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Writing Kerouac's bookmovie: cinematic influence and imagery in the modern road novel

ABSTRACT

This essay adopts a creative-critical approach in looking at the influence of cinema on the modern road novel. It is in agreement with Mills, in her 2006 work titled *The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving Through Film, Fiction, and Television*, that the road novel can only be understood as part of a wider genre, the road story, which encompass a broader spectrum of mediums, most notably film. Through exploration of classic texts in the genre – Kerouac, Wolfe, et al. – it demonstrates the extent of cinematic influence on the road novel's gestation and development. In particular, the essay examines Kerouac's concept of 'the bookmovie' and seeks to establish just how prescient and prophetic this has become. In so doing, it will posit that the author's own road novel, *The Drive*, fits the criteria of the 'bookmovie' through its integration of cinematic homage, as well as its deployment of filmic style and technique.

In our cine-saturated society, all prose writers have to contend with the influence of film, and the road novel in particular seems especially suited to making use of filmic devices and operating within a cinematic context. This stems from the fact that the road novel is actually a branch of a larger 'intermediary' genre (Mills 2006, 6), the road story. The road story is not limited to prose form; it has also been a feature of our cinematic landscape for many years, and the connections between these two branches of the genre have been evident since its inception. As the father of the modern road novel, Jack Kerouac played a vital role in developing these connections and the intermediary aspects of the genre. In this essay, I will examine Kerouac's interest in what he called 'the bookmovie' and how that concept influenced the development of his work. I will also explore how subsequent books in the road genre – including my own road novel, *The Drive* (2013) – follow Kerouac's example, resulting in a tradition of texts that 'bend' towards other mediums, particularly film.

Film has had a clear and evident impact on prose narratives ever since the birth of cinema, which, appropriately enough for our purposes, coincides with the invention of the automobile. The first car, the Benz Patent-Motorwagen [sic], was invented and built by Karl Benz in 1886, whereas the first film camera was patented by Frenchman Louis Le Prince in 1888. By the early 1900s – when the car was achieving unprecedented popularity – cinema was also coming into its own. The influence of cinema on prose narrative began then. It was a new form of popular storytelling: one which had its own structure, language, and style. Virginia Woolf was so fascinated by the new medium that she sought to work out the implications in her essay, 'The Cinema', in which she analyses its early state, and notes the burgeoning relationship between cinema and literature, though she is concerned that at the time the relationship is parasitic: movies are already in the habit of consuming the content of

well-known novels for adaptation, and Woolf feels that 'the results are disastrous for both. The alliance is unnatural' (Woolf 1926, 2).

Other artists were equally drawn to this upstart medium. Critic Andrew Shail has argued that 'cinema and its attendant institutions' were a 'major cause for the emergence of modernism in literature in the United Kingdom' (Shail 2012, 1). Not all would agree, but few would argue that thereafter the modernist novel inevitably became more cinematic, integrating and adopting some of the techniques authors were instinctively imbibing from film. For example, modernist novels 'tend to eschew summary, to present a series of scenes which the reader must fill in' (Chatman 1980, 75). This is arguably a cinematic device, adopted by prose authors, who were moving away from the long sections of summative narration that marks many of the turn-of-the-century classics, from James to Dickens. In this and other ways (the use of montage and flashbacks, for example), the literary world began to increasingly see 'a technique developing in one narrative medium', film, being ported over into another, prose (70).

So the connections, and mutual symbiosis, between film and prose narratives were already being developed prior to the birth of the road story genre. As noted above, this is generally credited to Kerouac, with the publication of *On the Road* in 1957; there are other road texts that pre-date Kerouac, most notably Henry Miller's *Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1979), but none had such wide appeal or impact. It was through *On the Road* and his subsequent work that Kerouac cultivated these intermediary trends, and solidified the connection between film and prose in the road story genre. He did so in two main ways. Firstly, he drew on cinematic tropes and imagery in composing his landmark texts, and secondly, he began to look beyond prose, to expand the telling of road tales into other mediums. As will be seen, the established links between the mediums were of particular importance to me during the writing of my own road novel, since before turning to prose I, like Trevor (the narrator of *The Drive*), worked in the world of independent filmmaking and was no doubt partly drawn to the road story genre due to its cinematic characteristics.

Upon close inspection, it is very apparent that *On the Road* is a text saturated with photographic and cinematic references; the chief reason for this is that when Kerouac and the Beats took to the road, at the middle of the century, they brought with them the visual baggage of their own upbringing, and the previous generation from the 1930s. In particular, and foremost in the public consciousness, was the Depression-era imagery produced by the Farm Service Administration (FSA), including photographs of the dust bowl landscapes, abandoned farmhouses, and displaced families, intended to cultivate sympathy in the public (Mills 2006, 39). This was complemented by films of the era, perhaps most clearly John Ford's (1940) adaptation of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which was itself partially inspired by the portraits of the FSA, and filmed in a deliberately sober and realistic style.

Counterbalancing these 'gritty' sources were two sub-genres of Western film. The first was the light-hearted, non-violent, comical 'singing cowboy' genre, epitomised by the films of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers; the second was what might be called the

'heroic' Western that offered a more romantic view of the American West, and the all-American hero, as portrayed by John Wayne, Gary Cooper, et al. (Dirk 2016). In sum, the highway realm Kerouac set out to depict was not 'a completely open road – it was already a "cinemascope", a landscape defined by prior literary representations and cinematic images' (Mills 2006, 40).

The Beats, and Kerouac in particular, instinctively embraced these images, and incorporated them into their texts, often intermingling various aspects of the styles noted above. Thus Dean, that charismatic if problematic protagonist of *On the Road*, constantly worshipped and imitated by Sal, is introduced as 'a young Gene Autry – trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed' (Kerouac 1972, 8). Dean is compared to a handsome actor from a Western film who has dropped into Sal's life to ferry him off on a bona fide cinematic adventure.

However, part of the allure of Dean's realm isn't just its romantic freedom, but also the sense of hardship and grittiness and the 'realness' of it. Sal is impressed by the fact that Dean has a 'real Oklahoma accent' and had 'just been working on a ranch' (Kerouac 1972, 8). Sal is hungry for experience, and life, not the safe cosiness of his book-loving friends in New York, and he 'does not find the true West until he becomes like the "ghost of Tom Joad"' (Mills 2006, 45), the character from *The Grapes of Wrath*. This is most evident during his brief romantic liaison with Terry; Sal joins her in working the cotton fields, sleeps in a tent with her and her son, wears a 'ragged straw hat' (Kerouac 1972, 94), and lives the life elegised in Steinbeck and the film adaptations of his work. Sal even pretends to be a character from *Of Mice and Men* and, to entertain Terry, repeatedly quotes Burgess Meredith's line (playing George in the 1939 version): 'You won't tell what he done up in Weed, will you?' (87) It's very clear that Sal (and by extension Kerouac) has deliberately adopted iconic film images and references, and taken real delight in depicting himself as an inhabitant of the great American cinemascope. This approach was something I intuitively adopted, in depicting Trevor's road travels. Trevor, like Sal, seems to 'cast' himself as an actor in a pre-existing cinematic and literary realm. For example, when questioned about his motivations, he tells the border guards that he is going on his road trip because it's a rite of passage, which youths have been partaking in 'for decades, ever since *Easy Rider*. Ever since Kerouac, actually' (Keevil 2013, 28).

For Sal, the cinematic aspect of his adventure turns sour during the famed sequence in which he and Dean have to spend the night in a movie theatre, watching 'all-night movies on skid row' (Kerouac 1972, 229). The famous, oft-cited phrase 'the strange Grey Myth of the West and the weird dark Myth of the East' stems from this scene; of more interest for our purposes is the context. Sal tells us that the double-header films include a cowboy feature with Eddie Dean (whose name references Dean's own) and a 'Peter Loire feature about Istanbul' (230): presumably he means *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1944), but alternatively he could be referring to *Background to Danger* (2001). Either way, the two friends watch the films six times in succession, and Sal feels he has somehow imbibed or absorbed some aspect of the cinematic narratives. This results in a form of 'oversaturation' that leaves him reeling:

We saw them (the on-screen actors) waking, we heard them sleeping, we sensed them dreaming, we were permeated completely with the strange Gray Myth of the West and the weird dark Myth of the East when morning came. All my actions since then have been dictated automatically to my subconscious by this horrible osmotic experience. I heard big Greenstreet sneer a hundred times...I rode and sang with Eddie Dean and shot up the rustlers innumerable times. (Kerouac 1972, 230)

It's clear that Sal believes the experience – and by extension the media of film – has had a powerful influence on his 'actions' and behaviour, and not in a positive way. Here he uses the term 'horrible' and later on the same page he refers to the theatre as a 'horror-hole' as if he, like Alice, has crossed through the 'looking-glass' of the movie screen into the cinematic realm. The scene marks a threshold point in the novel: having found that his wish to enter the cinemascap has finally been fulfilled, Sal now yearns to escape it. Again, there are direct parallels with Alice's increasingly frantic, manic, and nightmarish adventures in Wonderland. In the next sequence, Sal tells us he feels like he is a travelling salesman, whose life amounts to 'raggedy travelings, bad stock, rotten beans...nobody buying' (Kerouac 1972, 231), and thereafter he seems increasingly disillusioned with Dean's antics (the Gene Autry romance is fading); this results in an unravelling of their relationship and, ultimately, a final rift between the friends.

When Trevor, the narrator of my road novel, *The Drive*, sets out on his own journey, he – like Sal – is entering a 'cinemascap' saturated with pre-existing narratives and images. In fact, it is partly those narratives that have inspired his trip in the first place. And in the same way that Sal does, Trevor reacts to this predicament by incorporating previous works into his account, since 'on the road, one tends to seek out the cinemascap rather than attempt to escape it' (Mills 2006, 44). As a result, *The Drive* is infused with cinematic references, the most prominent and explicit being those to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Easy Rider* (1969), the work of the Coen Brothers, and the oeuvre of David Lynch. From an authorial perspective, adopting tropes and imagery from these sources allowed me to forefront the cinematic aspects of the road story in my novel, while at the same time acknowledging and questioning some of the traditions of the genre. It is worth examining these each in turn, and their impact on the writing of *The Drive*.

The Wizard of Oz, based on the children's novel by L. Frank Baum, is evoked in the novel's early stages, when Trevor admits to his friend Beatrice on the phone that he is missing 'all three' components that Dorothy's travelling companions so desire: a head, a heart, and courage – as well as his life-drive and libido. In the wake of his girlfriend's infidelity, it's apparent Trevor sees himself as an empty vessel, a tin man, his 'guts and heart rusting away' (Keevil 2013, 82). He purchases a second-hand copy of *The Wizard of Oz* on VHS, which he hand-delivers to Bea, who interprets this 'gift to the goddess' by viewing it with him. In the novel's finale, when the biker who has been stalking Trevor is defeated in a shooting contest, it is implied that the biker may have disintegrated into dust, an inversion of the grim fate of the Wicked Witch, who melts into water at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*.

The biker figure in *The Drive* is clearly a motif that has been adapted from cinema. The biker's first truly iconic appearance was courtesy of Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones* (1953), and the image reached its zenith in the 1960s, with the biker B-movies of Roger Corman and his imitators, such as *Naked Angels* (1969) and *The Wild Angels* (1966). Since then, the biker-motif has remained a staple of our screens, both large and small, and it was this image that Henry Fonda and Dennis Hopper tapped into in order to create one of the most influential road movies of all time: *Easy Rider* (1969). More recently, the Coen Brothers drew on biker iconography in their 1987 comedy, *Raising Arizona*. In it, the actions of the protagonist, Hi, trigger the arrival of 'the lone biker of the apocalypse', a menacing figure of destructive nihilism who 'lays waste to everything in his path' (The Coen Brothers 1996, 156). The biker haunts and hunts Hi and seems to act as his dark doppelganger, a link accentuated by the fact that both men sport the same Road Runner tattoo.

In *The Drive*, the biker and his brother, the hitcher, similarly act as doubles for Trevor. Trevor is first introduced to the image of the biker via the filmmaking brothers he meets at the wrap party, who have spent the past year shooting a documentary film about biker gangs. Their claim that it amounted to the best year of their lives partly inspires Trevor to set out on a similar journey, and in entering the 'cinemascape' of the road, as noted above, he is also trying to merge himself with the image of the bikerrebel, in his own hapless way. However, from the start Trevor is forced to admit that he'll be going on his road trip 'in a budget rental car, rather than on awesome choppers' (Keevil 2013, 28). He is no road warrior, and when he does cross over into the unknown realm of America, the 'cinemascape' he finds himself passing through is not glamorous and romantic, but menacing and dangerous. In the novel's central section, which depicts his journey through a surreal desert landscape, Trevor – like Sal and Alice – becomes trapped in an increasingly frantic, nightmarish realm that he is desperate to escape, while being pursued by his own inner demons.

The subtle connection between Trevor and the biker, as well as the hitcher, owes a debt not only to the Coen brothers but also to the work of filmmaker David Lynch. Lynch, like the Coens, is fascinated by the concept of the double or doppelganger, particularly in how it can represent a different persona of a single individual. The motif of the road is also integral to his work, most notably in *Lost Highway* (1997), *The Straight Story* (1999), and *Wild At Heart* (1990), which is based on the Barry Gifford novel of that title (1990), and continually references *The Wizard of Oz* both in plot and imagery. Thirdly, throughout all these works and others, Lynch has consistently explored themes of masculinity, which is also a central focus of *The Drive*.

Lost Highway, which Lynch co-wrote with Barry Gifford, is a perfect exemplar of Lynch's work, and integrates all the elements mentioned above. The main character, Fred (played by Bill Pullman), is seemingly unable to sexually satisfy his wife Renée (Patricia Arquette), who may be cheating on him, apparently leading to his murder of her, though at the film's midpoint both characters seem to transform into other people. Lynch has said the film is exploring the idea of a psychogenic fugue, in

which a person 'creates in their mind a completely new identity, new friends, new home, new everything' (Swezey 1997).

In *The Drive* Trevor, like Fred, is also trying to leave his old life and self behind and create a new identity; he, too, is suffering from issues of impotence, fantasises about killing his partner in revenge for her infidelity, and is similarly wrestling with aspects of his masculinity. The chief difference is the tonal treatment of these themes: whereas Lynch's film is dark, moody, and at times horrifying, *The Drive* is playful, knowing, and comic. This is highlighted in a moment early on, when the text directly references Lynch and gently criticises the very genre in which the book is written. When talking to the director of the film Trevor is working on, the director tells him the movie is going to be 'like *Easy Rider* crossed with David Lynch. It'll be about one character's journey. A personal odyssey. But with all these trippy and surreal elements thrown in' (Keevil 2013, 11). Though Trevor is sceptical of the director's pitch, as the book progresses his own journey begins to incorporate these very attributes.

As can be seen by the above examples, *The Drive* incorporates and adopts pre-existing cinematic imagery into its text, in the same way that *On the Road* did half a century earlier. As a result, my book – like Kerouac's – can be viewed as 'bending' towards the medium of film in terms of its content. Kerouac, however, was not content to merely adopt such images. Increasingly, he became dissatisfied with prose as a form, and began to look beyond it. You can see this restlessness in the famous 'spontaneous writing' techniques he developed. As part of that manifesto, he came up with a series of aphorisms in an essay entitled, 'Belief and Technique in Modern Prose', published in *Evergreen Review*. Of the maxims, one that stands out for our purposes is 26: 'Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form' (Kerouac 1959, 57). It was clear he already saw, to some extent, his novels as films in book form, and after the success of *On the Road* he began to look for ways to make the transition into cinema. He outlined his vision in a letter to Alan Ginsberg, telling Ginsberg that he intended to collaborate with photographer Robert Frank 'to make a movie...in May in New York', and that it would serve as precursor for he and Ginsberg to develop their 'first great movie' (Kerouac qtd. in Mills 2006, 60).

Kerouac set out to shoot an adaptation of *On the Road* with Frank, but during production their vision changed, becoming instead a short domestic drama about a Beat family entitled *Pull My Daisy*; it was a modest critical, if not commercial success. But he would never realise his dream of making a 'great movie' and would instead see savvy TV executives repackage and re-sell his road trip ideas, and ideals, in the form of television series *Route 66*, which was a CBS hit for four years, from 1960–1964. One of the main characters, Buz Murdock, was clearly fashioned after Kerouac, who considered filing a lawsuit against series producers Herbert B. Leonard and Stirling Silliphant for stealing from *On the Road* (Condon 1993).

One of Kerouac's literary disciples, Ken Kesey, similarly felt himself come up against the limitations of prose forms, and, after the success of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), like Kerouac began looking for other ways to express himself. He was hoping to 'go beyond the novel' in order to escape 'the constraints of writing' (Mills

2006, 88). The result was the famous 'almost' road movie, provisionally titled *The Merry Pranksters Search for the Kool Place*. The concept Kesey came up with was to load a tour bus full of artists, and drive around the country while experimenting with mind-altering drugs, thereby spreading the word and enlivening minds. For their driver they hired Neil Cassady – the real Dean Moriarty – as if hoping to channel some of that mania and zest for life he embodied in *On the Road*. The trip came together, but the film didn't, and never got finished. Kesey sank hundreds of thousands of dollars into the enterprise, but ran into huge editorial problems in post-production. Much of the footage was out of focus, out of sync with the sound, or simply out of control. It was left to Tom Wolfe to document the story of the pranksters, and in *The Electric Koolaid Acid Test* he arguably succeeded in writing the bookmovie envisioned by Kerouac (1972, 97), one in which Wolfe is the author-filmmaker and has control over what content makes the final cut.

The literary quality of Kerouac's own prose still divides critical opinion, but regardless of what one thinks of his technical skills as a writer there is no doubting that he was a visionary, and foresaw what was coming. The term 'bookmovie' is all the more prescient in our current pop culture climate, which is more saturated and overburdened with cinematic imagery than ever before. Many road novels, including the aforementioned *Wild at Heart* (1990), as well as Jim Dodge's *Not Fade Away* (2000), seem particularly suited to the bookmovie label. Some road authors have explicitly commented on this connection between the two forms. For example, in William Least-Heat Moon's *Blue Highways* (2012), the author draws our attention to the way in which the experience of driving a vehicle seems to parallel that of being in the cinema:

I, too, was rolling effortlessly along, turning the windshield into a movie screen in which I, the viewer, did the moving while the subject held still. (Least-Heat Moon 2012, pt. 5, ch. 5)

The comparison feels even more apt if we substitute the British usage of 'windscreen' for 'windshield', which connects it ontologically with the movie 'screen' onto which images are projected for the purposes of viewing. At another point, Least-Heat Moon tells us that the scenery 'raced by like the jumpy images of a nickelodeon' (2012, pt. 9, ch. 7). There is resonance here with the original noir films, many of which featured tropes of the road genre: *They Live By Night* (1948), *They Drive By Night* (1940), *The Devil Thumbs a Ride* (1947). Due to rudimentary technology, in those films the view out the windows and windscreen was indeed a second screen, set up in a studio, to make the filming of driving scenes more convenient, before the advent of hood-mounts and more portable filming equipment. This metaphor – of the world out the window as a screen – is everpresent in many road narratives, including *The Drive*.

In *The Drive*, it's clear that Trevor envisions his trip as a film, starring himself. When he parts ways with the road movie film director, Trevor assures him his journey is 'going to be even better than your movie, because I'll be living it' (Keevil 2013, 101). But the overlap and intermediary elements go well beyond that; the style, tone, and structure of the text all have a distinctly cinematic feel. The chapters unfold in short,

snappy scenes, with no filler between them – adhering to the filmmaking mantras of ‘cut and move’ and ‘start late, finish early’. The plot is divided into classic three-act screenplay structure (Bordwell 2008, 105), and in the opening sections a flashback technique is used, as we cut between time-lines in alternating chapters, moving from Trevor’s journey on the road to the slow-reveal of the events that have sent him on his way, and how he came to plan the trip. His descriptions – of people, of the landscape, of San Francisco – lean towards the visual:

Traffic was thinning and we were going faster, faster. We accelerated through the tunnel and emerged into a glare of daylight, like a flare-out in a film, so bright I couldn’t see, as if I’d driven right into the afterlife. (Keevil 2013, 273)

In this way, the text seeks to merge itself with Kerouac’s vision of the ‘bookmovie’ as well as the philosophy of intermediary writing that Mills believes Kerouac and Frank embraced, in which ‘one artistic medium – prose, in Kerouac’s case, and photography, in Frank’s – is bent in the direction of another medium (film)’ (Mills 2006, 58).

In summary, it’s very apparent that the road story is not a vehicle that can be understood strictly in terms of prose narratives. It is an intermediary genre, and many of its core texts can be read as ‘bending’ towards the medium of film. This is particularly applicable to *On the Road*, whose author was influenced by depression-era imagery, incorporated cinematic references into his text, and attempted to adapt the novel for screen, before moving on to envision other narrative possibilities, including the ‘bookmovie’.

The Drive similarly embraces aspects of the bookmovie concept. It is influenced by, and directly references, a range of cinematic predecessors; in addition, it draws on screenplay structure and makes conscious use of cinematic aesthetics and techniques. It is not alone in this respect. Many other road authors, past and present, from Wolfe to Gifford, seem also to have been writing their own variations of the bookmovie. In fact, the concept can be taken further, and pushed beyond the boundaries of genre. We could argue that many contemporary books, particularly commercial novels, have taken up Kerouac’s manifesto – whether intentionally or not. The traditional novel chapter break has given way to the scene break; dialogue is often short, snappy, punchy; descriptions tend to be dominated by visual details. This is of course not the case for all novels, and there are authors who deliberately eschew the influence of cinema, or seek to question it. But such efforts seem increasingly to be the exception, rather than the norm. As post-millennial artists, we are not merely working within the cinemascapes, but living our lives in it. Or, as Wolfe (1968, 133) proclaims in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, ‘everybody everywhere has his own movie going, his own scenario, and everybody is acting his movie out like mad’.

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