

Filming *On the Road*: Too Much Baggage?

On the Road a film by Walter Salles

Why would anyone make a movie of *On the Road*? Jack Kerouac's novel is famously plotless. The author himself summed it up best before he actually wrote a word of it: "...two guys hitchhiking to California in search of something they don't really find, and losing themselves on the road, coming all the way back hopeful of something else."¹ Notwithstanding its status as a foundational "Beat" text, *On the Road* is a deeply elegiac book. Sal Paradise, the narrator, embraces the values of a vanishing America and laments its postwar materialism and conformity. He searches for authenticity and rarely finds it. Council Bluffs, where "great wagon parties held council...before hitting the Oregon and Santa Fe trails," has been reduced to "cute suburban cottages." In Cheyenne, it's Wild West Week. Not much actually happens on the road except sex, drugs, and bebop, and the occasional menial job.

Unfortunately, director Walter Salles and screenwriter Jose Rivera (who previously collaborated on the movie version of Che Guevara's *Motorcycle Diaries*) add a politically correct story arc that, in attempting to "update" the novel, ends up weighing it down with value judgments Kerouac never intended to make. If there is one line which sums up what Sal discovers during his life on the road, it is the San Francisco tenorman's cautionary words to protagonist Dean Moriarty: "life is too sad to be ballin' all the time."

Salles makes the evolution of Kerouac's style and the writing of the book a big part of the story. In one particularly painful montage, Kerouac/Paradise bangs away on his typewriter while beboppers jam in Dionysiac frenzy, as if the connection between rhythms of bebop and Kerouac's prose were not self-evident after all the time we spend with Sal and Dean in smoky nightclubs. Worse yet, the movie's message is explicitly instrumentalizing: you can sleep around, smoke "tea" and even crush up a few Benzedrex inhalers in pursuit of youthful kicks, but at some point it's publish or perish. In the movie, Carlo Marx (Allen Ginsberg) overcomes his erotic, amphetamine-addled obsession for Dean and publishes "Denver Doldrums," a poetry chapbook (Ginsberg didn't actually publish this poem until decades later). When it arrives in the mail it prompts Sal to get serious about his own writing.

Salles' *On the Road* is not a movie of, or based on, the novel, but rather a biopic – a literary docudrama *about* Kerouac and friends loosely laid over parts of the novel that can be compressed into a movie plot (which of course rules out some of the best parts). As a docudrama, the film strains credibility. The more the characters are played as their real life alter egos, the harder it is for a knowledgeable viewer to separate fact and fiction. One cannot forget that William Burroughs, Jr. fatally shot his wife Joan while playing William Tell with a whiskey glass on her head, or that William Burroughs, III, the child Vigo Mortenssen's Bull Lee (William Burroughs, Jr.)

lingers over so lovingly in the film, died at 33 after a short, miserable life of drugs and alcohol. (In the novel, Kerouac describes Bull as “a father who would certainly never bore his son.”) As a father, Kerouac was not much better. His ex-wife had to take him to court to admit paternity and pay child support for his only child, Jan. She lived in substance-abusing penury in a trailer park and likewise died young. Kerouac, and later, the Sampas family, his alleged legatees – I use this term because in 2009 a Florida judge declared Kerouac’s mother’s will, leaving them the rights to Jack’s work, a forgery --declined any assistance to her.² Transforming literary fiction into cinema “faction” brings all that nasty real life denouement into play, and reduces ***On the Road*** to a mere *roman a clef*. Why should anyone else care whether the movie “gets” Jack and Neal or Burroughs right – as opposed to “getting” the essence of Sal and Dean and Bull, in period or otherwise? Is it germane to have Sal Paradise speak French Canadian to his mother? Kerouac left that part of himself out of ***On the Road***. What the hell kind of Quebecois name is Sal Paradise anyway?

I admit that Kerouac is more a mythic figure than a writer of direct influence. Most recent Kerouac scholarship is biographical or sociological, not literary. A biopic may have been the path of least resistance, but it doesn’t grasp the power the novel still has. Nearly three decades after it came out Thomas Pynchon called ***On the Road*** one of the great American novels. Larry McMurtry describes it as a “catalytic book for a generation of American writers.” Bob Dylan, Sam Shepherd and others have weighed in with similar homages. But on the road from fiction to film, the literally transposed and the reverentially rendered are common roadkill.

A movie project of ***On the Road*** has been wandering through Hollywood on borrowed time for more than half a century. Kerouac tried to persuade Marlon Brando to sign on as Dean Moriarty opposite Kerouac himself as Paradise in 1957. Coppola bought the rights in 1979. Michael Herr co-wrote a first screenplay with Coppola. Jean Luc Godard took a few meetings with Coppola in San Francisco, then fled America for good. In 1995, enter Barry Gifford, author of ***Jack Speaks***, an enduring oral history of Kerouac’s life, as well as ***Sailor and Lula*** (filmed by David Lynch as ***Young at Heart***). Gus Van Zant was on board to direct, but that pairing went nowhere. Finally, Russell Banks was brought in to give the story a little proletarian “continental drift,” and Roman Coppola tried as well. Four scripts, zero traction.

Salles has said he wanted to honor Kerouac and bring a new audience to the book. There is something condescending in the idea that you have to lure kids to the movies to get them to read a book. And if you think that, can you really expect them to recognize the picture of Rimbaud the set designer hung over Sal’s writing desk?

If you haven’t read the book and are tempted to catch the movie, let me make another suggestion. See Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie’s ***Pull My Daisy***, newly available on DVD in the collected films of Frank. More than any road movie, it captures Beat culture’s low-fidelity craft of spontaneity. Based on a play by Kerouac, it also has voice-over narration by Jack, a bop score by David Amram, and the

participation of the real Allen Ginsberg. If you insist on going to a road movie, choose one from **Road Movie: USA**, by Bernard Benoliel and Jean-Baptiste Thoret, an imaginative survey of the genre writ large, taking in not only the obvious high points like *Easy Rider* and *Two Lane Blacktop* but also the “end of the road” movies of Wim Wenders, Werner Herzog, Jim Jarmusch, and Gus van Zant. Every one of these owes something to Kerouac’s novel.

Better yet, listen to the Will Patton audiobook version of ***On the Road*** – it’s only 11 hours and 8 minutes long, and comes with **whispersync** for voice, which allows you to listen to it for a while and then jump right to where you are on your Kindle, and back. (This virtual versatility is very funny when you consider that Jack and Neal shlepped around Proust in their rucksacks. Neal Cassady’s two-volume copy of ***In Search of Lost Time*** weighs 6 pounds 4 ounces without dust jacket. In the film they carry the much lighter ***Swann’s Way***, volume one of the Modern Library edition.) Get in your car, pretend it’s a ‘49 Hudson with a CD player or an Ipod dock, and listen to ***On the Road*** driving somewhere nice upstate. After all, it’s the language, stupid.

Recognizing that the only way to compete with the digital page is to make an art object out of the printed one, Ed Ruscha has given us a magnificent artist’s book of ***On the Road***, a veritable Gutenberg Bible of Beat from a second generation Beatnik nurtured on Kerouac (Kerouac was born in 1922, Ruscha in 1937. He migrated from Oklahoma to Los Angeles the year after ***On the Road*** was published). The artist inserts found and commissioned photos of car parts and diner food into Kerouac’s text with the careful attention of an archaeologist. In the same vein, Ruscha recently “sampled” Kerouac in a series of paintings utilizing some of his favorite linguistic moments from the book against a mountain backdrop evocative of Kerouac’s primal Western landscapes:

FIRST I BOUGHT A LOAF OF BREAD AND SALAMI AND MADE MYSELF TEN SANDWICHES TO CROSS THE COUNTRY ON (illustration)

or

THE HOLY CON-MAN BEGAN TO EAT (illustration).

Richard Prince, a generation younger than Ruscha (he was born in 1949) has also appropriated ***On the Road*** as cultural artifact in various sculptures and collages incorporating relics like Kerouac’s cancelled checks – one for \$40 to Allen Ginsberg and another for \$12.47 to his local Long Island liquor store –or juxtaposed American and English first editions of ***On the Road*** glued shut and attached to a bonded plinth.

If ***On the Road*** is already part of your DNA but you hunger for twenty-first century continuation of the textual variety, William T. Vollman is your man. In his 2008 ***Riding Toward Everywhere*** (an expanded version of “A Short Essay on Freight Trains” which appeared in ***Harpers*** in 2006), he combines an account of his own

experiences riding the rails with a *tour d'horizon* of hobo literature, from the “dogged cat-and-mouse triumphs” of Jack London’s hoboes of ***The Road*** to “Kerouac’s desperately rapturous self guided highway pilots” via Boxcar Bertha, Pittsburg Ed, and Montana Blackie. Vollman recognizes that, today, nothing accessible by internal combustion powered vehicles will yield even a hint of random adventure. On the road in the twenty-first century, there is only tourism. By riding the rails, Vollman has upped the ante. He is not just on the road, he’s off the grid. Just how off can be understood in such casually rendered asides as: “Here is another virtue of riding the rails: Wherever you are, you will wait so long the liquor store will open eventually.”

Around the time of Kerouac’s and Cassady’s deaths at the end of the sixties, a boarding school classmate of mine got to ride the rails in the company of an older family friend schooled in the secrets of hopping freights. I was green with envy. It was an unimaginably hip thing to do for one’s summer vacation, far more outré even than, say, joining the San Francisco chapter of the Hell’s Angels. Today, Vollman’s ongoing attraction to empty freights (he still lights out regularly from his Sacramento home) does not resonate like Kerouac. The railroad “bulls” are too violent, the “citizens” too paranoid, and Vollman’s fellow travelers too marginal.

An empathetic chronicler of poverty and desperation around the world, Vollman identifies another fundamental change since the days of ***On the Road*** that sets the bar of vagabondage considerable higher. It is no longer possible to stop somewhere and join the labor force for a while as a “fruit tramp” in order to accrue some travelling capital. Those jobs are spoken for by a permanent migrant labor force, whose numbers far exceed demand. There is no room in the ecosystem for *fauxbaux* – Vollman’s self-deprecating term for himself that covers a long line of lonesome travelling seekers.

Though gimlet-eyed about the present, Vollman understands the nostalgia for *back then*. A sparkling passage connecting freighthoppers to an Autopian police state evokes a Neal Cassady carjack *cum* joy ride:

“Back then, before the old open faced automobile carriers had to get walled off thanks to vandalism, a trainhopper could climb into a brand new car, turn on the heater and radio, recline in the drivers seat, and even turn on the windshield wipers just for laughs, getting drunk and gazing out at aspens in the evening...raising his fifth of whiskey to toast the gorgeous swellings of the trees that crawled up the bellies of three mountains.”

To be riding toward everywhere, is, for Vollman, to be free for some indefinite period, “which while it lasts is as good as forever.” But such occasional revelations or respites become fewer with age and then disappear. The kindred power of ***On the Road*** lies in Kerouac’s ability to convey the ecstatic possibilities of this freedom and at the same time intimate its eventual extinction with the passing of time. Russell Banks’ unproduced screenplay for the book sets up a parallel narrative in which a

sour, bloated Kerouac, a year away from his death in 1969, goes on a road trip to Chapel Hill, the birthplace of Thomas Wolfe, with a young Canadian cousin. Flashbacks to the novel's action are triggered by well-meaning but clueless questions by hippie college students. In response to one about the end of things between him and Neal, Jack says: "The whole damned book turned out to be the beginning of the end ! I shouldn't be surprised, I guess. I mean that's actually the POINT of the book, isn't it?"³ Salles' film misses the point completely.

Robert Melvin Rubin is a cultural historian and independent curator. His exhibition **Richard Prince: American Prayer**, an installation based on the artist's collection of rare books and manuscripts of postwar American countercultures, will open at the Morgan Library in the summer of 2015.

¹ Kerouac's journals, August 23, 1948

² Kerouac left everything to his mother. He married third and last wife Stella Sampas, a childhood acquaintance, primarily to assure care for her after he was gone. The lower court ruled that her brothers forged the will.

³ Second draft, October 24, 2000