

The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving Through Film, Fiction, and Television.

Katie Mills.

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In *The Road Story and the Rebel*, Katie Mills defines the post-World War Two road narrative as a transmedia genre and chronologically surveys its many manifestations in literature, film, and electronic media, with the major focus on film. In her initial, theoretical chapters, Mills introduces some useful terminology that conceptualizes her interdisciplinary and multimedia approach to road stories. She asserts that the postwar road story is based on “automobility”—the autonomy and mobility provided by the automobile that enables or symbolizes social rebellion. “Intermedia” is a type of postwar and postmodern artistic transformation of one medium by another, violating modernist concepts of generic purity. “Transmedia” storytelling extends the same narrative over several media environments (such as print, television, film, videogame, Internet). Thus, the medium, the message, and new technologies merge in this innovative cultural studies analysis of a genre. In her introductory chapters, Mills also reviews the critical background on American road narratives in both literature and film, noting that most prior critics do not cross disciplinary or media boundaries.

Mills sees the road story as a powerful narrative that dominates American culture—especially film—in the second half of the twentieth century. She describes road stories as vehicles for automobility in which social rebellion challenges established hierarchies and social identities, providing opportunities for minority groups or marginalized identities to assert their perspectives and thereby transform the story. The key texts in Mills’s survey are *On the Road*, *Easy Rider*, and *Thelma and Louise*, but the book deals comprehensively with many other road narratives and media—indeed it becomes apparent that the postwar road story is also a vehicle for intermedia and transmedia forms. The chronological overview shows a repeated cycle of rebellion and conformity in the realm of the social and of innovation and commodification in the realm of the cultural.

The cycle begins in the 1950s with the Beats and Kerouac’s *On the Road*, followed by commodification in the early 1960s TV program *Route 66*. The next cycle begins with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters’ unfinished film, *The Merry Pranksters Search for the Kool Place*, memorialized in Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and followed by the popular film *Easy Rider* in 1969. The success of *Easy Rider*—a commercialized “art” film portraying the counterculture and based on both underground movies and biker exploitation films—led to what Mills terms an “explosion” of road movies directed by Hollywood’s new “auteurs” of the 1970’s: Coppola, Scorsese, Malick, Peckinpah, Cimino, Bogdanovich, Eastwood. The artistic and social rebellion of the 1970s road movies gave way to more conservative familial themes in the 1980s, such as in *Back to the Future*, while, in contrast, women’s novels of the 1980s by Barbara Kingsolver, Bobbie Ann Mason, Mona Simpson, and Cynthia Kadohata employed the road narrative from a feminist perspective. Mills calls the 1990s “the decade of identity politics” and shows that road movies became more multicultural and returned to the rebellion theme in stories about racial/ethnic minorities, women, gays and lesbians, and even old white men in, for example, *Smoke Signals*, *Get on the Bus*, *Thelma and Louise*, *My Own Private Idaho*, and *About Schmidt*. The last chapter explores the road narrative in the new electronic

media such as video games, video documentaries, and Internet and the transmedia story forms developed by MTV, advertising, animation, and graphic novels.

Beat studies scholars will be most interested in Mills's perceptive discussion of *On the Road* as an intermedia work (Kerouac's term "bookmovie" is telling as is his "spontaneous prose" manifesto) and as an attempt to rewrite the Depression "cinemascope" as an optimistic postwar quest for mystery, ecstasy, and redemption. She points out that Kerouac, like other Beats, was constantly aware of the influence of the mass media (the "mediascape") and had a post-modernist interest in experimenting with the technologies of film, photography, and tape recordings in works such as *Pull my Daisy*, *The Americans*, and *Visions of Cody*. In this chapter, Kerouac is the focus as the originator of the postwar road narrative, which is appropriate, but the tendency to conflate Kerouac's vision with the Beats in general is flawed: references to other Beat writers, such as Ginsberg and Burroughs, are perfunctory; and the discussion of early works by younger Beats LeRoi Jones and Joyce Glassman are too brief to convey the complexity of individual Beat perspectives.

After the discussion of Kerouac, the road narrative in print form (literature) takes a back seat to the survey of road movies, belying the promise of the book's subtitle and resulting in what seems to this East Coast reader to be a rather California-centric book. However, Mills's decade-by-decade discussion of the transmutations of the road trip on film is detailed and illuminating, analyzing the historical, political, and economic context of the film industry and those who rebel against it, and the grip of the road narrative as well as its flexibility. This reader is both impressed and bemused by the versatility of the road story, which can be the basis for a gangster movie (*Bonnie and Clyde*), a couple on the lam movie (*The Getaway*), a romantic comedy (*The Sure Thing*), a buddy movie (*Sideways*), the slapstick family travel film (*National Lampoon's Vacation*), social satire (*Lost in America*), a race/chase movie (*Cannonball*), and more. The protagonists are equally varied: the lone individual, male or female buddies, heterosexual couples, gay couples, triangles, or families/groups/collectives. Interestingly, the road movie does not always base automobility on the automobile: road movies have made use of motorcycles, trains, planes, busses, Winnebagos, and even lawnmowers (but never a bicycle—it seems the American love affair with the open road requires fossil fuels).

On the other hand, sometimes Mills's definition of a road film is so broad that almost anything can fit in the category and it begins to lose meaning. For example, *Midnight Cowboy* takes place primarily in New York City, not on the road; *Duel* is more of a horror movie than a road movie; extensive discussions of *Scorpio Rising* and biker exploitation films are a digression. There are also some surprising omissions, such as Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which is partly homage to both Kerouac and Kesey and was made into a movie.

The Road Story and the Rebel is an ambitious cultural studies project that traces the postwar road narrative from novel to video games in the second half of the twentieth century. Mills persuasively defines the road story as a transmedia genre, and I believe she is the first to do so. Transmedia theory retrospectively sheds new light on Kerouac's aesthetics and *On the Road*. The book is not as comprehensive as promised in that, aside from one chapter on the Beats and one chapter on recent new media and forms of expression, the main focus is film; thus, the book will be an important resource for film studies. As with most cultural studies criticism, the social

and material context of works of art are discussed almost to the exclusion of content and aesthetics, and the popular arts dominate, which will disappoint literary scholars somewhat. However, Mills has made an important and original contribution to contemporary genre criticism, which will serve both literary and media studies.