

2018

## Easy Riders Lost in America: Marx, Mobility and the Hollywood Road Movie

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### Recommended Citation

Alford, Steven E. (2018) "Easy Riders Lost in America: Marx, Mobility and the Hollywood Road Movie," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatpower/vol6/iss2/1>

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# Easy Riders Lost in America: Marx, Mobility and the Hollywood Road Movie

## **Abstract**

The movement of people and settlement of the American west has been psychologically and sociologically represented as engendered by a sense of Manifest Destiny. Yet, the western migration was fueled by capitalist corporations seeking profit by exploiting international markets for goods through extractive practices (principally animal pelts, fish, and lumber): the Hudson's Bay Company, the North West Company, and millionaire American capitalist John Jacob Astor. The economic foundations of settlement have, however, been erased in cinematic representations of this history, replaced first by the Hollywood Western and its myth of frontier individuality, and subsequently by the Hollywood road movie, concerned largely with an existential quest for personal value and meaning. Hence, the extractive corporate industries of the nineteenth century have been replaced by the corporate entertainment industry, the latter selling American myths in place of American pelts.

## **Keywords**

Easy Rider, Marx, Mobility, Hollywood

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

Or not.

T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," modified by the author

Prior to the invention of film, non-native, largely European-Americans traversed the vast spaces of "empty" (i.e., already occupied) North American land through a series of pathways: rivers, trails, railroad tracks and, eventually, paved roads. Modern paved roadways provide a more comfortable and efficient means for individuals to cover ground. Roads also enable travelers to connect with what they conceive of as their history. This history, given the terrible depredations visited on the original Amerindian inhabitants, as well as the thoughtless exploitation of plant and animal resources, necessitates a more salutary view of the past for travelers to imaginatively participate in. Mobility, in the American imagination, became linked to a sense of self-invention and self-discovery. American identity, unlike the European experience, rested on adherence to a set of principles rather than historic ties to land, tribe and family. This resulted in the idea that one was free, through movement, to refashion one's identity, given that identity originated in adherence to a set of ideas, not in ties to family, land, and national history. This novel (for EuroAmericans) notion of personal identity, of lighting out for the territory, enabled individuals to create themselves anew, simply by moving westward. And their understanding of what was meant by "the West" rested largely not on actual history, but on imaginative representations of the west, in novels and, with more widespread effect, the movies.

The historic record is marked by capitalist exploitation of the land and its inhabitants. Prior to settlement of the west, in early nineteenth-century North America, a group of fiercely competitive profit-centered corporations sought to extract wealth from the Pacific Northwest for themselves and their shareholders: The North West Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, and American millionaire John Jacob Astor's ambitious settlement at the mouth of the Columbia River, Astoria (ca. 1811-12), a capitalist beachhead that became a key first attempt to establish a truly international (New York – Astoria – China – London) trading corporation.<sup>1</sup>

These economic foundations of American settlement have been largely erased in crowd-pleasing (and ticket-generating) cinematic representations of North American history, first by the Hollywood Western and its myth of frontier individuality, and subsequently by the Hollywood road movie, concerned largely with an existential quest for personal value and meaning. Hence, the extractive corporate industries of the nineteenth century have been replaced by the corporate entertainment industry, selling American myths in place of American pelts.

### **The "Road" in the Road Movie**

For obvious reasons of narrative economy, films featuring road trips don't focus on the roads *per se* (the roads' political and economic origin, composition, relation to the majority and

minority communities they traverse, connections to the larger infrastructure, etc.). Yet, one must consider the existence of roads alongside other national interests and programs. For example, war among nation-states, alongside imperialist adventures, constitutes an additional mode of national economic expansion, akin to the extractive economic practices of early corporate entities I mentioned above, though rationalized through an ideological/political purpose, from *Lebensraum* to Weapons of Mass Destruction. One of the keys to success in these endeavors is the ability to efficiently move war matériel. In the twentieth century, the Autobahn and Dwight Eisenhower's National Defense Highway System (which became the American Interstate Highway System) were seen as central to their respective nations' economic expansion. From early Rome to the United States, while roads have benefitted citizens in extensive and complex ways, their rationale has often been to aid in national defense and/or to extend national borders and hence, global economic influence.

While mid-twentieth century America saw road building as a national defense imperative, in early nineteenth century North America the "roads" consisted of rivers and portage trails connecting the rivers. Canadian voyageurs, American mountain men, and the emerging trading corporations employed rivers as links between their extractive practices in the west—beginning with animal pelts and moving on to logging and fishing—and their corporate headquarters in New York and Hudson's Bay. These individuals and companies, prior to the area's settlement by private citizens, created the riverine communication systems that linked the western areas of two not-yet-formed nations with their eastern political and economic centers.

Thomas Jefferson's planning and funding of what came to be the Lewis and Clark expedition (May 1804 – September 1806) was the first truly national road trip. Following the disastrous French attempt to suppress a slave revolt in Haiti, the French government sold—or to some subsequent observers, gave away—the Louisiana Purchase. The American acquisition of this vast, uncharted new territory motivated Jefferson to send out a military-style expedition with multiple goals (among them, to find a trading route to the Pacific Ocean, as well as verifying the existence of mastodons, which he believed populated the western part of the continent).<sup>2</sup> Under American president James Polk a series of conflicts with Mexico resulted in the acquisition of massive tracts of western land which eventually formed the American Southwest, along with California. Although the geographic boundaries of these areas remained vague, and decades elapsed before the American and British governments could agree on a northern border between Canada and the U.S., this new land was ripe for settlement.

Subsequent to exploration, a major force behind settlement was one in which government and corporate economic-centered expeditions were replaced by individual ones: the personal quest for get-quick riches through a series of "rushes" for precious metals (e.g., California, 1849; Pike's Peak, 1858; the Black Hills, 1874; the Klondike, 1897; etc.), primarily gold, a second wave of extraction of materials destined for foreign markets.

The myth underlying American expansion—Manifest Destiny—plays out in the popular mind as an inevitable establishment of an arena for American democracy—Jefferson's idea of the Yeoman Farmer, who would, through industrious land cultivation, take a psychological stake in the democratic ideals contained in America's founding documents. One of the solutions to getting these farmer's crops to market was the creation of a new set of roads: railroads. While the railroads did eventually connect vital parts of the young nation to enable transit of goods and persons, the building of the railroads themselves was one of the most scandalous public enterprises in American history, in which a few wealthy individuals embezzled millions upon millions of dollars from the federal government in a series of sleazy, underhanded deals.<sup>3</sup>

This background to the American road system suggests that a fruitful way to look at the cinematic development of the American highway as a mythological site for individual identity formation is to understand its economic history. Cinematic representations of the desire for self-reinvention by heading out for the territories, portrayed as a consequence of the myth of American individualism, have at their base economic motives. More simply, road movies are as guided by economics as the roads themselves. Those so motivated were not the historical travelers, whether they be explorers, exploiters, or settlers, but the corporate entertainment industry which, in its quest for profits, engendered several myths of western travelers that both entertained audiences and provided them with individual opportunities to imaginatively play out their own participation in this mythic American history during their own contemporary travels. American ideas of the personal possibilities that could be gained from travel emerged not from an understanding of American history, but from the pleasing myths originating in Hollywood.

### **Hollywood “Roads”**

The Hollywood Western cannot be considered a version of the road movie. However, it did establish one of the preconditions for the road movie narrative: the lonely individual(s) traversing “unpopulated” tracts of land (a characterization that, as noted, would be news to the Amerindians), only to arrive in a settlement, where the hero is confronted with a moral quandary (threatening Indians, wild bandits, sheep vs cattle) that can only be settled through an act of regenerative violence.<sup>4</sup> Since the Westerns were set repeatedly in a mythic five-year period around 1870, the road films’ heroes would have to wait a couple of decades for the emergence of the internal combustion engine-driven automobile and motorcycle to give them the opportunity for self-exploration through mobility that these vehicles would provide.<sup>5</sup> Unlike members of a wagon train or passengers on a railroad, and analogous to the horse-riding western hero, the automobilist and motorcyclist are self-directed, both in terms of their geographical direction and the self-revelation that the journey will bring.

During the 1910s, another road trip occurred among American immigrant Jews, from the cloud-covered swamps of New Jersey and boroughs of New York to an area nearby a new California housing development named Hollywoodland. The motive for this western migration was doubly economic. Long denied the right to own property in Europe, Jews turned to financial activities such as banking and the entertainment industry. In America, smart entrepreneurs went all in for the novel commercial possibilities of the developing film business. Already beset by vicious northeast-based cartels—the most famous of which was the Edison-helmed Motion Picture Patents Company (controlling the distribution of film stock, as well as opportunities to screen their finished products)—Jewish filmmakers left the east coast for California, where they could escape the violence inherent in largely unregulated capitalist competition, to a place where there were sunny skies for filming in natural light, and where, when financial problems arose, the Mexican border lay within easy reach. Once in California they could begin to create narratives of rugged individualism and the protean possibilities of movement, both of the lone male hero and of the road, that resulted in the road movie.

Hollywood could have considered dramatizing a set of explanations for historical American westward expansion: exploration, resource extraction, religious conversion, settlement, and the solidification of distant markets through transport networks (i.e., railroads and roads). While we could certainly compile a list of documentary films that trace these various historical events, consider how human motivation for westward migration gets translated into the

Hollywood film. First, it becomes individualized, and then the capitalist notion of “markets” is eliminated, in favor of psychological explanations for characters’ behavior.

Economically, Hollywood’s process of fictionalizing (and psychologizing) road travel occurs on two levels. First, the studio system evolved into a Fordist factory mode of production, complete with hierarchical organization, repeated and often successful attempts at vertical integration (housing production, distribution and exhibition under one corporation, to the detriment of competitors). Second, although some films did attempt to address economic inequity (e.g., *A Corner in Cotton* [1916], based on a story by Anita Loos) or social problems (e.g., *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, multiple versions from 1897 to 1926), prior to the advent of sound, Hollywood film principally sought to entertain. As such, films generally averted their gaze from the actual social and economic conditions of production, labor, inequality, and racial and gender discrimination. Movies existed to amuse the working class—often those lacking in English skills—exhausted by their own labor. As such, as Katie Mills notes, filmmakers were “commodity producers catering to mainstream audiences.”<sup>6</sup> Hollywood was not called the Dream Factory for nothing.

When the road does appear as space for character transformation in Hollywood film, it and the space around it appears as what Emily Bingham calls “an unscripted landscape, a site outside the bounds of spatial structuring that accommodates and produces a free-floating individual detached from any spatiotemporal context.”<sup>7</sup> As noted in the case of the American Interstate Highway system, this supposed “empty space” where characters pursue and experience the “freedom of the open road” has already been determined by economic, political, and historical forces that allow us to travel to some places, but not others, if we choose vehicular travel.<sup>8</sup> Hence, in film *The Road* does not have a reliable referent, but is instead the occasion for dramatizing a number of conflicts among travelers who seem to intrigue the American imagination. Truckers, outlaws, stoners, feminists, foreigners, cowboys, explorers (both internal and external), alienated young people, the poor and desperate, all have a reason for their presence on the road, and every reason is different, opening up myriad possibilities for dramatic conflict and action.

Broadly speaking, we can consider three categories of road films, two of which are anchored in a geographical location. First, in the outlaw/domestic drama film, we have an individual or group trying to get away from something: the scene of the crime, a violent domestic situation, a personal tragedy, an economic disaster, etc. Second, in the quest film we have a character or characters seeking something: freedom, survival, self-transformation, riches, etc. These characters are not trying to escape something but rather put themselves in a place where they accomplish something, either by simply reaching their geographic goal, or achieving something by virtue of being in a new, particular place. In both of these cases, the road journey is anchored on both ends by a geographical location, but, in the course of the journey, the locations and goals recede into the background, to be replaced by incidents during the journey itself. These incidents result in some sort of character transformation, one in which it’s generally revealed that, whatever the goal, the journey’s consequence is the transformation of the protagonist’s identity. The third category, and one which has become identified to the extent of parody, is the existential film. In these road movies, such as *On the Road* and *The Wild One*, there is no purpose behind the journey; it’s simply enough just to go. In the interplay between the passivity of the character and the activity of the trip, the idea of character transformation through action is generally exhibited as futile. If there is anything for the protagonist to learn, it’s that there’s nothing to learn.

The expectation of all three forms is that cinematic art can transform the viewer just as the trip transforms the protagonist. The road movie establishes a dialectic or reciprocity between our own sense of our self and the images that we consume. By the time we ourselves hit the road, we have likely already vicariously participated in scores of road-based dramas that imaginatively configure our approach to our trip, perhaps traveling along such storied cinematic locales as Route 66. Yet, by and large, the images emerging from Hollywood are not those that seek to challenge and change us, but to entertain us and reinforce social, economic and ideological values that comfort us and, in a sense, narcotize us rather than confront us. Clearly, it's against Hollywood's financial interest to create the conditions for the viewer to experience the transformative pains that the protagonists endure in the narrative.

To illustrate the economic ties that bind in the road movie, I would like to examine two films: *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Lost in America* (1985). They reveal that the capitalist system of moviemaking creates an internal dialectic on several levels that, despite narrative or directorial protestations to the contrary, serve to mythologize the idea of "escaping the system" and to reinforce the boundedness of any individual within the (economic) system. These levels occur within the narrative, as part of the economics of moviemaking, and the myriad possible relations between film audiences and the stories that films tell. I intend this claim not as a polemic, but simply a description of how America filmmaking works on narrative, economic and audience-related levels.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Easy Rider***

In terms of the subgenres of road movies outlined above, *Easy Rider* is a quest movie. But a quest for what? The tag line on the movie poster states, "A man went looking for America. And couldn't find it anywhere . . ." Let's ignore the fact that the film features two men on a quest who pick up a third, and note that, based on the narrative, the men went looking for "freedom." The vagueness of the meaning of the term "freedom" is partly a function of the film's approach to a goal-oriented plot: like many movies, it's enough to be out on the road and perhaps, while on the road, one's goal can become clarified through experience. As we know from the ending, this did not happen for Wyatt and Billy. However, it must also be said that "freedom" was a word floating through the counterculture at the time, and was, one can assert, no clearer to the hippie community (or their critics) than to Wyatt and Billy.

To embark on this quest, Wyatt and Billy needed transportation. Captain America's (Wyatt's) bike is one of the most famous in movie history, introduced by a slow erotic pan across the gas tank and shiny chrome surfaces. One might ask, where did Wyatt get the money for such an exotic bike and, for that matter, for the trip? The opening sequence shows the pair selling a hollowed-out motorcycle battery full of cocaine, with the cash proceeds being concealed in plastic tubing inside Wyatt's gas tank.<sup>10</sup> The path to freedom was funded by a dope deal.

This, of course, is the initial way of sticking it to The Man: rather than holding down a steady job, paying taxes, and judiciously saving money to finance a road trip, the pair engage in the criminal act of selling drugs. Yet, one of the largest and most profitable industries in the world is selling psychoactive substances: legal ones, such as caffeine and alcohol, and illegal ones, such as cocaine. The difference? Legal drugs are regulated by governments, while illegal drugs aren't. Both are capitalist enterprises, involving acts of production and distribution in the course of seeking a profit. Hence, Wyatt and Billy are the middle men, the distributors, seeking, and achieving, a profit from their sales. Their trip is financed through participation in an

unregulated capitalist marketplace. While outside the law, they are certainly not outside the capitalist system.

Wyatt and Billy's physical appearance in the film identifies them as "outlaws" without having to perform any action: long hair, buckskin/leather clothing, motorcycles as transportation, transient movement from place to place, etc., all are visual announcements of their outsider status. (Consider the famous scene at the café, where, as strangers, they didn't need to engage in any overt action to engender hatred in the other male customers and sexual interest in the teenage girls.). Yet, as travelers, nothing other than their drug(s) of choice configures them as outside the law: they enjoy riding their bikes, they are respectful to the Mexican family they encounter, they pick up hitchhikers, and generally try to avoid any confrontation (e.g., their quick exit from the café). Even though they model themselves as inheritors of the movie Western (Wyatt, from Wyatt Earp and Billy, from Billy the Kid),<sup>11</sup> wherein narrative problems are almost always solved through gunfire, they are not the initiators, but the victims of the violence perpetrated in the film.

Outside the film world, all three actors (Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Jack Nicholson) were considered at least hipsters by the public, and so often an actor's success results from migrating his/her public persona into the film world.<sup>12</sup> But consider their respective pedigrees: Peter Fonda is the son of one of the most talented and beloved actors of his generation and brother to Jane Fonda. As a business proposition, *Easy Rider* had first been pitched to AIP, where Fonda already had a three-picture deal.<sup>13</sup> Dennis Hopper and Jack Nicholson were both veterans of the movie industry as actors in the Roger Corman stable, as well as performers in more mainstream films (consider Hopper's role in the big-screen extravaganza *Giant* [1956]). These individuals were not Hollywood "outsiders" in any sense, indicating that their outlaw characters in the film were truly roles, not a migration from life into film. Like everyone else in the business, they were pursuing professional success as part of a larger economic system, and the film's monumental financial returns altered Hollywood to a new way of telling stories and marketing them to a particular demographic. (The film's \$500,000 cost resulted soon after its release in 19 million dollars in rentals.)<sup>14</sup>

While the film was still under consideration at AIP, a deal was engineered with Raybert, a new firm formed by two wealthy Hollywood insiders (responsible for *The Monkees* television show). To get the process started, Raybert's Bert Rafelson wrote Fonda a check for \$40,000 to finance test shooting in New Orleans, suggesting that the film's producers, as well as its stars, for all the drug-taking and womanizing, were not outlaws, either.<sup>15</sup> As filmmaker Jim McBride said of the group, "The truth is, they were very schizophrenic. We used to call them the 'Hollywood sperm,' because they were all children of successful Hollywood people. They had beards, but in other ways, they didn't seem all that different. These were very rich guys who were playing at being hippies."<sup>16</sup> As has been said, to write a novel you need a typewriter; to make a movie you need an army, and funding an army is in principle expensive. If outlawry sells, then outlawry will be portrayed. Apparently, to make a movie about outlaws, you can't yourself be one.

Consider as well the film's title, *Easy Rider*. The term refers to a man who lives off the profits of his prostitute girlfriend (he's not her pimp but her lover). This would suggest that the supposed outlaws of the film are living off the profits of ill-gotten gains—which, of course, they are—which does not ennoble them as characters who have discovered an alternative and more virtuous way to conduct their lives (reflected, perhaps, in the movie portrayal of the Mexican farmers and the hippie commune), and provide narrative lessons which audiences can learn to apply to their own experiences and life choices.



Independent of the film's final scene, one could ask if the narrative has provided a context for the "success" of the characters' quest. George Hanson's (Jack Nicholson) murder effectively removed him from his own life of drinking and aimless drifting. But the oft-discussed key scene occurs while camping overnight in an unspecified place in Louisiana, when Billy suggests that they have succeeded, that, in his words, "We're rich, man. We're retired in Florida." Billy's conception of a successful life is one spent in idleness (curiously, surrounded by elderly escapees from the Northeast). If, as Marx contends, we create ourselves through work, idleness is simply the flip side of alienated labor: because we work against our will in an exploitative position, servant to the profit motive of the company we work for, escaping alienation and exploitation should be our goal: we should seek more fulfilling work, not no work at all. Marx would suggest that this is impossible in a capitalist system, that the solution is not to seek non-alienated work, but to overthrow the economic system to pave the way for such a possibility. So, regardless of whether Wyatt and Billy adhered to Marx's interpretation of life under capitalism, Billy's view of escaping it to some sort of idle "freedom" is misguided.

And, as we know, Wyatt recognizes this, stating in his famous claim that "we blew it, Billy." Wyatt recognizes that not working and getting high all the time do not constitute a successful existence. As noted, the visit to the Mexican farm and (perhaps) the commune interlude gave the characters some idea of how best to live, but these experiences did not seem to be transformative, except perhaps in the sense the Wyatt now recognizes that their trip was not directing them to individual freedom.

For first-time viewers, the significance of this scene is likely obscured by the emotional impact of first George's and then Wyatt's and Billy's murders. In both cases, there was no "lesson" to be learned, except to recognize the violence that rednecks are capable of when they feel threatened, as George's campfire comments suggest:

*What you represent to them is freedom. ... It's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. Course, don't ever tell anybody that they're not free, because they're going to get real busy killing and maiming to prove to you that they are. Oh, yeah, they gonna talk to you and talk to you and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em ... It makes 'em dangerous.*

George's attackers (who were most likely the men in the café) and the redneck in the pickup who dispatches Wyatt and Billy, are not the evil face of capitalism, but simply violent (and cowardly, given the means of execution) working-class Southern bigots. If we are seeking any systemic causal forces in the murders, the film does not provide them. Lower-class rednecks, who should see *The Man* as their enemy as well (exploiting them in their low-wage jobs), instead turn on fellow citizens who do not share their values.<sup>17</sup> While sociologically understandable (given the conditions of the Vietnam war and the hostility toward its opponents and hippies in general at the time), there does not seem to be any internal logic to their murder. Perhaps we are asked to conclude that pursuing "freedom," however misguided, is mistaken, but the other alternative, adhering to the values of middle-class America, is equally unpalatable.

Another way to describe it is that the film has it both ways: it celebrates capitalism without regulation (drug dealing), envisions freedom as idleness (not working in retirement in Florida), yet serially criticizes the economic forces that would allow them to live out their fantasy (the Mexican farmer, the hippie commune, etc.).<sup>18</sup> Seen this way, the film embodies a

paradox under capitalism: Americans are told that, politically, we live in the land of the free, but economically, forces of the capitalist system are designed to drive that quest for freedom in the direction of work that benefits the profit-seeking motives of corporations. This view of the film would seem to validate the Marxist view that there is no “outside” the system, and those seeking to find it will encounter futility (or, as the violent drama of the film’s end suggests, death). Wyatt and Billy blew it not because they made the wrong choices, but that any choice was bound to fail, so long as they found themselves in an exploitative economic system. Wyatt may have recognized in his “we blew it” comment that, as a dope dealer he was simply one more cog in a capitalist system, who simply avoided federal business regulation.

If so, this same pattern seems to work on the meta-narrative level of Hollywood filmmaking. Fonda and Hooper wanted to make an “honest” film,<sup>19</sup> which one assumes would seek to go beyond the profit-seeking motives of Hollywood and address more serious issues confronting individuals and/or the country. Yet, the industry itself seems to exist in a closed loop. While there have always been tales of filmmakers working outside the system—most notably “indie” filmmakers—the successful ones seem to be either absorbed into the Hollywood system, individually or through corporate buyouts of their filmmaking properties, or their very success invokes a crash-and-burn cycle.<sup>20</sup>

### *Lost in America*

Albert Brooks’ gentle, funny film, *Lost in America* (1985) emerges as a parody of the hopes and dreams of Wyatt and Billy, featuring aging boomers who, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, want to quit their lucrative jobs, go out onto the open road and “touch an Indian.” David (Albert Brooks) and Linda (Julie Hagerty) are both employed in high-powered, and high-salaried jobs in L. A. (in advertising and high-end clothing, respectively). After losing out on an anticipated promotion, David convinces Linda to quit her job. They purchase an RV and place all their savings into the psychological category of a “Nest Egg.” David convinces Linda that “We’re going to roam across the country and find ourselves, just like they did in *Easy Rider*” (clearly forgetting how the movie ends). They then head out on the highway, looking for adventure and whatever will come their way.

What comes their way at their first stop, Las Vegas, is a disastrous loss of virtually all of the Nest Egg by a naïve Linda, who gambles it away in the middle of the night as David sleeps. They find themselves beached in Safford, Arizona, and pick up minimum-wage jobs in an attempt to recoup enough money to get them to New York. They arrive in New York, where David gets his job back with his old firm “with a 31% pay cut, but with better medical,” and Julie gets a “job at Bloomingdales and is expecting their first child.”

While the characters in *Easy Rider* may have begun their trip by deluding themselves into thinking that a road trip is a path to “freedom,” David has been deluded by the film *Easy Rider* into thinking that he can find freedom, touch an Indian, and improve his relationship with his wife by buying an RV and hitting the road. This being a filmic parody, the audience is in on the joke and can laugh at (and, perhaps, with) the characters as they pursue a goal that is clearly not attainable based neither their self-awareness nor the means they chose. Yet, on reflection, while the film is good for some excellent laughs, the seeming message of the film is depressing. It’s better to abandon hope of self-transformation on the road and return, a bit older and wiser to what one ultimately wants in life: upper middle-class life in the city. Brooks’ 1980s version of the road trip repudiates the possibility of the road as a site of self-transformation. While he and

Linda survive at the end, the film shares with *Easy Rider* a fundamental pessimism about the road's role in possible self-transformation.

Yet, the irony, hopefully not lost on the audience, is that David's fantasy of his future life roaming aimlessly around America as an assertion of his freedom was obtained not by thinking through his mid-life options, but from watching a movie: *Easy Rider*. Consider as well that (perhaps like many viewers) he didn't seem to have absorbed the film's message. First, *Easy Rider*'s protagonist recognizes that roaming around the country is an expression of failure, not success ("We blew it, Billy"), and the three characters themselves are serially murdered.

While, according to Wyatt, their trip resulted in a failure to achieve their goals (a realization prior to their murder), David and Linda's pursuit of their movie-influenced goal was simply a component of their delusion. Their plan to escape the "system," unlike Wyatt and Billy's, resulted from hard work and savings: their "Nest Egg," which was to see them through to some future, unspecified time (when the money had run out and they had "found" themselves).

While Wyatt and Billy financed their trip through a dope deal, Linda hoped in her own delusory way (apparently not having a clear grasp of how gambling works), to increase the Nest Egg substantially through a legal, but short-sighted, and labor-free activity: gambling. Like the seemingly something-for-nothing activity of being the middleperson in a dope deal, gambling holds out the promise to make something for doing nothing other than betting against a gambling house. While millions are entertained by gambling, any organized form of it is, of course, based on the statistical reliability that the house always wins. Either one gambles to be entertained, or one has a shallow grasp of statistical possibilities. Although the narrative does not offer the information, one can speculate that Linda has seen a gambling movie or two wherein the protagonist has "hit it big" (and, like David, no doubt forgotten the ending, where the character, penniless, tries to hitchhike back home).

They did not commit a crime to finance their leisure, but what David thought would be their daily life on the road was comically mistaken. David could not have imagined while in L.A. that he would be sitting in a Las Vegas casino executive's office trying to convince him to return the money his wife has lost as a means of advertising the casino's largesse. While we can simultaneously criticize and respect Wyatt and Billy's goal, David's ideas are simply fodder for humor. David blew it before he even left town.

What both road movies suggest in their own way is that the road cannot be a vehicle, as it were, for self-transformation in the absence of a general economic transformation. This occurs on two levels: hip capitalists make movies about escaping the system (questioning whether that's possible) while simultaneously profiting from it. Characters in these films seek individual transformation, not realizing (either just in time or too late) that their goal is thwarted by forces beyond their control. As *Lost in America* comically illustrates, the dialectic between moviegoers and the movies they consume seldom results in the type of self-transformation fostered by British Romantic poets: that art has the capacity for individual moral transformation.

In her discussion of the beatniks, Katie Mills refers to their "romanticization of marginality," which includes rejecting consumerism and embracing the freedom of impoverishment.<sup>21</sup> Clearly the films based on these principles are the exact inverse of the beatniks' values, namely the films are co-opting these values to serve their bottom line.<sup>22</sup>

## The End of The Road?

I began this discussion by suggesting that, while the original motivation for hitting the road for the west was the ruinous nineteenth-century practice of extracting pelts, lumber, fish, and precious metals in the Northwest, the movie business has, particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s, trafficked in images of western possibility, not so much of riches, but of possible individual transformation by taking to the road and heading west. Hollywood has, in a sense, extracted profits from the pockets of Americans by marketing The Road as a site of self-exploration. The two movies under examination gloss over, or endorse, the complex economic relationships between the denizens of the road and the system under which their goal-seeking occurs. What hovers unseen behind the choices characters in road movies make is the governing aspect of the economic choices the characters make, suggesting a type of fatedness of which the characters are unaware. This pattern could be extended to scores of road movies not examined in this essay.<sup>23</sup> Given the reciprocity, or dialectic, between movie going and how one understands one's own romances, work life, and personal aspirations, one could extend this idea to the film audience as well.<sup>24</sup>

Another possible irony linking these two films concerns what we have learned from Mark Twain, Frederick Jackson Turner, and countless films: that if Americans find themselves in need of escape or transformation, the solution is to head West, to the land of possibility and, one hopes, a new-found freedom. Note that in the case of *Easy Rider* and *Lost in America*, the characters head *east*, from California to Louisiana and New York, respectively. If heading West is hurtling toward life-changing possibility, is heading East moving toward the realization that the hope for self-transformation is futile? One could argue that the travel direction of these films dovetails with the narrative message and, if so, preserves the West as the land of possibility. Following the demise of the characters, or their reinsertion into a labor market they valiantly sought to escape, one then recognizes that the direction of their journey signaled the folly of the characters' self-delusion.<sup>25</sup>

The West remains an arena of American possibility. However, focus has shifted away from both the Columbia River and Hollywood to Seattle and Silicon Valley. The spectacular fortunes made by John Jacob Astor and Louis B. Mayer now are earned by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and the owner of an online bookstore in Seattle, Washington. Lives and identities are transformed today by those who work on engineering a new, digital road, the Internet, where much of the world's population now travels. This road is now in the process of absorbing and transforming the Dream Factory as well, with online contenders such as Netflix and Amazon spending, as of this writing, 6.3 billion and 4.5 billion, respectively, on entertainment content.<sup>26</sup> If so, in *Tron* (1982, 2010) are we witnessing the nascent future of the road movie?

As we have noted, within the current economic system there remains a doubly closed loop in the relationship between the road and the movies. We find the new lives sought by those who traveled west in the nineteenth century determined by the economic system that dominated the extractive industries that profited from western migration. In turn, the west of Hollywood's narratives enriched the moviemakers who told audiences stories that reinforced the values that the economically determined, ideological system had defined for them. Moviegoers, in lieu of opening themselves up to the unpredictable experiences of the road, enter into travel with an imaginative notion of their goals and possible experiences engendered by the movies themselves. It appears that, absent of a transformation in the economics of the internet (supported by systems

of advertising and surveillance control), we are entering into a third closed loop of capitalism. We may well have blown it even before we've logged on.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A history of the influence of modern corporations and the concept of their "personhood" can be found in Adam Winkler, *We the Corporations: How American Businesses Won Their Civil Rights* (New York: Liveright, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Fossilized mastodon bones had been discovered in upstate New York and, in 1803, were displayed in Charles Wilson Peale's Philadelphia museum, Peale's Museum (Ross J. Wilson, *Natural History: Heritage, Place and Politics* [New York: Routledge, 2018]: 26).

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive account of the machinations behind early American railroad building, see Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (W. W. Norton, 2012). As White notes, "Railroads were the epitome of the modern in the late nineteenth century. Technologically, they were part of the move from muscle—human and animal—and wind power to steam and fossil fuels. They were part of the great wave of wage labor that largely eliminated slavery and indentured workers in North America and cut deeply into the ranks of independent producers. During most of the period between the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century, the railroads were for all practical purposes synonymous with large corporations in North America. Yet, in terms of their politics, finances, labor relations, and environmental consequences, the transcontinental railroads were not only failures but near-disasters, and in this they encapsulated the paradox of the arrival of the modern world in western North America" (Kindle loc 9978). See also John J. Stewart, *The Iron Trail to the Golden Spike* (New York: Meadow Lark Press, 1994; John Hoyt Williams, *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Times Books, 1988); Sarah Gordon, *Passage to Union: How the Railroads Transformed American Life, 1829-1929* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1996); Jeanne Minn Bracken, ed., *Iron Horses across America* (Carlisle, MA: Discovery Enterprises, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> For an exhaustive account of mythic American western violence, see Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: U Oklahoma Pr, 1998). For a narrative analysis of the Western hero, see John Cawelti, *The Six Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U Pr, 1984), as well as *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago, IL: U Chicago Pr, 1976). See also Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: U California Pr., 1977) and Raymond Durnat and Scott Simmon, "Six Creeds That Won the Western," *Film Comment*, vol. 16, no. 5 (1980): 61-68, 70, 79.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of early twentieth-century road narratives, see Chapter 1 of Ann Brigham, *American Road Narratives* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015): 17-52.

<sup>6</sup> Katie Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving through Film, Fiction, and Television* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U Pr, 2006): 8. For an extended period of early film history, film was considered a lower-class entertainment, while opera was the proper choice for the educated Anglo-Saxon class.

<sup>7</sup> Brigham, *American Road Narratives*, 10. Her book encompasses both written and filmed road narratives, stretching back to the earliest attempts in the teens and '20s to make cross-country automobile trips.

<sup>8</sup> Among many examples, in linking the interstate highway system to population centers, highway builders often found the area surrounding the city center densely populated, creating a linking problem that was solved by paving over areas already inhabited by the poor and/or people of color, thus implicitly supporting a policy of racial and economic discrimination. For a brief overview, see Steven Alford and Suzanne Ferriss, *An Alternative History of Bicycles and Motorcycles: Two-Wheeled Transportation and Material Culture* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016): 64-67. For a more extensive examination, see Mark H. Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics 1939-1989; Revised Edition* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1979, 1990). For a background on pre-Interstate American roadways, see I. B. Holley, Jr., *The Highway Revolution, 1895-1925: How the United States Got out of the Mud* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> For another discussion of these two films, see Mas Ud Zavarzadeh, *Seeing Films Politically* (Albany, NY: SUNY U Pr, 1991): 153-168. Other references to the two films can be found in Christopher Morris, "The Reflexivity of the Road Film," *Film Criticism*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2003): 24-52. Brief scattered comments can also be found by various authors in the edited collection *The Road Movie Book*, ed., Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Psychology Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> For some comments on the flag's significance, see Michael Chappell's observations at [http://ijms.nova.edu/November2005/IJMS\\_RT.Chappell.html](http://ijms.nova.edu/November2005/IJMS_RT.Chappell.html)

<sup>11</sup> In choosing their *noms du voyage*, one assumes that while both had been to the movies, neither spent much time bookishly informing themselves about the history of the American West.

<sup>12</sup> The list of academic studies of stardom and celebrity is long and growing. See Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis and London University of Minnesota Press, 1997); and Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998): Kindle loc 780.

<sup>14</sup> While those were relatively immediate returns, according to IMDB, by 1972 the film had grossed over sixty million dollars worldwide.

<sup>15</sup> \$40,000 in 1967 would be the equivalent of approximately \$250,000 in 2018 dollars. See <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com>.

<sup>16</sup> Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, Kindle loc 1572.

<sup>17</sup> For an instructive and entertaining look at how this values conflict emerged outside the movie world, see Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Macmillan, 2007), and the wide-ranging discussion and subsequent publications the book engendered.

<sup>18</sup> This notion of selling outlaw/counterculture images for corporate profit aligns well with Jim McGuigan's notion of "cool capitalism": as "the incorporation of disaffection into capitalism itself" (*Neoliberal Culture* [London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016]: 35).

<sup>19</sup> Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, Kindle loc 1517.

<sup>20</sup> The examples of outsiders creating fictional, narrative films, who escape the system are not encouraging. While John Cassavetes is often held up as exemplary, the absorption of independent filmmakers into the Hollywood system is much more convincing. See, among many examples, those contained in John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers & Dykes: A Guided Tour across a Decade of American Independent Cinema* (Austin: U of Texas Pr, 2014). Sean Baker's *Tangerine* (2015) and Stephen Soderburgh's *Unsane* (2018), both shot on iPhones, might project a new technological direction for filmmakers to work outside the system, but history suggests that Hollywood and/or Netflix will find a way to entice filmmakers to consider audience entertainment as their primary creative goal.

<sup>21</sup> Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> In other words, they are coopting images of rebellion for profit, which McGuigan defines as "cool capitalism." See note 15 above.

<sup>23</sup> Consider *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Vanishing Point* (1971), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), *Nebraska* (2013), etc.

<sup>24</sup> We could ask ourselves how akin we are to David in *Lost in America*: when thinking about *Easy Rider*, do we remember two cool guys on awesome bikes who travel around and get high? Or do we look at the film as a cautionary tale about self-delusion and the consequences of misunderstanding what "freedom" means?

<sup>25</sup> One should note that the great John Ford film, *Stagecoach* (1939), involved a west-to-east journey. Its culmination, however, resulted in the Ringo Kid (John Wayne) and Dallas (Claire Trevor) cementing their romantic relationship by crossing the border into Mexico, where the Ringo Kid had a “spread.” As is the case with the traditional western hero (in film Westerns and Western literature—see Odysseus), he loses his heroic status in cementing a monogamous romantic relationship with a woman, thus the need to exit American cinematic space for another country.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Rani Molla, “Netflix Spends More on Content than Anyone Else on the Internet—and Many TV Networks, too,” *Recode*, February 26, 2018: <https://www.recode.net/2018/2/26/17053936/how-much-netflix-billion-original-content-programs-tv-movies-hulu-disney-chart>.