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Neil Archer, *The French Road Movie. Space, Mobility, Identity*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013. 206 pp. Filmography and bibliography. \$70.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0857457705.

Review by Leila Wimmer, London Metropolitan University.

With two book-length studies on the topic published in quick succession, the idea of a specifically French-language road movie has enjoyed a recent resurgence of scholarly interest.[1] Approaching contemporary French cinema through the road narrative, Neil Archer makes a claim for a recognisable French road movie with the aim to historicize and understand French cinema's exploration of a genre which, as he helpfully notes on page two, is rarely recognised in existing French cinema histories.

Focusing mainly on films made since 1968, the book starts with an informative analysis tracing the postwar origins of the use of the journey in the American and French cinematic contexts, particularly in relation to what Archer describes as a genre whose identity is paradoxically always already in flux, in a process of becoming. Rather than discussing the generic specificity of the genre within French cinema, which the author argues would be a reductive approach, Archer chooses to consider how the road movie impacts on ideas of national cinema and identity. Archer's overarching argument, a position to which he returns several times in the course of his study, is that the road movie complicates received or essentialized notions of nation and national cinema, providing an interpretative grid through which narratives of identity can be explored and critiqued.

The book is thus structured around key thematic issues which, according to the author, offer important perspectives on socio-political, cultural and transnational cinematic transformations. The first chapter considers the notion of utopia in the road movie mainly through an analysis of *Les Valseuses* (1974). Archer swiftly brushes aside feminist debates around the film, arguing instead for a conception of the film as "surface, play and fantastic expenditure" (p. 32). To reduce the film to a narrative of male disavowal and misogyny, Archer contends, would "underestimate the possibilities of this restless, in-between form to play on and play with motifs of gender in its relation to genre, rather than simply inscribe them" (p. 36). The discussion in chapter two concentrates on marginality and the road movie. Archer contends that *Sans toit ni loi* (1985) established a paradigm for a number of the films which follow it such as *Aux yeux du monde* (1991) and *Baise-moi* (2000), providing an influential model for a new form of political road movie, a template that also points to the self-reflexive aesthetics of the genre more generally, particularly in the way that it disrupts the assumed connection between the viewer and cinematic protagonists.

Chapter three moves on to discuss *Drôle de Félix* (2000) in the context of the road trip as a search for identity and origins and helpfully points out how the central protagonist's search for alternative and sexual identities is complicated by the film's camp mediation, a trope that affords the central protagonist the possibility for transformation and invention. Chapter four and five explore masculinity and the representation of women respectively and Archer argues that the French road movie in its French form is a mode through which the interrelationship between gender and genre can be helpfully explored, questioned, but also reconfigured. The final chapter looks at mobility and border crossing in *Twenty-nine Palms* (2003), *L'Héritage* (2006) and *L'Intrus* (2004), travel narratives, that, in their respective

investigation of identity, according to the author, evoke a constant process of negotiation with the Other rather than undermine the significance of the national.

While the road movie has undeniably strong U.S. roots, Archer makes a strong claim for its place within recent French cinema history and the narrative of the journey as a trope with which to explore a number of thematic issues that pertain to the genre in specific national contexts. *The French Road Movie* is a very interesting book, one which, on the whole, effectively balances a broad overview of space, mobility and identity in travel narratives with close readings of representative films while providing some explorations of the social, political and industrial issues that surround them. Archer is also good at explaining the theoretical underpinnings of his analysis without intruding too much on the filmic analysis of the texts themselves. However, the book's engagement with the historiography of the reconfiguration of the American genre of the road movie within French cinema overall and how it might be understood historically is, to my mind, underdeveloped. No mention is made of Billy Wilder's *Mauvaise graine* (1934), arguably one of French cinema's first road movies and one that complicates the argument that French films have only explored and reconfigured the road movie genre since 1968, as the author suggests.[2]

This is also a text that offers a challenge to the notion that transnational identity is simply an occurrence of our recent contemporary world. However, most disappointing is the scope of material covered, consisting largely of the usual suspects (*les Valseuses*, *Drôle de Félix*, Denis, Dumont, Varda). Although Archer notes that he is keen to move away from a reading which locates the films purely within the tendencies of *auteur* or "art" cinema, the discussion of individual films is largely concerned with such texts. The compact nature of the book has undoubtedly imposed limitations on the scope of material covered. However, in a book that claims to discuss the French road movie, it might have been productive to map out with a bit more breadth the genealogy of the genre beyond the post-68 period, particularly in relation to the notion of the road as a social critique and in the context of the immediate postwar phenomenon of capitalist modernisation, Americanisation and the car as the emblematic object of consumer culture since the road movie genre offers what Walter Moser has described as "a matrix whose central element is breaking away from sedentarising forces of modernity and producing contingency." [3]

In conclusion, the book engages with a very small number of already canonical films and thus its aim to historicize French cinema's exploration of the road movie is largely underdeveloped. Engaging with the diversity of French films with the narrative of the journey such as *Les Petits Matins* (Jacqueline Audry, 1962), *Le Corniaud* (Gérard Oury, 1965), *Un Homme qui me plaît* (Claude Lelouch, 1969), *Plein Sud* (Sébastien Lifshitz, 2008), *Voir la mer* (Patrice Leconte, 2011) or Emilie Jouvett's 2010 queer road trip *Too Much Pussy!* (to name but a few) would offer a fresh perspective on French film history. Enlarging the canon might have also been productive in terms of a critical remapping of the imagined parameters of marginality, camp, masculinity, gender, identity and the transnational which are discussed here. Overall, then, the exclusions and omissions mentioned above and, more generally, the insufficient attention to the trope of the road in French cinema history does mean that the book is a bit incomplete as a monograph claiming to investigate the French road movie and one would hope that scholars take up the topic in future publications. Ultimately, though, apart from these few reservations, *The French Road Movie* has much to recommend it. It will be a useful guide to students, teachers and those who love French film and it is a welcome addition to the growing body of French cinema scholarship.

NOTES

[1] Michael Gott and Thibaut Shilt, eds., *Open Roads, Closed Borders. The Contemporary French-language Road Movie* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2013).

[2] See Leila Wimmer, “I don’t have no home!’: Paris Interregnum in *Mauvaise graine*,” in Karen McNally, eds., *Billy Wilder Movie-Maker* (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2010), pp. 161-177.

[3] Walter Moser, “Le Road movie: un genre issu d’une constellation moderne de locomotion et de médiamotion,” *Cinéma* 18/2-3(Spring 2008):7-30.

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