

# Like a reel of celluloid, the road stretches on and on

Tinseltown long has taken dramatic license with the classic combination of cars and journeys of self-discovery

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Last winter, a near-stranger recommended I watch “Paris, Texas,” the 1984 Wim Wenders film about Travis Henderson, who mysteriously wanders out of the desert and finds himself reconnecting with family on two drives through the Southwest. We had been discussing one of my favorite topics: road trips. I never saw the man again, but I watched the movie and found myself spellbound by the big sky, open road and uncomfortably long silences. I know this stretch of road, I thought; the silence feels familiar. I itched to get in the car and go.

It was two months before I drove with my beagle from Washington to California to visit my 96-year-old grandmother, one of several epic cross-country trips I’ve made in the last decade. But the film stuck with me. I thought about long drives, inspiring landscapes and chance encounters, and I realized that many of my favorite movies featured road trips.

This winter, homebound with writing deadlines, I devoured road films — more than 30 of them. I watched “Paris, Texas” again. This time, undistracted by the road, I turned my focus to the narrative and the characters. At the end, I wept.

Somewhere during my road-movie binge, I realized that — apart from the simple pleasure of watching great films — the on-screen dramas enhanced my own relationship with the open road. I saw parts of myself in some of the characters. The pictures kindled my enthusiasm and whet my appetite for the next journey. In a way, they reinforced my wanderlust.

To find out what makes a good road-trip movie, I talked to Leo Brundy, a cultural historian at the University of Southern California. He pointed out that the roots of the genre go back to classical literature such as “The Odyssey” and “Don Quixote.”

Characters are on a quest for something or someone and what happens, he said, is that they discover themselves along the way. “The idea of a road trip is to expand your consciousness,” Brundy said. “The road picture is like that — going from place to place, meeting all sorts of people. It’s a cliché, but it’s true — it’s about the journey, not the destination.”

The movies I watched spanned more than 80 years, starting with “Wild Boys of the Road” (1933), a Depression-era film about two kids who leave their families and bum their way across the country to find work. Next came “The Grapes of Wrath” (1940), in which Henry Fonda plays Steinbeck’s Tom Joad, forced out of his Midwest home and taking his family to California.

These early films explored westward movement with a sense of adventure we can only imagine today. What hasn’t changed is the expansiveness of our country and the universal desire to explore it.

The 1960s and ’70s generated many road classics. “Easy Rider” captured the spirit of American culture in the late ’60s as two doped-out bikers rode their choppers from California to New Orleans with a wad of drug money. Francis Ford Coppola’s “The Rain People” (1969) brought us another searcher representative of the changing times — a Long Island housewife who finds out she’s pregnant, feels trapped, panics about matrimony and motherhood, and heads west. Wenders’s low-budget ’70s road trip trilogy includes “Alice in the Cities,” “The Wrong Move” and “Kings of the Road,” which thoughtfully portray three wanderers, all played by the same actor, on the road in the United States and postwar Germany.

“Thelma & Louise” (1991), about a girl getaway gone bad, may be the quintessential road film. What better illustrates freedom than Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis in a 1966 Thunderbird convertible, singing at the top of their lungs, hair blowing in the wind? “You said you and me was goin’ to get outta town and for once just really let our hair down,” Thelma tells Louise early in the movie. “Well darlin’ look out, cuz my hair is comin’ down.”

These days, road movies are a less prominent part of our cul-



ENTERTAINMENT PICTURES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



AF ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



MERIE W. WALLACE/FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Geena Davis, left, and Susan Sarandon, as the eponymous “Thelma & Louise,” choose a decidedly final end to their road trip; on a trek through California’s Santa Ynez Valley, Paul Giamatti, left, tries to help Thomas Haden Church get the hang of wine snobbery in “Sideways”; Peter Fonda, center, ferries Jack Nicholson while Dennis Hopper rides alongside in “Easy Rider” on their way to road-trip doom; Dean Stockwell and Harry Dean Stanton walk the rails in “Paris, Texas.”**

ture, Bundy said, noting that bucket lists and heavily programmed travel have killed the opportunity for spontaneity and discovery. Mobile phones, digital mapping and interstate highways yield a different kind of trip. Route 66 is romantic; I-40, not so much.

## Stranger days

On the road, we take risks that we would never consider at home. A few years back in Texas, I traveled for a short time with a semi-stranger, an Australian man I had met the previous year riding Metro. We shared a few motel rooms, and at first, I snuck my wallet and phone into the bathroom when I showered. Perhaps I was remembering the “Thelma & Louise” scene in which a drifter steals the pair’s money from a motel nightstand.

Turns out, the Aussie was trustworthy. And fun. A laugh over dinner one night remains one of the best of my life. But it doesn’t always turn out that way. “Kalifornia” (1993), in which someone in the back seat is a serial killer, reminds us what can happen if we don’t carefully vet our passengers.

As for those brushes with the law that so often crop up in the movies, mine came in Texas several years ago; an off-duty cop gave me his pocketknife for protection and later taught me to two-step. Hollywood’s cops are less benign. Of course the characters are, too. They steal cars, groceries, drugs and corpses, kidnap police officers and kill folks at Piggly Wiggly’s.

“Alice in the Cities” tells the delightful and charming story of a German journalist who tours the United States and meets a woman who asks him to chaperone her 9-year-old daughter back



ASSOCIATED PRESS

to Europe. I haven’t been surprisingly saddled with anyone’s children on the road, but I have found myself drawn into other people’s lives in ways I wouldn’t have chosen. In Portland, Ore., I once helped a photographer lift heavy furniture onto a dolly and maneuver it into the freight elevator — a backbreaking task I

cause Ray is afraid to board a plane to California. As an adult, I’ve never road-tripped with my family, but I’m considering a drive with my father this spring. I wonder if he still drums the steering wheel to country music as he did when I was a kid, or if I’ll have more patience for it now. My sister and I would fight

*The pictures kindled my enthusiasm and whet my appetite for the next journey. In a way, they justified my wanderlust.*

could have done without. But I enjoyed his company, and he needed a hand; we happened to meet the week he was moving out of his studio.

Sometimes, the stranger is a family member. In “Rain Man” (1988), Charlie Babbitt (Tom Cruise) gets to know his autistic savant brother Ray (Dustin Hoffman) after picking him up from a mental institution in Ohio. The road trip takes place only be-

in the back seat, and more than once my dad slammed on the brakes and pulled over to the shoulder, steaming.

But what’s a road trip without someone getting huffy?

Stopping to visit friends and family along the way is a common theme on the road. Paul Giamatti’s character makes an obligatory visit to his mother on a wine country tour in “Sideways” (2004), and college bud-

dies crash at the home of a friend’s grandparents in “Road Trip” (2000). “Nebraska” (2013) is the story of a man driving his alcoholic father, played by Bruce Dern, to collect a nonexistent million-dollar prize. It’s a gorgeous black-and-white film; panoramic shots of the pair driving along empty roads look like a Subaru moving across an Ansel Adams photograph. The deadpan living-room scene at the uncle’s house is among the most memorable of film family visits.

## Eating and running

We love the road because it’s nothing like home. Yet we still seek the comfort of shelter and food. Diners are the surrogate kitchen tables, where we fuel up, hold family meetings, set the agenda and recap the day.

In “The Motorcycle Diaries” (2004), a film with stunning scenery and a musical score to match, a young Che Guevara (Gael García Bernal) and his friend spread maps on a cafe table to plan their motorcycle expedition through Patagonia. Generally, road-trip food isn’t anything to write home about. Unless that’s your job, like Steve Coogan, who drives through the British and Italian countryside with Rob Bryden, the men dining finely and amusing themselves with hilarious imitations and one-night romances in “The Trip” (2010) and “The Trip to Italy” (2014).

We also can’t help connecting with home, even as we speed away from it. In “Transamerica” (2005), Felicity Huffman is driving cross-country with a teenage boy she just met and calls to check on her pending gender reassignment surgery. In “Carol” (2015), a road movie filled with long silences and seductive cigarette drags, Cate Blanchett (Car-

ol) calls home for news of her contentious custody battle.

Watching old films, I longed for the days of pay phones. During my binge, I counted a number of notable phone booth scenes. Recurring themes: men learning over the phone that their business or big idea has gone bust; and women calling home to cut ties with their men, sometimes on answering machines. At the beginning of “The Rain People,” Natalie makes a collect call to her husband from the Pennsylvania Turnpike, saying she has to get away. “Why didn’t you talk to me? I would have gone with you,” he says.

She replies: “I didn’t want to go away with you. I wanted to get away from you.”

## Size matters

A good rule of thumb in road films: The larger the vehicle, the greater the focus on what goes on inside it. If the vehicle is small, the lens is focused largely on the outside world. In both “American Honey,” Andrea Arnold’s 2016 film about misfit teens selling magazine subscriptions across the country and “Get on the Bus,” Spike Lee’s 1996 offering about a group of Los Angeles men busing to the Million Man March in Washington, the focus is on the inside. Compare that with “Easy Rider.” In that film, Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda’s characters are on the smallest of vehicles, and the scenery plays a starring role. Snow-capped peaks dot the horizon, and the sun sets behind them — the sky turns the color of pink lemonade, then blueberries.

Arguably, my road trips would make dull movies. They haven’t ended violently or tragically; at worst, I nearly run out of gas in the middle of Wyoming or end the trip feeling melancholy. But nowhere do I feel more fully myself than when I’m on a road adventure, and I’ve found the same to be true for many of the characters I’ve met this winter. Breathtaking beauty, human connection and the freedom to detour as one wishes makes a potent concoction — and a ready-made formula for Hollywood.

A dozen road movies remain in my queue, unwatched. But for now, I bid a fond farewell to film. My compass is set to the west. Road-trip season is nearly upon us.

[travel@washpost.com](mailto:travel@washpost.com)

Kaplan is a freelance writer based in the District. Her website is [melaniedgkaplan.com](http://melaniedgkaplan.com).

For a closer look at the author’s favorite road movies, visit [washingtonpost.com/travel](http://washingtonpost.com/travel)