

Sound and Fury on the Move: A Critical Exploration of the Self and Metamorphosis in Road Movies

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Abstract: A road movie is a film genre in which the main characters leave home on a road trip, typically altering their perspective from their everyday lives. A road movie is technically defined as a movie that starts at geographic point A and travels through various pit-stops along the way before reaching geographic point B, the final destination. Road movies are noted for their vivid, dynamic and picturesque narration. Normally the protagonist or traveler is a male and the purpose of journey is self-discovery. Characters' internal conflicts and transformations are highlighted. The characters in road movies often experience new realities on their trip and often explore the intensity of their alienation and solitude on a possibly long road trip to a remote destination. In road movies, the protagonist is usually considered as on the move. The present paper explores the theme of oppression, rebellion, escape, self-discovery and the metamorphosis of the protagonist as depicted in Frank Capra's movie *It Happened One Night* and the *Easy Rider* by Dennis Hopper. The paper, on a further note, examines the emotional transformations of the protagonists as they sail through varied personal, emotional and social experiences on the way to their destinations. Montage sequences, travelling shots, aerial shots and diegetic music are some of the technical peculiarities employed in road movies. The road movie entered a political phase in the late 1960's influenced by the low budget biker movies and Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. The narrative is somewhat picaresque in almost all road movies that sequentially present certain pertinent events that culminate in a good or bad ending.

Keywords: road movies, self-discovery, metamorphosis, narrative, travel fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema, from its birth and until the present moment has arranged ,disrupted and rearranged time, space and motion to unravel the myriad vistas of its dynamism, that is deeply technological, social, aesthetic, psychological and to a great extent political. Cinema's dynamism and its multiple dimensions define "cinema" in the most modern sense of the word. Cinema revolves around everything that is common to human experience and creates a world of its own where stories and narratives mould our ideas and thoughts to create a new platform for self-expression. "Then came the film" is the phrase used by the German cultural theorist Walter

Benjamin to describe the emergence of a novel art form towards the fag end of the nineteenth century.

For many film critics and enthusiasts, the reach of world cinema is so great that the search for novelty and distinctive expressions is so distinctive that one barely finds oneself brooding along the same line of thought. While discovering every single image, we might probe, as does Reynold Humphries in the films of Jean-Luc Godard. "What values and ideas are already contained in an image from the fact of its mere presence?"(Humphries 1975:13).One of the most technological advancements in the field of world cinema was marked in the late 1920's with the arrival of synchronized sound as a privileged site for further development. Andrew Dix in his influential work *Beginning Film Studies* writes:

As the complexity of soundtracks accompanying the image increased – from the vitaphone discs attempting rudimentary and partial synchronization that were supplied for Don Juan (1926) and the Jazz Singer (1927) to the fuller acoustic track imprinted on the filmstrip-voices could be heard pronouncing that this development was the death of cinema or on the contrary, its liberation. Rudolf Arnheim ,whose despondency regarding the arrival of color was mentioned in chapter 1, was just as melancholy about the sound era. Writing in 1928,he concedes that it might benefit cinema in the areas of instruction and journalism but adds that it threatens the integrity of silent film art that had been carefully elaborated over three decades.[78-79].(Andrew Dix,2010) Arnheim, while exploring the nuances of sound film, stated that there had been interesting instances of asynchronism between acoustic and image tracks; however, he discovered most works to be dully matching or pairing picture and sound in a way that beguiled the artistic vocation of cinema in the long run. As Andrews Dix puts in his essay *Hearing Film:Analysing Soundtrack*: "Yet where Arnheim deplored the violence that sound did to the aesthetics of sound film, Salvador Dali welcomed it. For Dali cinema had become increasingly formalist and abstract, and the addition of soundtrack functioned as a corrective."[79] A travel documentary is a television program that describes, in a series of episodes, different tourist destinations in general or travel experiences in particular. "Travel film", as an analytic genre, is an early type of travel documentary which gained momentum towards the latter half of the 19th century. Road movies are generally considered a subgenre of the "travel film". In road movies roads form the metaphor for the freedom from the oppressive, crude and constricted rule bound society .Sometimes road movies are not restricted to the close confines of a moving vehicle. Most often the places or venues projecting the intimacy and conflicts between the different characters are also staged.

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Music and songs occupy an integral part in road movies and at times, they also serve as panacea for the troubled minds.

II. IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT: AN ANALYTIC OVERVIEW

Frank Capra's romantic comedy *It Happened One Night* bagged five top Academy Awards making it one of the most discussed movies in the road movies paradigm. The movie spins around the life of Ellie Andrews who feels disturbed and troubled when her father warns her to back out from her relation with a famous aviator, King Westley. Ellie is introduced as a rich heiress from an affluent well to do family. As the movie begins, Ellie is spotted with her father on a secluded yacht hired by her father. On many occasions, their discussions end up in heated arguments and Ellie manages to escape from the yacht but in vain. Later she decides to join her husband, King Westley in New York. On her way to New York, Ellie comes across an out of work reporter Peter Warne who finds out Ellie's true identity from a newspaper article. When he finds out the story of her escape, he offers to help her to get to her destination in exchange for exclusive rights to her story. Ellie at first refuses to succumb before him but later changes her mind as Peter threatens to turn her to her authoritarian father. As Ellie desperately wanted to join her husband, King Westley, she had no other option than to agree with the proposal put forward by Peter Warne.

In the remaining days of their journey, Ellie Andrews and Warne pretend to be husband and wife and share hotel rooms at various venues enroute their destination. They use a blanket as a barrier to safeguard the sanctity of their friendship. Warne, at times, refers to the blanket as the "Walls of Jericho". The story takes a surprising twist when a newspaper article carries the report of the reward money worth \$ 10,000 to those who help Ellie's return to her father, Mr. Andrews. When the news reaches New York, Ellie and Peter are on board a bus where one of the passengers recognises Ellie. The co-passengers offer to split the money if Warne helps them turn in Ellie to Mr. Andrews but to their dismay, Peter Warne turns down the request. Instead he frightens and warns the passengers implying that he himself is a criminal looking for \$ 10,00000 in ransom and threatens to shoot them off in case they leak the message. The passengers are taken aback and leave them without causing any harm.

Peter and Ellie pass the night sleeping in hay. By splashing one of her legs, Ellie Andrews stops a driver. The driver turns out to be a robber who drives off with their possessions. Peter Warne follows the driver and after some time returns with his Model T car. Things take a brighter side when Ellie's father reluctantly agrees to approve the marriage of his daughter if she returns to him. As days pass, they spend many nights in a blanket partitioned room. Meanwhile, Ellie develops a fascination for Peter and secretly proposes Peter to spend the remaining days together. Peter doesn't concede and slowly manages to evade Ellie from making further moves. Ellie retires to bed and falls asleep.

In the middle of the night, Peter drives back to New York deliberately and diplomatically making an impression that he has betrayed his loyalty to Ellie. As soon as Peter reaches New York, he embarks to sell the story of Ellie to his boss for an amount worth \$1000. Peter's intention, on the other hand, was to utilize the money from his boss for his marriage with

Ellie. Ellie firmly believes that Peter has betrayed and left her forever to start a new life with another woman. The manager of the hotel gets suspicious and kicks off Ellie from the hotel suspecting her fidelity. Ellie becomes hopeless and at last decides to ring up her father in order to turn herself in Mr. Andrews picks her up with police escort and as soon as they leave the spot, Peter returns in time to see them drive by. Peter, quite embarrassed, calls Ellie's father and tells him all about his honest intention and how he was planning to save the reward money for his marriage with Ellie; but to Peter's dismay all the arrangements and preparations for marriage had already started and everyone was caught up in a festive mood. Peter once again admits to Mr. Andrews that he was all set to marry Ellie and that intention was never dishonest. However, Ellie was hard to convince but somehow Mr Andrews manages to convince his daughter that Warne had a really honest intention when he left her in New York. Meanwhile, Mr. Andrews pays off the aviator to annul the wedding and finally Ellie is married off to Peter Warne. Thus the film ends on a happy note in a hotel room with the "Walls of Jericho" coming down.

The movie *It Happened One Night* is set against a realistic backdrop exploring the themes of escapist and egalitarian ideologies. The director assures everyone that the movie is an excellent lesson in screenwriting, structure, dialogue and pacing. Frank Capra's film gained reputation as a movie with a shrewd sketch of romance and marriage. Claudette Colbert played the role of Ellie Andrews and the role of Peter Warne was played by Clark Gable. While making the film, there weren't much automotive options available; so the movie used a 1926-27 Ford Model T car which makes multiple appearances throughout the movie. The man behind the landmark film *Nanook of the North* was one among the prominent figures who made the genre of road movies one of the successful media of literary and visual communication; but the origin of the genre is supposed to be from the ideas generated by ancient painters and photographers who migrated to hitherto unknown lands and explored uninhabited barren lands, unknown to outsiders. As Walter Salles quotes in his article *Notes for a Theory of the Road Movie* :

In terms of storytelling, *The Odyssey* seemed to me the basis of it all, the source from which all road films, including Wender's own *Paris, Texas* seemed to arise. Wenders argued otherwise. For him the origin lay even further back in history-in our nomadic roots-in mankind's primal need to leave an account of its passage on earth. If you accept this vision, the cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira are the true first accounts of life in movement.[4].(Walter Salles,2007)

III. MOVIE REVIEW: EASY RIDER

The expansion of geographical area or the merging of new lands was often one of the prime foci of the earliest road movies. One such road movie set against the backdrop of American Civil War was *The Searchers* directed by John Ford. The movie delves deep into the theme of national identity and the preservation of national integrity. Lately, transformation and metamorphosis form the basis of almost all road movies.



Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* exposes the rigorous implosion of the American dream during the Vietnam years. Such movies, like the *Easy Rider*, tend to discuss the transformation and metamorphosis of an entire culture from the perspective of the protagonist who is always on the move. As the *Easy Rider* begins, Wyatt and Billy, two young, vibrant and energetic bike riders are engaged in the business of selling dope in South California. After reaping the profits of the illegal business, Wyatt and Billy stash the money in the bike's fuel tank and set off for a trip across America. They describe the journey as their own personal odyssey looking forward to a novel way of leading life. Amidst their personal odyssey, they encounter many instances of biased behavior from different communities who cast a contemptuous gaze on their non-conformist attitude. But they also encounter communities with alternate life style who are against such narrow mindedness.

The future of the protagonists in these road movies remains bleak throughout the movie. Wyatt is garbed in a flag adorned leather coat suggesting typical American outlook and he is addressed as "Captain America". Billy, however, gets into the garb of a native American with the American style buckskin pants and shirts and a typical bush hat. Billy and Wyatt are poles apart in their perspectives. Wyatt appreciates the attention and escort they receive from the outsiders whereas Billy remains tough throughout the movie and never appreciates the fidelity of the outside world. Peter Honda and Dennis Hopper star as Wyatt and Billy respectively. Once the drugs have been smuggled to Los Angeles from Mexico, Wyatt and Billy confront a vendor in Los Angeles. He is known to the public as "Connection"; a man who arrives in Rolls Royce. The eminent actor Phil Spector plays the role of "Connection" in the movie. The money gathered after smuggling is placed in the fuel tank of Wyatt's chopper. Once the money is hidden, both make an attempt to reach New Orleans.

Wyatt and Billy are not given rooms in motels as they are not in presentable attires. They look more like a hippie and a biker. They are coerced to stay out in the fields. Amidst their rigorous journey they encounter many hurdles which finally result in the metamorphosis of the central characters. The movie ends on a catastrophic note with the shot of a flaming bike and the bodies stranded on a deserted road suggesting the end of the duo's journey. "Why the road movie *Easy Rider* is considered as one of the pertinent movies of all time?" has always been a point of discussion in recent years.

IV. CONCLUSION

Film is largely seen as a novel platform to create something revolutionary. All road movies, though funny, exciting and captivating showcase an outward journey of a protagonist whose quest for self and identity results in a final inward transformation or what we call the metamorphosis. The gesture of travelling or movement which is common to all road movies is an extended version of the literary themes prominent in the literary epic stretching back to Homer's *Odyssey*. A hunt for the essence and meaning of life forms the back bone of any road movie. Most of the road movies portray bold and robust white men from the city as heroes such as the two hippie bikers bound for Florida in *Easy Rider*. The central characters are outlaws from conventional society. They fight against the established rules and values. Dope and drugs cure their ailments in a conventionalised society.. Thus

road movies project the disturbed selves of the heroes and their final metamorphosis into something new and demanding. A true ode to freedom, the road movies highlight the sociological changes the western societies underwent by presenting opposing characters with contrasting mind set who are always on the move searching for novel platforms of self-expression. Quoting the words of Amy Villarejo from his influential book *Film Studies: The Basics*:

The changing nature of college and university curricula and disciplinary divisions lands film studies in a number of different locations: you may be a student in an English department, a communications school, an art division, or a cultural studies classroom. Film studies as a discourse thus finds itself in conversation with a number of broader critical endeavors, and theories of film converse with them as well. Psychoanalysis, ideology critique and cultural studies, postmodernism, feminism, queer theory: all of these projects extend across the humanities and help us to think about the future of studying film in the context of a changing world[151](Amy Villarejo,2007)

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