



## Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie

Laderman, David.

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David Laderman argues the core of the road movie is tension between rebellion and conformity but he rejects dichotomous thinking by recognizing how this genre continually negotiates rebellion in response to “the perpetually shifting specter of conformity” (p. 20). The result is a detailed history of the genre. Laderman points out that his readings and interpretations are partial and indebted to the evolving cultural consciousness that these films are trying to tap into.

Laderman cites the Spanish picaresque novel and the Hollywood western as shaping the genre. In chapter one post-world war two youth and the escapism promised by a proliferation of cars and motorways allowed for the emergence of the road movie. Though road films exalt rebellion over conformity Laderman notes that these films often give only the appearance of rebellion, as they were products of the Hollywood genre system.

Chapter two explores the conservative undercurrents of pioneering 1960’s road movies. His discussion is focused on *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*. The latter is often held up as the quintessential of film rebellion with its protagonist Captain America, driving rock soundtrack, and morphing of man and machine. For Laderman, *Bonnie and Clyde* is classic rebellion as he argues that the film, while set during the Depression, is a critique of the poverty and rootlessness of 1960’s America. Laderman argues that Bonnie and Clyde’s critical consciousness is replaced by greed and patriarchy in subsequent decades of gangster films.

In chapter three Laderman explores the cynicism, irony and nihilism of 1970’s films. In the 1970’s the “Film School generation” created the blockbuster road movie comedy possessing hyperrealism, patriarchal heroes, and self-reflexive humor. In these two chapters Laderman adopts a critical consciousness arguing that conformity and a disdain for counterculture in these films promoted misogyny. Females embodied the counterculture and were ridiculed (e.g., *Two-Lane Blacktop*), abandoned (*Five Easy Pieces*), or made sexual playthings (e.g., *Drugstore Cowboy*). Laderman similarly argues that non-white and gay characters are powerless, ridiculous, and/or hegemonic pawns of patriarchal power.

Chapter five examines how multicultural and feminist filmmakers have re-envisioned the genre and Laderman is a shrewd enough critic to understand that much work remains to be done in this realm. He is not blinded by the libratory hype surrounding the film *Thelma and Louise*. Instead he explores how the film makes concessions to patriarchy such in the benevolent cop Slokum and the charming drifter J.D. who teaches Thelma how to do a robbery. Yet J.D. does not represent rebellion for Laderman argues, “Yet the narrative has ‘taught’ her through the authority of the male. Has she appropriated his performance or is she subservient to it” (p. 190). *Thelma and Louise*, he argues, let the police off the hook for their participation in the women’s oppression. Instead Laderman points to the German film *Bandits* in chapter six as an example of an unyielding feminist perspective. By ending the book with this film he cleverly avoids trying to make any claim to any final word on the genre but with this film he suggests his desire for the future libratory potential of the genre. He would connect *Thelma and Louise*’s potential with *Bandits*’ feminist fruition to expand the genre’s to embrace a more inclusive politics.

Chapters five and six provide rich cultural criticism but how Laderman chooses to organize them could be critiqued. The fact that he separates out both multicultural and European road movies for treatment in separate chapters could be considered a shortcoming of the book because, despite his attention to independent films elsewhere, this move defines the road film genre in decidedly American terms. To be fair, his separation out of these chapters allows him to argue that these films expand the genre beyond what American filmmakers have been able to offer.

This book is a worthwhile piece of criticism. I particularly appreciate how Laderman’s description is detailed but nuanced with the effect being that he reveals just enough of a scene to validate his interpretation but not enough to ruin classic scenes for unacquainted viewers (e.g., his description of the diner scene in *Five Easy Pieces*). This quality of his writing retains all of the mystery and excitement of these classic films and compels readers to re-experience them through the fresh eyes that only time and perspective can provide. *Driving Visions* is hopeful in anticipating a genre revitalized by an increasingly independent and diverse perspective. True to that expectation Laderman rejects the opportunity to offer essentialized definitions of the genre for to do so would anticipate drawing the genre to a conclusion. He pushes the genre towards transcendence and evolution. He argues, “Revolution and liberation taste too sweet; the abyss beckons. Suddenly the car speeds over the edge – into a glorious white light” (p. 1).