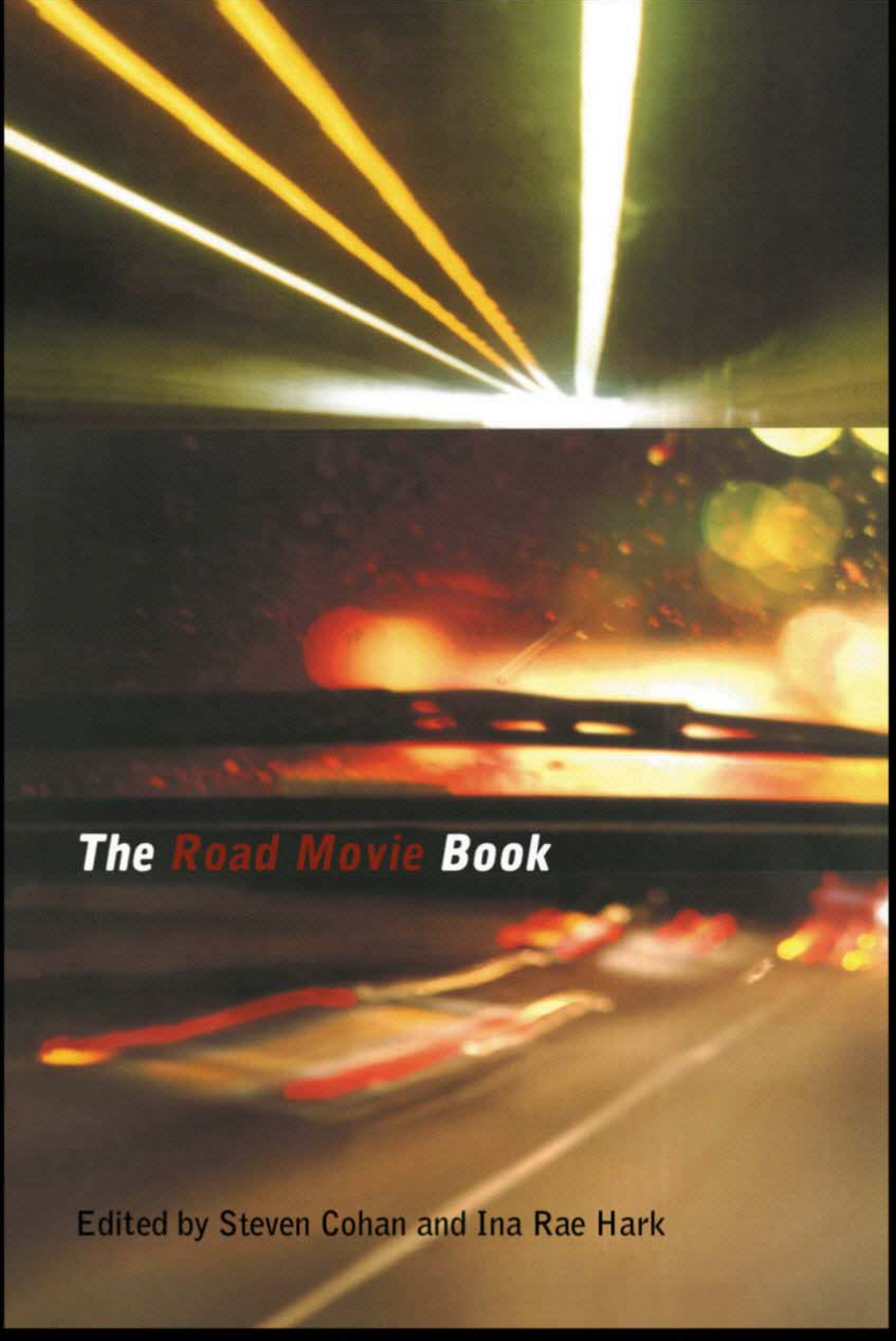

THE ROAD MOVIE BOOK

The road is an enduring theme in American culture. The myth of the road has its origins in the nation's frontier ethos; in the twentieth century, technological advances brought motion pictures to mass audiences and the mass-produced automobile within the reach of the ordinary American. When Jean Baudrillard equated modern American culture with "space, speed, cinema, technology" he could just as easily have added that the road movie is its supreme emblem. *The Road Movie Book* is the first comprehensive study of this enduring but ever-changing Hollywood genre and its legacy to world cinema beyond the United States.

Movies discussed range from the classics such as *It Happened One Night*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and the Bob Hope–Bing Crosby *Road to* films, through 1960s reworkings of the genre in *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie and Clyde*, to the road movie's contemporary flourishing with hits such as *Paris, Texas*, the *Mad Max* trilogy, *Rain Man*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Natural Born Killers* and *The Adventures of Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert*.

The contributors explore how the road movie has confronted and represented issues of nationhood, sexuality, gender, class, and race. They map the generic terrain of the road movie, trace its evolution on American television as well as on the big screen from the 1930s through the 1990s, and, finally, consider road movies that go off the road, departing from the US landscape or travelling the margins of contemporary culture.

Contributors: Stuart C. Aitken, Mark Alvey, Steven Cohan, Corey K. Creekmur, Delia Falconer, Ina Rae Hark, Barbara Klinger, Robert Lang, Ian Leong, Christopher Lee Lukinbeal, Katie Mills, Angelo Restivo, Shari Roberts, Pamela Robertson, Bennet Schaber, Mike Sell, Julian Stringer, Kelly Thomas, Sharon Willis.

Editors: Steven Cohan is Professor of English at Syracuse University. He is co-author of *Telling Stories* and author of *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*. Ina Rae Hark is Professor of English and Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at the University of South Carolina. She is co-editor with Steven Cohan of *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*.

THE ROAD MOVIE BOOK

Edited by
Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark

London and New York

First published 1997
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
The road movie book / [edited by] Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
1. Road films—History and criticism. I. Cohan, Steven. II. Hark, Ina Rae.
PN1995.9.R63R63 1997
791.43´655—dc21 97–8924

ISBN 0–415–14936–3 (hbk)
0–415–14937–1 (pbk)
ISBN 0-203-13742-6 Master e-book ISBN
ISBN 0-203-18302-9 (Glassbook Format)

CONTENTS

PLATES

CONTRIBUTORS

Stuart C. Aitken is Professor of Geography at San Diego State University. His books include *Putting Children in Their Place* (1994) and *Place, Power, Situation and Spectacle: A Geography of Film* (1994), as well as numerous articles. He is currently completing a book, *The Place of Families and the Power of Community*, for Rutgers University Press.

Mark Alvey received his Ph.D. from The University of Texas at Austin in 1995, completing a dissertation on television drama series of the early 1960s. His work has appeared in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised* (Routledge, 1996) and *The Encyclopedia of Television* (Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997). He is Director of Archives and Education at The Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago, just a few blocks from the eastern terminus of old Route 66.

Steven Cohan is Professor of English at Syracuse University, where he teaches film, gender studies, and narrative theory. He is co-author of *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction* and co-editor of *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*; his articles on film have appeared in *Camera Obscura, Screen, The Masculine Masquerade*, and *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*. His most recent book is *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*, published by Indiana University Press in 1997.

Corey K. Creekmur has taught film and cultural studies courses at the University of Chicago, Wayne State University, and the University of Iowa. He is the co-editor, with Alexander Doty, of *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 1995), and his current work examines the representation of gender and sexuality in the Western genre.

Delia Falconer received her Ph.D. from the University of Melbourne in 1996. Her thesis, *Vanishing Points: Mapping the Road in Postwar American Culture*, was undertaken in the Department of English, where she currently teaches.

Ina Rae Hark has, since 1975, taught film studies at the University of South Carolina, where she is Professor of English and Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Her articles on masculinity in film, Hitchcock, and film and politics have appeared in *Cinema Journal, Literature/Film Quarterly*, *The Journal of Popular Film*, *Film History*, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *The New Orleans Review*, and the essay collection *Hitchcock's Re-Released Films*. She is co-editor with Steven Cohan of *Screening the Male* (Routledge, 1993).

Barbara Klinger is Director of the Film Studies program and Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. She is the author of *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk.* She is currently working on a book entitled *Revolution Revisited: Cinema, Public Memory, and the 1960s*.

Robert Lang, who teaches film studies at the University of Hartford, recently spent a year at the University of Tunis as a Fulbright Scholar. He is the author of *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli* and the editor of *The Birth of a Nation: D. W. Griffith, Director.* He is currently completing a book on homosocial masculinity in Hollywood cinema.

Ian Leong is a doctoral student in literary theory and cultural studies in the Department of English at the University of Michigan.

Christopher Lee Lukinbeal received his Master of Arts in Geography from California State University at Hayward in 1995 and is presently in a joint Ph.D. program at San Diego State University and University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of articles in *California Geographer* and *APCG Yearbook*.

Katie Mills is completing her Ph.D. in English at the University of Southern California, and her thesis is on the road story since the Second World War. She has published articles in *The Spectator* and *Vanishing Point*.

Angelo Restivo is completing his Ph.D. in Critical Studies at the University of Southern California. He has articles forthcoming in *Film Quarterly* and *Quarterly Review of Film and Television*, and is editing a special issue of *The Spectator* on "The New Psychoanalysis."

Shari Roberts is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communications at Pennsylvania State University. She has published in *Cinema Journal* and is the author of *Seeing Stars: Spectacles of Difference in World War II Hollywood Musicals* (Duke University Press, 1998).

Pamela Robertson is a Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Newcastle, Australia. She is the author of *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp From Mae West to Madonna* (Duke University Press, 1996).

Bennet Schaber is on the road three days a week, commuting to his job teaching in the English Department at the State University of New York at Oswego. He is co-editor (with the late Bill

Readings) of *Postmodernism Across the Ages* (Syracuse University Press) and author of essays on literature, art, film, and television.

Mike Sell is a graduate student in the Department of English at the University of Michigan and has an article forthcoming in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*.

Julian Stringer is a teaching assistant in the graduate film studies program at Indiana University. His articles appear in *Asian Cinema, CineAction! Popular Music*, and *Screen*.

Kelly Thomas is a doctoral student in American cultural studies in the Department of English at the University of Michigan.

Sharon Willis is Associate Professor in the Department of Modern Literatures and Cultures at the University of Rochester. She is co-editor of the journal *Camera Obscura*. Her many publications include chapters in *Boys* (1996), *The Ends of Theory* (forthcoming), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (1993), *Rethinking Translation* (1992), and *Seduction and Theory* (1989). She is co-editor of *Male Trouble* (University of Minnesota Press, 1989), author of *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body* (University of Illinois Press, 1987) and has completed a book on sexual and social difference in contemporary popular cinema.

INTRODUCTION

Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark

The mating of the road and the movies is as enduring as any of Hollywood's famous couples, and seemingly just as inevitable. The road has always been a persistent theme of American culture. Its significance, embedded in both popular mythology and social history, goes back to the nation's frontier ethos, but was transformed by the technological intersection of motion pictures and the automobile in the twentieth century. When Jean Baudrillard equates American culture with "space, speed, cinema, technology" (100) he could just as well be describing the characteristic features of a road movie. Forging a travel narrative out of a particular conjunction of plot and setting that sets the liberation of the road against the oppression of hegemonic norms, road movies project American Western mythology onto the landscape traversed and bound by the nation's highways: "The road defines the space between town and country. It is an empty expanse, a *tabula rasa*, the last true frontier" (Dargis: 16). The 1969 ad campaign for *Easy Rider* exclaimed, "A man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere," and this much-remembered sentiment condenses what is typically taken for granted as the ideological project of a road movie, regardless of what travel narrative it specifically recounts.

The ongoing popularity of the road for motion picture audiences in the United States owes much to its obvious potential for romanticizing alienation as well as for problematizing the uniform identity of the nation's culture:

> Road movies are too cool to address seriously socio-political issues. Instead, they express the fury and suffering at the extremities of civilised life, and give their restless protagonists the false hope of a one-way ticket to nowhere . . . road movies are cowled in lurking menace, spontaneous mayhem and dead-end fatalism, never more than few roadstops away from abject lawlessness and haphazard bloodletting . . . road movies have always been songs of the doomed, warnings that once you enter the open hinterlands between cities, you're on your own.
>
> (Atkinson: 16)

But much more significant is that a road movie provides a ready space for exploration of the tensions and crises of the historical moment during which it is produced. Key moments in the history of the road movie tend to come in periods of upheaval and dislocation, such as the Great Depression, or in periods whose dominant ideologies generate fantasies of escape and opposition, as in the late 1960s. Likewise, the three major cycles of outlaw-rebel road films – the subgenre that provokes the sentimental existentialism in the above quotation – have occurred in eras where the culture is reevaluating a just-closed period of national unity focused on positive, work-ethic goals: the *film noir* aftermath of the war (*Detour*, *They Live by Night*); the late 1960s challenge to the corporate conformism and anti-Communism of the Eisenhower era and the deepening involvement in Vietnam throughout the subsequent decade (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*); and, most recently, in the early 1990s as the Reagan era's renewed offensive against the Communists lost its primary target and the masculinist heroics of the Gulf War gave way to closer scrutiny (*My Own Private Idaho*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Natural Born Killers*).

From the old studio system to the new Hollywood in short, the American road movie has measured the continuity of the US film industry throughout its various economic incarnations. The road movie is, in this regard, like the musical or the Western, a Hollywood genre that catches peculiarly American dreams, tensions, and anxieties, even when imported by the motion picture industries of other nations. However, despite the obvious popularity and significance of the road movie throughout the history of American cinema, there has not yet been much sustained inquiry into what precisely qualifies a film as a road movie, how the genre relates to the social and cultural history of the United States, or how its inflection alters when carried over to a non-American landscape such as Australia. As Timothy Corrigan has observed, "As a film genre, road movies are frequently bypassed by some of the best studies of genre" (143).

According to Corrigan, "the road movie is very much a postwar phenomenon" (143), and it finds its generic coherence, he explains, in the coalescence of four related features that connect the genre to the history of postwar US culture. A road narrative, first of all, responds to the breakdown of the family unit, "that Oedipal centerpiece of classical narrative" (145), and so witnesses the resulting destabilization of male subjectivity and masculine empowerment. Second, "in the road movie events act upon the characters: the historical world is always too much of a context, and objects along the road are usually menacing and materially assertive" (145). Third, the road protagonist readily identifies with the means of mechanized transportation, the automobile or motorcycle, which "becomes the only promise of self in a culture of mechanical reproduction" (146), to the point where it even becomes "transformed into a human or spiritual reality" (145). And fourth, as "a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women" (143), the road

movie promotes a male escapist fantasy linking masculinity to technology and defining the road as a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately contained by the responsibilities of domesticity: home life, marriage, employment.

Corrigan's account of the road movie makes only partial sense of its generic continuity, however, which stretches back before the war to the 1930s. "Road movies are," as he observes, "by definition, movies about cars, trucks, motorcycles, or some other motoring self-descendant of the nineteenth-century train" (144). The significance of technology in the road movie, differentiating its quest narratives and wandering protagonists from those of the Western, has as much to do with representing modernity, its historical achievements as well as its social problems, as it does with reiterating masculinist fantasies of escape and liberation. One early shot in *Easy Rider*, which places Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper in the background, fixing the flat tire on the former's motorcycle, while a rancher shoes his horse in the foreground, vividly captures how the genre repeatedly does not oppose so much as bring together the modernity of transportation on the twentieth-century road and the traditions still historically present in the settings that the road crosses.

The informing relation of modernity and tradition has repeatedly organized road narratives on film, leading David Laderman to conclude in a recent article that the genre is defined by its repeated positioning of conservative values and rebellious desires in an often uncomfortable, even depoliticized dialectic. As a result, the road movie genre has repeatedly worked, first, to set in opposition two contrasting myths central to American ideology, that of individualism and that of populism, and second, to use the road to imagine the nation's culture, that space between the western desert and the eastern seaboard, either as a utopian fantasy of homogeneity and national coherence, or as a dystopic nightmare of social difference and reactionary politics. The ad campaign for *Easy Rider* may confirm Wyatt's (Fonda) conclusion in the film that "We blew it," but these two travelers *do* find "America," even if it is not the one they initially set out in search of. As lawyer George Hanson (Jack Nicholson) concludes, when explaining why the two bikers represent so great a threat to the Southern rednecks who ultimately destroy them, it all has to do with the freedom they represent on their bikes. "Talking about it and being it, that's two different things," he comments. "I mean it's hard to be free, when you're bought and sold in the marketplace."

The irony here is that, while the bikers' being on the road testifies to their apparent freedom, visualized further in their counter-culture appearance and behavior, they themselves represent an incoherent conjunction of modernity and tradition (after all, the American flag is emblazoned on Wyatt's helmet and bike). More to the point, a plastic tube hidden inside the gas tank of Wyatt's bike is the evidence of this pair's own containment by the marketplace of US capital. The tubing conceals the bankroll earned in the drug deal that

Plate I.1 Easy Rider. Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda go in search of America and discover that "We blew it."

opens the film, and Billy (Hopper) sees this money as their ticket to freedom, by which he means the same kind of economic security that drives corporate America on the two coasts that bound their road. Billy thus cannot understand why Wyatt thinks they "blew it": "We've done it. We're rich, Wyatt. Yeah, man. Yeah. . . . We'll retire in Florida now, mister. We're rich, man. . . . That's what it's all about, man. I mean, like you know, and then you do it for the big money, man, and then you're free. Dig?" As the film depicts it, though, what prevents these easy riders from achieving their counter-culture version of the American dream is the redneck Southern culture that they have to pass through on their quest for freedom, and this makes the road menacing once they leave the utopian promise of the desert and the hippie commune housed there. The dystopic view of America from the road they go on to travel, which sets the liberation of that desert wilderness against the oppression of the redneck culture beyond it, causing Wyatt to realize "we blew it," has dominated road movies since the release of *Easy Rider*, which, Lee Hill rightly asserts, "almost single-handedly created the road movie as a vital post-60s genre" (72).

The impact of *Easy Rider* is undeniable and important to any understanding of the genre, but it has also obscured the road movie's own history. Although the road has always

road has always functioned in movies as an alternative space where isolation from the mainstream permits various transformative experiences, the majority of road films made before the 1960s more successfully imagined an ultimate reintegration of road travelers into the dominant culture. Certain perpetual wanderers of the 1930s, most famously Tom Joad (Henry Fonda) in *The Grapes of Wrath*, might emerge in the genre, and other such defiers of the law might perish at the hands of an unforgiving society, as in the outlaw couple (Fonda and Sylvia Sidney) in *You Only Live Once*, but such cases were the exception rather than the rule. More paradigmatic of the "classic" road film is *It Happened One Night*, the big Academy Award winner of 1934. Its female protagonist, Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) flees the oppression of her wealthy class background, and she finds her liberation in the "normality" of the people she meets on the road, most notably her unexpected companion, newsman Peter Warne (Clark Gable). The significance of their coupling is condensed when he teaches her how to dunk doughnuts: "Forty million dollars and you don't know how to dunk," he observes with scorn. "I'd change places with a plumber's daughter any day," she replies; and moments later, when her father's detectives come into their motel room to question them, she pretends that she is such common "folk," which allows her to escape their

Plate I.2 Gable and Colbert: the heterosexual couple on the road in *It Happened One Night*.

scrutiny. Ellie's road trip results in a change of character, which her father notices upon her return, allowing her to appreciate Peter's worth in contrast to her gigolo-husband, because it assimilates her to the culture that her wealth has isolated her from. Furthermore, while on the road she can be stripped of her luggage and money, subjected to chance meetings and detours, threatened with starvation and homelessness, and ultimately dependent on the hospitality and good will of strangers like Warne, but the precariousness of her situation still does not make the road a place of potential menace or danger.

Ultimately, the road traveled from Florida to New York State in *It Happened One Night* is a utopian space rather like the desert in *Easy Rider*, and it defines both the setting and agenda of road movies throughout the studio era. As Barbara Ching and Rita Barnard observe about this film: "The basic premise and source of laughter ... is that all experience is mediated or filtered by class. This uncomfortably radical insight, however, is sanitized by the standard comic narrative, and finally distilled into the trite message that the rich are unlucky because they are sealed off from real people, real experience, and real community. However, the force of this ideological containment is balanced by the film presentation of communal experience," as evoked by Ellie's travels, as when she joins in a singalong on the bus (54). Romance and the reestablishment of a democratic consensus dominate the road in 1930s and 1940s Hollywood films such as *Love on the Run*, *Fugitive Lovers*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *Saboteur*, and *Without Reservations*, just as they do in the Frank Capra comedy.

The famous and influential example of *It Happened One Night* should remind us that Corrigan's account of the road movie, which emphasizes its "distinctly existential air" and the corresponding centrality of "male buddies, usually a pair whose questing will only be distracted or, at best, complemented by the women who intrude from time to time" (144), takes for granted a crucial paradigm shift in the genre that occurred in the decades following the Second World War, when the road and the road movie were both mediated by the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* in 1957. A recounting of journeys that occurred a decade prior to this date, the novel in fact chronicles a rethinking of the road myth that the cultural marginality of Kerouac's protagonists would later codify even before the release of *Easy Rider* in 1969.

The novel's famous pair of road buddies, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, epitomize the road's prior and future connotations. Sal is in many ways a contrast to Dean, particularly in his middle-class origins and family safety nets; his long-suffering aunt is always bailing him out monetarily. He is the college boy who looks not only to live life on the road but to use it as raw material for his books. In an oft-cited example he envisions a trip that will promise to end just in time for him to return for the beginning of the next semester at school. Sal's adventures, moreover, resemble those in pre-1950s road films, where the unpredictability

and chance occurrences of the road mean that getting to one's destination depends upon the kindness – and motor vehicles – of others. Most of Sal's road journeys without Dean combine hitch-hiking and bus trips. At one point Kerouac even cites a 1940s road film as an analogue of his adventure. Sal observes of the bus trip to Los Angeles where he meets the Mexican girl Terry: "In the gray, dirty dawn, like the dawn when Joel McCrea met Veronica Lake in a diner, in the picture *Sullivan's Travels*, she slept in my life" (82).

Sal's companion, Dean Moriarty, on the other hand, is an ex-convict and juvenile delinquent, whose drunken father is the never-realized goal of all his frantic motion. It is with Dean that the union of man and automobile becomes an integral part of the myth of the road. As Michael Herr (who has completed a screenplay of the novel for director Francis Ford Coppola) comments, Dean, like his real life alter-ego, Neal Cassady, "was like the Demon Driver. The guy could drive with his eyes closed. He just was born to drive." "It's Dean," Herr also comments, "who's the money character. He's the guy with the real juice" (Porter: 22). When Warner Bros, attempted to adapt the novel for the screen in the late 1950s, that unfilmed screenplay ended, unlike the novel, with Dean dying in a car crash "because he has to be chastised for his excessive sensibility" (14).

In *On the Road* Dean barrels both east and west in a 1949 Hudson and later takes a late 1930s Chevy on the climactic trip to Mexico. The pairing of the wild Dean with the more cerebral Sal is what announces the shift in thinking about America through the trope of the road and its future significance for postwar car culture. When, on his first trip west, Sal and his road-pal Eddie are offered the chance to take over one of two cars that a Montana cowboy needs driven home from Nebraska, Eddie is the one who takes the wheel, because urban easterner Sal doesn't even have a driver's license. By contrast, Dean's skills as a wild, speeding, yet masterful driver are celebrated throughout the novel, uncannily mirroring Hollywood's own personification of the liberation that speed represents, James Dean, who did, of course, die in a blazing car crash just like the one Warners wanted for the end of *On the Road*. Indeed, for Corrigan, Hollywood's speeding Dean is the quintessential road figure (though he did not make a road movie) and a prefiguration of Kerouac's Dean. Corrigan sees the image of James Dean haunting the genre's investment in masculinist fantasy: initially as symbolized by the imagery of the traveling pair's transcendental relation to their automobile, later by the "commodification of the image [itself] as vehicle," which eventually causes the road pair to lose "that James Dean-like innocence and [embrace], with increasing abandon, its own definition as material image" (148).

In redefining the road protagonist as marginal and unassimilable by mainstream culture, Kerouac's novel significantly reconfigured the road "personnel." Prior to *On the Road*, road movie protagonists were either heterosexual couples, as in *It Happened One Night*, *You Only Live Once*, *Sullivan's Travels*, *They Live by Night*, and *The Long, Long Trailer*, or whole

communities of displaced persons, as in *Wild Boys of the Road*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or *Three Faces West*. After Kerouac, such pairs or groups of travelers were eclipsed by the male buddy pair. Here, too, *On the Road* appears to look forward as well as backward. For, although the shift in the gender of a traveling couple from a heterosexual pair to male buddies was clearly prompted by *On the Road*, ironically enough, Dean and Sal, even when Dean owns the car, are rarely alone. Various male friends and female lovers, or ride sharers from the travel bureaus, are usually passengers as well. Even the final expedition to Mexico, which reads most like a road movie script, brings mutual friend Stan Shepard along for the ride. That buddy-road movies of the late 1960s and 1970s so often center on two guys in a car or on bikes owes as much to the peripatetic Buz and Tod driving together in their Corvette on a seemingly endless road in the 1960s television series *Route 66* as to Kerouac. Previously male buddy teams had taken to the road primarily in comedies, most famously the Hope–Crosby *Road to* series. Post-Kerouac buddy-road movies take the male couple more seriously, while simultaneously problematizing it.

The couple is a dominant configuration in road movies just as it is in Hollywood movies in general. A road movie relies upon the couple for rather practical reasons of story-telling. Two people in the front seat of a vehicle make for easy classical framing and keep the dialogue going. The confined space of the car, the shared lodgings, booths in diners, and often hardship and desperation build intimacy and plot conflict quickly. While the Production Code was in effect, and before the sexual revolution happened, this intimacy created a sexual tension whose relief would have to be endlessly deferred. Road movies of the studio era thus frequently trace the spatial contours of a heterosexual courtship and its postponed consummation, most famously in *It Happened One Night* with its "Walls of Jericho" conceit for respecting the virtue of the couple while putting them in the same bedroom. Another Claudette Colbert road film, *Family Honeymoon*, well summarizes this convention while revealing, too, how the postwar domestic ideology of the late 1940s had already begun to pressure it. In this film, Colbert and her second husband, Fred MacMurray, end up having to take her three children along with them on their cross-country honeymoon, and the family, ironically enough, is what repeatedly thwarts the couple's efforts to consummate their union, which finally occurs only after they leave the road and return home.

The deferral of sexual intimacy in road films of the 1930s and 1940s allows for a closure that integrates the populist values of the road with the dominant culture through the trope of sexual consummation. By the 1970s, however, audiences would be more skeptical that a man and a woman who found passion on the road wouldn't simply act on it. And without the deferral of consummation much of the power of road intimacy and, eventually, the ameliorating closure enacted through consummation evaporated. Thereafter, heterosexual

road movies had to derive their frisson instead from implicating the couple's sexual union in a wider tapestry of violence which became just another version of their relationship. Fireworks, sexual and ballistic, replaced romance, and the heterosexual couple became united through their criminality, like Bonnie and Clyde (Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway) or Mickey and Mallory (Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis) in *Natural Born Killers*. The closures of such films are, as a corollary, also much more resistant to the liberation of the road, unable to imagine any form of synthesizing integration of individual freedom and the social order, of technology's movement and domesticity's stasis. With the couple's turn to outlawry, getting off the road is tantamount to going to jail if not worse, not to the marriage bed. Bonnie and Clyde's exultant "We rob banks!" is meant to signal the title characters' solidarity with those poor people whom Depression-era mortgage lenders have foreclosed upon. Yet when one robs banks and keeps the money instead of working to shut them down or destroy them, the politics get a little muddied, to say the least, and the outlaw couple's transgression necessitates their exclusion from the social order except as figures of mass-culture folklore: the poem about their exploits that Bonnie has published in the newspapers gives the couple their fame as figures of lore and, significantly enough, excites Clyde to the point where he overcomes his impotence and can consummate his relationship with Bonnie for the first time, a literal climax almost immediately followed by their execution. A similar if more blatant ambiguity surrounds Oliver Stone's pair of road criminals and media heroes, Mickey and Mallory, ironically pointed out by the seamless transformation of this outlaw couple into RV-driving family vacationers in the coda to *Natural Born Killers*.

Even more common than the transformation of romantic couples into outlaw lovers, at least until after the direct influence of *Easy Rider* had run its course, was the woman's removal from the road trip altogether. At the beginning of the decade 1969 to 1979, the tension between two men on the move, cut off from any emotional ties except to each other, could provide the same intimacy-without-sexual-union previously found in heterosexual screwball romances of the 1930s and 1940s, because the mainstream audience hardly expected two men to sleep with each other. While Corrigan sees the buddy-road movie as the archetype of the genre, generally speaking, it in fact had a relatively brief period of dominance. Many got made in the 1970s, Robin Wood reports, but in the early 1980s they had "virtually disappeared" (229). This is not to say that buddy-cops and other workplace sidekicks were not still in evidence, but the male buddy with whom a man travels, eats, and shares a room in the intimacy of the road quickly became a problematic figure. In buddy movies, as Wood notes, "the emotional center, the emotional charge, is in the male/male relationship, which is patently what the films are about" (228). By the end of the decade, partly through the increasing visibility of the gay liberation movement, and partly through the lessons taught by 1970s buddy movies themselves, audiences could no longer as easily

ignore the possibilities that the intimacy of a same-sex road couple suggests, since such a queer subtext was by then widely acknowledged by the popular press, even when it was diegetically insisted to be "impossible."

Along with the United States' recentering of its economy from the east to the Sunbelt states, the increasingly problematic status of the buddy couple may help to explain the turn of road movies in the 1980s from existential narratives of rebellion to comedy and farce, usually set in the rural Southwest or South. Redneck chase farces like *Smokey and the Bandit* and its sequels persisted in the *Cannonball Run* films in 1981 and 1984. Willie Nelson chronicled the life of a touring country singer in *Honeysuckle Rose*, soon re-titled *On the Road Again* after the hit song on its soundtrack. Clint Eastwood, partial to the road genre from the *Outlaw Josey Wales* to *A Perfect World*, also played a country singer in the sentimental Depression-era film *Honkytonk Man* as well as the impresario of a traveling show in *Bronco Billy*. Other major studio road movies were played for broad laughs (*Bustin' Loose, Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, the *National Lampoon Vacation* series) or romance (*Back Roads*, *The Sure Thing*). Though there was a smattering of low-budget outlaw chase films like *Eddie Macon's Run* and *Running Hot*, from the late 1970s until the early 1990s the most interesting road films were being made outside mainstream Hollywood. Germany's Wim Wenders, who would name his production company Road Movies, pondered the genre's essential Americanness through European eyes in his powerful series of films that includes *Kings of the Road*, *Alice in the Cities*, *The American Friend*, *Paris, Texas*, and *Until the End of the World*. Other notable European road films of these years are *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, *Landscape in the Mist*, and *Vagabond*, while at the same time the *Mad Max* films made their mark in Australia. The European road sensibility also influenced the road movies that independent film-maker Jim Jarmusch began making in the US in the mid-1980s.

The release of *Thelma and Louise* in 1991, significantly the same year in which Corrigan's chapter on the road movie genre appeared in his book *A Cinema Without Walls*, marked an important turning point in the popular and academic reception of the road film. Like the male protagonist who finds himself unexpectedly on the road with a fugitive or criminal in 1980s buddy films, Thelma (Geena Davis) discovers that she is more adept at being an outlaw than a housewife. Her skill is evident from the time she robs the convenience store to make up for inadvertently causing the theft of Louise's (Susan Sarandon) bankroll to the way she takes charge of the highway patrolman who stops them. "I know it's *crazy*," Thelma observes. "But I just feel like I got a knack for this shit." For all the disastrous violence that forever changes the lives of these two women, their road trip turns out to realize the temporary liberation from their oppressive, dissatisfying normality that they seek whenthey start out on their vacation. "Whatever happens," Thelma tells Louise as the police close in on them, "I'm glad I came with you." they start out on their vacation. "Whatever happens," Thelma tells Louise as the police close in on them, "I'm glad I came with you."

Plate I.3 Women and cars: Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon in *Thelma and Louise*.

In many respects, *Thelma and Louise* performs on film the same critique of the road movie genre that Corrigan offers. Its female couple, who replace the male buddies or heterosexual lovers of earlier road movies, react to the failure of patriarchy to support their desires, just as they register the dynamic interaction of character and its road setting, identify their fantasies with their means of escape (Louise's green Thunderbird convertible) and, most of all, interrogate and, to some critics, overturn the masculinist bias of the road. The critical controversy surrounding *Thelma and Louise* as soon as it was released testifies to its impact in recodifying the genre (which, as *Los Angeles Times* critic Kenneth Turan commented, recounts "the classic American way of finding out who you were and what you were about"), in identifying the genre's complex history (see the critical perspectives on the film gathered together by *Film Quarterly* in "The Many Faces of *Thelma and Louise*"), and in generating a backlash to its feminist appropriation of the masculinist road fantasy, which the *Times*'s other film critics more disparagingly called a "high-toned 'Smokey and the Bandit' with a downbeat ending and a woman at the wheel" (Benson), and "a sort of post-feminist howl" (Rainer). As Sharon Willis points out, though, such dismissals of the film's female-revenge set-pieces (such as the immolation of the truck driver's rig) "recognize the fantasmatic drive of the film's pyrotechnic spectacle only to shut it down immediately in

order to fixate on a stable, if imaginary, antagonism between men's anxieties and women's vicarious pleasures" (122). The apprehension that, as another *Times* writer put it, after seeing the film, "the women of America [will be moved] into flinging off their aprons, stowing the hubby's .38 in the diaper bag, pumping premium into the Country Squire and careening down the blue-line highways toward riot and mayhem, leaving behind a trail of dead men" (Morrison) ignores the basic fact that *Thelma and Louise* is, finally, "a story about women and cars" (Willis: 125), which draws its fantasy of road life from the television series *Route 66*. "Our cars and the roads we drive on are one of the few arenas where it is acceptable, and even anodyne, to act out aggression" (126). As Willis points out, this has always been accepted as a truism for men on the road, which is not to say that it does not determine the relation of women to their cars as well.

Not surprisingly, *Thelma and Louise* galvanized critical attention on the road movie as an identifiable Hollywood product and revived the genre, which by this point, Corrigan was arguing, had reached a point of traveling "in a culture where images of history now only recycle themselves. Now the representations that once secured a place are neurotically cut loose of any referent but themselves" (152). After *Thelma and Louise*, Hollywood films began to recognize again the increasing hospitality of the road to the marginalized and alienated – not only women (*Leaving Normal*), but also gays (*My Own Private Idaho*, *The Living End*, *To Wong Foo*, *Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*), lesbians (*Boys on the Side*, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*), and people of color (*Get on the Bus*, *Fled*, *Powwow Highway*) – and to renew the road's historical currency. "The law is some tricky shit, isn't it?" Thelma rhetorically asks after Louise explains why their explanation of self-defense will not excuse their criminality. Simply put, the road movie throughout its history has been wrestling with this question, and it continues to do so.

The essays in *The Road Movie Book* look at the genre from as many different perspectives as road movies themselves look at the consequences of adhering to or opposing laws, of freeing oneself from or seeking to rejoin the wider community. Using both historical and theoretical methodologies, they find the genre a productive ground for exploring issues of nationhood, economics, sexuality, gender, class, and race.

The first section, "Mapping Boundaries," sketches certain broad thematic and ideological tropes of the genre. Bennet Schaber delineates the discovery of "the people" as the true destination of mainstream Hollywood and European road classics of the 1930s and early 1940s and then cites as a significant generic transformation the ensuing impossibility of this project in postwar cinema. Shari Roberts uses the films of Clint Eastwood to explore the essential masculinism inscribed into road space, particularly as the road movie genre takes over the ideological burden of its close relation, the Western. Following these wide-

ranging pieces, Ian Leong, Mike Sell, and Kelly Thomas turn to a historical discussion of the relationship between sexuality, consumer capitalism, and style in three classic outlaw couple films: *Gun Crazy*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Natural Born Killers*. Corey Creekmur finds, in the mixture of fame and infamy, a surprising link between the careers of outlaw couples in such road movies as these and those of touring entertainers in musicals.

The next section of the book, "American Roads," further historicizes the issues raised by the volume's first group of essays, tracing the continual reinvention of the genre in Hollywood cinema from the early 1940s to the end of the 1980s. Steven Cohan examines the utopian association of the road and home, as achieved through the mediation of show business culture, in films of the 1940s and 1950s. Mark Alvey next studies the cultural, political, and industrial factors that combined to make the television series *Route 66* the emblematic road narrative between *On the Road* and *Easy Rider*; and Julian Stringer follows a parallel, but more culturally repressed, road also being traveled in the 1960s by Russ Meyer's low-budget, exploitation biker movies. Barbara Klinger then reconsiders the landmark impact of the release of *Easy Rider* by examining its complex placement in competing discourses of counter-culture politics and American nationalism. Finally, Ina Rae Hark charts the displacement of buddy-road movies from mainstream Hollywood at the end of the 1970s and their subsequent revival in the late 1980s as a Hollywood strategy for recuperating patriarchal capitalism from the yuppie excesses that had tarnished it during that "high-flying" decade.

The concluding section, "Alternative Routes," concentrates on road films that depart from the American landscape or that travel on its cultural margins. Angelo Restivo shows how the new Italian national highway system of the late 1950s and early 1960s broke down regional differences and created a new national subject. Delia Falconer next turns our attention from a European road to another nation with a powerful road mythology, examining how the *Mad Max* trilogy offered a means of renegotiating the economic connections between Australia's nationhood and its spatial history in the 1980s. Looking at the Australian road a decade later, Pamela Robertson explores the intersections of nationalist, sexual, and racial politics as organized through the trope of "home" in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Following somewhat similar terrain at the sexual margins of the American road, Sharon Willis analyzes the spectatorial position of fantasmic community, and its corresponding effacement of race and transgressive sexualities, in *To Wong Foo* and *Boys on the Side*. The next two essays then turn to the independent gay cinema movement of the 1990s, with Katie Mills and Robert Lang finding, in *The Living End* and *My Own Private Idaho*, respectively, a more genuinely alternative space for the representation of homosexual desire. Finally, Stuart Aitken and Christopher

Lee Lukinbeal close the volume with an examination of the ways that masculinity is – and is not – liberated through the space and scale of the road movie's cultural geography.

As these final essays point out, the 1990s have once again revealed the endless permutations and combinations available on the road for the cinematic imagination. Even mainstream road films with heterosexual protagonists have changed markedly during this decade. The outlaw-couple film productively reinvented itself through the lens of postmodernism (*Wild at Heart*, *Kalifornia*, *True Romance*, *Natural Born Killers*). And, just when the buddy movie might seem to have exhausted its resources, late-1996 releases in the US feature a man–elephant buddy pair (*Larger than Life*) and feuding former presidents (*My Fellow Americans*), as well as a more familiar coupling of mismatched road men (*Good Luck*). The essays in *The Road Movie Book* remind us just how varied and adaptable the genre has always been and, we hope, will prevent in the future the ahistorical pronouncements that have too often underestimated the genre in the act of describing it.

Syracuse, New York
Columbia, South Carolina
December, 1996

Works Cited

Atkinson, Michael. "Crossing the Frontiers." *Sight and Sound* 1 (1994): 14–18.

Baudrillard, Jean. *America*, trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 1988.

Benson, Shelia. "True or False: Thelma and Louise Just Good Ol" Boys?" *Los Angeles Times* (May 13, 1991), Home Edition: F-1+. *Los Angeles Times* Online. August 9, 1996.

Ching, Barbara and Barnard, Rita. "From Screwballs to Cheeseballs: Comic Narrative and Ideology in Capra and Reiner." *New Orleans Review* 17.3 (1990): 52–9.

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Dargis, Manohla. "Roads to Freedom." *Sight and Sound* 3 (1991): 14–18.

Hill, Lee. *Easy Rider*. London: BFI, 1996.

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 1957.

Laderman, David. "What a Trip: The Road Film and American Culture." *Journal of Film and Video* 48.1–2 (1996): 41–57.

"The Many Faces of Thelma and Louise." *Film Quarterly* 45.2 (1991–2): 20–31.

Morrison, Patt. "Perspective on the Sexes; Get a Grip, Guys: This is Fantasy." *Los Angeles Times* (July 22, 1991), Home Edition: B5+. *Los Angeles Times* Online. August 9, 1996.

Porter, Mark. "Michael Herr on Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*." *Video Eyeball 2.2* (1995): 14–15, 22.

Rainer, Peter. "True or False: Thelma and Louise Just Good Ol' Boys?" *Los Angeles Times*, (May 31, 1991), Home Edition: F-1+. *Los Angeles Times* Online. August 9, 1996.

Turan, Peter. "Smooth Ride For 'Thelma & Louise.'" *Los Angeles Times* (May 24, 1991), Home Edition: F-1 + . *Los Angeles Times* Online. 1996.

Willis, Sharon. "Hardware and Hardbodies: What Do Women Want? A Reading of *Thelma and Louise*." *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins. New York: Routledge, 1993. 120–8.

Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Part I

MAPPING BOUNDARIES

1

"HITLER CAN'T KEEP 'EM THAT LONG"

The road, the people

Bennet Schaber

> Hitler has a passion for movies – including the products of Hollywood. (Two of his favorites were *It Happened One Night* and *Gone with the Wind*.)
>
> William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, Dec 1, 1940

> That was the first bad thing I'd heard about [*It Happened One Night*]. I was shocked and started to analyze it, but I gave it up. But I resent it like the devil.
>
> Frank Capra, 1941

In an entry from his diary for November 5, 1939, William Shirer makes the following observations, worth quoting at some length.

> Hitler is a fiend for films, and on evenings when no important conferences are on or he is not overrunning a country, he spends a couple of hours seeing the latest movies in his private cinema room in the Chancellery. News-reels are a great favorite with him, and in the last weeks he has seen all those taken in the Polish war, including hundreds of thousands of feet which were filmed for the army archives and will never be seen by the public. He likes American films and many never publicly exhibited in Germany are shown him. A few years ago he insisted on having *It Happened One Night* run several times. Though he is supposed to have a passion for Wagnerian opera, he almost never attends the Opera here in Berlin. He likes the Metropol, which puts on tolerable musical comedies with an emphasis on pretty dancing girls. Recently he had one of the girls who struck his fancy to tea. But only to tea. In the evening, too, he likes to have in Dr. Todt, an imaginative engineer who built the great Autobahn network of two-lane motor roads and later the fortifications of the Westwall. Hitler, rushing to compensate what he thinks is an artistic side that was frustrated by non-recognition in his youthful days in Vienna, has a passion for architects' models and

> will spend hours fingering them with Dr. Todt. Lately, they say, he has taken to designing new uniforms. Hitler stays up late, and sleeps badly, which I fear is the world's misfortune.
>
> (244)

Shirer compiled these notes for "a picture of Hitler at work during war-time," to be broadcast on CBS radio. That picture is worked up through Shirer's rather wry humor, which traces a kind of fault-line on one side of which is Hitler-the-man (he "stays up late"), on the other, Hitler-the-political-leader ("the world's misfortune"). Film, however, runs directly down, or, at least, on both sides of that line. On the one side there is the man who loves the latest movies, on the other the Chancellor watching film from the army archives. Of course, this imaginary line was untenable and Shirer knew it. Capra seems to have known it as well and it irked him. Untenable and irksome because film here realizes the Führer as *both* contemplator *and* creator of images. Hence the repeated trajectories of Shirer's "portrait": from watching the news to making the news, from watching the girl to taking tea with the girl, from gazing to "fingering," etc.

Indeed, what one witnesses in this portrait is a small trace of the many ways in which National Socialism realized itself in competition with Hollywood. Capra himself was well aware of the struggle, and well before the making of *Why We Fight* and the revelation that *It Happened One Night* (1934) was one of Hitler's favorites. "I never cease to thrill at an audience seeing a picture. For two hours you've got 'em. Hitler can't keep 'em that long. You eventually reach even more people than Roosevelt does on the radio. Imagine what Shakespeare would have given for an audience like that!" (McBride: 432). One might detect in Capra's bombast something of Shirer's wryness. After all, Hitler's only watching movies when he's not "overrunning countries," as it were. But there is a hint here that between film and the most aggressive politics, there is less a relation of choice than of extension. Film belongs to its own overrunning. Film is extensive; it "reach[es] more people than Roosevelt," etc. Extensive and grasping, film not only reaches, it holds. It practices its own specific kinds of domestic and foreign policies. This is why it is essential to situate it not only within its contemporary political setting but within a nexus of political technologies: the metropolis, the *autobahn*, the newsreel, the lightning war, etc. The quotations from Shirer and Capra have the advantage (with their obvious differences) of doing just this. They invoke time and motion as political-cinematic questions.

The problem this essay sets for itself, then, has less to do with Hitler's personal filmic proclivities (it has more to do with Capra's recognition of them, and anyway, so what if the Führer secretly identified with Clark Gable?) than with the ways in which a seemingly innocent road film like *It Happened One Night* could get itself mixed up in and with a series of larger political questions. Hence the principal emphasis of this essay will be a

consideration of the road movie as political in the broadest sense of the term. Capra's words, from which the essay's title is drawn, powerfully represent the director's sense of the massive political stakes of film-making (hence his resentment at finding out about Hitler's love of *It Happened One Night* strikes me as both appropriate and somewhat disingenuous). Indeed, it seems to me that Capra's prewar career is characterized by an increasing awareness of the interplay of populism, capitalism and fascism and the fact that film can represent these tendencies only at the risk of flirting with them (culminating in *Meet John Doe*, 1941).

What is at stake here is precisely "the people." And "the road" is very much the locus of the revelation of this people. In *It Happened One Night*, Gable will take on the weight of becoming the very image of the people, revealing them in the process of revealing himself to the upper-class Claudette Colbert and, later, her father. And seven years later, Capra returns to the road, when in *Meet John Doe* Gary Cooper and Walter Brennan, the two musical tramps, stage the meeting of the road with the image factory of the newspaper industry, with Barbara Stanwyck unwittingly furthering the fascist designs of Edward Arnold. Preston Sturges, more clever, wittier, smarter, and more cynical (but also and decisively less visionary) than Capra, would simply cut to the chase: in *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) Hollywood sets out explicitly to give the road and its people their definitive image as Joel McCrea's Sullivan sets out to make a film "like Capra."

The road, the people: this is the equation I wish to ponder. Who are these people? Are they a subject (of history, for example) or merely subjected? An image it is the duty of cinema to discover, or to invent? Obviously Capra is not the only prewar director to pose this question. We have already glimpsed it in Sturges, and it is there in Ford as well (to mention only the big three in the US). To be on the road is to be in the presence of the people, and this constitutes what Gilles Deleuze (216) has expressed as the "unanimism" of prewar American film. The people are present and real but also virtual and ideal: the summation of a real history which they unify, the seed, soul, or spirit (*anima*) of a greater people to come. The image of the people, then, is pregnant with its own political arrival. And this is where the Hitlerian threat makes itself most acutely felt, when the image through which the people finds itself and its freedom is reversed and becomes the instrument of its subjugation.

The burden of my essay is twofold. In the first section I hope to demonstrate some of the ways in which prewar films, predominately although not exclusively products of Hollywood studios, deployed the road as a cinematic vehicle for the coming-to-presence of the people. This coming-to-presence implied a specific practice of images the variety of which can be usefully cataloged according to the directors responsible for them. For example, John Ford films images relating a solitary, vertical figure to a vast horizon, or of simple exchanges of looks among ordinary people as they register and acknowledge an act

of generosity. However, it is not my contention that the people become a single, unified image; rather, that they are given as simultaneously present and possible, a presence with both a being and a destiny.

In the second section I hope to demonstrate some of the ways in which postwar films, predominately although not exclusively products of independent American and European cinemas, deployed the road experimentally, as it were, with the result being various practices of images both of and in the absence of the people. For example, Jim Jarmusch films a forking road without an horizon, while Wim Wenders films a hand holding a photograph of a house that will not find its address. Unable to find a practice of images capable of bringing them to presence, the people discover their being-in-common through the various ways in which images communicate among themselves.

If we imagine, and no doubt we must, the people as a community, then the difference I am describing can be given as simply this. Before the war, on film, the road presents the community to itself, becomes a vehicle of self-presentation constitutive of the people, in two major modalities: dialectically, insofar as the relation of the one to the many becomes the unified being or oneness of the many; narratively, insofar as the deployment of redemptive scripts or texts enables the people to cross a boundary or obstacle and thus enter into its own fullness. After the war, the community progressively defies its own self-presentation; it literally cannot be presented, at least honestly, with its own proper image. Its presentation, then, is the channels of communication through which its members expose themselves one to another. These are the communities recent social theory has called unworking, unavowable, or arriving.[1]

Throughout my essay, which amounts to an extended meditation, I have tried to mark some of the salient differences between pre- and postwar road films by calling attention to their pervasive use of Biblical rhetoric – Exodus for the prewar films, Apocalypse for the postwar. But this distinction is never hard and fast. In my last section I will turn my attention to a single image, the desert, at once the place of a gathering and the promise of a new homeland, but also the site of a new diaspora, a dispersion of the people and of the filmic image itself.

I

In his image of Hitler at the movies, Shirer made the connection between National Socialism and cinema. No doubt Capra had intuited this connection before reading those words; and he spent a good part of his career working through the relation of film to totalitarianism. Although this is hardly the place for an extended analysis, it is nevertheless crucial to point out just how strongly National Socialism was wed, not only to a specific repertoire of

images, but to specific technologies of image production. One need only recall Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* to recognize the ways in which the camera not only insinuates itself into the advent of the Nazi event but realizes itself as an indispensable component in the very being of the event. Indeed, the camera grounds the dialectical play of being-with-the-people and the being-of-the-people, not only by juxtaposing the single face or figure with the massive phalanx, the single voice with the symphonic chorus (notably in the *Sprechchor* of the *Arbeitsdienst*), but by physically making available the one to the other. Now, this dialectic is procured through a relation of motions to a series of returns to rest (all in the service of making perfectly clear a series of hierarchical equivalences: the Führer is the people is the land is the nation, *etcetera ad infinitum*). The camera encounters Nuremberg through the clouds, in flight aboard a plane; it comes to rest outside the plane to witness Hitler's disembarkation. It encounters the people on the road, in a moving car through the city streets, and comes to rest outside the Deutscher Hof, Hitler's hotel, newly remodeled with the Führer's name in lights, recalling a Broadway or Hollywood marquee (the Nazi–Hollywood competition that haunts the film). The people, at march or at play, encounter the camera in ceaseless motion: it either penetrates their ranks or they parade past it. They encounter themselves when the camera comes to rest with the Führer, aligns itself with his gaze (which is also a gaze that gazes upon itself). This is Nazi "unanimism": *Ein Volk, ein Führer, eine Kamera*. It is not precisely that the camera manufactures events (propaganda in the simplest sense) but that the events themselves are conceivable only in the presence of the camera (given its outward and objectified double in the famous nighttime rally, the sea of flags in an architecture of light, the latter phrase at least a partial designation of cinema, of political life affirming itself in the presence of and as film).

The year 1934, the date of the fourth Nazi Party Rally at Nuremberg, the subject of Riefenstahl's film, brings us full circle, back to Capra and *It Happened One Night*, also made that same year. And, like Riefenstahl's film, Capra's too means to think through the emergence of the people in the presence of the camera. But it does so in a completely different way, on the road, as it were, which requires of the camera not a coming to rest but a certain restlessness.[2] And this is sometimes literalized, for example near the film's conclusion, with a shot of the cameramen pursuing Claudette Colbert across the lawn of her father's estate. This is important to notice. Unlike Riefenstahl, Capra does not so much set the camera in motion as set it the task of discovering and recording a relation of cameras and motions. Indeed, the only really interesting shot-in-motion occurs as Gable watches, from his car, the entourage of vehicles carrying Colbert off toward the horizon. But this is the only point at which Capra encounters the road in one of its essential visual/filmic modalities – its vanishing[3] (Ford is the great American master of this image/insight, and this no doubt because of the experience of the Western).

Capra might be said to have inaugurated the road film with *It Happened One Night*. The film seemed to sketch the contours of a remarkably open, fluid genre which could nevertheless maintain its conditions of recognizability even across a series of finely layered wagers (what the film, finally, would be about: love, class, travel, communication, nation, sex, technology, etc.). The film includes a visual account of nearly every possible means of transportation: from walking to boats, buses, cars, motorcycles, planes, autogyros, and trains, even swimming). Horses are metaphorically included when Gable refers to the entire caprice as a "buggy ride." Only bicycles seem neglected. The list can be expanded if one adds to it the transport of communication: phone, telegraph, mail, newspaper, newsreel, radio, intercom, all points bulletin. This is Capra's restless nation, and the camera casts about (and sometimes tags along) for as many of these images as it can possibly find, only coming to rest, generally, only at motor camps, rest stops for the restless. The film throws down the gauntlet, so to speak, so that, by the time Sturges inherits it, the rather simple halts of Capra's buses (by the police or by the elements) have been transformed into full-scale, catastrophic and slapstick motions (sometimes accompanied by special effects, notably slow motion) in "land yachts" and "whippet tanks." And Sturges opens *Sullivan's Travels* with film footage of a gunfight atop a moving train on a bridge over a rushing river. Hence for the road movie, as originally conceived and constructed, any political wager finds its primary condition in an analysis of film and motion.

Bodies at rest, bodies in motion: the road film could be likened to an entire physics. And it is the road film itself that perhaps provides the vocabulary, the periodic table or thermodynamics, that makes possible both its analysis and its analytical work. In short, far from designating a genre merely, the phrase "road movie" can be taken to express a cinematic concept.[4] To inquire into this concept is to inquire immediately into just what we mean when we say or write the words "road movie." Now the road, as theme or metaphor, has exercised a powerful grasp upon the narrative imagination for a very long time. Its hold extends far beyond the borders of Western film-making, even as the road movie belongs to the global extension of the West.[5] It may be fair to say then, that the hybrid nature of the genre, the vast differences that traverse it and constitute it, belongs in a number of important ways to a social and historical mode of being with difference. On the road there are, inevitably, encounters, which have to do with precisely how men, women, things, and places will be with one another.

For the road movie, even those of limited ambition, there is a relation, a belonging together of "what happens" and "happiness" (here using precisely the vocabulary provided by Capra's film). This is what makes the stakes of the road movie so often and so explicitly ethical or political: the road enacts a symbolic circulation so that the traffic of events comes to bear a meaning far in excess of itself. As Jacques Lacan observes, "*Happiness* is after all *happen*; it, too, is an encounter, even if one does not feel the need to add the prefix, which

Plate 1.1 It Happened One Night. Traveling with the people.

strictly speaking indicates the happy character of the thing" (12). His comment elaborates on the relation of happiness to what happens, that is, the conditions under which seemingly random events come to fulfill a kind of symbolic destiny.[6]

The "It Happened . . ." of Capra's film has to perform, therefore, the double task of letting happen both a love affair and "the people" themselves. Gable and Colbert are the instrument, their liaison giving birth, so to speak, not to the people as such, but to their image. And what becomes clear, not only in Capra's film but in a number of prewar road films, is that this letting happen of the image of the people amounts to the people's liberation. In fact, for the prewar road film, this dialectic is given explicitly within the rhetoric of the Biblical Exodus: the Walls of Jericho tumble in *It Happened One Night*, the Colorado River is transformed into the Jordan when the Joads cross into Canaan–California in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the congregation of the Negro church sings "Let My People Go," the story of Israel's Exodus from Egypt, as Joel McCrea and his fellow shackled convicts enter the homemade cinema in *Sullivan's Travels*. Hence the story, the fable of a few finite lives to and for whom "it happened . . . ," links itself to the infinity of the people, the universal project of its emancipation ("we'll go on forever, 'cause we're the people" says Ma Joad); and film itself,