidents on and off the screen, the drug-dealing hippies in *Easy Rider* being one classic example. Identification was both individual and collective, the long-haired viewer left the theatre reconfirmed in a common dissent from the mainstream of American society.

The basic tone of many of these films is pessimistic. *Badlands* (1974), for example, tells the story of two young people on a killing spree through North Dakota. Here the road opens itself to the worst kind of adventure, senseless murder. The story is narrated in dispassionate, matter-of-fact way by the heroine. The killings are done out of boredom, and seem to reflect the normlessness that being on the road can engender. That there are no rules is the rule of the road. At home, in smalltown America, life is normal, guided by the norms of family and community; it's secure, but it's dull. To go on the road is to break out of the patterned routine of everyday life, that's why it's liberating.

Characteristic also is a mixing of criticism of the contemporary society with a nostalgic recall of the Depression-ridden 1930s. In some films, like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) or *Thieves Like Us* (1973), it took form in gangster road movies, in others like the more tame *Emperor of the North* (1972) or *Bound For Glory* (1976) — which was about Woody Guthrie's life — it romanticized the hobo and railroading tramp. In *Paper Moon* (1973), the road took us through
the Kansas dustbowl in the midst of the Depression with a charming, Bible-selling con-man and a 9-year-old who may or may not be his daughter. The road is depicted here as a fantasy place, an escape from poverty and dreariness, and a place to rediscover the fun and games of parent–child relationships. The many-sidedness of authentic life is, thus, on the road and not in what's left behind.


**Yuppies at the Wheel**

This new wave of road movies clearly distinguishes itself from its predecessors. It is a mixed bag, from brutal thrillers to light comedy, and the social criticism which unified the previous generation is much less obvious, if not entirely absent. A typical 1980s road movie theme is the disillusioned yuppie looking for authenticity instead of junk bonds. *Lost in America* (1985) can serve as one example. The male hero — or anti-hero since the film is a light satire — is a Los Angeles advertizing executive who, after failing to receive the promotion he feels he deserves, leaves it all behind to search for a new life in the 'real' America, just as the two 'easy riders' did in the late 1960s, only now the main characters are man and wife and their means of transport is not a motorcycle but a trailer home. The male lead's occupation and place of work are important in establishing the plot: the way of earning a living must be at least as alienating, as 'phony', as the rest of the environment — the cold glass and steel, as well as the smog, one seeks to escape from. Escape is the drive eastward, reversing the traditional flow of American historical development, to the real America, the America before Los Angeles. Time and space are here collapsed into one: taking the road east is also to move back in time. But, since this movie is a mild parody, what is discovered on the way is not always authenticity, and maybe Los Angeles (or New York where the film ends), for all its faults, was not so bad after all.

Another example of the yuppie road movie is *Something Wild* (1986). Here we meet a New York advertising man who falls prey
to a rather typical road movie character: the dark and dangerous woman complete with dubious past and interesting sexual preferences. Luring him into her car — a worn, yet still exciting convertible — she shows him new sides of America and unknown sides of himself. As in *Easy Rider* however, this American heartland is peopled with phoniness and small-time criminals, amidst the high school reunions and neat country villages. Here it is ‘normality’ that meets the road’s risky and otherwise different lifestyle. The symbolism abounds as motorcycle gangs sweep by the family station wagons, like sharks at the beach. In the end, however, it is normality that emerges victorious: the hero realizes that his yuppie life was empty and meaningless, and even manages to transform the *femme-fatale* into a pretty — and harmless — middle-class women.

*Something Wild* plays on the theme of the road as a neutral sort of space where cultures and classes can meet and mix. This idea was the basis for another road movie comedy, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987). Here Steve Martin plays a successful businessman — too old perhaps to qualify as a yuppie — who is forced to take more ‘proletarian’ means of transport when the airport is snowed in and his first-class flight cancelled. From the elegant business-class waiting rooms and the executive suite of the Hilton Hotel, Martin moves down to discover — in his understated comic style — the other America of worn and dangerous train and bus stations, seedy motels, dirty cafes and overweight travelling shoe salesmen. Being forced out of the wall-papered and seat-cushioned security of air transport and into the unpredictable and improvised life on the road is also the theme of *Rain Man* (1991). Here the yuppie (Tom Cruise) is forced to take care of his autistic brother and in the process of the journey to learn new sides of himself. The road can play a therapeutic role.

**The Pedagogy of the Road**

Such films reveal aspects of the genre’s pedagogical tricks. The automobile is given the lead role in several senses. It can be a means of freedom and power, which can be shown through sequences where the hero is left stranded and must make it on foot, as in *My Own Private Idaho* (1992). Without a car, one loses control and can easily be victimized by the hostile environs, social and natural. Further, the automobile creates an arena for a particular kind of social interaction. The compact steel compartment
can be a shelter from humdrum everyday obligations, offering a means to try out new versions of yourself against what Kerouac called 'the protective anonymity of the road'. On the other hand, the car can just as quickly be transformed into a claustrophobic cell, where an enforced intimacy with fellow travellers may become threatening.

Even if the road movie is essentially about the lone wolf, the outsider and the misfit, most films in the genre get their dramatic force through unexpected confrontations that occur along the way. The road creates the possibility of strange encounters, from buddy-relations to death-struggles, where pair and triangular relationships work themselves out in the inner space of the car or along the wayside of the road. Positions in the role-play are rather set: it is primarily men who meet, often odd couples, as in Easy Rider or Scarecrow. This can include businessmen meeting the working class, criminals hitching a ride with middle-class squares or the young confronting the old.

The automobile also structures the relationships between the travellers, exploring the social psychology of front and back seat, of taking the wheel or staying behind. A classic example can be found in Cohen and Tate (1988), where two hired killers kidnap a small boy who was witness to a mafia murder. Under the dark night sky, where only the flames and lights of the passing oil refineries are visible, the trio travel by car from Oklahoma to Texas. A stark drama unfolds in this encapsulated setting as the journey reveals differences between the gunman, an older-generation professional and a younger, near-psychotic killer who enjoys the thrill as much as the money he receives. As they move along and the tension mounts, the three change places, from the symbolic driver's seat to front-seat passenger, to the victim's place in the back.

As we noted, it is usually men who have the leading roles in road movies, white men. Women on the other hand, must content themselves with rather predictable supporting roles, the motherly or cynical waitress at the roadside diner, the damsel in distress or the seductive hitchhiker. The automobile — and of course the Harley Davidson — serves both as an extension of male potency and an intoxicant. In continually moving forward, and presenting a moving target, one escapes the boredom and the demands of that other life, at the same time as movement itself offers a sense of change as well as of nothingness. In one of the latest road movies,
A Perfect World (1994), a man and his young male hostage sit together inside an automobile. The man asks

what is this we're sitting in kid, a car? No, its a modern time machine. See that behind us? that's the past; that in front of us is the future and this here [in the car] is the present. If you want the future to come a little quicker, you just push down on the gas pedal.

In the road movie, it's men and machines that make the world move. ‘In American popular culture, few images have exhibited such continuing virility as the road’, Estelle Jussim and Elisabeth Lindquist-Cock (1985: 105) point out in their analysis of American landscape photography. Taking to the road often becomes a ritual of manhood, a way of proving yourself. Playing on these possibilities is what gives Thelma and Louise (1991) its force and power of attraction, and why many have called it a feminist road movie (Dargis, 1991). Suddenly we are presented with women in the driver's seat, even if they seize it through traditional male means, with a pistol. The cliches are at least given a shake or two. This is not the first road movie to give women the opportunity to sit behind the wheel and break away from a claustrophobic family life or the gossiping small town. In Martin Scorsese's Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1975) the theme is similar to Thelma and Louise. Alice makes her symbolic westward journey only to discover that her place in the sun consists in what the American author Douglas Coupland (1991) has called ‘McJobs’ low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, low-benefit, no-future jobs in the service sector . . .

The difference is that the heroines in Thelma and Louise, like many of their road movie male counterparts, end up on the wrong side of the law and become quarry in a police hunt, while Alice finds happiness in the arms of Kris Kristofferson. While it may not be the first ‘female’ road movie and may or may not be ‘feminist’, Thelma and Louise does offer a good example of how a certain landscape aesthetic has been created in road movies. Its journey follows the path of many of its predecessors, taking the off-ramp of the interstate highway and travelling the side roads from Arkansas through Oklahoma and New Mexico, towards Mexico itself. The route is the traditional one, not only for road movies but also for westerns and gangster films. Mexico has always served Hollywood as the hideaway ‘across the border’. Ridley Scott,
the film's director, worked very hard to recreate the classic road movie atmosphere, consisting of a dry, flat landscape, empty of all human beings except the chased and the chasers, where the only other signs of civilization are the endless string of telephone poles. After a long search along the ruins of Route 66, he finally settled on a desolate stretch in southern California.

The road movie builds on both a physical and a mental landscape. Both compose a specific cultural grammar that stands behind the way the journey is organized from start to finish. The journey itself can be thought of as one between several alternative destinations like Badlands, Wasteland, Dreamland and Heartland. These symbolic paths can be combined, mixed together, in various ways. In reality, however, it is not the stations themselves that are the most important. The road and its destinations are essentially a metaphor for life itself: part of a process of social learning. On the road anything can happen, one is vulnerable but also open and, at journey's end, a new person has been manifested. Men discover new sides to their personality, mellowing, maturing; but on the other hand it is striking how often the darker sides of the human personality are the ones called forth: teenagers transformed into violent psychopaths, timid family men into rapists and so on. Leaving it all behind seems also to mean anomie rather than just alienation, after all 'it's a jungle out there'!

The ways in which the road movie has been institutionalized into a genre also account for its attraction to film-makers. Quite a few directors began a career by making such a movie. Besides the cultural resonance and, thus, the relatively sure market, it is not only a low-budget genre but a safe genre as well. The road movie has acquired a basic narrative structure, a journey from start to finish, as we have suggested, and developed a set of castings, props and backdrops. It was not by chance that Steven Spielberg's first film was a road movie: *Duel* (1972). The risks involved are not so much that it can't be done or that it won't sell, but that it will be too predictable, with its well-rehearsed themes turning into hackneyed cliches. A good example of this cultural petrification can be found in Edward Zwick's *Leaving Normal* (1992) which attempts to cash in on the success of *Thelma and Louise*. Here we find all the familiar road movie ingredients: the insecure and mousy Marianne leaves her home and brutal husband in the town of Normal to strike up a roadside fellowship with the cynical and tough but good-hearted cocktail waitress Darly. Together they
travel north in a predictable odyssey towards personal development and final happiness in a small Alaskan village — an end station with the unmistakable flavour of the Heartland.

From its, beginnings the road movie was constituted around nostalgia: nostalgia for a sensed loss of freedom or missed opportunity, but there is also a marked tendency in other films and film genres to make reference to the moods and styles of the 1950s and 1960s. Even for films set in the 1980s or 1990s, there is an unmistakable historicizing in the choice of everything from automobiles to gas stations and landscapes.

In some ways this tendency towards petrification of a genre has been countered by the ways in which the goals and destinations circumscribed by road movies have shifted from generation to generation, in the 1960s the searchers and seekers were hippies, in the 1980s, they were yuppies, looking for another life among the gas stations and the roadside cafes. In this sense the road movie mirrors the changing cultural climate in America, as well as changing social conditions, offering at different times idyllic dreams or social criticism, farce or tragedy. Now it looks as if a new generation of viewers will be found on the other side of the Atlantic.

Crossing the Atlantic
Since the 1960s American road movies have had a large and enthusiastic European audience. It is a genre which not only has fascinated film-goers but film-makers as well. This has resulted in an impressive production of European road movies — from France to Iceland in recent years. What is it that makes this American genre so attractive in Europe and what happens when it crosses the Atlantic? What kinds of cultural transformations are involved in its reception? What types of cultural resonance do we find?

Answering such questions calls forth a paradox — the popularity of the road movie is found both in its power to strike a familiar note as well as an exotic one. For Europeans the road movie often becomes a piece of Americana, a condensed version of something represented as typically American: a mental and physical landscape, which produces reactions of both fascination and repulsion. Here America is frozen in its image, a specific form of freedom and adventure, of taste and distaste, a timeless landscape with neither significant past nor future.

The road movie can be interpreted as an expression of the
ambivalent way in which the European middle class and its intellectuals deal with the American Other. It is not by chance that the most comprehensive catalogue of road movies was made by some clearly fascinated Germans or that Jean Baudrillard's controversial book, *America* (1989), starts in classic road movie style:

Nostalgia born of the immensity of the Texan hills and the sierras of New Mexico: gliding down the freeway, smash hits on the Chrysler stereo, heat wave. Snapshots aren't enough. We need the whole film of the trip in real time, including the unbearable heat and the music. We'd have to replay it all from end to end at home in a darkened room, rediscover the magic of the freeways and the distance and the ice-cold alcohol in the desert... (Baudrillard 1989: 1)

We can parallel this crystallization of something 200 percent American in the ways in which European media and advertising exploit road movie images in marketing, consciously playing upon and intensifying European (male) fantasies and expectations. Let us just mention two 1993 examples: the Scandinavian Levis ads which combine pretty faces, a Chevy convertible, an open-ended desert landscape and an old rock song like, 'I'm on the Road Again', to sell the quintessential American product, or the British cigarette ad which consists of an archetypical rendering of road movie landscape, a deserted road, an abandoned Harley Davidson standing beside rusty oil cans and a wooden shack with a lonely row of telephone poles as a backdrop.

The commercial use of such imagery both contributes to and draws upon constructed American icons, helping create a European cult complex enough to contain its own internal differentiation, regarding the reception and interpretation of this symbolically constituted America (Wulff, 1993). In Sweden, working-class youths from smaller rural towns have adopted the gas guzzling Ford and Chevy of the 1960s and 1970s as the basis of an anti-establishment subcultural identity (O'Dell, 1994), the same type of automobile in which 'Thelma and Louise' made their classic road movie journey. But the college-educated, middle class and predominantly female, Swedish audience that flocked to see that movie would probably never dream of riding with these working-class 'greasers'. Each class-related audience makes its own use of these 'authentic' American icons (cf. the discussion in Crane, 1992, regarding audience specificity).

These European readings of the 'Americanness' of imported road movies become even more evident when we look at the ways in
which European film directors have turned to the genre. The most striking example is of course Wim Wenders, whose film-making career from *My American Friend* (1977), where Dennis Hopper sings the theme from *Easy Rider* against the backdrop of a desolate German landscape, to *Until the End of the World* (1993), marketed as ‘the ultimate road movie’, has been tied to the open road. Wenders’s version of the road in *Paris, Texas*, as both a mentality and a physical setting, illustrate the ways in which this exotic European Americanness can be condensed and communicated, to receptive audiences on either side of the Atlantic.

British director Ridley Scott’s search for the ‘perfect road movie landscape’ in *Thelma and Louise* illustrates this process of selection and enlargement. It can also be found in Finland’s Aki Kaurismäki’s *Leningrad Cowboys go America* (1989). Here a hopeless Finnish rock band rolls along the highway from New York to Mexico, chasing after gigs. Outside the windows of their beat-up Cadillac a predictable American landscape glides by, the level zero of the road: industrial cemeteries, broken-down hotels and gas stations, hole-in-the-wall bars. Kaurismäki knows his Jim Jarmush. But in the end, like its Swedish counterparts to which we will turn in a moment, the transposition seems forced, while the comedy depends upon Finnish rather than American sensibilities. The trip, as we will soon see, has a very different meaning in Scandinavia.

Problems of cultural translation become even more obvious when we look at the ways in which European directors have tried to transplant the genre into European settings. Here we can name two Swedish examples from the early 1990s. *Have a Wonderful Life* (1991) by the Swedish director Ulf Malmros is a tale told in a yellow Chevrolet moving from northern Sweden to Stockholm. The action is laden with cultural leftovers and a tempo imported from America: young men slouched down and ‘hangin’ out’ as if they were on 42nd Street and Broadway, worn luggage standing on the asphalt, truck drivers in cowboy boots, rubber dolls hanging on the windscreen and Dolly Parton in the cassette. All on Swedish Highway 151. Such imported images do not make woodsy, northern Sweden more American, but rather have a quaint and irresistible Swedishness about them that never ceases to fascinate Americans. The ways in which elements of American everyday life, from body language to truck stop interiors, are transformed into pieces of Americana in Sweden and used in the formation of Swedish identity.
constructs, imply a very thorough domestication of these transnational imports (cf. Löfgren, 1993; O'Dell, 1994).

The second example, John Lindström’s *Dreaming of Rita* (1992), is a road movie around the classic theme of middle-class mid-life crisis. Here the trip runs from Stockholm to the Continent, with a wife escaping from a career-centred husband, who doesn’t live up to contemporary Swedish expectations concerning childcare commitments. The film lacks the constant references to American lifestyles and symbols of *Have a Wonderful Life*, but it abounds with many of the American road movies’ classical narrative techniques and visual tricks, for example in the leading lady’s over the shoulder glance as she hears her lover’s motorcycle start up outside the window. The sound of freedom calls, but can she leave husband and children behind for a fling further on down the road? While they may call upon the condensed imagery of the road movie, neither of these films convey the same meanings to their, ‘native’ audiences that their American counterparts and models do. Just why this is the case, will be our next topic.

**Going for a Drive in USA and Sweden**

In spite of their faithful adherence to the American road movie formula, films such as the two mentioned above have an extremely Swedish flavour, which raises the question of why is it so difficult to transplant the genre? The most obvious, but not the most important answer is that the American road movie takes place in a very specific setting with definite social and moral characteristics. ‘I’m a connoisseur of the road’, says one of the characters in *My Own Private Idaho*, and this particular cultural competence has a much longer history in America than in Sweden. The American way of handling the automobile, the road and mobility accounts for one of the obstacles in translating the genre. At the most obvious level, with its neat family hotels and tidy gas stations the Swedish roadscape can never live up to the atmosphere surrounding a Greasy Joe’s Bar & Grill or the quaint seediness of the ‘Love-in-Motel’. The frequent use of American icons, for example the 1993 remodelling of a chain of roadside cafes as ‘Route 66 theme places’ crammed with Americana, tends to underline the Swedishness of the setting. The difficulties of translation however, go beyond the rather obvious differences of physical landscape to those of a more elusive social and cultural roadscape.

The long and intense marriage of Americans and their cars has
created an anonymous space, a zone-zero transit arena made up of freeway rest areas and commercial strips, separated from the surrounding local community. This helps to create a real basis for the road movie cliche that ‘out there anything can happen’. In Sweden, this road culture, cliched or otherwise, has little basis in reality. Swedish highways are definitely not a jungle and this transit culture is, at best, very underdeveloped. Thus, the shock of confrontation and the openness of possibility which road movies play upon does not work in the same way in such a relatively homogeneous culture. The travelling heroes in the two Swedish movies mentioned only experience a very mild culture-shock when they hit the road. Their encounters are safely grounded in a classic Swedish film tradition, where the quaint and rustic ruralis confront the city-slickers from Stockholm.

The idea of ‘going for a drive’ or ‘taking to the road’ is also difficult to translate into Swedish. Driving in the USA is, as film directors have long understood, a mental state, a specific art — ‘the freeway experience’, as it has recently been labelled. This elusive Americanness of driving has been caught by writers like Kerouac in his visions of ‘the purity of the road’; or, by Thomas Pynchon or Joan Didion in their ethnographies of the California freeways:

To understand what was going on it is perhaps necessary to have participated in the freeway experience, which is the only secular form of communion Los Angeles has. Mere driving on the freeway is in no way the same as participating in it. Anyone can ‘drive’ on the freeway, and many people with no vocation for it do, hesitating here and resisting there, losing the rhythm of the lane change, thinking about where they came from or where they are going. Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway. The mind goes clean. The rhythm takes over. A distortion of time occurs. (Didion, 1979: 83)

In an earlier book, *Play It As It Lays* (1970), Didion’s heroine finds her life crumbling and turns to freeway driving as therapy and release:

Again and again she returned to an intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic. On the afternoon she finally did it without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly. (Didion, 1970, 13)

This theme of letting your mind go is echoed in many other
ethnographies of ‘going for a drive in America’. ‘Just driving’, is a many-layered experience, embedded in dispositions and sensibilities, of mind and body, that are rarely verbalized. As such, it does not lend itself to easy translation into Swedish culture. Here, the car has had a rather different position in society (both in terms of gender and class) and experiences of ‘going for a drive’ or ‘hitting the road’ differ not only on the level of image and ideology, but also in the structuring of what, following Bourdieu, could be called the cultural habitus of the road.

Finally, the basic theme of road movies, ‘risking it’, has little resonance with basic Swedish conceptions of personal challenge and social mobility. In this way, an analysis of the obvious domestication of the road movie in its Swedish version may tell us something about the totally different ways in which conceptions of social mobility are organized, experienced and mass-mediated in the two national settings.

**On the Move**

We pulled out at dawn. I had the feeling, the floater’s only fix: I was free, it didn’t matter if I never saw these streets again; even as we passed them they receded and entered a realm of placeless streets. Even the people were gone, the good ones and the bad ones; I owned whatever real had occurred, I took it all. I was vanished, invisible, another apartment left empty behind me, my possessions given away, thrown away, packed away in taped boxes fit into an available vehicle. The vehicle was the light, the early light and later the darkness.

This is Jayne Philips’s (1987: 43) literary version of a classic road movie image: wiping the slate clean. In the American version of ‘moving on’ one finds a focus on erasing the past which is quite different from many European traditions, particularly the Swedish. If we leave the world of imagery for the numbers game, and look at the frequency of garage sales and ‘welcome wagons’ or more basically the frequency of actually moving home, we find great differences between America and Sweden.

In many ways the culture constructed around being in transit is as basic to the American way of life and the American dream as it is to the road movie. The genre explores a central aspect of this in the theme of ‘not looking back’, just as the continuous popularity of Edward Hopper’s urban scenes rests on the ways these paintings have come to be viewed as icons of a transit culture. His bare interiors are hymns to simplicity and what the folk singer John Prine
has called ‘life’s in-betweens’: hotel rooms where the phone never rings, where expectations are small and baggage minimal. Here individuality rests upon a strength derived from loneliness, where a rolling stone gathers no moss.

Like the Freudian, the American Dream has suffered many interpreters and interpretations. However, it usually involves moving from worse to better, through hard work and sacrifice, more than moving from one place — or class — to another (Weiss, 1969). As long as reward matches effort no one complains, until, that is, the final destination — success — is reached. The secure job and the family in the suburbs, all achieved on borrowed money, can cause boredom to set in, giving the automobile, the centrepiece of the Dream, and the road to drive it on, a whole new look.

While the American Dream is essentially about success and security, about making it, the road is about escape, and freedom. As the owner of New York’s Harley-Davidson Cafe put it at the opening in 1993, ‘Harley-Davidson is the essence of America: freedom, open roads and a lot of fun...’. Freedom here is not of the ‘freedom from want’ kind that Franklin Delano Roosevelt made famous. It is rather of the ‘freedom to’ kind, the freedom to move on, to make one’s own way and to risk everything for a new chance. For most, this kind of freedom is not the stuff of politics or practicality, but of dreams, of fantasy, and thus, of movie houses and films.

The automobile was always invested with a dreamlike quality. Right from the beginning, with Henry Ford’s mass-produced Model T, it was designed to give more than speedy transportation. It was a measure of success to be sure, but more importantly it was a symbol of the freedom to move. One of Ford’s competitors in the 1920s put it this way: ‘When I sold a car, I sold it with the honest conviction that I was doing the buyer a favor in helping him to take his place in a big forward movement’ (Jakle, 1990: 294).

As Katherine S. Newman notes, however, there is a downside to all this.

American culture has always celebrated forward motion, progress, upward mobility. We are true optimists, always assuming that the world — or at least our corner of it — will continue to provide more for us than it did for our parents, and more for our children than we have today. This central expectation dies hard. When reality fails to provide what we think we are owed, we seldom readjust our expectations. Instead, we stew in frustration or search for a target for our anger, pointing fingers at more fortunate generations, incompetent presidents, disloyal
corporations. When this fails to satisfy, Americans are often inclined to look within, to personalize wide-scale economic disasters in the form of individual failings. (Newman, 1991: 122)

Here would seem to lie at least part of the explanation for the changing tone, if not the content, of road movies. Since the 1970s the American middle class has been hard-pressed by a stagflating economy and a slow, but steady de-industrialization, a situation which has created at one and the same time, high rates of unemployment and many new, but low-salaried, jobs (cf. the discussion in Ehrenreich, 1989; Newman, 1988). Moving down the road in the 1990s somehow does not have the same double-sidedness of risk and expectation that it previously had. The risk is certainly there, but no longer the expectation of a better life at the end of the road. Without the mediating force of social movements, which, as C. Wright Mills noted, help turn personal troubles into public issues, Americans have turned criticism inward, becoming distrustful in their attitude towards others and cynical. Chris Rea captured this mood in his 1990 hit with the refrain: ‘This ain’t no upwardly mobile freeway, this is the road to hell . . . ’; the same bitterness was echoed in many movies of the period.

So much for the road movie and the American dream. What about the Swedish equivalent? An American observer commenting on the migration of Swedish peasants from countryside to city described their motivation thus:

They came seeking work, and through it found trygghet, an ancient term that conveys safety and security, consensus and predictability, and the absence of all things uncomfortable and unpleasant. . . . If trygghet was the goal of modern Sweden, then lagom, or appropriateness became its guiding principle. . . . This idea colors all sides of Swedish life — the home, the workplace, the schools. And while it makes for an orderly society, some Swedes fear that this lagom ethic, combined with an educational system that stresses uniformity, discourages the best and the brightest — the smartest kid in the class, the entrepreneur, the risktaker, the artist, the inventor . . . (Belt, 1993: 22)

Such statements belong to a well-established and cliche-ridden genre of national stereotyping, which usually tells us more about the observer than the local reality. If the gods of ‘lagom’ and ‘trygghet’ really ruled, Sweden would probably remain an immobilized peasant society but, as will be discussed below, mobility and the importance of being modern have been central themes in Swedish culture.
The dreams and processes of modernity have shaped modern Sweden, although in different ways than in the United States. Dreams of breaking loose, notions of freedom and social mobility are organized in a different way in the European welfare states, especially of the Scandinavian type, than in the United States (Löfgren, 1993). The concept of freedom that the road movie builds upon does not have the same kind of resonance in cultural settings where individual freedom is always counterbalanced to that of the collective, and where the focus of both public and private policy has been to minimize risk and uncertainty. This of course does not mean that one cannot find vicarious pleasure in viewing such risk-taking in the safe confines of the cinema. Hell can be exciting and even fun, as long as it’s over when the lights go on.

If we compare the ideologies, the discourses and actual patterns of social mobility in twentieth-century Sweden and the United States there are striking differences. The welfare nationalism which developed in post-war Sweden incorporated high levels of social mobility. Although amongst the highest of European nations and higher at some points even than in the United States (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992), Swedish social mobility never entered public discourse in the same form as it did in the US. Mobility in the United States is not only openly discussed, but generally evaluated in positive terms (Lipset and Bendix, 1963); it is part of the nation’s self-image. In Sweden, the ideology of classless modernity which accompanied the formation of the welfare state, helped ensure that discussion of class difference and upward mobility was taboo, or, if talked about at all, couched in metaphorical terms (Frykman, 1989; Löfgren, 1991). One looks in vain for the same kind of rhetoric and imagery concerning personal betterment, physical and social mobility, which has been so common in the USA. When an advertising campaign in the 1980s developed the motto ‘Rely on Yourself!’; for example, this was generally viewed as an example of a too rampant Americanization. Central to the American self-image, mobility has been anathema to the Swedish.

If the discourse on social mobility is rather muted, the phenomenon itself, as we have said, has been predominant in the making of modern Sweden. The actual paths of mobility however, differ from those evidenced in the USA. In Sweden social mobility has often been routed through collectivist social movements and state supported education, and the main body of upwardly mobile class travellers have ended up being employed in the public sector.
(Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992). The signals controlling these mobility routes derived from the dominant cultural emphasis on collective responsibility rather than individual risk-taking. From this follows a fundamental difference in the explanation of the causes of class differences and the experience attached to mobility, social or otherwise. The American pattern of individualizing the failure to 'make it', which Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972) captured in their interviews revealing the 'hidden injuries of class', is far less prevalent in the Swedish working class, for example, where such failure is more likely to be placed at the collective or societal level. Successful mobility tends to be similarly understood, as collective, and thus truly social, rather than individual.

By the early 1990s, however, times were indeed changing. The Swedish welfare state was in crisis, old solutions were being questioned and new paths discussed. In this context, it is not surprising that the road movie, with its message of the open future and fascination for the unknown found a new audience in Sweden and in the rest of Europe, where similar forces had been in motion from an even earlier period. The road movie is a genre tailored for tales and times of crisis — for downward as well as upward mobility — whether they be individual or collective. This, together with the capacity for producing a nostalgia for tomorrow, for romancing the open road, form the essential part of the genre's seemingly universal appeal. Taking all this together with the continuing European love-hate relationship with the United States, we have the grounds for the explanation of the current popularity of the road movie with European film directors and viewing publics. There probably lie many more road movies just around the next bend.

Notes

1. The radical transformation of the 'outer-space' of American culture that would occur in the 1960s was being prepared in these seemingly quiet 1950s through a number of social and cultural processes. A thorough discussion can be found in Jamison and Eyerman (1994).

2. Fredric Jameson (1991: 28ff) offers a quite different interpretation of this film. Rather than a road movie, Jameson analyses *Something Wild* as an expression of post-nostalgia in postmodernism, the dominant culture of late capitalism. Jameson's analysis and his attempt to link cultural forms to stages of development in capitalism are suggestive, but relate to a different tradition of theorizing from the one being presented here. Jameson's explorations of nostalgic dimensions are
important and fruitful, but by analysing this film (and others) outside of its historical position within the road movie genre, he tends to overemphasize differences and underplay the way in which *Something Wild* faithfully reproduces many of the genre’s traditional elements.

Although highly critical of Jameson, Norman Denzin (1991) shares many of the former’s assumptions concerning contemporary cinema and ‘postmodernism’. For an alternative reading of some of the films named here, we can refer the interested reader to the work of these two authors.

3. One of the few examples of a road movie featuring a non-white cast is *Pow Wow Highway* with Native Americans in the leading role.

4. Although the *rite de passage* of taking to the road has been a predominantly male project in most cultures (cf. the discussion in Leed, 1991; Wolff, 1993), the gendering of moving out and moving on is especially striking in American contexts. An interesting way of reading road movies would be to view them in light of the social construction of gender, more specifically, of masculinity. Obtaining a driver’s licence and having access to an automobile was and in many cases still is the *sine qua non* of manhood in the United States. It is in that auto that sexual prowess is expressed. In addition to freedom and mobility, the automobile is thus bound up with masculinity: with and within a car one becomes a man. This is why it is such a shock when Thelma and Louise take over they wheel. They are grabbing a set of male symbols and entering forbidden territory.

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