

# Introduction

## Locating the Road Movie

A man at the wheel of his car loses himself to the sounds of his radio and the sights of the landscape, trying to leave behind him the troubles of his work and family; while another, fuelled by whisky, drives down a midnight highway in a delirium of speed and fluorescent lights. A girl, meanwhile, her boots torn apart at the seams, hitches along dusty roads; while elsewhere, two delinquents steal a car, then blaze a trail through the country's roads. At the same time and in another place, a desperate young man hijacks a bus, leading it at gunpoint across an empty and unforgiving landscape.

These sound like descriptions of American films: the type of film most commonly recognized as the 'road movie'. Yet the films I have in mind are, in the most recognized sense of the term, French. Made in France, generally with French money, in French with French actors, these are works which represent a dimension of French cinema from the last four decades. We know the troubled executives from Laurent Cantet's *L'Emploi du temps/Time Out* (2001) and Cédric Kahn's *Feux rouges/Red Lights* (2004); the itinerant girl from *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond* (Agnès Varda, 1985) and the sentimental criminal from *Aux yeux du monde/Autobus* (Eric Rochant, 1991); while the lawless duo, we may recognize alternately from Bertrand Blier's *Les Valseuses/Going Places* (1973) and *Merci la vie* (1991), or from Virginie Despentes's and Coralie Trinh-thi's *Baise-moi* (1999).

As this book will argue, motifs familiar from the road movie can be traced and analysed within the context of recent French cinema; to the extent, I will suggest, that we might even talk of a recognizable 'French road movie'. Any discussion of the road movie's influence in the context of French cinema needs to deal with its ambiguity and elusiveness as a cinematic genre. Recent studies on the road movie from a variety of perspectives (Corrigan 1991; Cohan and Hark 1997; Laderman 2002; Wood 2007) have tended to stress, to varying degrees, the centrality of masculinity (typically in crisis), the importance of rebellion, of mechanized automotive culture and of self-discovery as a process of the journey. For the sake of clarity, we generally accept as a road movie any film which fulfils a number of these criteria. Yet even from this basis, if the road movie has any presence in France, it tends to be exceptional rather than familiar: as I will discuss, the above-mentioned studies offer little or no coverage of the genre in a French context. Moreover, because of its lack of grounding within a French tradition of production and reception, which has its own distinct genre traditions, the road movie is rarely recognized even in existing French cinema histories.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, in terms of academic interest, the genre has enjoyed a recent resurgence of attention in the French and Francophone world, as well as in Europe more widely. The 2005 edition of *CinémAction* devoted to 'Utopie et cinéma', for example, features an essay by Anne Hurault-Paupe entitled 'Une Utopie américaine: le road movie'. This essay is quoted in a 2008 brochure, 'Le road movie', made to accompany an exhibition of posters and photographs celebrating the genre at the Cinémathèque Française and coinciding with the larger exhibition devoted to Dennis Hopper, director of *Easy Rider* (1969).<sup>2</sup> In 2008, meanwhile, the French daily newspaper *Libération* offered a *série road movies* set of DVDs, sold weekly in conjunction with the paper, with an article in the respective editions dedicated to each volume.

Neither of these events, however, introduced to any sizeable degree the idea of a French road movie, or even a European one. Of the *Libération* series, only one film, Chris Petit's English road movie

*Radio On* (1979), is not American. The selective chronological filmography accompanying the Cinémathèque brochure, meanwhile, establishes the genre's precursory and foundational films as entirely American, with the exception of Ingmar Bergman's *Smultronstället/Wild Strawberries* (1957) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1969), the latter in any case being filmed in the U.S.A. The exhibition in fact follows a familiar notion, established in most existing studies on the genre, of a chronological borrowing of the form on the part of European and, later, Asian, Australian and South American filmmakers.

The resurgence of interest in the genre, however, is not limited to American cinema, nor simply to academic or exhibition interests. If we are to understand the road movie in its most fundamental semantic and syntactical sense – as a genre in which narrative development is intertwined with physical movement, automotive or otherwise, across space – then since the turn of the millennium we have seen a revitalization of the road movie in an international, or more particularly 'transnational', cinematic context. A strain of French and Francophone filmmaking, for example, has focussed on questions of displacement and identity, particularly in relation to the experience of *maghrébin* immigrants, or of young *beurs* exploring the culture of their parents or grandparents: films such as *Inch'Allah dimanche* (Yamina Benguigui, 2001), *La Fille de Keltoum/Daughter of Keltoum* (Mehdi Charef, 2001), *Le Grand voyage* (Ismaël Ferroukhi, 2004) and *Exils* (Tony Gatlif, 2004). At the same time, European cinema is displaying an increasingly familiar motif of border-crossing (both by protagonists and the filmmakers themselves), with a particular emphasis on marginal identities and economic migration – as in *Lilja 4-ever* (Lukas Moodysson, 2002), *In This World* (Michael Winterbottom, 2002) and *Import / Export* (Ulrich Seidl, 2007), to take just three well-known examples.

These concurrent trends have been accompanied by an academic engagement with the road movie in its new geo-political contexts: in particular, the centrality of travel to issues of post-colonialism and migration, be it the ethnographic issues relating to the genre (Ruoff

2006), or the genre's potential to explore contemporary questions of dislocation, memory and identity (Naficy 2001; Ezra and Rowden 2006). Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli (2006), meanwhile, have sought to bring the road movie's motifs of quest, flight and transition to bear on this contemporary European experience, taking up the previous work of critics such as Ron Eyerman and Orvar Löfgren (1995) in their effort to read the genre in its European context. A similar approach has been taken up most recently by Wendy Everett (2009), who looks to trace a European specificity across a variety of films and national contexts.

As this brief overview suggests, the road movie need not be so strictly confined within the connotations of an 'American' genre. In terms of origins, to what extent we can or should acknowledge these as American is a question I will consider in more detail below. It is important to stress that questions of national specificity, interesting as they may be from a film-historical point of view, should not obscure what the road movie actually does: which, as I discuss in this book, is to explore space and mobility within that space and the meanings produced through this movement. It is, in this sense, a genre whose identity is always already in flux, in a process of becoming. Rather than take a reductive approach which prescribes generic specificity within a national context, then, this book aims to take a productive approach, considering the impact of the road movie itself on ideas of national cinema and identity.

## The Possibilities of the Road Movie in the French Context

Before we can discuss the possibilities of a French road movie, we need to deal with some of the more complex associations of the genre in its American mode. A common line of thinking sees the American road movie as at once a supposed break from the organizing colonial structures of old Europe (Hurault-Paupe 2005: 54) and a liberal counter-aesthetic to the classical Hollywood system (Kramer 1998: 300). Yet a more sceptical strain of criticism sees the road movie also

taking its cue from the territorial (that is, colonial) spirit of the pioneers. To take Barbara Klinger's example, the tagline for the release of *Easy Rider* famously stated: 'A man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere'. Yet here, paradoxically, 'America' is already implied structurally in the act of looking: the very search implied by the American road narrative may then always already affirm what it supposedly repudiates: the founding American myth of freedom and discovery, the idea of nation and nationalism as process (Klinger 1997). In this sense, a film like *Easy Rider* is little different from a proto-road movie such as *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939); another film which inscribes its now iconic geography as nation in the process of the journey, through the latter's own resolution of narrative trajectories, and, in particular, the journey's forging of a mobile community. Such structural paradoxes lead Susan Hayward, who sees the road movie's precedent in westerns such as Ford's, to suggest that the genre 'is about a frontiersmanship of sorts' (2006: 313). It is also, as Hayward adds, a genre that tends to disavow its predominantly masculine nature (see also Haskell 1987); the implication being that such processes of 'self-discovery' within the genre are implicitly conservative.

David Laderman's *Driving Visions*, a history of the genre from a mainly American perspective, walks this same tightrope between a radical agenda and a reactionary politics. Weighing heavily on the archetypal notion of the genre as expressing 'rebellion against social norms', of the journey as 'a means of cultural critique', Laderman sees the genre as one that 'aim[s] beyond the borders of cultural familiarity, seeking the unfamiliar for revelation' (2002: 1). Yet a potential problem with Laderman's analyses (although one he manages to avoid) is the way a failure to address the issues of power and privilege, of gender and the iconography of nation, risk making notional rebellion and discovery mere re-inscriptions of the 'social norms' the films putatively rebel against. The kind of casual misogyny and latent fear of otherness seen in many road movies, for example, should be indication enough that the road movie is hardly radical or visionary in itself.

Beyond the issue of how a supposedly American genre is intelligible within European cultural and filmmaking contexts, how, moreover, is the road movie intelligible within a European spatial context? As Everett argues, American narratives of the road privilege the scale and notionally utopian possibilities of travel in that country (what Eyerman and Löfgren call the ‘freedom to move upward and outward’ (1995: 55)), while European space is by nature more contained. Interestingly, while containment may once have been intelligible in terms of scale and more precisely in terms of the relative smallness of European countries, ‘New’ Europe and its more fluid borders has brought about a change in scale, but also, paradoxically, a new kind of containment: be it in the form of ‘enforced journeys’ and ‘widespread migratory experiences’ undertaken within it (Everett 2009: 166); or at the level of ‘Europe’ itself as an idea, already existing in a balance of various and often intractable constituencies, characterized by the problem of communication (Everett 2009: 169).

Implicit however in Everett’s analysis, as in Mazierska and Rascaroli’s *Crossing New Europe*, is that these same circumstances of European space in flux and contestation give the road movie its significance as a contemporary form. These studies recognize how the road movie as a genre responds to geo-political and cultural transformations, as one of its defining features is the intention to comprehend space through movement. But in its ability to cross borders (both literal and imaginary), it can also be used to transcend boundaries. Even if we see the road movie as an imported category, for example, we can see it in terms of a dialogue, mapping a particular spatial imaginary onto an often inappropriate material space and exploring the discrepancies of this mapping. This transcending of boundaries, in the process, enacts a form of self-questioning into location and identity, or the idea that the latter is determined by the former. Consequently, the road narrative functions across cultural contexts not as a marker of any specific culture, but as a marker of its possible disruption and transgression.

This enables us, furthermore, to consider the movement and journeys of domestic or ‘native’ subjects in new ways, focusing on

the search for identity rather than its re-inscription. This also underpins my decision to focus not on the more overtly transnational or inter-national road movies: those identified by Hamid Naficy as an ‘accented cinema’ of exile and dislocation, or the ones covered in Yosefa Loshitsky’s recent work (2010) on migration, ethnicity and ‘the stranger’ in European cinema. Although I will touch upon a number of films which may be read in these terms, both the given scope of this book, and the sense that the films are well covered within these above studies, prohibits their consideration here. Yet my decision to focus on films located predominantly within French national borders, frequently featuring French protagonists, is also motivated by a theoretical position: specifically, my interest in the possibility of reconfiguring space, rather than the relationship between two places (in terms, say, of the ‘adoptive’ nation and the ‘home’). As I will discuss at more length, what interests me in my choice of films is not the idea of the ‘leaving’ or ‘returning’, both of which presuppose at a structural level a stable idea of place. Rather, it is the possibility of transformation within a space that these films explore and the consequent undermining of fixed conceptions of place and identity. Before looking into this, we need to consider some of the contextual issues around the road movie in France.

## 1968 and the Road Movie

As Keith Reader puts it, the French experience of May 1968, a catch-all term for the dramatic social events of that month, acts ‘as a prism in which the major cultural changes of twentieth-century France are multiply refracted’ (1993: 2). These events and their aftermath and the contested nature of what the events meant – what Kristin Ross calls the ‘management of May’s memory’ (2002: 1) – have only emphasised their continuing fascination to French life. It is not within the focus and scope of this present study to address 1968 as a cultural happening; nor will I take the reductive approach of using the chosen films to gloss such a complex and fiercely debated historical moment. However, besides providing a suitable

chronological starting point for the study, many of the contestations that were and are part of the ongoing process of the *événements* can be seen to persist in a number of French road movies.

It is useful for one thing to stress the importance of 1968 as part of a debate into the meaning of cinema itself. The immediate period surrounding and following May 1968 saw the increasing influence of Louis Althusser's ideological critique on filmmaking and theory, alongside the political turn in the editorial of the previously auteur-driven *Cahiers du cinéma* and the increasing influence in the English-speaking academy of the journal *Screen* (which was itself instrumental in publishing translations of French film theory). Inherent to such a development in criticism and theory was the broader attack on ideology and imperialism (American in particular): consequently, many of the prevailing norms of cinema aesthetics, production and distribution were called into question (Harvey 1978). Significantly, a film such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Week End* (1967), which in its image content and narrative structure utilizes many of the tropes now familiar to the road movie, is often seen to represent a transitional point; certainly in Godard's career and possibly within certain modes of film production more widely. To what extent we should take *Week End* as representative of 'French cinema' is of course a highly debatable point, bringing into focus as it does the discrepancy between work like Godard's and the more popular French cinema that domestic and international audiences actually see. Nevertheless, given the centrality of Godard's work to questions of French cinema within academic study and in particular the kind of political questions it addresses, the use of a road movie as a form to bring into focus key questions of the period – capitalism, spectacle, the politicization of cinema – cannot be overlooked.

1968 is, however, pertinent not only to the French cultural context. Using this period as a starting point, Peter Biskind (1998) has famously depicted the cultural, film-industrial and film-aesthetic contexts which gave rise to the 'New Hollywood', exemplified by road movies such as *Easy Rider*, *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Monte

Hellman, 1970), *Vanishing Point* (Richard Sarafian, 1971) or *Badlands* (Terence Malick, 1974), to name just a few; films which partly took their cue from *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967). The predominance of the road movie in this period suggests its centrality to an industrial and ideological shift in American filmmaking,<sup>3</sup> and with it, its pertinence against the backdrop of political instability, witnessed in the United States within this period as much as elsewhere (Harris 2008).

Whether or not the road movies of the New Hollywood can be seen as genuinely radical departures from cinematic and cultural norms, these films at the very least bring into focus the cinema's significance in reflecting socio-political contexts; especially in relation to the liberalization and loosening of representation stimulated by late 1960s social change and the dismantling of the Hollywood Production Code at the end of that decade (Shiel 2006: 18–20). Looking at the French context, it is significant that the kind of individualism or hedonism the road movie often explores has sometimes, albeit controversially, been held up as one of the real meanings of 1968 (see for example Lipovetsky 1983). Writing four decades later about the cultural memory of the events, for example, Chris Darke suggests just as much: part of their legacy, he writes, was the way 'libertarianism found expression' in, alongside the kind of softcore pornography typified by Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974), 'Bertrand Blier's road movie romp[s]' (2008: 29). The allusion here to Blier's *Les Valseuses* amongst other films is revealing. The popularity of Blier's film in its time, second only in domestic popularity to Jaeckin's film, cannot but suggest its significance to this filmgoing era: qualities which appear to be those of a cynical individualism, a carefree attitude to sexual promiscuity, and a sense of romantic revolt typical of much of the decade's cinema and the crime film in particular (Smith 2005: 35–73).

As I will suggest below, any reading of Blier's film needs to take into account its adaptation of popular traditions and practices, in particular notions of carnival (Harris 2001; Rigby 1991: 1–38). Moreover, the idea of a cynical individualism in 1970s cinema,

and, more concretely, its legacy in the kind of fatalistic or violently thwarted individual trajectories we see in later films, is more complicated than it appears. If for many critics at the time *Les Valseuses*, with its picaresque tale of two near-sociopathic youths, appeared to offer an image of moral bankruptcy and irresponsibility, this may have had something to do with the type of individual being represented, rather than its individualism per se. Aside from this, the failure that, as I will discuss, is actually inscribed in *Les Valseuses* amongst many other French road movies, disrupts the presumed close fit between society, ideology and its workings on screen. Conventional thinking would say that, like any other genre, the road movie has the aim of resolving social contradiction at the level of the imaginary. This may sometimes be the case, but what is significant here is the frequency with which this particular genre, in a French context, ends in a sense of lost direction, capture, or death. As I will show, then, it is a sense of absence and loss that underpins many of these films.

## Origins of the (French) Road Movie

The idea that the road movie is ‘a peculiarly American genre, albeit one which has been subsequently borrowed and adapted by filmmakers of other nationalities’ (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2006: 2), has until recently been a critical commonplace. Given its discursive centrality to American cinema, it is unsurprising that the phrase ‘road movie’ persists trans-culturally, together with many of its connotations. A rare but important analysis of road movies in the French context, in Carrie Tarr and Brigitte Rollet’s *Cinema and the Second Sex*, acknowledges from the outset that it is ‘an archetypal American genre’ (2001: 228); although here, significantly, its foreignness is seen to signify an inversion of representational norms, consistent with the inversion of gender representation discussed in their study. Recent Anglo-American volumes on the genre, meanwhile, often position the non-American road movie in a relation of dependency. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark’s *The Road Movie Book* consigns

the European (along with the Queer and Australian) road movie to a third section entitled 'Alternative Routes'. Such an editorial inflection places these texts within a hierarchy and chronology: they are other ('Alternative') yet are constrained by the notion of the American journey to which they stand in dialogue or difference. *Driving Visions*, similarly, manifests a fear of flying through its relegation of 'The European Road Movie' to a sixth and final chapter, one whose title – 'Travelling Other Highways' – also implies a kind of secondary status. More ambivalently, Jason Wood has argued that 'the road movie is by no means an exclusively American domain and has been historically embraced by filmmakers from across the globe as a means of exploring national identity and confronting social and political issues springing from disenchantment with the dominant ideology' (2007: xix).

Besides the road movie's status within reception and discourse, what is it, we might ask, that makes it so 'American'? Eyerman and Löfgren's suggestion is that, while the journey is a motif as old as European narrative itself, 'the Americanisation of this type of narrative in the road movie format is a consequence of the way specific conceptions concerning the freedom and the function of the road were constructed in the United States' (1995: 55). We have already considered these conceptions and the way they might sit uneasily within a European context, where the 'function of the road' has a more limited connotation. Responding to this, and aiming to justify the road movie as a European form, Mazierska and Rascaroli seek to trace films which (in a potentially circular description) 'maintain . . . a strong European imprint' (2006: 3).

Examining the genre's historical development, however, suggests that the chronology of the road movie and its direction of influence are less clear-cut. This can be illustrated by a couple of passages from recent studies. While suggesting the origins of the road movie lie in the 1950s and early 1960s, along with the influence of writers such as Jack Kerouac, Laderman sees the key transition towards his 'visionary' road movie in the form of *Bonnie and Clyde*: a film which, for Laderman, explores ambivalently the tensions of modern capitalism

(2002: 50–51), or what, reasserting his central thesis, Laderman calls the road movie's 'negotiation between individual impulse and social organisation' (2002: 35). Yet in the final chapter we read:

Released the same year as *Bonnie and Clyde*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967) furnishes yet another distinctly European contrast with the American genre. Like most road movies, *Weekend* is driven by a cultural critique of Western middle-class society . . . that leaves American road movies in the dust. In this respect, *Weekend* essentially turns the road movie on its head. (2002: 255)

The chronology of this passage seems informed mainly by the belated entry of European film in the study, and which therefore, as Dervin Orgeron argues, gives a misleading idea of continuity and influence (2008: 7). It is confusing to suggest that a film made at the same time as *Bonnie and Clyde*, and on the other side of the Atlantic, should turn out to be not only 'like most road movies' but one, moreover, that 'turns . . . on its head' this same genre. Similarly, in a 2006 book on American cinema, Michael Hammond writes:

While the genre has examples from the classical period . . . it is not until the late 1960s with *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969) that the road becomes a forceful metaphor for a crisis-ridden America. This potential in the road movie 'American style' has inspired European filmmakers [such as] Jean-Luc Godard. (2006: 14)

As Hammond implies, Godard's dialogue with the road movie in his films up to and including *Week End* was in response to proto-road movies such as Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1950).<sup>4</sup> Yet those qualities Hammond identifies in the New Hollywood road movie – marginality, 'existential ambiguity', the 'peripatetic' (2006: 14) – are, as the same writer actually points out, those qualities already evident within a European postwar 'art' tradition exemplified by films such as Godard's: those same films which contributed to the re-vision of American cinema and space generally attributed to the New Hollywood. *Bonnie and Clyde*'s discursive centrality in terms of the New Hollywood and the road movie, in fact, risks neutralizing the influence of European filmmaking aesthetics and practice on that film's own development, as well as New Hollywood filmmaking

more broadly. As is well documented elsewhere, David Newman and Robert Benton acknowledged the influence of Godard's *A bout de souffle/Breathless* (1960), along with François Truffaut's *Tirez sur la pianiste/Shoot the Pianist* (1960), on their writing of the *Bonnie and Clyde* screenplay; and in fact early versions of the script were discussed with both French directors as early as 1964, before the project was passed on to Arthur Penn (Newman and Benton 1972: 13–31).

Many of these issues are already addressed in Dervin Orgeron's *Road Movies*, which is not only the most recent full-length book to engage with the genre, but also the one that challenges most consistently the idea of the road movie as an 'American' genre. Besides its innovative thesis that the road movie, in its most familiar form, embodies a fascination with filmic and automotive mobility that is actually as old as cinema itself, Orgeon's study is significant for its emphasis on the transnational nature and in-between-ness of the road movie since the 1960s. Hence, for Orgeron, not only does a film like *A bout de souffle* stage the crisis of a protagonist who cannot reconcile cinematic images with physical landscape (or an American idiom with French filmmaking) (2008: 75–80), but similarly, analysts of archetypically American road movies undervalue 'the peculiar mobility of [the genre] or the equally critical fact that the road movie is modelled on postwar [European] cinematic reflections upon American genre' (2008: 6).

It is not my point here to argue for an inversion of road movie chronology: it should be clear that the movement of influence is more hybridized and reciprocal than anything else. But more importantly, to claim an historical priority for the French road movie would be beside the point: this would merely reiterate the inherent 'French-ness' of the genre, countering this book's view that the road movie complicates received or essentialized notions of nation and national cinema. The key point for our present concerns, then, is that the road movie is and always was an inherently self-reflexive genre (Hammond 2006: 14), one that is about the search for identity, rather than being a representation of it.

On a related point, the notional ‘Americanization’ of France since the end of the Second World War forms a background to the readings in this study (on this subject, see Golsan 2007), especially as it has been central to debates about the identity and status of French (and more broadly, European) cinema, in the face of so-called American economic and cultural imperialism (Giffard 2003). My reading of this American influence, in line with my argument so far, is a complex one. Gordana Crnkovic is right, I believe, when she suggests that ‘Americanization’ may be a misleading term for what is in reality a process of parallel change, with late twentieth-century Europe reaching similar stages of postindustrial development to its more developed transatlantic counterpart. France, from this viewpoint, is not so much influenced by American capitalism and culture, as belatedly ‘adopting the existing forms’ that are really transnational in character (Crnkovic 2003: 10).

Crnkovic nevertheless misses a trick when she assumes that these processes of development inevitably lead to a preference for homogenized or purely escapist cultural production. But nor should it follow, from the historical outline I have given above, that the use of the road movie in a French context implies a parodic adaptation of the genre. In some instances, for example in *Les Valseuses* or *Baise-moi*, a form of American influence can be read in liberating terms, an explosive challenge to representational norms. In any case, whether or not the dominance of the Hollywood model has left an imprint on recent French cinema (a discussion beyond the scope of this book), the flows of cultural influence can work in different ways. The road movie, from the 1960s (in both America and France, as we have seen), was already out of step with the dominant ideology from which it emerged. Consequently, even if we do see the road movie as representing Americanization and in turn American influence on French cinema, its influence is to some extent already to question and criticize these same processes that bring it into being: an idea I will explore later with regard to *Le Huitième jour/The Eighth Day* (van Dormael, 1996), *L’Emploi du temps* and *Extension du domaine de la lutte/Whatever* (Harel, 2000), and their implicit critiques of technocracy and capitalism.

## The French Road Movie in its Historical and Film-historical Contexts

This book is structured mainly around key thematic issues that pertain to the road movie in French cinema; issues which, I argue, relate to socio-political, cultural and cinematic transformations. At the same time, this thematic movement is generally allied to a chronological movement through four cinematic decades. The aim here is to bring the film-historical to bear on the historical and vice versa: to see how transformations at the level of film production, discourse and aesthetics both inform and are informed by the broader social contexts.

In my first chapter, 'Road to Autopia', which focuses mainly on Bertrand Blier's *Les Valseuses*, I look at how a particular form of road movie emerges during this period of the 1970s. Following my argument above, I see this emerging form not in a parodic sense, but as the product of specific forces and ideas pertinent to France within that period. As with the study of any genre, we need to account for the particular appeal of the form to filmmakers and audiences of the period.

The nascent interest in the genre in the French imaginary, as suggested above, is arguably related to liberalization, along with related transformations in consumer life. In her seminal study *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, Kristin Ross details the way that, in the 1950s and early 1960s, the largely unattainable (American) automobile figured as a desired object for the burgeoning consumer society (1995: 27–29). As she points out, the white Cadillac that rolls down the seafront in Jacques Demy's film *Lola* (1961) is a fetish object, precisely because the car itself (let alone a Cadillac) was still for most an object of desire rather than an everyday commodity (1995: 30). This book picks up where Ross's leaves off and where the road movie as we commonly know it comes into being. *Les Valseuses*, I will argue, has at its heart a fascination with the fetish objects of consumer culture and with acquisition more generally. Blier's choice of the country's often remote highways as a main location links his film to other works of the decade that are equally interested in transient

spaces, the lure of motorized liberty and the influence of low-cultural texts: Alain Cavalier's rarely seen *Le Plein de super / Fill'er Up with Super* (1976) and to a slightly different extent Alain Corneau's *Série noire* (1979).

What is important to note in the context of these films, and in the shift between *Fast Cars* and the present study, is that the connotations of the automobile change markedly in the 1970s. The early part of that decade gave the West an oil crisis and recession that, in France, marked the end of the *trente glorieuses* (the thirty-year period of postwar prosperity). The motor car's promise of automotive liberty at this point is undermined at once by the car's ubiquity – still a desired object, but by now a more commonplace one<sup>5</sup> – along with the absence of material means to run it. Jacques Tati's *Traffic* (1971), meanwhile, expresses the banal way the motor vehicle comes to signify in the life of the early 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Tati's film depicts the car not so much as the imaginary extension of its occupant but as a character in itself. As indicated in the film's frequent shots of motorway traffic, moving in close but precise order at unified speeds, the modern mass-produced car no longer affords the kind of display-value with which it might previously have been associated. Individual expression is played down, paradoxically, in the service of a monadic, individualized lifestyle, designed to move rapidly and concurrently, but also separately.

*Traffic*, and the films I discuss in chapter one, are emblematic of an aesthetic turn in the late twentieth-century most famously evoked by Gilles Deleuze in his work on the medium (1983, 1985); in particular, his notion of the postwar shift from the 'movement image' to the 'time image'. For Deleuze, Tati's films illustrate the shift towards a cinema in which optical and aural impressions predominate over the spatial coherence of narrative trajectory (1985: 18). Deleuze's analyses of a particular and predominantly European tendency will prove suggestive in this thesis, if not unavoidable in terms of their wide influence, although it is important to stress the methodological position I will take regarding his work. As has been suggested, using Deleuze as a framework for reading film risks a form of circular

argument, one that in turn becomes a gloss on Deleuze rather than an analysis of specific film texts (Powrie and Reader 2002: 79). The more purely philosophical elements and high-cultural tendencies of Deleuze's cinema books, meanwhile, have meant that they are sometimes received and discussed in isolation from the text-and-context approach I will be undertaking here; and in particular, from the possibility of a reading relating to more popular film traditions. There is, then, space for a more historical contextualization of Deleuze's readings; one that considers them not as the product of a counter-cinema or of an *auteur's* individual genius, but in the light of related transformations in the social sphere and the economies and technologies of film production.

The choice of Blier's film as a starting point is useful, as it brings into focus conceptions of the popular in French filmmaking, as well as explaining my choice of key texts. While many of the films studied here can be connoted within the terms of *auteur* filmmaking (for example, those works by Agnès Varda, Claire Denis or Laurent Cantet), or films notionally aimed at minority social constituencies (*Baise-moi* or *Drôle de Félix/The Adventures of Felix* (Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, 1999)), I am keen to move away from a reading which locates the films purely within the tendencies of *auteur* or 'art' cinema. This would play into a reading based purely on opposition ('anti-Hollywood', for example), rather than on parallel development, dialogue or inter-textuality. But it would also be a false opposition, given that the American road movie, historically, already has a slippery or even oppositional relationship to the mainstream norms of Hollywood production. Furthermore, such distinctions would downplay the possibility that the road movie as a genre had an impact at the level of the popular imaginary. Blier's film was extremely popular commercially, without being obviously populist; at least not in the contemporary sense of the globalized cultural mainstream and high-concept exportability. Blier, like his sometime collaborator Michel Blanc (director of *Marche à l'ombre* (1984)), as well as both Patrice Leconte (*Tango* (1995)) and Philippe Harel (*Les Randonneurs* (1997) and *Extension du domaine de la lutte*), all

of whom are discussed later in this book, are filmmakers with their roots in theatrical traditions such as the *café concert* or television satire. The popularity of their films indicates that popular cinema in the French context does not necessarily equal ‘Americanized’ or even ‘commercial’, but needs to be considered in relation to other performance traditions.

Moreover, beyond its dominant understanding within the terms of commercial success, ‘popular’ also has specific social connotations in terms of its relationship to ‘the people’; an elusive term which does not automatically imply a mass audience, but particular social formations and practices (Dyer and Vincendeau 1992). From this perspective, Varda’s *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse/The Gleaners and I* (2000), or *L’Emploi du temps*, although we can see them as the work of distinct directorial identities, are significant mainly for their engagement with social situations: the marginal practices of gleaning, in Varda’s film; contemporary redundancy and unemployment in Cantet’s. Besides being a documentary about specific social practices, Varda’s film in particular can be understood as a ‘popular’ film by virtue of the fact that it generated, in the form of responses to it, its own form of public afterlife (as depicted in Varda’s follow up film *Deux ans après/Two Years After* (2002), an extra on DVD versions of *Les Glaneurs*). We can therefore consider these films, to follow Martin O’Shaughnessy’s recent study (2007), as representative of contemporary political engagement: an overarching and incorporating characteristic that subsumes their identity as individual *auteur* films. As I argue in this book, their dialogue with the road movie as a form contributes to the way they explore their particular themes.

Chapter two looks more closely at the politics of the road movie, in its consideration of the individual as a key motif of the genre. The ‘individual’ in this context is not to be understood simply in terms of ‘individualism’, but in terms of the complex and often antagonistic relationship of the individual to the social body. The fact that the road movie frequently invests in expressions of individual liberty directs us to the individual’s relation to social formations; formations

to which – in the French context – they exist only superficially in distinction. In other words, *liberté* needs to be balanced alongside the other constituent parts of the tripartite Republican model, *égalité* and *fraternité*. This indicates the degree to which the concerns of the road movie are not related merely to the accelerated and individualist nature of consumerist (car) culture, but to the foundational texts and tenets of the French Republic.

This is suggested by Hayward's reading of *Week End* as a fable of liberty in the Revolutionary tradition (underscored by the film's various allusions to the renamed months of the Revolutionary calendar): one in which the logical extension of the Jacobin revolutionary text is the Sadean endpoint of terror, murder and 'an indifference to and abuse of human rights' (Hayward 1993: 255). *Week End* does indeed make a mockery of automotive aspiration, and our received iconography of the road genre, through its reduction of car culture to mechanized manslaughter or the literal impasse of traffic jams. But it is either a limitation to Hayward's reading, or to Godard's film, that the connotations of fable make *Week End* seem a highly moralistic film; much more didactic than works like *A bout de souffle* or *Pierrot le fou* (1965), the strength of which consists in their general reluctance to condemn or condone (both films, in their own ways, are about the tension between action and inaction, movement and stasis). In its extremes, nevertheless, *Week End* illustrates the power of the road movie to explore our relationship to images, pushing limits and generating critical dialogue. *Week End* might even be a blueprint for the genre's continued exploration of social unease and its applicability to broader issues of liberty and identity. As Powrie puts it in reference to *Baise-moi*, the particular drama of the road movie involves 'reconciling the intensity of individual affect with social insertion' (Powrie 2007: 73). The testing of limits becomes the theme, challenging the very desire to prescribe boundaries.

These issues of liberty form the core of this chapter, as do my readings of *Baise-moi*, *Sans toit ni loi* and *Aux yeux du monde*; in particular, the way that liberty in these films, as Powrie implies,

involves a process of negotiation. Rather than simply focus on the negotiation within the film's narratives, however, I examine the negotiation that takes place between the films and the viewer: what does it mean to 'capture freedom' when freedom itself implies a resistance to capture? And in what ways do changes in cinematic influence and content require us to reconsider our judgement of what we see?

If chapter two focuses on questions of individual identity, chapter three, 'No Place Like Home', picks up on two other familiar motifs of the road genre: movement and space. Far from reiterating a hegemonic notion of the national space, I argue here for the road movie's potential to transform our conceptions of the spatial and its connotations.

A common theorization of classical film montage as representing 'the modern nation as a textual unity' (McQuire 1998: 206), through its capacity to evoke temporal simultaneity across space (what Benedict Anderson (1991), in literary terms, calls the 'meanwhile'), is altered in the road movie. If the imagined synchrony of parallel montage in much narrative cinema suggests the totality of a shared space, the road movie tends towards the restricted narrative space of the moving vehicle and protagonists. If the road movie is interested in vision and landscape, it does not, then, as we might presume, necessarily express the unified space of action and nation. Paradoxically, it represents a restricted and hence de-familiarized narrative space. In the road movie's frequent emphasis on pure vision and movement, in fact, this is a space closer to the 'cinema of attractions' that, in Noël Burch's terms (1990), preceded the bourgeois 'industrial mode' of representation, characterized by narrative techniques such as synchronic montage, as defined above.

The road movie's departure from this industrial mode is also reinforced by a movement on the audio level towards a mix of the subjective and the objective, between intra- and extra-diegetic sound. This is particularly relevant given the road film's frequent use of music, and also in-car music, as soundtrack. As film theorist Michel Chion remarks, this introduction of a complex subjective register

in modern film indicates ‘a shift from the collective sound in the old style’ (1994: 77); he then adds that the attention in the modern audio-visual image towards ‘pure indices of reality and materiality’ bring us closer in such works to the conditions of silent film (1994: 155–156). One implication of these developments, simultaneously forward-moving and primitive, is that they work to disrupt the more unified connotations of place and identity more typically related to language, along with those classical techniques such as the establishing shot and cross-cutting.

‘No Place Like Home’ therefore focuses on these issues of spatial signification and practice, through a detailed reading of Ducastel and Martineau’s *Drôle de Félix*. As I show here, through close analysis of the film’s use of space, point of view and sound, Ducastel and Martineau’s film works in a highly self-reflexive manner to explore the experience of the road movie and its effects. The film’s approach, I argue, reveals the road genre’s intrinsic appeal and potential, in the form of an imaginary projection across borders of both space and identity. Importantly, because the protagonist of Ducastel and Martineau’s film is both as an HIV-positive gay man, and a person of mixed French and *maghrébin* descent, the film has been seen as an expression or affirmation of such identities; or indeed, has been criticized for not going far enough in this regard. I emphasise, however, that *Drôle de Félix* implicates viewers within processes of identification and border-crossing that most clearly affirms not any one identity, but rather the possibility for transformation and invention that is the real subject of the film.

Chapters four and five consider a group of films which provide a specifically French context for the analysis of gender: an issue which has figured significantly in debates about the road movie. Chapter four, ‘Nowhere Men’, focuses on the now familiar generic motif of men on the road, exploring what the latter means for men in a world regulated by the working routine, either in its presence or its absence. For the road movie in its more recent American form, the road is often connected with freedom from work and responsibility and hence associated with leisure, as in Alexander Payne’s *Sideways*

(2004), or Todd Philip's *The Hangover* (2009), to take just two examples; although it has also been used to explore the transitional space and time between work and leisure, as in John Hughes' *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987). The films under discussion in this chapter go slightly further, depicting the road as an ambiguous space in which men both carry out their social function, while at the same time evade responsibility: a process that is brilliantly explored in *L'Emploi du temps* or Harel's *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. Alternatively, it serves as a kind of liminal, transient zone for the masculine subject in crisis or disavowal, as in *Feux Rouges*, or in Manuel Poirier's *Western* (1997), about two unemployed and lovelorn men wandering around coastal Brittany.

Much of the discussion in this chapter engages with aspects of fantasy, and more specifically virtuality: the point at which the 'real' space and time of the film becomes imprecise, transformed by the effect of the journey and the protagonist's mood and vision. This directs us towards a modern reading of the road movie as a specifically filmic re-presentation of space, a world re-viewed through a (wind)screen. In the fifth chapter, 'From *Flânerie* to *Glânerie*', I bring this vision of the road movie to bear principally on two films by women filmmakers: Claire Denis's *Vendredi soir/Friday Night* (2002) and Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*. My focus is on their reconfiguration of cinematic vision and narrative space in 'feminine' terms, thinking beyond the potential limitations of the 'women's road movie' exemplified, for example, by a film like *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991).

Through Denis's film in particular, I consider the road movie's potential for evoking the subjectivity of a female protagonist that, in distinction to the kind of viewing paradigms familiar from classical Hollywood theory, is both the bearer of the look and mobile. Denis's work therefore dialogues historically with the road genre's motifs, and in turn aims for a transformation both of the genre and of the gendered assumptions relating to cinematic vision. Varda's film, meanwhile, is significant in the way it works concurrently with shifts in cinematic technologies: shifts which respond to and help effect

a reorientation towards what has been described (in the late 1990s) as a new realism in French cinema (Powrie 1999) and a new significance for the road movie. If the increasing mobility and portability of film cameras since the 1960s helped facilitate the road movie as a form, the emergence of digital video in the 1990s contributed towards a cinema of itinerancy, intimacy and exploration (Vasse 2008: 198): a *réel de proximité* in Jean-Pierre Jeancolas's words (1997). This new realism intersects with the narrative and virtual space of the road movie in two ways. First, because it emphasises a 'real' that is not pre-determined, but is waiting to be found through the mutual involvement of filmmaker and viewer in a sensorial process of cinematic viewing (O'Shaughnessy 2007: 23); second, because this subject, imprecise and waiting to be found, is already in a liminal relationship to represented or representable space and is therefore already a figure of movement and instability.

In my final chapter, 'Travel and the Transnational Road Movie in the Twenty-First Century', I look at three examples of this more recent type of road movie – Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003), Gela and Temur Babluani's *L'Héritage/Legacy* (2006) and Denis's *L'Intrus/The Intruder* (2004) – in which we see a new vision of the form's possibilities. This modern road movie responds to those transformations that globalization and more fluid borders have had on European space, identity and cinema; whether this be in the form of the foreign 'other' (as in *L'Héritage* and *L'Intrus*), or the crisis of a European culture itself (*Twentynine Palms*). As I suggest, the new experiences of the twenty-first century mean that these millennial road movies also look back towards cinema's infancy; in particular, to the traditions of the travelogue or ethnographic film. Yet if such early cinematic experiments frequently inscribed the foreign subject as primitive or irredeemably other, a form of cinematic tourism, the transnational circumstances of the early twenty-first century require a more urgent renegotiation of this relationship between the filmmaker, viewer and subject. As I conclude, then, this type of film offers a striking and vital direction for French filmmaking in the context of the new century's demands.

## Notes

1. For example, in both Hayward (1993) and Williams (1992) there are occasional references to individual films as road movies, though no identification of a corpus or tradition.
2. The brochure is anonymously authored and unpaginated. The exhibition ran from 15 October 2008 to 19 January 2009.
3. Eyerman and Löfgren (1995: 62) offer an outline of the number of films termed road movies made between 1968 and 1975. The size of this output – sixteen are mentioned within this brief sketch alone – indicates to what extent, in a period in which the studio system was in crisis, the road movie had become central, rather than peripheral, to the (New) Hollywood aesthetic.
4. On this connection see Andrew 1995.
5. By 1970, 56% of French homes had access to a car. By the end of the decade this figure had gone up to 68% (Ardagh 1982: 387).
6. The contiguity between both *Week End* and *Trafic* and the publishing of J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) should not be overlooked. Ballard's novel, steeped in the milieu of Greater London's road network, is a striking example both of the contemporary staged as science-fiction, and an ambiguous expression of the car as eroticised instrument of death.