

# Walter Salles' *On the Road*. The Road as evasion

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## Abstract

This study addresses a transtextual analysis of the movie *On The Road*, directed by Walter Salles. It reviews the film's technical dimension, as well as the narrative intent thereof, to permit character verisimilitude from specific staging. It includes a section which defines the *Beat generation*, the cultural and historical expression of the time, in which the film's events are set.

**Key words:** Road movie; Cinema; Cinematographic analysis; Adventure film.

*On The Road* is a movie from 2012, directed by Walter Salles (Cf. Brevet, 2011), adapted from a novel with the same name, written by Jack Kerouac (1993)<sup>2</sup>. Therein, the affairs of three young people from the *beat generation* are described. The protagonists, Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty, and Marylou, travel the United States' highways, in order to distance themselves from the limitations that life imposes, while they experiment with drugs and explore their sexuality. The novel is based on real events. Kerouac (1993) affirmed that: "Owing to the objections of my first editors, I could not use each person's real names". However, it is true that the story is based on Kerouac's adventures traveling through the U.S., together with Neal Cassady and William S. Burroughs, who are also considered founders of the freedom movement.

## Textuality, intertextuality, subtextuality, and contextuality

The argumentational basis of the project focuses on the journeys of companions who occasionally changed with the times. We know that Sal Paradise wished to write about his experiences. As such, tended to surrounded himself with those who could provide him with novel and peculiar situations. Throughout the story, he records his experience in a notebook. Moreover, we observe the way in which the characters tend to constantly quote Karl Marx and Marcel Proust. The scenes often end with the melody of a northwest song, sung by one of the travelers.

In accordance with that stated above, this cinematographic product is a representation of the novel entitled *On The Road*, which was the pillar for those who formed part

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2 Jean-Louis Lebris de Kérouack was a founding novelist of the beat culture. His texts proposed traveling freely, and included writings about a life based upon the rejection of classical American values (Cf. Swartz, 1999).

of the beat generation in the 1950s. It was written by Kerouac on a single paper roll in three weeks. He is also known to have traveled through 33 American cities. The product, according to certain critics, shifts poorly from text to screen. Richard Corliss (2012), for example, wrote a review entitled *Kerouac's On the Road Comes to Cannes: Where's the Beat?*, which ends as follows:

Though there's plenty of cool jazz in the background, the movie lacks the novel's exuberant syncopation — it misses the beat as well as the *Beat*. Some day someone may make a movie worthy of *On the Road*, but Salles wasn't the one to try. This trip goes nowhere (Cf. Ortiz-Orderigo, 1952).

Despite the fact that the characters seem to be okay with doing things with certain liberties, at times, they seem frustrated or angry when one of their companions exploits a situation. For example, during the majority of the legs of the trip, Sal is uncomfortable when Dean charms women with whom he has rapport. He is later able to start relationships with Dean's ex-girlfriends, as if this were part of his revenge.

Watching this film, it is difficult to generate an exact idea of the protagonists' hidden emotions, as many of their feelings are masked by the effects of marijuana, alcohol, or another psychoactive substance. However, it may be deduced that, despite the constant attempts to achieve absolute climax, the end always includes the sadness and emptiness that surfaces when one of the characters is sober.

This movie constantly reminds us of the date, with sections in complete blackness that last a number of seconds. This shows that the initial date of narration is 1940. As such, considering the historical context, it may be underscored that, at the time, the United States was ending its fight in World War II. On occasion, government propaganda that pushes one to join the capitalist state, and reject all other types of regime, is shown on televisions. The Beat community emerges precisely in order to oppose the rules of the state, as a kind of licentiousness.

## Technical dimension

The visual component reveals completely opposite situations: in some scenes is a character, focused with low depth of field, perfectly framed with a medium close-up, and in compliance with the law of thirds, and in other scenes is a camera in an unbalanced hand, focusing on the ground. These cases may be perceived to break with the movie's aesthetic and lend a false documentary feel, which cannot function as well as it seeks to.

The colorization component gives way to a color desaturation and a focus on yellowish tones, which induces a modern film aesthetic, although it was made in contemporary times. The ISO components in the night shots were excessive, and provided a home-movie characteristic. The night scene generates a nostalgic, solitary environment that the characters sense in the subtext.

In terms of sound, the work is stunning. The protagonists being the ones to sing the song vocals generates sensations that range from sadness to calm. The *Bebop* music that forms part of the narration complements the idea of the *Beat* experience quite well.

## In-scene narrative

In terms of the staging, there is a linear timeline which accompanies the movie in its autobiographical essence, although it really is uncertain whether the end of the movie is really an end to the events, given that neither the book has ended, nor have the journeys. From time to time, pauses are inserted into the ends of scenes, which contain dates. Similarly, informative elements are found, such as the dates at the end of each trip, and during the tapes, references are shown which fit into the 1940-1950s American political context. The lighting was occasionally supplemented by sunlight, and for night shots, the little light available was aimed at the focal point, and ISO was increased to compensate for the lack of lighting in the shot.

The narrative jives with the ideology of the Beat generation, predecessors of *Hippies*. It was a literary movement initiated in 1948, which consisted of writing about one's own experience in one's confrontation with detachment from conservative American values. This was reduced to traveling, consuming psychoactive substances, exercising sexual freedom, and a fondness for oriental philosophy. It was shaped by Lucien Carr (Cf. Oliver, 2005), Allen Ginsberg (2017), William Burroughs (Cf. Severo, 1997), and Jack Kerouac (1957), who, with novels such as *On the Road*, led readers to their own exploits. Within the American community, the term *Beat* meant to 'demolish' or 'destroy', and so they defined themselves as a limited collective. Despite that, the creators of this way of life assert that the idea of this name was to express everything contrary to what their expression represented. Said expression disappeared in the 1960s, with the arrival of the *hippie* collective.

The movie is categorized in the *road movie* genre, and is unique in its footage with this type of narration, the rebellious aspect, which requires the protagonists' confrontation of an unknown path. For this reason, the genre emerged at the end of the second world war, when having one's own vehicle represented the start of maturity and economic stability in adult life.

In this particular case, numerous trips were used, which present us with scenes in which the culture is completely different, documenting the story that finally became a book. The road music is the humming of the main and secondary characters that, in their monotony, immerse themselves eastern culture and sing a song that, at the end, everyone sings.

To conclude this analysis, it must be noted that the movie is difficult to follow, as one must be familiar with American cultural history from the *Beat* generation, in order to understand the plot. Many of the characters' conversations are incomprehensible without knowledge of the references to books of the time, which makes structuring the narration a demanding task.

On many occasions, the goal of the protagonists, who perhaps should not have played the structure of the story, is unclear. After having watched the movie, however, it may be concluded that the journeys have no particular motive, and that their meaning is to be found in the wandering itself.

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