

Review:

Neil Archer *The French Road Movie: Space, Mobility, Identity*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2012

Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt (eds.), *Open Road, Closed Borders: The Contemporary French-Language Road Movie*, Bristol: Intellect, 2013.

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*The French Road Movie* and the edited collection *Open Road, Closed Borders* both focus on what has been left out of previous literature on the road movie genre, namely French-language (mainly European) road movies. A lot of scholars before them have relegated European road movies to the last chapter of their work, as if only branching out from the ‘original’ American genre (see Cohan and Hark 1997; Laderman 2002). In a similar way, the gendering of the road movie has often been mentioned but rarely challenged (see Corrigan 1991; Orgeron 2008; Pérez 2011). Conversely, the two books reviewed here seem to follow Wendy Everett’s lead as she asserts that ‘European journeys specifically engage with the lack of space and the predominance of borders’ (Everett 2009: 167). They firmly place the genre within a European context, a context of mixed roots, open and closed borders, and existential and emotional quests for both genders.

While *Open Road, Closed Borders* takes a political stance reflecting on France’s centrality in Europe, Neil Archer deals more with the aesthetics of the genre. Archer states from the beginning his will historically to contextualise the French road movie, yet he unfortunately neglects to thoroughly question the ‘French national borders’ (Archer 2012: 7) that he uses to limit the scope of his research. Archer covers large ground surrounding the road movie; utopia, freedom, home, gender and transformation form the key themes of *The French Road Movie*. The author places the road movie as a genre in-between, ‘limit-testing,’ a ‘space for contestation’ (Archer 2012: 35) representing protagonists and (national) spaces in process, sometimes in a utopian process whereby French road movies distinguish themselves from their more authenticity-aspiring American counterparts. He especially puts emphasis on the *autopian* space that the genre creates. Although Archer’s use of the term ‘autopia’ is unclear, his first chapter nonetheless manages to situate the car as a moving cinematic space, a site for utopia.

It is not surprising, then, if the protagonists of *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond* (Agnès Varda, France, 1985) and in *Aux yeux du monde/Autobus* (Eric Rochant, France, 1991) are deprived of a car, and thus of a utopian space. Illustrating the economic deprivation of the post-1968 generation, marginality in these two films manifests as the characters' refusal or inability to settle down (Archer 2012: 43). This leads Archer to consider the notion of home as the next logical stage in his journey through the road movie. In his analysis of *Drôle de Félix/The Adventures of Felix* (Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, France, 2000), the author describes France as a passage rather than a destination. As he concludes that 'home is no place' (Archer 2012: 88), Archer stresses that, on their way to identity and identification, protagonists and viewers alike need to keep moving.

Since the road movie has the 'ability [...] to articulate shifting concerns' (Everett 2009: 173), Archer suggests that home and masculinity have ceased to exist as stable constructs in the French road genre (and in the European one, Everett would argue). Male protagonists Nino (Sacha Bourdo) and Paco (Sergi López) in *Western* (Manuel Poirier, France, 1997) are thus left wandering without opportunity to find the relief that journeys away from home once promised (Archer 2012: 105-107). In *Open Roads, Closed Borders*, Thibaut Schilt goes further in this interpretation as he reveals the film's idea that, in opposition to the road movie genre, 'practical, sedentary conformity should be preferred over escapist, nomadic rebellion' (Schilt 2013: 63). On the one hand, Archer describes the protagonists as 'false immigrants' (Archer 2012: 110) who embody displaced masculinities and a notion of 'home' in-between mobility and a desire for community. On the other hand, and in a more political reading, Schilt asserts that the protagonists illustrate France's cultural diversity in a utopian 'micro-version of an idealized European Union' (Hélène Sicard-Cowan as cited in Gott and Schilt, 2013: 64). Instead of standing in the centre of a stable Europe, France here appears on the circumference and mirrors a displaced idea of 'home' emblematic of the European road movie.

Following on his idea that gender in the road movie does not remain unquestioned, Archer argues that *Vendredi Soir/Friday Night* (Claire Denis, France, 2002) and *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse/The Gleaners and I* (Agnès Varda, France, 2000) open in-between spaces for their female protagonists. While these spaces seem to allude to potential reconfigurations of gender within the genre, they remain underexplored. The author drifts into abundant theoretical considerations, ending the chapter with a hasty conclusion that the road movie 'may already be feminine' (Archer 2012: 144), without much explanation. Just as road movies create filmic 'sites of productive encounters' (Archer 2012: 154), Archer's ambitious opus itself creates a rich site for dialogue between thoughts on the generic form (by Michael Atkinson, Devin Orgeron, Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli, Carrie Tarr and Martine Beugnet, among others) and on space, film and

identity (such as by Michael O'Shaughnessy, Richard Dyer, Hamid Naficy, Phil Powrie, Kaja Silverman, Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson). Throughout, Archer keeps the reader moving fast through theory and sometimes too-short filmic analyses, which paradoxically intermittently causes us to get lost on the road.

In his last chapter and afterword, Archer insists on the road movie's potential for transformation, not only conditioned by the margins but also emerging from a French (maybe transnational) centre. To his last question 'what "French cinema" actually connotes' (Archer 2012: 170), Archer answers with an analysis of *Welcome* (Philippe Lioret, France, 2009), which he qualifies as a 'national' product that provides nonetheless 'a challenge to orthodoxy and hegemony' (Archer 2012: 172). As if brilliantly to prove to us again that Archer's work was part of a bigger and continuous debate, *Welcome* is one of the films chosen by Laura Rascaroli to open the collections of essays *Open Roads, Closed Borders*. Whereas Archer locates France in the centre of Europe, however, for Rascaroli France manifests as a 'borderland' (Rascaroli 2013: 24). As we will see, Rascaroli's position reflects the whole collection's continual questioning of France's centrality within Europe.

The three films Rascaroli analyses *Welcome*, *Loin/Far* (André Téchiné, France, 2001) and *Depuis qu'Otar est parti.../Since Otar Left* (Julie Bertucelli, France/Belgium/Georgia, 2003) have in common protagonists on the 'eve of a journey' that never starts or that is born to end up in stasis and circularity. With a flowing prose, the author examines the hindered relations between Western Europe and the countries on its South and Eastern borders. Through *La Fille de Keltoum/Daughter of Keltoum* (Mehdi Charef, France/Belgium/Tunisia, 2001), Darren Waldron also explores the cultural confusion of the protagonist who situates herself in between Algeria and French-speaking Europe. In response to the misogynist portrayal of rural Algeria, Waldron deplors the film's lack of a local female rebel to defy patriarchy (Waldron 2013: 85). Rather than relieving tensions, the road takes on the image of a purgatory in both Rascaroli's and Waldron's essays, questioning by such means the possible opening of Europe and its actual potential for transnationalism.

The road movie seems to emerge from the collection as what David Laderman calls 'a crucial vehicle for reevaluating French cultural identity' (Laderman 2013: 175) as well as, it seems, for reevaluating the controversial newly unified Europe. As Laderman goes back to Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli's *Crossing New Europe* (2006) to reassert the tendency of the European genre to develop 'spiritual and emotional quests regarding national identity' (Laderman 2013: 176). In a similar way, Glen W. Norton in a previous chapter explores the existential quest and the 'moral perfectionism' (Stanley Cavell's concept) of Benoît Jacquot's road movies (Norton 2013: 108). Here, instead of placing Jacquot's female protagonists'

on alternative roads like many scholars would, Norton sublimely grounds them in the diasporic tendency of the European road movie in which ‘home’ is only transitory and ‘ways of being’ (Norton 2013: 116, original emphasis) are to be explored by both genders.

As editor Michael Gott asserts, the trend of the collection of essays *Open Roads, Closed Borders* is to examine ‘a new style of European road film’ (Gott 2013: 139). Gott points to the ‘contradictory impulses’ between the open borders policy of Europe and a contentious notion of ‘French national identity’ (Gott 2013: 139). Sylvie Blum-Reid powerfully concludes the book with a thought that travelled with us all along the reading of both *Open Roads, Closed Borders* and *The French Road Movie*: home is a mobile construct escaping boundaries, which ‘might [perhaps] be found anywhere’ (Blum-Reid 2013: 216). Where Archer finishes with transnational aspects of the road movie, the collection starts with the articulation and deep questioning of an already transnational French-language cinema. As these two insightful works show, I want to conclude by echoing Tim Corrigan, who says that the road movie has already taken other roads.<sup>1</sup>

### **Endnote**

Various contributors to Gott and Schilt (2013) are not discussed here, including Florian Grandena, Ewa Mazierska, Joseph McGonagle, Martin O’Shaughnessy, Michelle Royer and Miriam Thompson.

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