

Elements of a “Road Film”

The road movie has been a staple of American films from the very start, and have ranged in genres from westerns, comedies, gangster/crime films, and action-adventure.

But the things road movies have in common include:

- An *episodic* journey or quest
- An open road or undiscovered trail.
- In each leg of the journey, there is a challenge to be met, although not all of them will be met successfully.
- In each leg of the journey, a piece of the plot is revealed, or knowledge learned, or allies are gained.
- A search for escape, or
- A quest for some kind of goal – either a distinct destination or the attainment of love, freedom, mobility, redemption, the finding or rediscovering of oneself, or a coming-of-age.

The road is a testing ground for the main characters -- These people on the road often have courage and determination they never knew they had, and the road movie proves it to them.

The genre deals with themes of:

- breaking from tradition and normality,
- embracing change,
- escapism – from the constraints of society or otherwise, and most obviously:
- freedom.

One important, conventional filmmaking technique in the road movie is the *use of mobile cameras*; shots of the vehicle as it moves along the road, as well as shots from the point of view of the driver, making the viewer feel part of the journey being undertaken. These techniques enhance the *idea of mobility*. This series of shots is also known as the *dynamic montage sequence*, used to convey the passing of time and therefore length of the journey, as well as the thrill of driving.

Cars or motorbikes are the most common form of transport within a road movie, and as well as the aforementioned conventional landscape shot, empty roads, border-crossings, motels and gas stations frequently appear. Also typical are shots of wing-mirrors and side windows, as well as shots from a camera placed somewhere on the vehicle, so that features of it are prominent at close range to the viewer.

The Online Resources for Media and Society (4th edition, chapter 15) describes the movement within road movies as a car chase which extends to a whole film; making it constantly exciting, but always alluding to the **“American representations of space: the way to deal with or solve problems is to move.”**

Road movies traditionally end in one of five ways:

- Having met with triumph at their ultimate destination, the protagonist(s) return home, wiser for their experiences.
- At the end of the journey, the protagonist(s) find a new home at their destination.
- The journey continues endlessly.
- Having realized that as a result of their journey they can never go home, the protagonists either choose death or are killed.
- The film ends without any implication of further jaunt.