

Perpetuating Teenage Drifters in Contemporary American Road Movies ***Carmen INDURAIN****Universidad Pública de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain**

“In the road genre, nearly all of the characters are young. This is naturally appealing to youth culture, as the road offers adventure, escapism and opportunity.”¹ As Brian Ireland remarks in this opening quotation, the idea of youth is indeed a recurring image and theme of the road genre. From the late 1960s until the present day, many young film directors like Dennis Hopper, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese, Wim Wenders, Jim Jarmusch, and more recently Alexander Payne or David O. Russell, found the road movie attractive and started their filming career with it. But it was especially the young spectator that felt the appeal of either the life-affirming, young-spirited energy or, as Barbara Klinger argues, the dystopic, melancholic view of the world for which many road movies are remembered.² Youngsters on the road have been the protagonists of a variety of movies ranging from juvenile delinquency films (*They Live by Night*, Nicholas Ray, 1949), to the hot rod cycle (*Hot Rod Girl*, Leslie H. Martinson, 1956). However, I agree with Kay Dickinson when she claims that “the road is largely a (masculine) adult preserve.”³ Indeed, the average road movie protagonist is not just young, but a young male adult. This is the case in such varied and emblematic titles made over more than four decades until the year 2010. Among these we may find the following: *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), *Duel* (Steven Spielberg, 1971), *Rain Man* (Barry Levinson, 1988), *O Brother! Where Art Thou?* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2000), *Everything is Illuminated* (Liev Schreiber, 2005), and the most recent *Due Date* (Tod Phillips, 2010). Nevertheless, it is also true that in the 1990s the road genre started to follow a new trend towards a more democratic and egalitarian social representation. As Michael Atkinson points out, in the 1990s the hegemonic road movie protagonist — a white, heterosexual American young adult — started to be displaced by non-heterosexuals, non-whites and also non-adults:

Fonda and Hopper, both young white men with gas tanks full of cash and a mind-expanding world of time on their hands, don't seem to have as much of a natural birthright to the back roads as the randy pair of HIV-positive misanthropes in *The Living End*, the lost boy of *My Own Private Idaho* and the amateur Cheyenne revolutionaries of *Powwow Highway*.⁴

Thus, from the 1990s onwards, we witness a series of road movies that challenge stereotypes dealing with not only gender (*Thelma and Louise*, Ridley Scott, 1991 and *Boys on*

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¹ Brian Ireland, “American Highways: Recurring Images and Themes of the Road Genre,” *The Journal of American Culture* XXVI, nº 4 (2003), 447.

² Barbara Klinger, “The Road to Dystopia”, in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *The Road Movie Book* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 179-203.

³ Kay Dickinson, “Such Time When Young’uns Run the Roads: the Depiction of Travelling Children,” in *Lost Highways: An Illustrated History of Road Movies*, edited by Jack Sargeant and Stephanie Watson (London: Creation Books, 1999), 194.

⁴ Michael Atkinson, “Crossing the Frontiers,” *Sight and Sound* VII, 1 (1994), 16.

the Side, Herbert Ross, 1995), ethnicity (*Love Field*, Jonathan Kaplan, 1992; and *Smoke Signals*, Chris Eyre, 1998) and sexual orientation (*My Own Private Idaho*, Gus Van Sant, 1991 and *The Living End*, Gregg Araki, 1992), but also age.

A major aim in this paper is to provide an analysis of the representation of adolescence, that is, of the teenage presence in the contemporary United States road movie in an attempt to understand its variety of forms and meanings and the potential of the adolescent drifter as a key ingredient for generic hybridization. This study therefore adopts a generic approach since, although a closed list of film titles may actually work as an effective descriptive tool for the average viewer, yet a film genre cannot be understood exclusively as a fixed list of movies, as the corpus-based approach suggests. The hybrid nature of genres, their blurred borderlines, makes the corpus-based approach to genre not fully satisfying, as with historical approaches, which usually circumscribe a given genre to a fixed, inaccurate and narrow time sequence. A transhistorical approach to genres tends to understand films beyond history, as if they floated in a timeless space where they were all contemporaries. Edward Buscombe puts forward the view that genres are not historical, applying it to the western, and was followed, among others, by Richard Maltby and Ian Craven.⁵ On average, the corpus-based approach and the historical approach provide a list of films including only emblematic titles which are wholly and exclusively identified with a single genre and/or a period. Similarly, although generic conventions are essential generic markers, they are neither constant nor genre-exclusive, since both their cross-generic use, and their presence throughout history may change them. Furthermore, the corpus-based approach proves rather restrictive because it discards films that may show a rich cross-generic nature. This is why this paper follows both Rick Altman's and Tom Ryall's approaches to genre. Altman suggests that we should not reduce the notion of genre to a corpus but "treat genre as a complex situation" since "genre history offers crossbreeds and mutants".⁶ Similarly, Ryall believes that "regarding genres as pigeon-holes in which films must fit, rather than elements in a flexible conceptual world, is a problem".⁷ Thus, he offers a more reliable and useful approach in which generic context stands out as more significant than generic membership:

Questions of generic membership — 'To what genre does this film belong to?' — become less relevant. Indeed, alternative questions such as 'What genre or genres constitute an effective and pertinent context for the reading of this film? What is the world(s) evoked which make the film be understood, its narrative trajectory anticipated and its characters constructed, and so on?'⁸

Therefore, in the following case study on the road movie, a concept of genre as a constraining and closed corpus-based group is replaced by Douglas Pye's more flexible and open understanding of "genre as a context in which meaning is created, a context for the approach to an individual work".⁹ This analysis also adheres to David Orgeron's understanding of the road movie as an enveloping genre:

⁵ Edward Buscombe, *The F.B.I. Companion to the Western* (London: British Film Institute, 1988), 18; Richard Maltby and Ian Craven, *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 118.

⁶ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 84, 16.

⁷ Tom Ryall, "Genre and Hollywood", in Hill and Gibson, eds., *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 327-338, esp. 334.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁹ Douglas Pye, "Genre", in Maltby and Craven, *op. cit.*, 107-143, esp. 109, 233

The road film is a popular genre that continues to be reworked and recycled as we enter into the 21st century. Other genres like the film noir and the western have bursts of interest. The road film, on the other hand, moves in a realm outside of other cinematic genres because it envelops such a wide variety of genres.¹⁰

Accordingly, films that are generic hybrids are analysed and may be seen, among other things, to present remarkable portrayals of adolescence within the road movie context. In addition, it is necessary to analyse the rich combination of conventions that in different ways and to different extents make up the generic context of the road movie within these films. As I have deduced from Arthur Berger's illustration on the western genre:

A car on its own does not necessarily mark a road movie. But when this car is framed in a meaningful wide open roadscape, along a journey whose encounters and events are more important than its destination, when this journey presents the metamorphosis of the film protagonists and they are depicted by means of cast, costume, flags and/or road excess in the form of guns, sex and/or drugs, we will most likely be watching a road movie.¹¹

Therefore, this article also focuses on the representation of the period of adolescence, understood as a transitional stage of physical and mental human development between childhood and adult life. The aim is to explore the extent to which the depiction of teenage protagonists, instead of adult protagonists, affects generic conventions such as the motivation for the journey, its potential for the rider's metamorphosis, or the significance of the means of transport. It is within this generic context that we may read or understand several representative road movies with a predominant presence of teenage drifters. Thus, on-the-road adolescent protagonists will be examined in different hybrid titles from the early 1990s to the late 2010s, ranging from gross-out teenage sex comedies (*Road Trip*, Todd Phillips, 2000, *Sex Drive*, Sean Anders, 2008) and teen thrillers (*Joy Ride*, John Dahl, 2001), to independent films such as *Manny & Lo* (Lisa Krueger, 1996), *My Own Private Idaho* and *Transamerica* (Duncan Tucker, 2005). Their subsequent contribution not only to the evolution of the contemporary US road movie, but also to the "exportation" of these trends abroad will be explored.

The comic teen road movie

As explained above, the road has traditionally been ridden by young adult riders. Nevertheless, this kind of films also presents some remarkable examples of wandering minors that replace the average grown-ups. After all, as Kay Dickinson recalls, a literary tradition that presented the quest narratives of children¹² influenced films like *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) but also the making of many road movies. A representative corpus of teenage films made from the 1990s onwards corroborate Thomas Doherty's claim that by the traditional measures of genre affiliation, teenpics, a product of the decline of the

¹⁰ David Anthony Orgeron, *Road Pictures: The Transportation of American Cinema* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI ProQuest Company, 2000), 245.

¹¹ Arthur Asa Berger, *Popular Culture Genres: Theories and Texts. Foundations of Popular Culture*, vol. 2. Newbury Park (California: Sage Publications, 1992), 34-5; Carmen Indurain Eraso, *A Culture on the Move: Contemporary Representations of the US in Road Movies of the 1990s* (Ann Arbor: UMI ProQuest Company, 2006), 48.

¹² Dickinson, *op. cit.* Among these, she mentions David Copperfield, Huckleberry Finn or Kim.

classical Hollywood cinema and the rise of the privileged American teenager, are as elusive as any modernist picture amalgam. As Doherty argues,

Fast kids in cars remained a teenpic staple, but generally filmmakers blended the fast cars with other teen-oriented tastes. Few teenpics of the later 1950s relied on only one exploitation hook, they mixed two or more exploitation items in inventive hybrids.¹³

Remarkably, this penchant for generic teenpic hybridity seems to continue half a century later, so these films may be better understood within other generic contexts, like the road movie. In this analysis, I argue that the teenpic may hybridise with three main different types of road movies: road comedies, road thrillers (or horror films), and independent road melodramas, more specifically with what Steve Neale calls “family melodrama”.¹⁴ As Celestino Deleyto points out, the teenpic reached its most successful combination in the teen comedies and teen slasher and stalker movies of the eighties and nineties.¹⁵ As was only to be expected, these two categories are also mixed with the popular and versatile road movie. The road film especially hybridises with the teenage gross-out comedy, a very popular combination of the comedy with the road movie at the turn of the century. Todd Phillips’s *Road Trip*, James Cox’s *Highway* (2002), and Sean Anders’s *Sex Drive* are illustrative of the teen sex comedies¹⁶ made during the last decade and aimed at a young audience. These films use the road story to follow up the successful teen gross-out sex comedy that was spawned around the 1980s by *National Lampoon’s Animal House* (John Landis, 1978), *Porky’s* (Bob Clark, 1982) and *Revenge of the Nerds* (Jeff Kanew, 1984) and that successfully revived in the late 1990s with Paul Weitz’s *American Pie* (1999). Only one year later Phillips’s *Road Trip* becomes the first 2000 follow-up to *American Pie*, in this case framed within the road movie context. *Road Trip* presents the crazy three-day, 1,800-mile journey of four college students who head from Ithaca to Austin to recover a sexually explicit videotape before it reaches one of the boys’ girlfriend, Tiffany (Rachel Blanchard), and proves that her life-long boyfriend, Josh (Breckin Meyer), cheated on her. As expected, this teen “road trip” places male youngsters as sex-crazed protagonists of gross-out gags in fraternal relationships. Remarkably, *Road Trip* is the first title in the director’s evolutionary creation of films with a diegesis that takes place mostly on the road. Nearly a decade later Phillips repeats *Road Trip*’s pattern successfully in *The Hangover* (2009), but now its male foursome is ten years older and on the road to Las Vegas to have an unforgettable stag party. More significantly, only one year later Phillips’s last film *Due Date* (2010) presents a father-to-be who is forced to hitch a ride with an aspiring actor in order to arrive on time at the birth of his child. Thus, Phillips seems to continue his cinematic road journey evolution, significantly centred upon different critical moments in the male life cycle, starting in male teenagehood with *Road Trip*, going on to marriage with *The Hangover* and finally reaching fatherhood in *Due Date*.

¹³ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 50s* (London and Worcester: Billing and Sons Ltd, 1988), 12-14, 115.

¹⁴ Steve Neale, “Melo Talk: on the Meaning and Use of the Term ‘Melodrama’ in the American Trade Press, *The Velvet Light Trap* 32, Autumn 1993, 73.

¹⁵ Celestino Deleyto, *Ángeles y Demonios: Representación e Ideología en el Cine Contemporáneo de Hollywood* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2003), 166.

¹⁶ This group includes the *American Pie* series, and *Dude, Where’s My Car?* (Danny Leiner, 2000), which have in common the actor Seann William Scott.

In a similar vein to *Road Trip*, *Sex Drive* presents Ian (Josh Zuckerman), a naïve eighteen-year-old boy who takes to the road in order to lose his virginity with an inviting sex bomb he met on the Internet. He steals his brother's '69 GTO and drives from Chicago to Knoxville with his best buddy, Lance (Clark Duke), and Felicia (Amanda Crew), his childhood crush, on a journey that "will be like *Road Trip* but much more cooler," as Lance comments quoting Phillips's film. It is interesting to analyse the extent to which the change from the traditional adult protagonist to a teenage protagonist affects generic conventions. First of all, the motivation for the journey for teenagers in these road comedies is still associated with experiencing excess. But the protagonists' main aim is not so much centred upon the use and abuse of guns, drugs and alcohol but rather upon obtaining goal number one: sex. Thus, as happens in most teenage comedies, sex is the "driving" force in these films and most of the humorous scenes either deal with it or are somehow related to it. *Road Trip* uses a battery of jokes about anal probes, sperm banks, toe sucking, a grandfather's Viagra-fueled erection, a waiter rubbing French toast down inside his pants before serving it to one of the boys, etc. Likewise, *Sex Drive* presents gaudy jokes involving the annual Amish sex orgy, various shots of sexual organs, and even politically incorrect gay taunts through the presence of Ian's homophobic but macho gay brother. Excess in these films does not usually come in the form of shooting weapons. Instead, cars seem to replace guns as objects of excess. In these films, teenagers usually borrow an adult's car which is the cause of many misadventures, since they either lose it, (as in *Dude Where is my Car?* and *The Hangover*), spoil it and nearly have it carjacked (*The Hangover*, *Sex Drive*), or even wreck it. In *Road Trip*, for instance, they destroy the geek's father's Ford Taurus and they have to steal a yellow bus from a school for its blind. Thus, both road-movie generic icons: the means of transport and weaponry seem no longer to be used as potent symbols of the American way of life and the riders' personality. Weapons are rarely used by these teenage riders and cars have lost their specific generic significance and are now used like sex, as elements of both action and excessive comic effect, as in burlesque films involving cars.

As with adult riders, the journey for these teenagers is a journey of initiation or self-quest that results in their subsequent transformation. As Cohan and Hark note, "road movies project American Western mythology onto the roadscape, forging a travel narrative out of the conjunction of plot and setting that sets the liberation of the road against the oppression of hegemonic norms".¹⁷ It is this release from oppression that seems to lead some teenagers to get on the road. Moreover, adolescence is, after all, a period of transition and development, whose depiction seems to fit well in the road movie's plotline and structure. On the road, the protagonists meet all sorts of strange characters and problems that provoke firstly, their generic fraternal bonding, and secondly, their change or metamorphosis. This is a journey of disaster and above all laughs, but also of discovery. In *Road Trip* after the four travellers wreck their car and lose most of their money, they earn some quick money as sperm donors, they visit a friend's grandfather who turns out to be a horny 'druggie', and they have an enriching incident at an all-black African-American college fraternity house. Likewise, the teenagers in *Sex Drive* encounter a jealous boyfriend, a menacing hitchhiker, jail birds, carjackers and an Amish rumspringa party, when the Amish youth turn sixteen and are allowed to experiment with temptations of the flesh. As I have

¹⁷ Cohan and Hark, *op. cit.*, 1.

explained in an earlier study, the end of the journey in road movies is generally not marked by a return home, or a return to the cyclical structure of classical films.¹⁸ In teenage road films, however, the riders return to their point of departure - their universities or hometowns - after a series of trials and adventures have allowed for the recovery of the *status quo*. This different type of ending, including their return to their destination of origin, which is usually back home, illustrates how much the road experience has changed the protagonists and also presents the journey as a mere temporary excessive episode in the adolescents' lives. Apart from the staple character whose life changes drastically after he loses his virginity (e.g. the 'geek' in *Road Trip*) the travelling experience also brings out the teenagers' better judgment and, in subsequent decisions, transforms their lives. In *Road Trip*, Josh (Breckin Meyer) decides to break up with his long-time girlfriend Tiffany (Rachel Blanchard) and start dating Beth (Amy Smart), who seems to mean more to him than just a one-night-stand (just as in *The Hangover*, Stu (Ed Helms) break ups with his girlfriend and starts dating Jade (Heather Graham), a Las Vegas stripper, who seems more likely to mean true love and happiness to him). Similarly, in *Sex Drive*, Lance (Clark Duke) changes promiscuity for love and marriage within the Amish community. Furthermore, Ian (Josh Zuckerman) and Felicia (Amanda Crew) finally realise their love for each other and we are told how on New Year's Eve Ian gives his virginity to Felicia. Therefore, as in *American Pie* and *Highway*, sex and humour are finally outweighed by the romantic triumph of the endings in these teen road comedies. As Glenn Kenny explains in his analysis of *American Pie*, "the movie has a give-with-one-hand, take-with-the-other strategy" whereby, after thinking during the whole film of nothing besides having sex, "the protagonists finally come to the stunning realization that getting laid isn't everything." Although this is only true for some of the protagonists, I agree with Kenny's claim that one of the film's assertions is that "beneath the exterior of the most abject horndog beats a truly sensitive puppy heart."¹⁹ In *Road Trip*, Josh realises that preventing Tiffany from receiving the incriminating videotape is not that important since he is really in love with Beth. But it is especially *Sex Drive* that shows a greater romantic climactic content whereby Ian's obsession with losing his virginity and Lance's sex-crazed fulfilment are not as important as finding true reciprocal love with Felicia and Mary (Alice Greczyn) respectively. All in all, despite their initial coarseness, the endings of these two road comedies recall what Doherty denominates "the clean teenpics, which are bright, breezy, romantic and frankly escapist" and whose protagonists are "fresh young faces, 'good kids' who prefer dates to drugs and crushes to crime".²⁰ The confused protagonists in these two features finally prove to be decent and well-adjusted, and moreover, to believe in true love, which makes these films differ from their more vicious counterparts of the late seventies and eighties (*National Lampoon's Animal House*, *Porky's*, *Revenge of the Nerds*). As Stephanie Zacharek explains, the new teen films (mainly represented by *American Pie*) are forging a tradition of their own, far from the alternately nasty and clueless eighties teen fare and closer to the romantic comedies of the thirties and forties like *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934).²¹ In that sense, as mentioned above,

¹⁸ Indurain Eraso, *op. cit.*, 111.

¹⁹ Glenn Kenny, "American Pie," *Premiere* XII, 12 (1999), 30.

²⁰ Doherty, *op. cit.*, 195-6.

²¹ Stephanie Zacharek, "There's Something about Teenage Comedy," *Sight and Sound*, XIX, 12 (1999), 21.

Road Trip and especially *Sex Drive* could perfectly well join this group of new teen films with a romantic penchant, in this case within the road movie context, since they finally exalt the value of romantic love.

The horror teen road movie

Apart from teen road comedies, from the 1990s onwards there is a significant recuperation of the association between the road and horror (a traditional teenage market), mainly in the form of teen slasher and stalker movies. Remarkably, Caryn James points out how far film makers have come from the road to Oz and claims that: "today's yellow brick road leads straight to Hell", a view Michael Atkinson also shares.²² Such varied and numerous films as *Freeway* (Matthew Bright, 1996), *Joy Ride* (2000), *Jeepers Creepers* and *Jeepers Creepers II* (Victor Salva, 2001, 2003), *The Hitcher II: I've Been Waiting* (Louis Morneau, 2003), *Black Cadillac* (John Murlowski, 2003), *Highwaymen* (Robert Harmon, 2004), and *The Hitcher* (Dave Meyers, 2007) show how the bliss of road liberation may turn into a nightmare of mobility for wandering teenagers. These films illustrate a revivalist trend of road thrillers and horror road movies recalling Spielberg's *Duel* and Robert Harmon's *The Hitcher* (1986). Thus, the turn of the century witnesses a continuation and a proliferation of this old trend showing the darkest and most violent side of the road not only in films starring young adults – *Kalifornia* (Dominik Sena, 1993), *The Road Killers* (Deran Sarafian, 1994) and *Breakdown* (Jonathan Mostow, 1997) – but also teenagers. Thus, in the same period, young travellers encounter what Steve Neale describes as an "association between horror and family, horror within the everyday, contemporary world."²³ Instead of sex, teenage riders find blood and death on the road, as happens to the young boy protagonist in *The Hitcher*, who is not only stalked by a serial killer but also accused of his crimes and chased by the police. Thus, the road movie recuperates the classical Little Red Riding Hood story (best exemplified by Bright's *Freeway*) basically showing that youngsters should not be wandering on the road unaccompanied, but in the safety of home since there are many evil dangers they can encounter there. These youngsters are chased and forced to prove their resistance and bravery against mobile embodiments of evil – psychopaths, monsters or vampires –²⁴ in a coming-of-age story where there is usually no brave, strong hunter character who comes to their rescue, since police help is usually late or inefficient.

In *Joy Ride*, for example, Lewis (Paul Walker), a college student, drives home from Colorado to New Jersey, with a planned stop to pick up Venna (Leelee Sobieski), an old friend he is romantically interested in. Along the way, he stops off to bail his older never-dowell brother, Fuller (Steve Zahn), out of prison for a drunk-and-disorderly charge. Fuller convinces Lewis to buy a CB radio with which they stupidly play a nasty joke on a lonely truck driver (one of the boys pretends to be a hot girl called "Candy Cane" who promises sex in a roadside motel to "Rusty Nail," (Ted Levine) the truck driver). Just when the two brothers start to compete for Venna's attention they have to invest their energy and wit to save their

²² See Caryn James, "Today's Yellow Brick Road Leads Straight to Hell," *The New York Times*, August 29, 1990, section 2, 1; Michael Atkinson, "Highways to Hell," *Film Comment* XXX, 1 (1994), 82-83.

²³ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 96.

²⁴ For example in Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark* (1987), and Robert Rodríguez's *From Dusk till Dawn* (1996).

lives from the deadly rage of the offended psychopathic trucker, who stalks them on the road after nearly killing the guest he finds in the motel room where he expected to meet Candy Cane. Remarkably, the film plays successfully with the contrast between the visibility of the hunted victims and the non-visibility of the killer who not only remains in the darkness but also enjoys his voyeuristic perspective. On the one hand, the stalking driver successfully spies on their every move in a motel and he even forces the brothers to walk naked into a crowded truck stop. On the other hand, as happens in *Duel*, the truck driver's face is never shown (although we hear his scary voice), which makes the vehicle become both the humanized evil and deadly weapon against which the youngsters have to fight. In a similar way to Joel and Ethan Coen's *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *Joy Ride* makes the most of the potential of motel rooms for creating the right setting for menace and terror. As Mick Lasalle puts it, in *Joy Ride*: "motel rooms, with their dim light and old television sets showing porn, are presented as dens of forgotten evil — where bad things happen and none of it matters."²⁵ This film combines fear within enclosed spaces (motel rooms and the car, which needs to be a hardtop model instead of a convertible one so that the youngsters feel trapped inside), while panic is lived out in open isolated places - open roads and the countryside - mainly at night. During a powerful chase scene in *Joy Ride*, the truck pursues the protagonists through a cornfield at night with its blinding searchlight and the heroes are pictured running toward the camera with the truck almost on top of them (there is a very similar scene to this one in *No Country for Old Men*). Released only one month earlier, *Jeepers Creepers* tells the story of two siblings driving back home for a university break who experience a similar ordeal, except that here, the brother (Justin Long) and his sister (Gina Philips) encounter a flesh-eating monster in the isolated countryside and finally the hero fails to beat the monster and dies while his sister survives. In Bigelow's vampire road movie, *Near Dark*, a mid-western farm boy named Caleb (Adrian Pasdar) reluctantly becomes a member of a travelling "family" of evil vampires after he tries to seduce Mae (Jenny Wright), a girl member of that band. These are predator creatures who roam the highways in stolen cars to get the blood they need to survive. But Caleb refuses to kill for blood and he has to choose between his beloved family and his love for the vampire girl. What is significant in all these films is that road settings and encounters are no longer a source of self-discovery or catharsis for teenagers but of horror episodes that require a continuous fight for survival. These films present the idea that when you are a teenager away from home in an isolated or remote place or simply outdoors on unfrequented roads, isolated gas-stations or roadside motels you are not safe. So the usual static action of travellers' horror in films like *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and *Motel Hell* (Kevin Connor, 1980), both set in a motel, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), located in a farm, is given mobility and an episodic structure in these teen road thrillers. Even the usual urban American setting of vampire movies — nomadic creatures after all — is also replaced by the roadscape and the arid desert setting of road movies in *Near Dark*, and *From Dusk till Dawn*. Terror occurs mainly through the catalyst of hitchhiking and tends to develop in the form of a pursuit or car chase. If a character makes a wrong decision — is not cautious of strangers and picks up a hitchhiker or hitchhikes (*The Hitcher*, *Freeway*), stops in a remote unknown place (*Route*

²⁵ Mick Lasalle, "This 'Joy Ride' not for Wimps: Suspense Wizard Dahl Startles at Every Turn," *St Francisco Chronicle*, October 5, 2001, C-3.

666 [William Wesley, US/CAN, 2001], *From Dusk till Dawn, Jeepers Creepers*), or taunts an oversensitive trucker (*Joy Ride*) — his only way out is to speed up for his life. Regarding the prospect of the fruitful combination of road movie and teen horror, as Jim Morton argues, it seems to continue on the increase, since there is always a chance to find horror on real-life roads and road fiction will subsequently represent it:

Despite our increasing recourse to Internet “travel,” the roads will always remain, facilitating the spread of mobile killers and nurturing highway psychosis. And for as long as the cinema continues to mirror life, the screen will brim with human road kill.²⁶

The independent teen road movie

Perhaps the most interesting representation of teenagers in the road movie is to be found in independent titles such as *Manny & Lo*, *My Own Private Idaho*, and *Transamerica*, films that could also be read within the family melodrama and/or the social-problem film frameworks. After their mother’s death, the orphan sisters in *Manny & Lo* — eleven-year-old Amanda (played by a very young Scarlett Johansson) and her sixteen-year-old sister Laurel (Aleksa Palladino) — set to the road on their own, running away from their different foster-families to avoid being separated and sleeping in model homes. As Manny says in the film, they follow number one rule: “keep moving and you won’t get nailed.” Lo becomes pregnant so they end up kidnapping a clerk in a baby supply store to help Manny with the delivery and the new-born baby. This shop assistant eventually becomes a surrogate mother for these teenagers. Likewise, Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho* presents a young and fragile character, Mike (River Phoenix), who is sick and maladjusted and therefore socially and physically displaced. The film tells the story of two young male hustlers, Scott (Keanu Reeves) and Mike, from the point of view of the latter. Mike, the ill and incestuous son of his mother and her brother, is a gay narcoleptic desperately searching for his lost mother from whom he was separated at an early age. Mike is in love with his best friend Scott, with whom he shares the same fractured family references. Scott accompanies him in his search for his mother and assists him in his narcoleptic episodes on the road, which constitute the structuring dividing chapters of the film - from Portland to Idaho and finally to Rome. A further illustration of helpless teenagers is Toby (Kevin Zegers), the boy in Duncan Tucker’s *Transamerica*. This road movie tells the story of Bree (Felicity Hoffman), a pre-operative transsexual who takes an unexpected journey from Los Angeles to New York when she learns that she fathered a son whom she has to bail out of prison for drug-trafficking. Toby is a seventeen-year-old boy who had to run away from an abusive step-father and has ended up as a drug-addicted street hustler whose main ambition in life is to become a porn star. Unable to reveal her identity as both a father and a transsexual, Bree poses as a Christian social worker who releases Toby from prison and offers to drive him to Los Angeles. This mismatched couple cross the country together, stopping over at their family homes and getting to know each other on the way.

All in all, these three independent films illustrate Kay Dickinson’s idea that the road movie’s convention of self-quest, of finding oneself, becomes a search for someone else for

²⁶ Jim Morton, “Road Kill: Horror on the Highway,” in Jack Sargeant and Stephanie Watson, eds., *Lost Highways: An Illustrated History of Road Movies* (London: Creation Books, 1999), 128.

wandering minors.²⁷ Remarkably, what the teenage drifters in these independent road movies are desperately seeking for is a family reference, a mother, whether real or surrogate. As Gus Van Sant admits, *My Own Private Idaho* is “a film about looking for home. You may not find one but you keep looking.”²⁸ These teenagers on the lam provide the road movie with a symbolic dimension mainly suggesting that there must be something wrong in an adult society that leads helpless kids to run away from their home and desperately search for an alternative one. As Amy Taubin claims, “*My Own Private Idaho* connects the betrayal of familial love with the betrayal of the American Dream,”²⁹ which forces its alienated protagonists to a vagrant life in the streets and on the road. In addition, all these films seem to point to a dysfunctional family background suffering from problems of drugs and abuse (*Transamerica*) or incest (*My Own Private Idaho*), as the main reason for the youngsters’ critical situation. Dickinson’s claim that “the privilege of freedom, of ‘boysy’ beat-existentialism is virtually denied the child adventurer in road movies”³⁰ could be applied to teenagers in this case. In these independent films, protagonists go on the road out of desperation, not in order to feel the freedom provided by the journey and to experience excess regarding guns, sex, drugs and alcohol. They are on the road because they have been marginalized and displaced by the system. As David Laderman argues, for characters like these, aimless, outlaw mobility is the only appropriate response to living in a society that seemingly will not help or even have them.³¹ In these films we may find a variety of teenage outcasts ranging from runaway pregnant girls, to abused kids and orphans escaping from the social services, among others, who mostly have resorted to theft and prostitution in order to survive. The change from a traditional adult protagonist to a teenage protagonist affects generic conventions such as the motivation for the journey and the protagonist’s search, which is not individually-focused but usually involves a parental figure. Furthermore, these films exalt the institution of the family, firstly by presenting it as essential for the adolescent’s positive growth, and secondly, by pointing at the mother figure as the potential salvation for these vagrant teenagers in need. These road movies also deviate from patriarchal parameters in that they give visibility to dysfunctional families and to their usually underrepresented teenage social outcasts (pregnant runaways, sick homosexual drifters, or drug-addicted street hustlers) and they contribute to denounce their displacement.

Finally, although automobile culture is coterminous with Americanism, the increasing production of non-US road movies at the turn of the century shows that the road movie has mainly been exported, to Europe, South America and Canada, along with US cultural codes. As regards the depiction of teenagers, the “exported” road movie reinterprets and follows similar trends to those adopted by the US road movie, including the same variety of generic hybrids analyzed above. European cinema can claim teen gross-out comedies like the Spanish *Airbag* (Juan Manuel Bajo Ulloa, 1996), varied horror teen road movies (e.g. *Perdita*

²⁷ Dickinson, *op. cit.*, 195

²⁸ Lance Loud, “Shakespeare in Black Leather,” *American Film* Sept/Oct (1991), 34.

²⁹ Amy Taubin, “Objects of Desire: Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho*,” in Jim Hillier, ed., *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), 83.

³⁰ Dickinson, *op. cit.*, 194.

³¹ David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 216.

Durango, Álex de la Iglesia, 1997), or less rude teen road comedies like *Los Años Bárbaros* (*Barbaric Years*, Fernando Colomo, 1998), or the Italian *Alla Rivoluzione Sulla Due Cavalli* (*Off to the Revolution in a 2CV*, Maurizio Sciarra, 2001), while France has fostered the female sexual road film *Baise-Moi* (*Fuck Me*, Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2001) and England the road thriller (*Butterfly Kiss*, Michael Winterbottom, 1994). It is especially remarkable that these non-US road movies seem to be on average more daring and challenging in their criticism of the patriarchal system than their US counterparts.

To conclude, from the 1990s onwards, the traditional adult hero of the road movie has been displaced by adolescent riders. The significant presence of teenage protagonists goes hand in hand with the blurring of generic borderlines, whereby the 1990-2010 road movie successfully mixes with the teen gross-out comedy, the horror movie and the thriller, and with a kind of independent dysfunctional family melodrama which shows a vindictive penchant. An overview of teenage presence in road movies shows the potential of the adolescent drifter as a key ingredient for generic hybridization and subsequently, for the enrichment of the cinematic panorama that offers a wider variety of themes and the combination of generic conventions.

Indeed, the change from the traditional adult protagonist to the teenage hero also affects generic conventions. The mild version of the teen road comedy is devoid of drugs, alcohol and guns and it shows sex as the main motivation for the journey and as a major source of excess regarding plot and humour. The significance of the means of transport and of weaponry has decreased and cars appear as mere elements for action and laughs. Although the staple riders' process of bonding and transformation during the journey is also present, the journey's destination is finally home. Teenagers return home to their families and take decisions which illustrate the triumph of love and which deviate these films towards romantic territory. Teenage road thrillers and horror films turn the positive, liberating, even cathartic side of the American roadscape as a place for self-discovery and bonding into a destructive, nightmarish place without shelter, which leads teenagers to fight for their lives. Horror adopts a mobile and episodic structure that corresponds to the nightmarish journey's stopovers and to the teenagers' survival to each evil attack either along the open, deserted roads or within the entrapment of motels and vehicles. Lastly, the presence of teenage outcasts in independent road features helps denounce social injustice. The road movie's convention of self-quest becomes a search for a parental figure for these teenage drifters who have been marginalized and displaced by the social system. The proliferation of teenage sex comedies on the road may be associated to a conception of the road journey as a setting for trials, a rite of passage in characters' impending progress towards adulthood. The road journey becomes a friendly environment since its excesses are after all not extreme (there are no guns and little sex) and since the journey always finishes with the teenagers in the safety of their homes and taking the decisions approved of by their parents. Although in a different way, teenage road thrillers also depict teenage protagonists undergoing enriching, coming-of-age road experiences and trials while they travel alone on the road, these films eventually exalt the safety of home and family by contrasting it with the dangers and horrors awaiting teenage drifters along the darkest roads. Finally, a dysfunctional family or a lack of family background and society's bigotry seem to doom the teenage protagonists of independent road movies to drifting on the road searching for a mother figure. These three types of teenage road hybrids seem each in their own way to

point to the close relationship between teenage psychological development, which runs parallel to the journey's trajectory, and the concept of home and family, which is enhanced by the films. As the character of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* says at the end of the film "There is no place like Home" and this seems to be the subliminal message underlying all these road teenpics. The presence of teenagers increases even further the wealth of the fruitful, versatile and malleable road movie after the 1990s, since it contributes both to generic hybridization and to the variation of its generic conventions, while at the same time pointing towards an exaltation of the values of home and family.