Nomads of the Technical Sublime

Peter Krapp

Abstract

The Recreational Vehicle – emblem of the highway and of the outback, of affordable home-steading as well as unfettered exploration, of connection or escape. Motorhomes play an interesting role in the movies, and their history parallels the history of cinema. These homes on wheels allow projections of desires and distractions, exemplifying the affinity of tourism and cinema as mass phenomena of distraction, and illustrating the technological sublime of contemporary landscapes.

Keywords


To have a feeling for landscape, you have to lose your feeling of place.

Jean-François Lyotard

Why is the Recreational Vehicle (RV) so telegenic? Just what is it that makes motor homes so different, so appealing? Is there more to it than the paradoxical promise of leaving traffic behind by hitting the road? A dozen years ago, a group of Orange County, CA college graduates decided to hit the road in an old run-down 1972 Winnebago to figure out what they wanted to do with their lives. As they travelled around the country from Laguna Beach to Chicago and from Maine and Vermont to San Francisco, they interviewed people from all walks of life about their passion. Three months and 17,000 miles later, they decided to turn their 84 interviews into a documentary, The Open Road (2001). Their concept hit a nerve, and was soon turned into a public television series called Roadtrip Nation (2004–2010); each season the producers recruited a new group of curious graduates to board the green RV with fresh questions.1

---

One of the main reasons new protagonists flocked so readily to this reality TV show was that the RV had become associated both with film and television production on set and with iconic American exploration over the post-WW2 decades. In Nicholas Ray’s 1952 Western *Lusty Men*, Robert Mitchum stars as a rodeo bum, but arguably the plot revolves just as much around a lowly mobile home. Major cable television hits like *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) are likewise trafficking in the archetypes of the RV as an emblem of the open road and of the outback, of affordable independence and home-steading but also of unfettered exploration, of connectedness and techno-libertarian escape alike. In short, motorhomes play an interesting role in the movies, and the history of the recreational vehicle in many ways parallels the history of cinema. By the same token, these rolling living rooms, beds on wheels, and uprooted houses allow projections of desires and distractions onto the screen of mobile media that can exemplify, or transcend, certain modes of visual reception: as both an escape from, and return to, the strictures of screen media, the psychology of the film viewer, and the technological sublime of contemporary landscapes.

*Tracking Shot*. It is one of the less closely observed cinematic conventions that the plot gives way to landscape, as Giuliana Bruno demonstrates in the early history and prehistory of film (Bruno 2002, 75). Her media archeology of ‘site-seeing’ since the arrival of the Lumières’ train 110 years ago tracks the rise of early cinema out of the tourist arena, when moving images thematized travel, transportation, motion (Musser 1991; cf. Musser 1990). Among panoramas and world expositions, between colonial photography and postcards, cinema inherited the legacy of motion studies, dioramas, and magic lanterns (Schivelbusch 1983). Just as Walter Benjamin considers passages cities in miniature, dioramas open up to the world; film studies amply document what the camera does to the spaces of modernity (Dimendberg 2005). But the affinity of tourism and cinema goes further: as mass phenomena of distraction, they open onto a horizon of experience that emphasizes spectacle and entertainment based on temporary movement in space, constituted in, before, and through landscapes that are related to yet different from the everyday. In either case, cross-overs and cultural encounters offer the manifold juxtaposition of known and unknown, the extraordinary and the ordinary. As Bruno (2002, 84) writes:

Mobilizing its encompassing embrace, film has absorbed the touristic drive to ascend to take in the larger ‘scape’ as well as the desire to dive down to ground level and explore private dwellings. In such a way – that is, by incorporating a multiplicity of viewpoints – cinema has reinvented the traveler’s charting of space.