

THE END OF THE ROAD?
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS OF AMERICA'S CAR CULTURE AND ITS
CINEMATIC REFLECTION AROUND THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Jack J. Valenti School
Of Communication
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Christina Jaenicke
December, 2011

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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary analysis of America's car culture is looking at the contemporary cinematic depiction of the former vehicle of freedom given the increasing dissatisfaction among society that found its public expression in this year's "Carmageddon". By combining media and cultural research, this study tried to find out if movies acknowledge the entrapping reality cultural theorists point out. Furthermore, a detailed content analysis was supposed to offer cinematic indicators how this exceptional automotive love affair might end. The analysis of *Falling Down* (1993), *Duets* (2000), and *Collateral* (2004) revealed cultural phenomena such as road rage, America's carscape causing sameness and dislocation, as well as isolation, passivity, and akinesia. The protagonists appear to realize the car's physical and psychological impact on their life and they start to abandon the entrapping vehicle – an inspiring observation given America's increasing efforts in terms of public and alternative transportation.

“In Houston, a person walking is somebody on his way to his car” (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 269).

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, the American met the automobile and fell in love. Unfortunately, . . . he did not live happily ever after. . . . [He] joyfully leaped upon her, and she responded to his caresses by bolting about the landscape. . . . demanding rubbings and shinings and gifts.

(Keats, 1958, pp. 11-13)



Figure 1: America, the vehicle of freedom, and its cinematic celebration: The beginning of an enchanting love affair.

1.1. Context of the Study

“America is a road epic” – with these few words, non-fiction writer John Jerome (1972) expressed best what various cultural theorists tried to describe over and over again (p. 103).¹ He captured the main phenomenon that influenced as well as defined America throughout the years, changing it physically and psychologically, and turning it into the nation it is today; the nation of ““stars and stripes”” and ““cars and highways”” (Becker, 1989, p. 26).

Jerome (1972) set the groundwork for cultural theorists like Jean Baudrillard (1988) who claimed that the best way to get to know the United States is by driving throughout the country instead of thumbing through books: “Drive ten thousand miles across America and you will know more about the country than all the institutes of sociology and political science put together” (pp. 54-55). At the same time, Jerome (1972) hinted at the “body of road art” that occurred in the wake of America’s adaption to the automobile enabling its unique success (p. 103). Already Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1955) pronounced through one of the main characters that “the road is life” (p. 199). In 1969, Peter Fonda sent his characters on the road in his groundbreaking movie *Easy Rider* to tell the story of “[a] man [who] went looking for America. And couldn’t find it anywhere” (Becker, 1989, p. 148).

Julian Smith (1983) called such interrelation “a lush triangle of love affairs”; America fell in love with both, movies and cars, while “Hollywood and Detroit fell in love with each other” (p. 182). Cars supplied filmmakers with a natural subject for romance, comedy, and adventure, while movies helped intensify the popular interest in

¹ Hence, he was quoted by: Dettelbach, 1976; Primeau, 1996; Sargeant & Watson, 1999; etc.

the automobile (*see fig. 1*). In accordance with cultural studies which determined historically rooted ideals of freedom and individuality as reasons for the car's unique success in America (Chinoy, 1955; Hey, 1983; Laski, 1999), movies mythologized the open road, and celebrated cowboys of the highway (Becker, 1989, p. 148; Martin-Jones, 2006, p. 137). Cars and movies rose to popularity together because "both reflected 'the love of motion and speed, the restless urge toward improvement and expansion, the kinetic energy of a young, vigorous nation'" (Hey, 1983, p. 193).

In addition to this cultural interconnection, Smith (1983) characterizes both as an option of "elopement," an assumption inspired by the first narrative film to depict a car: Biograph's *Runaway Match* (1903). Already the title offers a perfect metaphor for the fact that movies and motorcars seemed to be made for each other. Instead of representing a simple mode of transportation, "automobility has been consciously marketed and both consciously and subconsciously embraced by the American public as a form of emotional transport, the state or condition of being transported by ecstasy, of being enraptured." In this way, Hollywood as well as Detroit supplied America with "dream vehicles" offering escape from boredom and danger, and promising "better times and bigger adventures;" they transformed cars and movies into "transports of delight" (Smith, 1983, pp. 181-182).

Looking at contemporary cultural studies, such "delight" and "elopement" might not be very applicable anymore. Cathrine Lutz and Anne Lutz Fernandez (2010) indicate an increase of the hours Americans spend stuck in traffic, "accelerating the number of people who say they no longer enjoy driving" (p. 130). In contrast to the literary and commercial promises that "freedom is no farther away than the car keys" (Primeau, 1996, p. 79), and you "feel behind the wheel like a hero all over again" (Alvord, 2000, p. 47),

America's car culture turned into a self-imposed stasis (Virilio, 2008). On July 16th 2011, such entrapping feeling found its public expression in a media sensation, that KNX news radio dubbed "Carmageddon" – the ““mother of all traffic jams”” (Wilson, 2011). An unprecedented 53-hour shutdown of the 405 freeway for construction evoked “apocalyptic” fears among the public, encouraging L. A. transportation officials to “come out and warn the universe of this impending doom” (Wilson, 2011). The city survived the dreaded weekend, but it seems like Jerome’s (1972) road epic might have reached a “(dead) end.”

This so-called “jam of biblical proportions” brings to attention what cultural theorists have been increasingly observing throughout the last few years (Kandel, 2011). It publicly displays America’s dissatisfaction with the automobile and the culture created around it. It shows how the car developed from celebrated “American Dream on four wheels” to America’s own entrapment (Gudis, 2004, p. 5); the ““freedom machines”” turned into “metal demon[s]” and the open road appears to be an oxymoron² (Seiler, 2008, p. 125; Alvord, 2000, p. 18). This evokes the question how the medium, that once captured the liberating perception of the automobile in its beginning, treats this declining love affair today. Do contemporary movies hold on to nostalgic depictions of the vehicle of freedom to keep the epic dream alive or do they reflect the findings of cultural theorists and portray the entrapping reality?

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to expand research of the automobile’s portrayal in American popular culture by focusing on its cinematic depiction around the turn of the

² “The ‘freeway’ is as much an oxymoron as the ‘expressway’ at rush hour” (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 118).

century. Previous literary studies showed that throughout the years the “automobile-linked dream” Jerome (1972) mentioned has developed an “attendant nightmare” (Dettelbach, 1976, pp. 4-5). In accordance with cultural studies, Casey’s (1997) analysis of *Textual Vehicles* displayed the car’s downfall from “central romantic figure” to “polluter and murderer” culminating in a decade of “ambiguity and complexity, nostalgia and bad feeling” (pp. 7-8). Various cinematic studies showed similar findings while focusing on the specific genre of *Road Movies* and its narrative structures, themes, and characters (Cohan & Hark, 1997; Sargeant & Watson, 1999; Grob & Klein, 2006). The goal of this study is to help fill that void in research of contemporary popular culture in relation to societal changes. More specifically, by focusing on the cinematic reflection of America’s car culture, it addresses a new area that might be particularly interesting considering the interconnected history of cars and film. According to Hammer and Kellner’s *Media/Cultural Studies* (2009), such media analysis will help to “gain insight and knowledge about the contemporary world” and thereby possibly indicate if Americans are ready to give up their beloved vehicle of freedom as cultural critics suggest (p. xxxv-xxxvi).

1.3. Preview

This paper presents a literature review about cultural studies addressing the unique love-affair of America and the automobile, its celebration as well as recent criticism in American popular culture, and the media’s ability to reflect societal changes and thereby possibly offer an insight on contemporary feelings towards the former freedom machines. Research Questions guiding data collection and analysis will then be posed. The proposed methods for conducting this study will be addressed, including the

data gathering methodology as well as the strategies for movie selection and analysis. Results will then be presented based on how the data help answer the Research Questions, followed by a discussion of how the results connect with previous research findings. Finally, limitations of the study will be considered as well as areas for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Literature Overview

Several topics in the relevant literature will inform this study and guide it in developing Research Questions. First, the area of cultural studies provides the general background information about American car culture. It addresses the unique emergence and adaption of the automobile in the United States, its societal impact as well as its historical roots of success. Particularly, its contradictory development from freedom machine to entrapping vehicle provides the basis for this analysis trying to find out if movies, the medium that rose to popularity with the automobile, starts to reflect how the promise of independence and individuality turned around on drivers. Secondly, studies of popular culture and their depiction of the “American Dream on four wheels” represent the groundwork for this analysis by looking at literary portrayals of the automobile up until the 1990s (Gudis, 2004, p. 5). The findings show parallels to cinematic depictions of the car throughout the years, the third area of research this study is based on. A closer look at the function of the automobile in movies – ranging from getaway car and car of chance in its beginning, to a major social problem causing pollution and immediate death in the last decades – reveals the declining satisfaction with the car as cultural theorists point out, and presages the end of an incomparable love affair. Finally, media studies, and specifically media/cultural studies, represent the last field of literature guiding this analysis and reconfirm the interdisciplinary approach this study is aiming for. It allows the application of cultural studies to media products, and vice versa, to get a better

understanding of society and its perception and feelings towards certain phenomena – like the automobile, America's national icon.

2.2. America and the Automobile – Cultural Studies

America embraced the automobile like no other country and made it an internal part of its culture, wherefore cultural theorists suggest that it should consider replacing the eagle with the automobile as national symbol since it turned into ““the land of pistons and the home of horse power”” (Becker, 1989, p. 9). The car has had such an enormous impact on American culture that it changed its physical appearance. By creating “congested ‘carburbs’” and covering the nation with asphalt, America turned its landscape into a “carscape”, where pedestrians became “*eine Abnormalität, ein Atavismus, artfremd*” ’an abnormality, an atavism, foreign to the species’ (Holtz Kay 1998, p. 2; Mühlen, 1977, p. 41). It changed the whole mindset of Americans as well as their idea of identity which is embodied by their driver’s license, the actual mark of identity in America (Clarke, 2007, p. 167). This psychological impact culminated in the current credo of American existence: “I drive therefore I am” (Clarke, 2007, p. 9; Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 358), a modification that rationalist Descartes would probably not have appreciated, but at the same time, seems to provide the basis for various cultural theorists that are convinced that *On the Road* is where America can be found (Jerome, 1972; Becker, 1989; Baudrillard, 1988; Holtz Kay, 1998; etc.).

When critics try to understand why the automobile had such an exceptional impact on the United States defining their culture up until today, they usually refer to a historically rooted sense of individuality and freedom. Cultural theorist Harold J. Laski (1999) highlights three important facts about American history that paved the way for the

immediate cultural adaption of the automobile. First of all, the American war of independence. It broke the domination of feudalism and established a civil republic where the mass of the people claimed their participation in political decisions and power right from the start. Secondly, American democracy as fundamental basis of life of this nation seems to explain the acceptance of their principle of equality of all citizens. The third reason represents the easiest and at the same time the most important one, according to Laski. He refers to the individualism Toqueville encountered; a feeling of freedom derived from the knowledge that the right of a citizen to move forward has no limits. Laski (1999) assumes that such feeling of freedom gave them hope, energy and the belief in endless horizons which is characteristic for the ability to adapt to continuously changing conditions (pp. 137-139). In short, Americans believe in the freedom to go where they want to whenever they want to. This hope seemed to find its fulfillment in the automobile, the archetype of such freedom and individuality. It was celebrated as “American Dream on four wheels” and turned into the internal part of American lifestyle and culture; a car-dependent culture that reached the opposite of what they were longing for (Gudis, 2004, p. 5).

As contemporary observations already indicated, the automobile could not maintain such promise of complete freedom and the initially unconditional love started to fade. By analyzing the complex changing relationship between automobility and American culture, historian James J. Flink (1972) identified three stages of American “automobile consciousness” (p. 451). The first stage ranged from the introduction of the automobile to the opening of the Ford Highland Park plant in 1910. It was characterized “by the rapid development of an attitudinal and institutional context that made the

domination of the American civilization by the automobile inevitable.” This stage was followed by “mass idolization of the motorcar and a mass accommodation to automobility that transformed American institutions and lifeways.” Finally, by the late 1950s it increasingly was perceived as a major social problem after realizing that “automobility was no longer an historically progressive force for change in American civilization” (pp. 451-452). The automobile did not turn out to be the perfect match that Americans decided to spend their lives with, or as John Keats (1958) put it:

Once upon a time, the American met the automobile and fell in love.

Unfortunately, . . . he did not live happily ever after. . . . [He] joyfully leaped upon her, and she responded to his caresses by bolting about the landscape. . . .

Quickly the automobile became a nagging wife, demanding rubbings and shinings and gifts. . . . She grew sow-fat . . . and the fatter she grew, the greater her demands (Keats, 1958, pp. 11-13).

In accordance with Flink’s (1972) findings, Keats (1958) already perfectly captured America’s changing relationship to the automobile. Furthermore, his metaphorical romance provided the ground for various studies of popular culture that started to observe the increasing dissatisfaction with the former vehicle of freedom and individuality in “road art” (Jerome, 1972; Dettelbach, 1976; Becker, 1989; Casey, 1997).

2.3. Popular Culture and the Automobile – Literary Studies

Studies of American popular culture in relation to cars show that throughout the years the “automobile-linked dream” Jerome (1972) mentioned, has developed an “attendant nightmare”, as for instance Cynthia G. Dettelbach (1976) claims in her study of America’s “road art” (p. 4). She defines the automobile as a “major phenomenon in

American culture” as well. Her analysis addresses the “car’s role in the larger dream/nightmare patterns dominating American life and thought” and its display in popular culture (pp. 4-5). It provides the basis for the assumption that movies, which once celebrated the car as vehicle of freedom and individuality, might offer a quite different picture today confirming the increasing dissatisfaction presaged by Flink (1972) and Keats (1958).

Roger N. Casey’s (1997) study of *Textual Vehicles*, which uses Keats’ romance as framework, follows Flink’s findings and shows its reflection in literature. In accordance with Flink, Casey examines the “romance and marriage of the automobile and America” in literary works which feature “the automobile as a central romantic figure” in its beginnings. “The innocent romance did not last long” since authors began to use the automobile as “satirical embodiment of the conspicuous consumption of America’s growing bourgeoisie.” At first, it was depicted as a “plaything for the rich” – F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) might be the prime example – and later on as “liberator of the masses” providing the basis for the second stage. By the Thirties, mass idolization set in; the car became essential to most Americans, it changed the face of the rural, and turned into “an increasingly complex signifier in American fiction. . . . the center of an intricate relationship of attraction and repulsion.” After World War II, the idolization of the automobile continued in terms of style as well as its “mythic prominence,” represented by “Jack Kerouac’s cultic *On the Road*” (1955) as mentioned earlier (Casey, 1997, pp. 7-8). Confirming Flink’s (1972) cultural findings anew, Casey’s analysis points out the “car’s mid-life crisis” as depicted in literary works with escape as central concern in the third stage. Moreover, “[t]he social revolutions of the Sixties and

Seventies continued to deflate the image of the great wheeled god, replacing it with an image of car as polluter and murderer – both a gradual destroyer of the environment and an instantaneous destroyer of lives.” The petroleum crisis of the early 1970s added to this negative representation since it “brought American automotive giants to their knees as Americans literally ran out of gas” (Casey, 1997, p. 8).

Hence, Casey’s analysis proves how popular culture – in his case literature – reflects the findings of cultural studies showing the decline of America’s satisfaction with the vehicle that defines its culture and became its national symbol.

2.4. Movies and the Automobile – Cinematic Studies

Taking a closer look at the car’s cinematic portrayal throughout the years reveals quite striking similarities. The very “first celluloid images of the automobile” that Smith (1983) came across in his study of American film between 1900 and 1920 were documentary records and trick films depicting “how the first generation of motorists looked upon its vehicles and upon the notion of automobility” (pp. 179-180). Movies like Edison’s *Automobile Parade* (1905) captured the introduction of the automobile and the “impact of the machine upon mass culture” reflecting Flink’s first stage of automobile consciousness (Thoms, Holden, & Claydon, 1998, p. 84). Early American cameramen merely recorded “reality” and documented “the large number of motor cars to be seen in American streets, fields, and mountainsides” as in Biograph’s *Automobiling Among the Clouds* (1904), or *New York Athletic Club Games, Travers Island* (Smith, 1983, pp. 180 181). While celebrating this technological phenomenon with documentaries slowly panning over parking areas or car parades, such form of rather passive display evoked the early impression of an “uncomfortable truth about automobiles (that they were primarily

the toys of the rich)" as Casey's analysis encountered in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) later on (Smith, 1983, p. 181).

The cinematic development towards narrative films held off such early negative implications and turned the car into the "central romantic figure" that literary studies indicated (Casey, 1997, p. 7). *Runaway Match* (Collins, 1903), the first true narrative film, introduced the car as option of elopement and established the central themes for its cinematic depiction: "the motorist as rebellious romantic hero, the chase, and the use of the car to both precipitate and resolve conflicts" (Smith, 1983, pp. 181-182). Biograph's *Lifting the Lid* (1905) and *Boarding School Girls* (1905) offered elopement for recreational reasons by "transport[ing] characters – and the audience – into new realms" which was quite common for movies made before 1914. At the same time, other movies presented cars as "tools for seducers and criminals", emphasizing the car as potential weapon. Biograph's *The Gentlemen Highwaymen* (1905) was the first movie to provide criminals with the new transportation technology, a connection that carried on, whereby the victim often used "his little car as weapon to knock the villain down." This early confrontation suggested the car's "chief utility" as tool in "the Darwinian struggle to create the best possible gene pool" – filmmakers continuously employed the car "as a means for proving who was the better man" (Smith, 1983, pp. 182-184).

In contrast to earlier recreational and criminal uses, later movies such as Edison's *The Apple Tree Girl* (1917) and *Putting the Bee in Herbert* (1917) addressed "the utility of the automobile in bringing happiness and success" and thereby acknowledged the culture growing around the automobile and its association with status, success, and chances – the Darwinian struggle appeared to be moved to the professional area. *The*

Apple Tree Girl employed “one fancy roadster to show Neil’s youthful ambition” and another “more luxurious model to document his success”, while *Putting the Bee in Herbert* used two new cars to represent Herbert’s inspiration and reward (Smith, 1983, pp. 185-186). These movies introduced “Horatio Alger themes” – get rich, the car and get the girl – whereby the latter even ended with “a title card proclaiming ’THE ROAD TO HAPPINESS’” (Smith, 1983, p. 187). Later depictions went even further and introduced the “‘saved by an auto’ theme” depicting “automotive rescues” as in Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916). It dramatized a young woman’s attempt to save her husband from the fatal effects of civil intolerance by pleading with the governor and even racing against the hangman (Smith, 1983, p. 181). All this came together in the most common situation associated with cinematic depictions of the car in its beginning: “the ‘happy accident’”. It displayed crashes and other misadventures leading to any kind of happy ending: “rich motorists, stranded in the country, fall in love with beautiful girl; villains are punished in last minute crashes . . . ; inconvenient spouses die so true love can triumph” (Smith, 1983, p. 188). Thereby, the car turned into “an ultimately benevolent deus ex machina” creating a connection between automobile, “fate, justice, and divine will” (Smith, 1983, p. 190). This association was captured in movie titles like *Wheels of Justice* (1915) and *The Threads of Fate* (1915) strengthening the image of “the great wheeled god” (Casey, 1997, p. 8).

A significant change of automotive depictions could be felt towards the period of film noir, and especially after the Depression (Grob & Klein, 2006; Sargeant & Watson, 1999). The portrayals became darker in the 1930s and the initial criminal use of the automobile was revived in movies like *Little Ceasar* (1930), *I Am A Fugitive From a*

Chain Gang (1932), and *You Only Live Once* (1937). They celebrated the getaway car offering “escape from oppression”, and suggested that “road travel has the potential of revelation” (Laderman, 2002, p. 27). Especially *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) addressed “the facets of unemployment and severe economic instability” the Depression left behind leading to “a general sense of rootlessness” captured in movies “full of wandering and flight” (Laderman, 2002, p. 24). It reflects Casey’s and Flink’s findings dating the car’s mass idolization as liberator of the masses to the Thirties, whereby its cinematic version offered “horizontal movement to ameliorate the failings of social, vertical mobility” (Hey, 1983, p. 195). The automobile was used “to express a rebellious response to the social crisis of the Depression” – from the start, Tom Joad was depicted as “unjustly imprisoned by society” turning his journey into a “righteous rebellion against society’s rules” – a utility that was meant to dominate the following cinematic decades in varying ways (Laderman, 2002, pp. 24-28).

Movies such as *Detour* (1945), *Gun Crazy* (1949), *They Live by Night* (1949), and *The Wrong Man* (1956) picked up the notion of rebellion against society and life on the street by using the vehicle as expression of power and enforcement of individual freedom (Mills, 2006, p. 192). They featured couples willing to become “real people” while they do not belong to the world of criminals, neither do they fit into the society they oppose. In this way, such rebellious movies addressed the “malleability of postwar identity” by offering “mobility of identity”:

The road offered them a chance to reinvent their past or maximize their future, the opportunity to escape fates otherwise dictated by region, race, family, class, and

ideology. For these characters, the automobile, the motorcycle, and even the Greyhound bus served as vehicles of freedom (Mills, 2006, p. 19). “[E]scape, rebellion, renewal” became the major themes in cinematic depictions of the car that carried on into the Forties and Fifties, whereby a shift from spatial to rather psychological mobility and escape can be discovered (Mills, 2006, p. 36).

Bonnie and Clyde (1967) represent the first landmark movie indicating such shift. According to Grob and Klein (2006), it introduced a period where the automobile replaced the horse as symbol for the outlaw in the American West. Hence, *Bonnie and Clyde*'s depictions differ from earlier movies like *They Live by Night* and *Gun Crazy* by emphasizing the car not simply as vehicle to life on the streets, but as status symbol, attire, and even a toy one can have fun with – cars turn into an instrument of protection, aggression and ostentation (Grob & Klein, 2006, p. 76). It reflects Casey's (1997) findings of a continuing mass idolization that started to focus on style and “mythic prominence” (pp. 7-8). The automobile offered *Bonnie and Clyde* not only escape and status; it celebrated the open road and turned them into cowboys of the highway (Becker, 1989, p. 148; Martin-Jones, 2006, p. 137). Other significant examples might be *Easy Rider* (1969) and *American Graffiti* (Coppola & Kurtz, 1973). The latter can be considered a firework display of various car styles signifying the automobile as essential instrument in a teenager's life. *Easy Rider* on the other hand offers “modern day pastiches of two legendary and much distorted Western figures, the lawman Wyatt Earp and the outlaw killer Billy the Kid” by introducing the characters “Wyatt [who] wears a helmet with an American flag design” and Billy “in a pioneer suede fringed outfit”:

The message is clear, there are no heroes for late 1960s society to rely on, the great American heroes were not only dead, but mythical in the first place. The quest for identity, the escape of becoming someone else was not a viable option (Sargeant & Watson, 1999, p. 35).

In almost the same manner, *Bonnie and Clyde* have to face the fact that “[a]s the seductive sheen of mobility fades, life on the road wavers between two tonalities: freedom from futility, and the futility of freedom” (Laderman, 2002, p. 56).

This defeated tone – “where the road closes in on the protagonists” – provides the basis for movies in the early Seventies (Laderman, 2002, p. 92). Cinematically, it presages America’s realization that “automobility was no longer a historically progressive force for change” (Flink, 1972, pp. 451-452). Instead of leading to “freedom and exploration,” movies like *The Rain People* (1969), *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), *Vanishing Point* (1971), and *The Getaway* (1972) lead “nowhere in particular, sometimes in circles, invoking a forlorn mood of wandering” (Laderman, 2002, p. 92). The “sense of purpose, direction, and excitement” previous cinematic utilizations of the automobile supplied, got lost on the highway of the early 1970s. Laderman (2002) indicated that the cinematic rebellion against and critique of society turned into “a cynicism about being on the road” and a realization that roaming actually does not offer spatial nor psychological escape from society (p. 83). The former counterculture “is not driving anymore, but being driven” (Laderman, 2002, p. 92). *The Rain People* (1969) introduced Natalie Ravenna who became pregnant and wanted to exert control over her life by hitting the road without destination. *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) depicted Robert Dupea’s revolt against the daily grind leading him on a journey that ends where it started. And most dramatically,

Vanishing Point (1971) sent its protagonist Kowalski on a journey to face “his existential identity crisis” ending in a roadblock – his death (Laderman, 2002, p. 110). In accordance with cultural and literary studies, these increasingly negative cinematic depictions of the automobile started to reveal the liberating illusion that was built around the vehicle throughout the years. They reflect the disenchanted perception of the automobile that emerged with the petroleum crisis of the early 1970s bringing “automotive giants to their knees”, as Casey put it (1997, p. 8).

Looking back at *American Graffiti* (1973), besides celebrating the car in terms of style, it already hinted at its negative effects by letting one of his main characters die in a car accident introducing the third stage of automobile consciousness – the car as “polluter and murderer” (Casey, 1997, p. 8). Particularly, *Mad Max* (1979) offered a perfect metaphor of the petroleum crisis of the Seventies. It illustrated the breakdown of society where gangs vandalize property, steal fuel and terrorize the population in their “*Kampf um das schwarze Gold*” ‘battle for the black gold’ (Rauscher, 2006, p. 155). “The automobile has metamorphosed, from servant to master”, Flink (1987) claimed, a fact that Stephen King’s *Christine* (1983) embodied (p. 215). It tells the story of a supernaturally malevolent automobile and its effects on his driver who almost loses his girlfriend due to his car that drives around killing people to dominate the owner. In this way, the movie illustrates “*Frankensteins Monster als das Monster Detroits*” ‘Frankenstein’s monster as the monster of Detroit’ (Becker, 1989, p. 147). It shows the negative impact of the monster the U.S. created themselves by “foist[ing] terror and violence on naive drivers” (Laderman, 2002, p. 12). Thereby, it represents the perfect

reflection of Flink's cultural as well as Casey's literary study and their third stage ending in the realization of the car as major social problem.

Returning to Casey's (1997) findings, his analysis continues from this point by looking at the car's literary depiction in the present era. It reveals multifarious responses:

In the last decade of the century, Americans view the car with ambiguity and complexity, nostalgia and bad feeling, contemplating the difficult choice of reconciliation with the car or life without vehicles (p. 8).

His study of the contemporary condition indicates the contradiction that Americans still feel like they need the automobile, but at the same time start to become aware of "the high cost of the relationship," a result that provides the grounds for further research (Casey, 1997, p. 8).

2.5. Society, the Media, and the Automobile – Media/Cultural Studies

Accordingly, Dettelbach's (1976), Ronald Primeau's (1996), and especially Casey's (1997) application of cultural studies to works of popular culture provide the starting point of this paper aiming for a new cinematic analysis of America's relationship to the car. Thereby, it follows the tradition of cultural studies as discipline which looks at cultural phenomena in various societies by analyzing meaningful artifacts of culture – like film in this case. More specifically, it follows in the footsteps of John Fiske (1987) whose works are rooted in cultural studies in terms of theory and methodology, and which analyze television shows as texts to examine the different layers of meaning and social cultural content. He defines "television as a cultural agent, particularly as a provoker and circulator of meanings" and emphasizes the interrelation of social change and televised depictions by claiming that "[s]ocial change does occur, ideological values

do shift, and television is part of this movement" (p. 1; p. 45). It might not be "an originator of social change but television can be, must be, part of this change, and its effectiveness will either hasten or delay it" (Fiske, 1987, p. 45). According to Fiske (1987), series like *Charlie's Angels* and *Police Woman* in the 1970s "were part of the changing status of women in our society, and could not have been popular in a period when women were firmly confined to domestic and traditional female roles" (p. 45). These research examples provide the theoretical and methodological basis for a study of America's changing relationship with the automobile and its cinematic reflection.

The argument that the makers of these series or movies often do not intend social change or the incorporation of ideological values was addressed by I. C. Jarvie (1978). He considers the media and especially popular movies as "a rich source of ideas about, information . . . concerning, and criticism of, society" as well (p. ix). "For far too long, movies were dismissed as social pap--mere popular entertainment," he claims, and even if "makers do not intend them to be sources of information and criticism," they "never cease to be surprised at the way their work is interpreted by the public" (p. ix). According to Jarvie (1978), "movies take on an existence independent of their creators" once they are finished. He is convinced that popular movies "made for money and entertainment" still "reward careful sociological analysis" because they all "tell stories; stories convey information and ideas; information and ideas affect the way people act; and stories meld people together into audiences -- this too affects the way they act" (p. ix). This statement shows that Jarvie (1978) points out the "unintended social significance" of movies (p. ix), while hinting at their function as "socialization agents" providing people with

information about their place in society as John Ryan and William M. Wentworth (1999) defined it later on (p. 7).

Thereby, he offered a basis for media critics who define the role of television in society as “one of common storyteller” that “lets us know who is good and who is bad, who wins and who loses, what works and what doesn’t, and what it means to be a man or a woman” reflecting Fiske’s earlier assumptions (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999, p. 528). Hollywood teaches human beings the basic practices of their culture. It enables the process of socialization, while still being perceived as “contemporary mythmaker,” according to Marshall McLuhan, who pronounced in 1964: “The movie is not only a supreme expression of mechanism, but paradoxically it offers as product the most magical of consumer commodities, namely dreams” (qtd. in Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2003, p. 231). This confirms the argument that movies helped create the myth of the open road, celebrated the automobile as liberating vehicle, and depicted it as America’s icon of freedom and individuality. At the same time, media critics are aware that: “above their immense economic impact . . . , movies have always worked on several social and cultural levels. While they distract us from our daily struggles, . . . they encourage us to take part in rethinking contemporary ideas” (Campbell et al., 2003, p. 231). Such contradiction between mythmaker and socialization agent – creating the myth of the liberating vehicle while offering cultural criticism – found its resemblance in endless discussion among scholars throughout the decades addressing how movies portray society. “[W]hether they idealize it, reflect it accurately, fantasize about it, or are critical of it,” media theorists basically agree that movies definitely offer true and interesting information about society (Jarvie, 1978, p. 42; Ryan & Wentworth, 1999; Lull, 2000; Campbell et al., 2003).

These discussions show the similarities and parallel approaches of cultural and media studies, two areas of research Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Kellner (2009) suggest combining to achieve deeper insights as well as a different perspective on present society. Their interdisciplinary approach titled *Media/Cultural Studies* “involves a dialectic of text and context, using texts to read social realities and context to help situate and interpret a wide range of cultural artifacts and to interrogate them about what they tell us about the contemporary world” (pp. xxxv-xxxvi). According to Hammer and Kellner (2009), such approach is possible since cultural studies continuously reinvents itself “as it subverts academic disciplinary boundaries and draws on wealth of fields, theories, and methods to engage topics that can range from McDonald’s or Barbie dolls to the media spectacle of a U.S. presidential election” (p. xxx). Considering the growing impact of the media on society “shap[ing] people’s view of the world and deepest values;” this interdisciplinary approach helps to “gain insight and knowledge about the contemporary world” (Kellner, 2009, p. 5; Hammer & Kellner, 2009, pp. xxxv-xxxvi). *Media/Cultural Studies* claims “Rambo films . . . can provide insight into contemporary masculinity and gender politics” and “2007 films like *Knocked Up* . . . and *Juno*” illustrate “the situation of contemporary young women” (pp. xxxv-xxxvi). These interdisciplinary examples confirm previous studies of popular culture as indicator for societal changes and thereby provide the theoretical basis to draw conclusions about the societal perception of the automobile from its cinematic depiction.

2.6. Research Objective

This study proposes to examine media products in relation to their cultural context, and vice versa, to gain a better insight about the contemporary world and society.

More specifically, analyzing present depictions of the automobile with the background of cultural studies might help to understand America's obsession with cars and possibly offers a prospect or solution how America can handle the "monster" they created themselves. It might give an answer to the question Nixon posed in a speech³ in 1954 right after Eisenhower conceived a \$50 billion highway plan: "Where is the United States going, and by what road?" (qtd. in Seiler, 2008, p. 93).

2.7. Research Questions

RQ1: How do contemporary movies depict the automobile and the culture that came with it?

RQ1a: Do they reflect findings of cultural studies?

RQ1b: Does the cinematic portrayal focus on liberating or entrapping characteristics of America's car culture?

RQ2: Do contemporary movies show societal indications how the love affair might end?

RQ2a: Does the protagonist hold on to the former vehicle of freedom?

RQ2b: Does the protagonist abandon the automobile?

³ It was a speech at the annual Governor's Conference in New York in July 1954; Nixon was vice president at that time.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

3.1. Methodology

As the purpose of this study is to explore something that has had little previous investigation besides theoretical assumptions and interdisciplinary conclusions, data will be collected and analyzed using qualitative methods to discover a range of responses to the Research Questions. To better understand America's current relation and perception of the automobile and the culture that came with it, a qualitative media content study is appropriate because it allows "to gain a 'window' on a particular worldview" on the basis of "a limited set of media messages selected purposively" (Priest, 2010, p. 110). Furthermore, Miles and Huberman (1994) identified qualitative data as a "source of well grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts," wherefore a qualitative approach represents an ideal opportunity to provide precise observations and interpretations of a marginally analyzed phenomenon (p. 1).

3.2. Methods

On the basis of media/cultural studies, this analysis will look at contemporary movies and their portrayal of the automobile and its influence on American culture. By combining cultural and media studies – drawing connections between text and context – this approach looks at findings of cultural theorists concerning the decay of America's love affair with the car and shows how this decreasing satisfaction is illustrated in movies.

The concentration on automotive depictions in the movies relies on the fact that "[e]ach critical method focuses on certain features of a text from a specific perspective,

and each individual perspective illuminates some features of a text while ignoring others” (Kellner, 2009, p. 14). Following this assumption, the interpretation of movies according to car-related aspects should show cinematic reflections of cultural phenomena. At the same time, it can reveal social changes concerning America’s intense automotive love affair that might have come to an end.

The individual movie analyses provide two analysis parts. Following the example of *Media/Cultural Studies*, the first part offers an analysis of the cultural phenomena being of importance during the time of the movie’s release – the context – and how it is reflected in the movie – the text. The second part focuses on the plot being driven by the character’s relationship to the car and the environment it created. The plot analysis is based on Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1972) and his elaborations on the stages of the adventure of the hero. It provides a rather comparable structure for the analyses of the protagonist’s journey and the role the automobile plays throughout the movie. Furthermore, the subdivisions provide another opportunity to show the car-related obstacles the characters have to face during their life-changing journeys that deliver a message about America’s fatal “automotive” love affair.

3.3. Procedures & Data Analysis

1. Individual Movie Analyses:

- Each movie analysis will provide a general introduction of the movie, how it was perceived, and how it is related to the topic.
- After reviewing various cultural studies of American car culture highlighting the deficits it created at the time of the movie’s production, I will look for cinematic reflections of these cultural phenomena.

- The study will follow the protagonist step by step throughout the movie to analyze which role the automobile plays on his journey and which additional information his environment provides. The stages of the journey analysis are (1) the call of the adventure, (2) the departure into the unknown, (3) the road of trials, (4) the elixir, and (5) the return.

2. *Conclusions:*

- On the basis of the individual movie analyses, I will draw conclusion on the overall contemporary depiction of the automobile possibly offering a certain impression how it is perceived in the present period. Is the car still celebrated as liberating vehicle or do movies start to reveal the entrapping truth?
- I will determine a certain trend these movies might indicate due to their differing release dates concerning society's feelings towards the former freedom machine.
- In the context of earlier movies that I will mention throughout the analyses, these three cinematic samples might show if the American love affair will have a happy ending and thereby offer a future prospect.

3.4. Sample

This study will employ purposive sampling by selecting three movies on the basis of certain features that became clear throughout an extensive research of cultural as well as cinematic studies. The following criteria were employed in choosing the films:

1. The film was (a) released between 1990 and 2010; (b) produced in the

- United States; and (c) depicts the common American environment and culture.
2. The primary plot centers on characters using the automobile for daily purposes in contrast to typical road movies.
 3. The film introduces a major protagonist whose life-changing journey can be followed to determine the role of the automobile throughout the story (liberating or entrapping).

Three films fitting these criteria were analyzed: *Falling Down* (Harris, Kopelson, Milchan, & Weingrod, 1993) – the story of William Foster who is trying to get home from work (See Appendix A: Plot Synopsis); *Duets*⁴ (Byrum, Paltrow, & Jones, 2000) – the story of Todd Woods who is trying to leave home because of work (See Appendix B: Plot Synopsis); *Collateral* (Mann & Richardson, 2004) – the story of Max Durocher who is trying to survive work (See Appendix C: Plot Synopsis).

⁴ *Duets* is commonly described as a road-trip comedy intertwining the stories of six strangers (See Appendix B), wherefore this study focuses on the storyline of Todd Woods whose journey analyzed separately from the rest of the movie fulfills the sample criteria.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE DISENCHANTMENT OF AMERICA

[Foster:] Can anybody tell me what's wrong with this picture? . . . I did everything they told me to. . . . I helped to protect America. You should be rewarded for that. Instead, they give it to plastic surgeons. They lied to me.

(*Falling Down*, 1993)



Figure 2: Fosters perception of America – the land of the free – shatters into pieces like this glass full of souvenir flags.

4.1. *Falling Down* (1993): “A Tale of Urban Reality”

Heat. Unbearable heat. Steam rises from the hot gray pavement. Sweat rolls down the temples. Stuffy air makes it hard to breath. No circulation, no movement, no way out. William Foster finds himself in an endless chain of cars, bumper to bumper, no exit in sight. He can feel the heat rise from all the cars around him. His car has barely crawled for the last ten minutes. While waiting, he gazes around. A little girl and her doll stare at him from the vehicle in front hidden behind clouds of smoke. To his left, a woman applies lipstick while monitoring him through her side mirror. A school bus full of playing kids has come to a stop in the next row. Two business men argue on the phone in the car behind. Honking noises increase. Radios blast. The kids’ laughter gets louder and louder. Foster’s freedom machine does not offer escape or protection anymore. He is stuck (*Falling Down*, scene description).

This opening scene of the movie *Falling Down*⁵ describes a situation quite familiar to most Americans considering the fact that “[n]ationally, the rush hour – defined as those peak hours of travel when roads are most congested – has expanded to span more than six hours a day, making it harder and harder to avoid” (Lutz & Lutz Fernandez, 2010, p. 130). Lutz and Lutz Fernandez’ (2010) study of the automobile culture and its effects on people’s lives shows that “[t]he average American spends more than eighteen and one-half hours a week in the car, or an astounding month out of every year” (p. 144). Considering our waking lives, they claim that: “[C]ar travel accounts for about one out of every six hours. That is 2.6 hours a day or two full months spent driving” (p. 145).

⁵ (See Appendix A: Plot Synopsis).

Furthermore, the study indicates an increase in the hours Americans spend stuck in traffic annually by more than half, “accelerating the number of people who say they no longer enjoy driving” (p. 130).

William Foster appears to be one of these people who start to realize the irony “that the car, this paramount symbol of freedom and independence”, actually makes drivers feel “trapped and impotent” (Lutz & Lutz Fernandez, 2010, p. 38). This observation becomes more obvious by taking a closer look at the scenario:

The air gets hotter and hotter. It becomes redolent with the scent of gas, making him light-headed. His eyes on the line of vehicles, Foster’s hand gropes for the window opener of his car. Broken. No relief. The head gets heavy, eyes begin to burn. An additional sound complements his miserable situation. A fly. Unable to catch this little intruder that violently invaded his personal space, his frustration reaches a climax. William’s body wants to escape this immobility. His breathing gets heavier. His fevered mind perceives once more his environment emphasizing the irony of his situation (*Falling Down*, scene description).

The business men next to him arguing about the next coffee purchase on the phone, the woman who still obsessively applies her lipstick, as well as the stuffed animal in her back window whose moronic smile seems to ridicule Foster, represent the American consumer culture which provides the basis for his pathetic situation. Especially having Garfield, a symbol of popular culture, laughing at him, shows the irony of his entrapment. This popular culture continuously depicted the automobile as something “that offers experience, freedom, . . . romance and meaning,” a myth that Kerouac’s characters spread in 1955 and movies such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) or *American Graffiti* (1973)

emphasized anew. They helped the car to its fame and celebrated it as the “vehicl[e] of freedom” (Mills, 2006, p. 19; Paes de Barros, 2004, p. 5) – a vehicle of freedom that becomes Foster’s personal trap.

Furthermore, the scene shows a girl tossing a paper plane out of the window of the school bus. The side of the bus is covered with a huge American flag that is reflected on the windshield of a convertible emphasizing the contradiction: freedom versus entrapment. The breakdown of Foster’s air conditioner as well as the malfunction of the window opener show how his former freedom machine lets him down and leaves him no option to escape:

One last frantic glance to the outside confronts him with symbolic pieces of bumper stickers and street signs: ‘Freedom . . . ,’ a close-up of a dripping tail pipe, ‘He died . . . , delay . . . delay . . . DELAY.’ He tries to make sense of these snippets of information metaphorically capturing the current situation. The loud noises of the radio, arguing people and the continuing honking become unbearable. It makes Foster realize that he can only escape by getting out of the car. He decides to walk home (*Falling Down*, scene description).

Abandonment of the automobile, leaving the root of all this misery behind, seems to be the advice this short opening scene of the movie *Falling Down* (1993) tries to give. By introducing William Foster, “an Everyman figure so average that he’s known only by the name of his license plate,” D-FENS, and his struggle with the traumas of everyday life, director Joel Schumacher “certainly digs its instruments into our most sensitive social fibers” (Hinson, 1993). Although Foster’s violent rampage across the city of Los Angeles “as the vigilante superhero of our common frustrations,” possibly compromises the

credibility of the social criticism of the movie, Hall Hinson (1993) still defines it “as a kind of cultural landmark”:

[E]verybody knows how it feels to be stuck in traffic in your crummy little car on a sticky-hot gray pavement day with the horns blaring and the radios blasting and the kids in the school bus above you screeching (C1).

Therefore, this movie offers a quite realistic reflection of American culture giving its subtitle a completely new meaning. This “tale of urban reality” shows how America’s obsession with cars, which once used to offer freedom and mobility, drove them into their own entrapment, physically as well as mentally. It depicts the irony of the American car culture Lutz and Lutz Fernandez (2010) analyzed and how it affects and eventually overtakes their lives. These observations can be considered as the basis of this analysis starting off with the simple question: What happened to the freedom and independence the automobile always promised to American culture? Did it reach a dead end or is it just in “delay” as *Falling Down*’s opening scene indicates? Did America’s historically rooted urge for freedom and individuality actually drive them directly into their own entrapment?

Although the opening scene brought this movie a lot of praise and attention (Hinson, 1993), it is also the only scene offering a direct and obvious critique on America’s present car culture. Nevertheless, several theorists still use *Falling Down* as cinematic illustration of cultural phenomena that developed throughout the decades while the influence of the automobile on America’s environment and their psyche steadily increased and started to show its effects. Paul Virilio’s book titled “*Rasender Stillstand*” ‘Rushing Stasis’ (2008) might best define this opening scene and even capture the

essence of this thesis and its contradictory approach. At the same time, other cultural researchers like Jane Holtz Kay (1998) and Tom Vanderbilt (2009) use *Falling Down* as reference for drive-by shootings and road rage, phenomena that seemed to be quite striking in the Nineties when the movie was released. Thereby, the movie offers a direct reflection of the changes in society, a society that seems to realize the negative impact of the car on its culture. It follows cinematic critiques of *Mad Max* (Kennedy & Miller, 1979) or *Christine* (Kobritz & Franco, 1983) that analyze the car's metamorphosis from servant to master, how it becomes a reason for war in the present world, and in the case of *Falling Down*, turns into a weapon itself.

4.2. Cultural Phenomena

4.2.1. Drive-by shootings: The car as physical weapon

By describing William Foster as “iconic angry white man” who “was driven to rampage by L.A. traffic,” Holtz Kay (1998) shows that the automobile, while representing a “[s]exual symbol, getaway vehicle, or status object,” also turns into “the weapon of choice,” as some behaviorists and police say (p. 18). In the case of drive-by shootings, this function becomes easily obvious. The car turns into a vehicle supporting crimes and bringing death to their target as well as unfortunate passersby, an occurrence *Falling Down* features whenever Foster starts his so-called rampage.

On his way home after leaving his car behind, he takes various shortcuts. One of them passes through “gangland” which does not go unnoticed or without consequences. Foster is confronted by two of the gang members who demand a toll for trespassing, a request that ends in Foster violently standing up for his rights and possessions by chasing them away with a baseball bat. To take revenge, they search the city for the intruder to

teach him a lesson, or rather make sure he will never be able to trespass their territory again. This personal vendetta illustrates the cultural phenomenon of the early 1990s when “Los Angeles freeways looked like a shooting range as fierce motorists took potshots” and the term “drive-by shooting” entered the lexicon (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 18).

It shows the bad influence of the automobile on America’s culture turning the vehicle into a weapon, as Holtz Kay (1998) pointed out. But taking a closer look at the scene, this argument gets another twist. It actually shows an act of vengeance missing its target and bringing death to its initiators. The gang members miss Foster, wound various passersby and kill themselves by losing control over their vehicle. They cause an accident and thereby turn the car into their very own “vehicle of death,” an expression which was already used in relation to works like *The Great Gatsby* when Gatsby’s Rolls Royce, his symbol of success, turns into the “death car” (Dettelbach, 1976, pp. 81-82). Returning to *Bonnie and Clyde* (Beatty, 1967) exemplifying freedom due to the getaway car as mentioned earlier, even this “mode of escape becomes a means of entrapment” reflecting “the malady of contemporary American life” (Casey, 1997, p. 140). Accordingly, their “vehicle of escape becomes [their] coffin” since they get shot in (Bonnie) or close to (Clyde) the vehicle and die (p. 105). It offers similarities to *Falling Down*’s depiction of the gang members’ campaign of vengeance ending in their own death.

In contrast to earlier cinematic critiques, the scene shows that it is not necessarily the car causing such negative cultural developments but the people who use the vehicle. This becomes more obvious by another new phrase that was added to “the dictionary of automobile crime” by 1992: “carjacking.” This word stands for hijacking a car to pursue criminal actions emphasizing the passive role of the car, simply being “the [used]

weapon,” which is stolen to fulfill the negative intentions of the driver (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 18). It supports the major argument of this thesis that the American people themselves caused the shift of their vehicle of freedom to their own entrapment. To stay with the metaphor of the “weapon” for now, a look at the second phenomenon Holtz Kay (1998) and Vanderbilt (2009) mention in relation to *Falling Down* shows the psychological impact of the car on the driver causing injuries and death in a quite different way.

4.2.2. Road rage: The car as psychological weapon

Besides the illustration of drive-by shootings, Holtz Kay (1998) uses *Falling Down* as reflection of the phenomenon of road rage; a term that was coined by the media in the late 1980s (Fumento, 1998). The 1997 *Oxford English Dictionary of New Words* defined it as “a driver’s uncontrolled aggressive behavior, apparently caused by the stresses of modern driving” (Knowles & Elliott, 1997, p. 264). In Holtz Kay’s (1998) research, the automobile appears as a weapon in the sense of a physical extension of the driver’s psyche. The main article she mentions titled ““Aggression Gets Wheels”” perfectly describes this phenomenon while it talks about a deadly incident that resulted from a ““mistake.”” This broad justification is not an individual case: ““The mistake in Brighton (Massachusetts) was not accelerating fast enough for a green light. . . . In Brockton last Friday, the mistake was tailgating. In Peabody, Monday night, it was passing in a no-passing zone”” (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 18).

These “mistakes” do not seem to be recent occurrences though, because “the nature of aggressive driving has intrigued social scientists for more than 50 years, and the earliest publications describing aggressive drivers date back to the late 1940s” (Galovski, Malta, & Blanchard, 2006, p. 4). By taking a look at popular literature, earlier references

can be found. William S. Gilbert and Arthur S. Sullivan's play *Mr. Jericho* made references to so-called furious driving in 1893, as Leon James and Diane Nahl (2000) noted. In 1950, Disney offered another early depiction of road rage before the term was even coined (Vanderbilt, 2009, p. 33):

The short film *Motor Mania* shows Goofy in the role of an exemplary pedestrian "Mr. Walker." He represents a well-behaved, polite, upright citizen who sings with birds and would not harm a fly, or in this case an ant that he tries to avoid while walking along. Whenever he sits behind the steering wheel though, his whole personality changes. He turns into "Mr. Wheeler," a power-addicted, uncontrollable speeder, who competes with other drivers for the first spot at a red light and considers the street his personal property. As soon as he steps out of the car – deprived of his armor – Mr. Walker returns. And every time he uses the car, Mr. Wheeler takes over again (*Motor Mania*, scene description).

Disney's *Motor Mania* (1950) was one of the earliest depictions of road rage emphasizing the car itself as initiator of the phenomenon. Whenever Mr. Walker puts it on like an "armor," it turns him into a totally different person, Mr. Wheeler. This process is comparable to the "Jekyll and Hyde drivers," as Tara E. Galovski, Tara Malta, and Edward B. Blanchard (2006) call it, whose elixir simply seems to be the car rather than outside influences (p. 41). Looking back at Holtz Kay's (1998) analysis of road rage, she refers to a Mitsubishi advertisement that tries to sell "[t]he ideal vehicle for 'type A' personalities, . . . Aggressive on the outside. Uncompromising on the inside." She emphasizes the "anonymity of tinted glass windows, isolated highways, and sidewalks emptied by a driving population" as triggers for antisocial behavior (p. 18). These

observations confirm Disney's early interpretation of the vehicle – the shell of the driver – as an instigator of rage and personality change.

Falling Down's opening scene briefly indicates such comparison of the car to a shell of the driver, his "own little bubble" as Michael Bull's study called it in 2007 (p. 90). Nevertheless, Foster's personal bubble bursts in the first minutes of the movie when the camera moves from the quiet interior of his car to the noisy outside. Its blaring noises immediately invade the inside of his vehicle and complement his rage. Therefore, this more current cinematic reflection of road rage focuses on outside influences like the "stresses of modern driving" in accordance with the *Oxford English Dictionary of New Words* (Knowles & Elliot, 1997, p. 264). It seems to give a preview of studies trying to find the actual reason for a sixty percent (60%) increase in reports from news media, police departments, and insurance companies of aggressive driving incidents from 1990 to 1996 (Mizell, 1997). David Shinar and Richard Compton (2004) suggest that the increase in aggressive driving behaviors is due to the increase in the number of vehicles on the road. By comparing the urban and rural road mileage in the U.S. to the number of registered vehicles from 1990 to 1996, this suggestion appears to be valid. In this time period, the road mileage in the United States increased by 1.36 percent while the number of registered vehicles increased by 9 percent (Galovski et al., 2006, p. 13). It suggests that roads became more congested. *Falling Down*'s opening scene perfectly illustrates this observation with an inescapable traffic jam triggering Foster's rage.

These recent studies also analyze how road rage displays itself. Galovski et al. (2006) identify four main categories while looking at current road rage behavior research:

- (a) verbal aggression and gestures (arguments, violent threats, cursing, honking, yelling);

(b) tailgating and blocking; (c) physical aggression (throwing objects, physical assault, bumping/ramming vehicles, threatening with gun, weapon assault); (d) and other raging behavior (giving chase, speeding, running lights, cutting cars off road, etc.) (p. 6).

Various movies had already featured such behavior, starting off with the classic *Duel* (Eckstein, 1971) representing Steven Spielberg's film debut and at the same time creating the basic formula for many more road rage movies to come. It tells the story of a salesman who leaves his house for a one-day business trip and is chased by a huge tanker truck, putting his life in danger. This “chase film with a mysterious truck pursuing Dennis Weaver across the country” introduced a completely new film genre that put road rage behavior in the center of action (Becker, 1989, p. 147). The typical plot starts with triggers like verbal aggression or gestures, somebody gets passed or cut. It sparks the anger of the mysterious pursuer and directs his raging behavior towards the unknowing driver in front. In the case of *Joy Ride* (Abrams & Moore, 2001), a more recent movie picking up Spielberg's cult formula, college students have to face the raging behavior of an angry truck driver, or actually his personified truck, tailgating, blocking and ramming their vehicle. This movie concept displays the typical road rage behavior the study of Galovski et al. (2006) shows. What is interesting about *Duel* might be the fact that Weaver sends his car down a canyon to save his life and thereby possibly paves the way for Foster's abandonment of his deceiving vehicle of freedom.

Looking at *Falling Down* again, which is considered a prime example for road rage, the behavior of Foster does not necessarily fit in any of these categories. He does not curse or yell neither does he move his car or physically assault anyone. He does not even honk. The stressful environment packed with cars blocking his way offers various

reasons for raging behavior. Nevertheless, instead of using his car as a weapon to extend his psychological rage to the outside, Foster stays quite calm in contrast to his environment displaying such sample behavior. He simply waits and observes the events. His inescapable situation rather seems to trigger a process of realization leading him to the conclusion that desertion of the car represents the only logical solution.

Thus, besides simply offering a cinematic reflection of contemporary cultural phenomena, the movie appears to provide a more complex message. As pointed out in the opening of the chapter, it perfectly depicts America's present dilemma: their once celebrated vehicle of freedom has turned into their entrapment. Foster seems to realize this fact and simply leaves his car behind initiating his "violent rampage across the city of Los Angeles." As the plot reveals later on, Foster is not allowed to see his wife and daughter anymore due to anger issues. Thereby, he lost his house and had to move back in with his mother. Not enough, he was fired more than a month ago evoking the question why especially a simple traffic jam can represent "[t]he last straw" for his anger to break out (Hinson, 1993, C1)?

By taking a closer look at his walk across L.A., it becomes obvious that this initial scene means more than a simple traffic jam to Foster. It makes him realize that the America he once used to protect with pride is not the same anymore, or even worse, it never was. Therefore, his "rampage" can rather be seen as a journey of enlightenment revealing the illusions America's culture is based on, starting off with the car, the nation's emblem of freedom and individuality which is celebrated by popular culture and advertisements as "American Dream on four wheels" (Gudis, 2004, p. 5).

4.3. An Analysis of Foster's Enlightening Journey

4.3.1. The call of adventure: Stuck in the vehicle of freedom

William Foster is an ordinary American man who once had a family, a house, and a decent job at NOTEC building missiles for military and law enforcement. Foster was living the American Dream and therefore protecting his country with pride; a country that “has been widely pictured as a ‘land of promise’ where golden opportunities beckon to able and ambitious men without regard to their original station in life” (Chinoy, 1955, p. 1). Recently, this promise no longer applies to Foster. He lost his wife and child, he had to give up his house and was fired about a month ago. It leaves him with nothing but his belief in America as “‘young, vigorous nation’” defined by a “‘restless urge toward improvement and expansion’” and based on freedom and individuality; rights which were guaranteed to its citizens and embodied by their self-proclaimed icon: the automobile (Hey, 1983, p. 193). Being stuck in a traffic jam shows that even this promise lets him down.

Foster lost everything. He is not even able to provide child support for his daughter making him feel useless in this ambitious and progressing society. Thus, he decides to “go home” to give her at least a present for her birthday. His attempt to fix what seems to be falling apart and regain his lost “American Dream” initiates his fatal journey.

4.3.2. The departure into the unknown: Defending consumer rights

Foster’s journey on foot leads him first to a grocery store where he wants to get change to call his family. To receive change, the clerk demands that he buys something, wherefore Foster goes to the fridge and chooses a can of Coca Cola. He uses the can to

cool down his face and his temper being already at its peak. This simple Coca Cola can – a typical American consumer good – symbolizes once again the America Foster proudly protected for years. In this way, the can calms down his rage and reassures his belief in his land of the free which he started to doubt while sitting in his stuck vehicle.

Unfortunately, this calmed anger does not last very long. Whenever Foster is confronted by the ridiculous price for this can, he cannot hold back his rage. He insists on staying until the clerk offers him an appropriate price. The clerk feels in danger and reaches for a baseball bat to defend himself enraging Foster even more. He reaches over the counter to stop the clerk, whereby a glass of American souvenir flags falls down and shatters into pieces like Foster's vision of America (*see fig. 2*). It symbolizes the initial point of his realization that the country he believed in and trusted is falling apart. Thus, Foster's “rampage” begins in this store where he is “standing up for [his] rights as a consumer” and “roll[s] back prices to 1965” while destroying the clerk's merchandise piece by piece. Foster defends his idea of America which turns out to be just a “lie” in the end (*Falling Down*).

4.3.3. The road of trials

Pedestrians trespassing the land of the free

Keeping the baseball bat for his own defense, he continues his walk home. On his way, he passes through “gangland” showing him once more that “the land of the free” is not as free as it claims to be. Foster found a place to rest. He finally drinks his Coke he was fighting for and examines his shoe that is giving him trouble walking. In doing so, he discovers a huge hole in the shoe sole. The camera shot opening the scene shows him looking through this hole over the city he lives in covered with smog, barely

recognizable. It makes the pollution visible that came with the enormous adaption to technological and industrial products, the automobile being one of them. It indicates America's environmental deterioration that is closely followed by its moral decay.

As Foster sits on a concrete form to fix the hole in his shoe – another consumer good letting him down – two gang members approach him and request a toll for passing their territory. Once more, he stands up for his rights as American citizen and chases them away using the baseball bat he had just acquired. As described earlier in relation to Holtz Kay's (1998) study, this incident results in a drive-by shooting showing the negative impact of the car on America. It reflects the collapse of the nation he used to defend for its rights and ideals.

The crime of trespassing Foster gets accused of by the gang members is closely related to another automotive phenomenon, because in America “[s]idewalk and street tree vanish for driveway; walkability gives way to driveability” (Holtz Kay, 1998, pp. 64-65). The former land of the free changed its entire landscape for their new national symbol. It created a ““carchitecture”” pronouncing that “[h]ere is where the car lives” leaving no room for pedestrians (Holtz Kay, 1998, pp. 70 & 58). They became un-American creatures (Mühlen, 1977, p. 41); a fact Baudrillard (1988) came across in his study of the American culture on the road: “If you get out of your car . . . you immediately become a delinquent; as soon as you start walking, you are a threat to public order, like a dog wandering in the road” (p. 58). Foster seems to embody such wandering dog. He turned into a threat to the order simply by stepping out of his car and walking home. This decision was perceived with indignation by the other enraged people stuck in traffic confusedly asking: “Where do you think you are going?” (*Falling Down*). He

leaves his vehicle of freedom behind and tries to fight his way through an environment that has not been created for pedestrians, something quite unnatural to this car-dependent nation (Mühlen, 1977, p. 41).

No rights of freedom or individuality in the loser-cruiser

At the same time, Baudrillard (1988) claims that “[o]nly immigrants of the Third World are allowed to walk” (p. 58). This leads to Foster’s next incident on his journey. Whenever he realizes how challenging it is to cross this country on foot, he decides to wait for a bus which might offer him a less dangerous and much faster option to reach his destination. Standing at the bus stop, he cannot avoid another insight he never came across while driving to work in his car isolated from his decaying environment. While waiting on public transit, Foster finds himself surrounded by the “have-nots” in our society, as cultural theorist Holtz Kay calls it (1998, p. 36). According to her study, “[i]n larger cities 60 percent of mass transit riders are women, and 48 percent are African American or Hispanic, more than twice their number in their population” (p. 36). This ratio seems to be reflected in *Falling Down* that appeared years before the actual publication of these findings. Taking a closer look at statistics, the “9 percent of households that own no car comprise one-quarter of the population, with the lowest economic strata and the most oppressed minorities among them” who are “[d]ependent on transit trips to get to work, to health care – to life – they face a system decimated by automobile subsidies.” It shows how America’s car culture has become “an engine of inequity” putting the barriers of race and class very high and adding up to the financial and social inequality people already suffer (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 36).

This leads up to Holtz Kay's (1998) argument titled "The Stuck Society" metaphorically underlining the essential claim of this study, whereby she hints at another issue closely related and even rooted in America's entrapping car culture. Holtz Kay claims that the major problem is not that "the poor are careless" but "that a society that shorts public transportation in favor of the private vehicle deprives the poor of any other way to move." Additionally, this society and its "highway-oriented public policy has financed the outward-bound corporation; it has funded the house at the end of the road and separated the poor from jobs that can be reached only by the car" (pp. 37-38). It creates their very own Catch-22 because people cannot find work without the car, wherefore they cannot earn money to finance a car.

Foster, who is surrounded by this fact and crushed by this realization while people try to rush into the bus, decides to continue walking and process this sad society he lived in for years without ever recognizing its grievance. He turns around, still dazed by this encounter and runs into a construction worker blocking his way and telling him to "just follow [his] tootsies" (*Falling Down*). The humiliation shows anew the unrealistic picture he had of this nation where buses are referred to as "loser cruisers" and are reserved for "the working poor, the careless forced to the margins of society" (Holtz Kay, 1998, pp. 36-37).

Thereby, Foster's encounter with public transportation represents another step in his process of realization shattering his picture of the land of the promise giving everybody a chance to be successful as long as one works hard enough. Furthermore, it emphasizes the reign of the car America created itself by celebrating the automobile as symbol of "wealth and psychic liberation" in contrast to public transit connoted with poor

stereotypes (McShane, 1994, p. 125). By insisting on their urges for freedom and individuality, they turned the bus into “a poor person’s car” offering none of their American ideals. It has to be “shared with other poor persons, other odors, other noises, other destinations. A bus passenger is denied his privacy and is often subject to strangers who may be annoying or offensive to him” (Dettelbach, 1976, p. 78). After the automobile’s emergence, public transportation – be it the bus or the railway – was criticized for limiting people’s rights of freedom and privacy. As early as 1903, Otto Julius Bierbaum complained:

[It] binds us to a timetable, makes of us prisoners of regulations, locks us in a cage, which we are not allowed even to open, let alone leave, when we please. Between telegraph wires – symbols of this entangling of our personal freedom – we are hauled at speed that completely eliminates the possibility of welcome sights, not from one place, but from one train station, to the other . . . (qtd. in Sachs, 1992, p. 93).

These early claims contributing to the car’s success seem to have turned into the opposite. As cultural theorists show and what Foster had to realize in his first scene, the so-called vehicle of freedom turned drivers into such prisoners of regulations; regulations which come with America’s car culture that rejects any alternative transportation. In addition, Bierbaum’s complaint about the movement “not from place, but from one train station, to the other” eliminating the possibility of welcome sights, finds its new interpretation in the insular culture the car created. It substitutes train stations with parking lots and garages leaving no room for an actual perception of the space in-between (Fuhrer, 1993, p. 7).

Foster's journey home continues on foot. He passes a park which confronts him with the poor once more, begging for money and food while children are happily running around the playground. It provides another disturbing impression of the nation Foster was proud of. One beggar approaches him and asks for cash while telling the story that he came all the way from Santa Barbara to see a friend who owes him money. He claims that he cannot go home because he is almost out of gas which seems to represent a nightmare in this country. Although this story might work on a regular American who would understand his doomed situation, Foster does not feel any pity for this illusive nation anymore and moves on.

Fast food nation selling an empty “American Dream”

His next stop gives him the opportunity to address such illusions. It leads him right into the heart of the insular culture mentioned above, giving Americans the option to stay in their cars while satisfying essential urges like hunger. Foster enters the fast food island on foot representing the first rebellious step against America's delusional promises, finding further expression in the production of their car-friendly meals. They are served in highly programmed settings engineered to speed up its preparation and at the same time accelerate customer turnover. This so-called fast food and its setting in harmony with the age of car convenience call once more the automotive promise of individuality and freedom into question given these chains that make all places look the same: “The restaurant looms as an important way to experience new localities, even, paradoxically, when the tourist relies on chain restaurants that are very much alike from one locale to another” (Jakle & Sculle, 1999, p. 1). The mass-produced food itself opposes American

values and evokes the next crucial outburst on Foster's enlightening journey at "Whammy Burger," where he metaphorically addresses America's empty promises.

He walks up to the counter and orders breakfast. "Sheila" rejects his order and notifies him that they switched to the lunch menu, wherefore Foster asks for the manager, "Rick", who smilingly confirms that they stopped serving breakfast at eleven. The false friendliness and companionship – "[Foster:] I still call my boss 'mister', and I worked for him for seven and a half years" – and the fact that he is three minutes too late for breakfast, enrages Foster who asks: "Rick – have you ever heard of the expression, 'The customer is always right'?" Rick is familiar with it but counters "[t]hat's not our policy" followed by another fatal comment delivered with a big smile: "Yeah, well, hey I'm really sorry" (*Falling Down*). Foster draws a gun ending this tense dialog.⁶

Again, this scene confronts Foster with unfulfilled wishes and ignored consumer rights. His land of promise lets him down anew because it is so stuck in its rules and regulations that it cannot oversee three minutes to satisfy another costumer with its mass-produced food. While rejecting his request, the manager replies with a phony smile on his face underlining the friendly atmosphere they try to create by using their first names. This illusive behavior Foster despises, is embodied by the food he receives looking not at all like the picture behind the counter: "Turn around, look at that. See what I mean, it's plump, it's juicy, it's three inches thick. Now – look at this sorry, miserable, squashed thing. Can anybody tell me what's wrong with this picture?" (*Falling Down*).

It confronts him with another illusion America offers making him realize that he really was fighting for nothing but a dream. The land of promise, its "American Dream",

⁶ (See Appendix A: Excerpt 1).

equal rights, and freedom, are nothing but deceptions culminating in the automobile turning from liberating vehicle into his entrapment. The nation he was protecting for years can only maintain its promise on the surface, but when you “[t]ake a walk around this town,” you will see what is “sick,” as Foster states in the final scenes while talking to his ex-wife (*Falling Down*). Leaving your car and getting in contact with the real environment, instead of just seeing it go by the windshield, shows America’s decay.

This belief is confirmed whenever Foster moves on and notices a citizen being arrested for demonstrating in front of a bank giving out loans but rejecting him as “not economically viable” (*Falling Down*). It illustrates that this country has no use for consumers without capital enabling them to buy the dreams the nation provides them with. Especially, the “American Dream” represents such empty cliché everyone is supposed to aim for without the actual possibility to reach it, as a study by American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1938) shows. He addresses the so-called American Dream as a vision of how life ought to be and what it means to be a success in life. It is celebrated as a common goal everybody should reach regardless of their standing in society. On the other hand, the American social structure that holds out the same goal to all its members, does not give them equal means to achieve it (Merton, 1938). These observations are reflected in this scene. In general, the movie offers a picture of a decaying car-dependent society outlawing the poor to dysfunctional public transit and thereby not giving them a chance to be a part of society. Inequality and discrimination makes the American Dream unreachable for a big part of society opposing Foster’s ideal of the so-called land of the free promising “equal opportunity for all” (Chinoy, 1955, p. xi).

4.3.4. The elixir: Falling down in Plato's cave

The revelation and transformation of Foster from gullible American citizen pursuing the American Dream to disenchanted rebel raging across the city, happens during the crucial encounter at a supremacist's store. The confrontation with Nick, the movie's archangel of America's inequality and discrimination, who sees in Foster a friend following the same racist mission, results in Foster's first direct murder (Hinson, 1993). He distances himself from Nick's accusation – "We are not the same. I'm an American. You're a sick asshole" – and starts to insist on his rights as American citizen once more: "I'm just disagreeing with you. In America, we have the freedom of speech, the right to disagree!" (*Falling Down*). Foster tries to hold on to his belief in freedom and equality, his ideal view of America that is shattered symbolically by Nick attacking him.

At first, he destroys the snow globe Foster bought for his daughter which he throws across the room where it bursts into pieces. Then, Nick forces him to get on his knees whereby Foster's glasses crack when he hits the ground due to "[g]ravity" making him "fall down" (*Falling Down*). It changes his perception of the illusive America he used to defend. The recurring line of "falling down", driving the whole movie and symbolizing the decay of society and Foster's world view, finds its climax in this scene. Foster's world is falling apart, a process that started in the grocery store when the glass full of American flags fell down and continues now with the smashed snow globe and his cracked glasses.

Kneeling on the floor with his "shattered view," Foster takes a last look around and realizes that this country is not worth fighting for anymore. He stabs the supremacist with his knife and shoots him and his reflection in the mirror representing a symbolic

moment on his enlightening journey. He realizes that this country was never actually worth fighting for, because it was only an illusion he was seeing. Shooting his own image in the mirror and thereby the deceived world view he used to follow, reminds of Plato's allegory of the cave that describes the progress of the mind from ignorance to knowledge.

Plato often uses the imagery of the sun and its light in terms of knowledge which he "conceives . . . as a kind of illumination." He "portrays the process of education as an ascent from darkness into light;" a process he illustrates by comparing the initial and unenlightened condition of human consciousness to prisoners in a dark cave (Sayers, 1999, p. 125):

Imagine the condition of men living in a sort of cavernous chamber underground, with an entrance open to the light and a long passage all down the cave. Here they have been from childhood, chained by the leg and also by the neck, so that they cannot move and can see only what is in front of them, because the chains will not let them turn their heads. At some distance higher up is the light of a fire burning behind them; and between the prisoners and the fire is a track with a parapet built along it, like the screen at a puppet-show, which hides the performers while they show their puppets over the top (Plato, 1951, pp. 227-228).

Due to their immobility, the prisoners in the cave are only able to see the shadows cast on the wall in front of them representing the puppets and figures manipulated by the people on the outside: "In such circumstance the prisoners naturally take the flickering shadows they see for reality" (Sayers, 1999, pp. 125-126).

Foster, who once used to be one of these prisoners driving to work every day only seeing the world through his windshield, perceived the shadows passing by as reality.

Paul Virilio (1978) describes the perception of the passing world as “flickering” of speed and movement as well, and claims that observing the environment through the windshield while driving makes the details of the world disappear. It creates “*Nicht-Ort[e]*” ‘Non-Places’ where nothing but the viewer offers a reference point (Virilio, 1978, p. 26). Hence, Foster’s car turns out to be the metaphorical chain that limited his view to these flickering shadows for years. The opening traffic jam showed the entrapping quality of his former vehicle of freedom. It gave him the first opportunity to leave this “chain” behind and become in touch with reality.

Furthermore, Plato’s allegory claims that prisoners released from the chains, turn around, look at the fire and at first “find its light painful, dazzling and blinding” and tend to “resist and turn back to the shadows” (Sayers, 1999, p. 126). On his journey, Foster continuously gets confronted with the decay of society and the “real” America. This reality – the light – dazzles him and he tries to avoid it by unceasingly insisting on his rights as American citizen. But once he gets used to the light and new freedom, as Plato put it, “he will begin to perceive things in the outside world, first by looking only at their shadows and reflections, but then by looking directly at the objects themselves” (Sayers, 1999, p. 126). Such change happens in the store when he shoots Nick and his own reflection. By shooting the mirror, he destroys the shadows he used to believe in and makes room for reality instead of its sugarcoated shadow. He discovers the truth, and realizes that he cannot go back – into the cave – anymore, as his speech on the phone with his wife indicates:

I’m past the point of no return. . . . That’s the point in a journey where it’s longer to go back to the beginning than it is to continue to the end. It’s like – remember

when those astronauts got in trouble? They were going to the moon and something went wrong. They had to get back to Earth but they had passed the point of no return. So they had to go all the way around the moon to get back and they were out of contact for hours. Everybody waited to see if a bunch of dead guys in a can would pop out the other side. That's me. On the other side of the moon now (*Falling Down*).

Foster's metamorphosis is visible in his clothing. He gets rid of his white shirt and tie defining him as an average working man pursuing his American Dream – the same outfit the “not economically viable”-citizen was wearing. He puts on a military outfit to begin his revenge on the illusionist country, reveal its lies, and call attention to its grievance. His new capability to “[look] directly at the objects themselves” finds its depiction in the next station on his journey, the source of the traffic jam (Sayers, 1999, p. 126).

4.3.5. The return: Revenge on the real world and its illusionists

His disenchanted path through the city leads him firsthand across the automotive phenomenon that caused his journey: the traffic jam that embodies America's illusive dilemma. Walking towards the core of the situation, Foster punches a road raging motorist unaware of his own fault as driver and worshipper of America's car culture. Foster reaches the construction worker overlooking the road works and asks “what's wrong with the street?” The worker is irritated because people usually do not question what they are confronted with. They take the shadows for reality and assume that they are fixing the street. Foster does not believe it and insists on the truth: “I think you're just trying to justify your inflated budgets. . . I want you to admit there's nothing wrong with the street!” His disenchanted perception comes across the real reason for the entrapping

traffic jam revealing the manipulated shadows he used to believe in. He shoots the construction site – “these yellow lights and all these big trucks” – holding them “hostage,” metaphorically reflecting the essential claim that America created the entrapment themselves (*Falling Down*).

Moving on, he intentionally passes private property and thereby finds an enormous golf course where he accuses the owners of their partial fault in America’s societal decay and discrimination: “You should have children playing here. . . . You should have a petting zoo instead of electric carts for you old men with nothing better to do” (*Falling Down*). Furthermore, his discovery of a mansion owned by a plastic surgeon indicates once more America’s obsession with illusions. It shows that most of the money can be earned by creating superficial perfection. Hiding the truth seems to be the most lucrative work one can do in America. This encounter leads to another interesting stage in his transformation. By talking to the caretaker’s family having a barbecue on the property, he tells them about his own daughter:

I’m going home to see my family. It’s my little girl’s birthday today. We were gonna have a barbecue, . . . my wife would hold my hand. . . . And then when it got dark we’d all go to sleep together. We’d all sleep together in the dark. And everything would be just like it was before (*Falling Down*).

As Plato’s allegory showed, whenever the prisoners get confronted with the fire, they tend to perceive it as painful and would rather turn to the shadows again. Foster displays such behavior in this scene. He wishes to get back together with his family and fall asleep in the dark, pretend like he has not been enlightened and return to the cave with its comforting shadows – its illusions of the American Dream and the land of the free.

Obsessed with the idea of a happy family, he returns home. The house is empty because his wife left with the daughter seconds before his arrival. He decides to watch some family videos to return to the times when he was married. Soon, the videos confront him with himself yelling at his wife and making the baby cry illustrating anew his previous delusive perception. It also reminds him of their former favorite place, the pier, where he later finds them. He runs towards both, hugs and kisses his wife trying to pick up the pieces and regain his family. This reunion is interrupted by police officer Prendergast who was following him. They manage to disarm Foster and bring his journey to an end making him express his metaphorical enlightenment verbally: “I’m the bad guy? . . . I did everything they told me to. . . . I helped to protect America. You should be rewarded for that. Instead, they give it to the plastic surgeon. They lied to me.” Prendergast is surprised about Foster’s reasoning and confirms that “they lie to everybody.” He adds that this realization “doesn’t give [him] any special right to do what [he] did today. The only thing that makes [him] special is that little girl,” an observation leading to Foster’s final rebellion. His enlightening journey, which was initiated by America’s fundamental lie of freedom embodied by the car, ends in an *ur-American* duel: “[Foster:] Showdown – between the sheriff and the bad guy? It’s beautiful” (*Falling Down*).

Foster finds his last chance to make up for his bad performance as a father in this mythical confrontation. It gives him the opportunity to provide his daughter – “[t]he only thing that makes [him] special” – with money from his insurance to make her an “economically viable” citizen in this decaying society (*Falling Down*). To pursue this goal, he uses an effective strategy he learned throughout his journey: delusion. He lies to

the police man about his possession of a gun and thereby gets shot in the duel between sheriff and villain. He switches the roles of defense. Throughout his journey, Foster was standing up for his rights as a consumer defending his idea of America. After his disenchantment, he developed “the ability to look at the source of light and the cause of things, the sun itself” (Sayers, 1999, p. 126). He sees the lies the consumer and popular culture provided him with for years and uses it for his own goal in the showdown making the police officer defend himself.

Thus, in a typically American cowboy manner, the villain endangering the freedom of the Western town gets shot; or in this case the “madman” who was about to reveal America’s lies and enchantment. Such disillusion could have made the whole nation fall apart, a nation full of people who enjoy living in the cave and are afraid to look into the light. They accept their “chain” and the view it offers, disguising the actual grievance this country has to deal with. Thereby, this “tale of urban reality” indicates how America created this misery themselves by letting a technological invention take over their culture, dominate their lives, and distort their perception of reality.

CHAPTER FIVE: HOW THE AUTOMOBILE TOOK OVER THE COUNTRY

[Todd:] I say we take the country back from the McDonalds and the Pizza Huts and the Wendys. I say we tear down all those strip malls. . . . This whole offer is just like every other pipe dream in the U.S.A. . . . Just another cynical stock-job sucker punch on us poor, dumb commercial believers.

(*Duets*, 2000)



Figure 3: America's entrapping "carscape" creating an unbearable insignificance that Todd tries to escape.

5.1. *Duets* (2000): “Going Places They’ve Never Been Before!”

Around the turn of the century, Bruce Paltrow sent another madman on a journey of revelation and societal critique; a madman who got “just a little tired of the American Dream” and is ready to tear down the enormous “strip mall” this country turned into throughout the years: “[Todd:] I say we take the country back from the McDonalds and the Pizza Huts and the Wendys. . . . and we get back in touch with the inner core” (*Duets*⁷).

Todd Woods, a sales executive who is fed up with his life marked by countless travel experiences, realizes that this whole country lost its uniqueness and regional diversity and turned into nothing but a “[b]ig strip mall from coast to coast.” Ironically, his job – dedicated to “jamming a bogus Pirates of the Caribbean village down some zoning board’s throat” – takes a big part in this development (*Duets*). In addition to the disappointing country he helped to create, his family – the only thing that is supposed to make him special (*Falling Down*) – lets him down. When he returns from a business trip where he ended up in the wrong conferences room due to America’s stressful way of life, he comes home and is ignored. He decides to break out and hits the road.

Similar to *Falling Down* (1993), *Duets* (2000) tells the story of an ordinary middle class man who believed in the American Dream for years. He worked hard to be successful, but one day snaps when he finds himself trapped in this mass-produced world where he is one in a million and not even his family seems to consider him as important or irreplaceable anymore. Thereby, the movie addresses America’s automotive illusions

⁷ (See Appendix B: Plot Synopsis).

and false promises as well by putting further emphasis on its physical impact on the country.

In contrast to Foster, Todd still has his job and family to return to and also uses the car to escape this entrapment in a quite nostalgic manner. That is one of the reasons why this movie and its societal critique does not appear as straightforward and remained unnoticed by automotive theorists so far. Additionally, Paltrow's attempt to interweave the stories of three odd couples brought together by coincidence adds up to the movie's inability to "find the right rhythmic balance," culminating in "a dark tone shift" towards the end that "throws it way off kilter" (Zacharek, 2000). According to critics, *Duets* "tries to squeeze bittersweet heartbreak and goofy social satire into the same story," incorporating six average people destined to meet at a karaoke contest in Omaha, where they get a chance to live out their dreams and escape their insignificance for three minutes (Ebert, 2000). If the movie "had found one tone and stayed with it" instead of trying to combine six destinies, movie critic Roger Ebert (2000) concludes, it might have earned the attention it deserves considering its rather obvious critique on America's obsessive car culture. This critique is delivered by the "catalyst" of the story; the salesman in the blue suit who discovers that he is not only in the wrong conference room and in the wrong city, but "in the wrong life, too" (Graham, 2000).

Thus, a closer look at *Duets*, and especially Todd's journey, shows that it complements the line of critical movies addressing America's relationship to the automobile. Furthermore, it confirms Casey's (1997) paradoxical results of the car's literary depiction in the present era. It expresses "nostalgia and bad feeling" towards America's car culture in Todd's torn character who becomes "cognizant of the high cost

of the relationship” – the fatal impact of his job contributing to America’s carscape – while following the lure of the open road to escape it (Casey, 1997, p. 8). At first glance, this behavior might appear contradicting and compromise the cultural critique the movie offers. At the same time, it perfectly reflects the evolving concern and realization of America’s unhealthy automotive love affair starting with observations and critique of the environment before questioning the actual psychological impact, as the analysis of *Falling Down* showed.

Duets illustrates how the servant turned into the master, taking over the country and dominating the American way of life instead of simply supporting it. It resembles Dettelbach’s (1976) observation that the former tool metamorphosed into a deity that is worshipped by turning America’s landscape into its very own altar; an “altar” Todd despises without realizing his persistent nostalgic belief in their “great wheeled god” (Casey, 1997, p. 8). In this way, the movie represents another step in the process of America’s realization. It reflects earlier studies of American literature and popular culture that found depictions humanizing the car and assumed: “If an individual is capable of treating the automobile as surrogate human, it is but one short, inevitable step further to treat that car as a surrogate god” (Dettelbach, 1976, p. 98).

Ernst Cassirer (1946) already observed that as soon as a man uses a tool, he no longer considers it as a simple “artifact of which he is the recognized maker;” he views it “as a Being in its own right, endowed with powers of its own.” Furthermore, “[i]nstead of being governed by his will, it becomes a god or daemon on whose will he depends – to which he feels himself subjected, and which he adores with the rites of a religious cult” (Cassirer, 1946, p. 59). This confirms current theorists talking of “metal demon[s]”

(Alvord, 2000, p. 18). It explains Todd's inconsistent character who despises the culture while being unable to resist its cultic allure. His persistent critique of America's "altar-like" carscape disavows his own worship of the car as American icon and symbol of liberation confirming Casey (1997) as well as the general ambivalence that comes with America's entrapping "vehicl[e] of freedom" (Mills, 2006, p. 19).

5.2. Cultural Phenomena

5.2.1. "Here is where the car lives": America's carscape

The automobile has been called the machine that changed the world; it changed the concepts and language in all areas of production, revolutionized standards of work, leisure and residence, but at the same time, the "greatest testament to the car's cultural significance" is its "contemporary mundanity" according to David Thoms, Len Holden, and Tim Claydon (1998):

Some of us can remember a time when streets were defined by the buildings which formed them; today, it is the architecture of the automobile which dominates our sense of public space. Indeed, the car has also become embodied in the very built environment itself – the filling station, the car park and the out of town shopping and leisure complex, not to mention the executive detached house with its two car garage (Thoms et al., 1998, p. 1).

The car created a world of its own in which people detached from everything outside their vehicle, move from one car-friendly place to another (Vanderbilt, 2009, p. 20). This resulted in an insular landscape where small towns and localities in-between primarily serve as access roads to the next insular area, be it the residential, leisure or shopping island (Fuhrer, 1993, p. 7).

Everything is accessible by car; no need to leave it, not even to get into your home. In addition to the landscape, the structure of houses changed moving the garage from the back of the lot to the front, next to the front door, for purposes of convenience and efficiency (Kihlstedt, 1983, p. 163). A study by Folke T. Kihlstedt (1983) shows that compared to turn-of-the-century houses, after 1945 halls, parlors and the front porch have been replaced by the increasing importance of the garage. It even replaced the front door “in function, for most American families leave the garage door open all day and enter through the kitchen” (Kihlstedt, 1983, p. 163).

Consequently, “[t]he element that projects farthest toward the street to greet the passer-by is no longer a shaded and generous porch. It is the large prominent surface of the garage door” (Kihlstedt, 1983, p. 163). This trend did not stop and even reached a different dimension today because the number of single-family houses with multi garages almost doubled within the last decades while the average American family became smaller. Every fifth newly built house provides a garage for three vehicles (Vanderbilt, 2009, pp. 26-27). These statistics are mainly applicable to suburban areas people escaped to for more room. At the same time, they had to put up with increasing commutes limiting their personal space to their vehicle for many hours during the day. According to commute statistics in the U.S., long-run commuters who spend more than two hours in traffic every day are the fastest increasing group possibly objecting the car’s promise of freedom as well (Vanderbilt, 2009, p. 27).

Hence, after being on the road for such long periods of time, people just return to their homes which they enter through their garages without ever getting in touch with neighbors. They simply switch from their isolated vehicle of freedom into the bigger

cubicle, their suburban home – “[Todd:] Suburbia – Mental jail” (*Duets*) – with its similar garage-dominated housing structures. Nobody gets in touch with one another and in Todd’s case, not even the family seems to know him anymore. This evokes the impression that commutes provide more closeness to other people than actual neighborhoods, as Baudrillard (1988) already observed. While he discusses the limitations of the road dictating the driver where to go, he hints at the fact that the closest you can get to people, is on the highway. It shows in a certain way how the promise of individualism turned into its opposite as well:

This ‘must exit’ has always struck me as a sign of destiny. I have got to go, to expel myself from this paradise, leave this providential highway which leads nowhere, but keeps me in touch with everyone. This is the only real society or warmth here, this collective propulsion, this compulsion – a compulsion of lemmings plunging suicidally together. . . . ‘Must exit’: you are being sentenced. You are a player being exiled from the only – useless and glorious – form of collective existence (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 53).

Baudrillard’s (1988) observation of the driver’s isolation resembles Flink’s (1987) claim that everything the individual gained from car ownership was “at the expense of undermining community and family, and it invited anonymity and anomie” (p. 161). Todd Woods, who helped create more leisure islands for years and thereby destroyed some of the last unique spots in America, feels like one of these lemmings heading towards the next destination the road leads them to. It confirms Vanderbilt’s (2009) observations that the world just “flickers” by the windshield and every other minute we are surrounded by a new group of people; people close to us whom we will never get to

know and never talk to while following the same path (p. 26). Freedom and individuality turn into isolation and anonymity on the road, and in Todd's case even at home.

As mentioned earlier, whenever Todd returns from another business trip, his family ignores him and makes him feel even more replaceable as he already does in-between all these "lemmings" heading for their garage doors. He decides to escape this indifferent and insignificant environment which is emphasized once more whenever he steps out of the door. The camera offers a view of his suburban surrounding where one house looks like the other and cars are easier to spot than people (*see fig. 3*). It illustrates the feeling of being one in a million causing Todd's fascination with karaoke which gives him a chance to be the center of attention for at least three minutes. Furthermore, this camera shot offers a reflection of Holtz Kay's (1998) cultural study indicating how "[s]idewalk and street tree vanish for driveway" and "walkability gives way to driveability" due to America's automotive adaptation (pp. 64-65). It states explicitly the death of the pedestrian – an un-American species (Mühlen, 1977, p. 41) – and the creation of an environment signifying that "[h]ere is where the car lives" (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 58).

Looking at more recent analyses, this aerial shot shows the real extent of Holtz Kay's (1998) statement turning out to be less metaphorical than she might have intended. The Public Transportation Users Association confirms: "“Motoring freedom . . . is purchased at the cost of curtailing the freedom of pedestrians.”" In addition to the loss of walkable landscape, they claim that ““[a]lmost everyone is affected by the pervasive pollution and noise which is a necessary condition of the freedom we enjoy as motorists”" (qtd. in Nakaya, 2006, pp. 19-20). Accordingly, researchers who studied a number of

U.S. communities in 2003, found that Americans walk far less than they used to:

“[W]hile 71 percent of parents of school-aged children walked or biked to school when they were young, only 18 percent of their children do.” McCann and Ewing see the reason in “sprawling counties . . . [where] homes are far from any other destination, and often the only route between the two may be on a busy high-speed arterial road that is unpleasant or even unsafe for . . . walking” (qtd. in Nakaya, 2006, p. 20). It complements general statistics Vanderbilt (2009) mentions, showing that 1969 almost half of the American youth went to school by bike or on foot; today, it is only sixteen percent. Between 1977 and 1995, the numbers of errands run on foot decreased by half bringing about jokes such as: In America, a pedestrian is somebody who just parked his car (p. 27).

The pedestrian is dying out due to America’s carscape. The automobile takes over the country, dominates their lifestyle and even begins to outnumber the drivers: “In 2003, the number of vehicles in the national fleet surpassed the number of Americans with a driver’s license for the first time” (Lutz & Lutz Fernandez, 2010, p. 3). Lutz and Lutz Fernandez (2010) found out that “[t]oday, a total of 244 million cars, trucks, SUVs, and motorcycles ply the roads,” and thereby “[n]ine out of ten U.S. households own a car, and most now own more than one” (p. 3). Similarly, Daniel Sperling and Deborah Gordon (2009) state in a previous study “more than one vehicle for every driver and more than two per household” (p. 13). They claim that by now “more vehicles are traveling farther – and multiplying faster than people.” Furthermore, “[p]ublic transport now accounts for only about 2 percent of passenger travel in the United States” indicating how “[c]ars have

nearly vanished their competitors” – only a question of time when the actual driver is next (Sperling & Gordon, 2009, p. 13).

As Julian Pettifer and Nigel Turner (1984) illustrated in their analysis of car culture with an aerial shot⁸ of the Rose Bowl in 1949: “[A] visitor from outer space might be forgiven for believing that it is the car that has inherited the earth and that man is here to serve it” (p. 101). It really shows that in America “is where the car lives” (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 58). Automobiles, not humans, seem to inhabit the nation. They drive along the “[b]ig strip mall from coast to coast” and randomly drop of a human being at “McDonalds, Pizza Huts, Wendys” or any other establishment “owned by major chains,” as Todd puts it when he picks up hitchhiker Reggie Kane initiating quite metaphorical conversations (*Duets*).

Their first encounter reveals that both have lived their lives “in tiny rooms.” Todd’s rooms are “owned by . . . Ramada, Sheraton, Motel 6,” while Reggie is talking about prison (*Duets*). This ironic comparison represents the beginning of their friendship. At the same time, it indicates how America’s urge for freedom and mobility caused the emergence of countless motels and fast food restaurants literally putting the country in “chains;” a metaphor that *Falling Down* applied to reflect America’s self-made entrapment. In addition, such conglomeration of chain establishments hints at another cultural phenomenon *Duets* illustrates: America’s landscape of nowhere (Primeau, 1996, p. 63).

⁸ (See Appendix B: Illustration).

5.2.2. “We could be anywhere”: America’s sameness and dislocation

[Todd:] Oh gosh. Uh, well, then I must be in the wrong room. Wow, I’m – very sorry, guys, I was just in such a hurry. . . . Does anybody know where the Everglades conference suite is? [Guy:] Everglades? This is Houston. [Todd:] Oh, God. I thought I was in Orlando (*Duets*).

The first time *Duets* introduces Todd, he wakes up in an airport hotel just before hurrying into a conference room where everybody seems to be waiting. He is on a business trip to sell a “Pirates of the Caribbean” amusement park to Shell Island, South Carolina. This park takes “one of the last remaining pristine beaches on the eastern seaboard” and turns it into “Toonville – with fast food” (*Duets*). While presenting the project, Todd has to realize that he is not in the right conference room, and not even in the right State. It illustrates the increasing “sameness” and “dislocation” Primeau (1996) expresses in his study of automotive depictions in literature (p. 63).

More specifically, in *American Journey*, a character called Reeves “is alarmed that our interest in what makes places unique is being replaced by the ubiquitous ‘sameness of tract homes, shopping centers, and hamburger stands.’” Furthermore, “[he] conjectures that uniformity is actually defended as an antidote to traumatic mobility. Noting that he can move for days without experiencing change, he feels a sense of dislocation” (Primeau, 1996, p. 63). According to Primeau (1996), American road narratives show the “apparent fading of regional differences,” a cultural phenomenon that finally seems to find its cinematic interpretation (p. 63). Peter Röllin (1993) came across this development even earlier while analyzing America’s insular landscape where spaces in-between, spaces which are geographically called localities, small towns, villages or

communities, are literally lost on the way (p. 72). Such car-friendly islands populating America make every place look the same, wherefore Todd manages to confuse Texas with Florida.

Thus, dislocation is one of the leading cultural phenomena in *Duets* finding further reflection in the two characters Ricky Dean and Billy Hannan who both pose the question “Where am I?” after waking up in a random motel room. Standard equipment and endless roads plastered with motels and fast food restaurants make them feel like they “could be anywhere,” as Todd states while entering one of several hotels on his trip (*Duets*). His critique continues where Foster’s Whammy Burger-scene ended. He criticizes the mass-produced culture Americans created themselves by adapting their landscape, lifestyles, and even eating habits to their icon of freedom and mobility.

Not the first, but America’s prime example for the fast food evolution can be seen in McDonald’s and especially their franchiser Ray Kroc, who is described as “entrepreneurial wizard” standing in a league with Henry Ford (Jakle & Sculle, 1999, p. 57). Following Ford’s example, he put “hamburger-making on assembly lines” and established “a system capable of delivering a hamburger, fries, and a shake every 50 seconds” (pp. 57-58). This mass production and consumption complements the insignificant environment Todd despises. Throughout the years, the customer turnover was accelerated even more by turning drive-ins into drive-throughs, where seventy percent (70%) of the nation’s fast food sales are made today (Vanderbilt, 2009, p. 27). It helped to enforce the American lifestyle “on the go,” representing another source for the sense of dislocation.

The creation of a car-friendly landscape satisfying the “eternal itch for mobility,” allows one to do almost anything in the car (Johnston, 1997, p. 9). Being on the go became such an essential element of the American way of life that one product followed the other making it possible to never stop the drive. Since the 1980s, the fold out cup holder belongs to the car’s standard equipment (Vanderbilt, 2009, p. 27). The number of food products with the word “go” on their label or in their ad – like “Campbell’s Soup at Hand” or “Yoplait Go-Gurt” – increased from 134 in 2001 to 504 in 2004. Consequently, the automobile changed the form of American eating habits introducing finger food that is easier to consume while driving; like the Crunchwrap Supreme which Taco Bell specially invented for drivers. “Tide to Go” comes in handy when the finger food experience had a bad ending. Audio books, which came into fashion in the 1980s and by now turned into a branch of business making 871 million dollars per year, make eating in the car appear less lonely (Vanderbilt, 2009, p. 28). In addition, the area of courtship and relationships reached a completely new dimension (Kihlstedt, 1983, p. 161). After replacing the traditional call with auto riding and thereby moving love “from the front porch to the back seat,” today’s “Tunnels of Love,” as Las Vegas likes to call them, make a wedding “on the go” possible with drive-through wedding chapels (McShane, 1994, p. 167).

This lifestyle strengthens *Falling Down*’s illustration of the car itself as a metaphorical chain. It traps Americans physically by transforming their landscape. At the same time, it turns into their mental chain limiting their view to a “*Tunnelsicht*” ‘tunnel vision’ which shows the outside only through the windshield (Fahr, 1993, p. 26). According to Peter Fahr (1993), the permanent movement that comes with the American

way of life – Primeau’s (1996) “traumatic mobility” (p. 63) – changes people’s perception. It becomes limited to the view straight ahead, while to the left and right everything passes in abstract stripes (Fahr, 1993, p. 26). This observation is reflected in *Duets* with camera shots through the windshield only showing the street in front like an ongoing movie. The car provides the drivers “each with its private space and each with a picture-window view into the reel world” (Hey, 1983, p. 200). Such restricted and abstract view adds up to America’s sameness and dislocation. While Americans “drive through” the country, the day and their lives, their limited perception disguises the country’s car-friendly homogenizing metamorphosis. It culminates in the feeling “that [one] can move for days without experiencing change” (Primeau, 1996, p. 63).

Accordingly, *Duets*’ characters go “places they’ve *never* been before” and have to realize that they all look the same.

The urge for freedom and mobility encouraged a lifestyle on the go. It turned America’s landscape into a conglomeration of car-accessible food and motel chains and limited their perception to the windshield. Ironically, various theorists tend to question if this transformation really enabled Americans to live on the go: “With two-thirds of the nation driving through congested ‘carburbs,’ the system of moving Americans was clearly askew” (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 2). Holtz Kay (1998) disagrees and poses the question if Washington would still advance the “policies that had produced dependence on the motor vehicle and assaulted the landscape . . . and the quality of life” or if he would actually tame the car (p. 2). She examined how the automobile ravaged the country over the past hundred years and came to the conclusion that “[o]ur transportation is a tangle, our lives and landscape strangled by the umbilical cord of the car. . . our vaunted

mobility is, in fact, obstructed by a car culture in which every attempt to move is fraught with wasted motion, wasted time, wasted surroundings, wasted money.” Instead of freedom and unlimited mobility, it created “motorized stasis;” a condition *Falling Down*’s opening scene made apparent (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 8).

It shows the contradictory and rather negative development caused by the celebration of the automobile that begins to be depicted in movies. Specifically, Todd’s journey illustrates the realization of these cultural changes while the belief in the “great wheeled god” and its liberating powers persists (Casey, 1997, p. 8). Moreover, theorists start to compare America’s car-obsession with the quality of “opium for the masses” which clouds the car-related deterioration of the country (Gartman, 1994). In 1978, Virilio talked about “*Opiomanen*” ‘opium addicts’ (p. 40). It perfectly defines today’s drivers who worship their automotive god and sacrifice their country’s uniqueness to maintain the comforting illusion of “freedom” which Todd is “flying on” (*Duets*).

5.3. An Analysis of Todd’s Nostalgic Journey

5.3.1. The call of adventure: A man went looking for a pack of cigarettes . . . the automotive promise of escape and liberation

Escape – that was what a car was. A man’s getting away from what and where you are. Get out, and if you don’t like your environment or your little life, you get in a car and you can get away from it (qtd. in Gartman, 1994, p. 94).

In 1987, a Chrysler executive remarked such promise describing the car as option of escape “from the future, or at least from the hassles of the present,” a promise Todd seems to follow on his nostalgic journey (Clarke, 2007, p. 13). Furthermore, Deborah Clarke (2007) attributes cars with the ability “not only to recover the past but also

transform one's identity, to get a person away from 'what . . . you are' – at least if 'you' are a man. Man is the one who escapes; woman is presumably what he escapes from" (p. 13). This observation applies to Todd's initial motivation to hit the road as well because he is not satisfied with himself, what he does, and his ungrateful family.

When Todd returns from a business trip, he enters his house which appears to be empty. His children are playing videogames and talking on the cell phone, not noticing his return. He finds his wife (Candy Woods) in their bedroom in front of the computer barely greeting him.⁹ In their rather one-sided conversation, he recapitulates his recent work adventures leading him from one State to another. While telling her about America's standardization causing his dislocation – "Thought I was in Florida and I was in Texas" – he realizes that his profession actually creates such depressing landscape. The job that enables him to provide for his family and live out the American Dream, destroys the country's uniqueness and turns it into "Toonville." He tries to share this revelation with his wife who is only wondering: "But didn't you want their breeding ground?" (*Duets*).

In accordance with Clarke's (2007) elaborations on typical escapist car ads, Todd tries to get away from his dull life and inattentive wife, who is too busy to help him through his dilemma. He decides to leave "for a pack of cigarettes" to escape his insignificant existence embodied by his environment, his family, as well as his profession, and illustrated by the aerial camera shot opening this chapter (*see fig. 3; Duets*). His spontaneous road trip reminds of literary characters such as John Updike's Harry Armstrong in *Rabbit Run* (1960), a novel Primeau (1996) describes as "an updated

⁹ (See Appendix B: Excerpt 1).

version of the story about the man who goes to the store for a gallon of milk and was never heard from again” (p. 90). Todd buys into the old literary promise: “When one feels trapped, freedom is no farther away than the car keys” (Primeau, 1996, p. 79).

At the same time, he follows in the footsteps of cinematic characters like Robert Eroica Dupea, the unhappy rebel of everyday life, who is trying to get in agreement with himself on the road (*Five Easy Pieces*; Rafelson & Wechsler, 1970). He starts a trip to nowhere to live out his internal revolt (Grob & Klein, 2006, p. 15). According to Roman Mauer (2006), the typical male road movie protagonist gets a crisis in everyday life, tries to breakout and therefore starts a journey of self-discovery (p. 102). This plot line sounds quite familiar considering Todd’s escapist motivations. It exhibits anew his inner conflict between “nostalgia and bad feeling” which finds further expression in a hotel bar at his first stop (Casey, 1997, p. 8).

5.3.2. The departure into the unknown: Hostile consumer culture selling pioneer spirit

After leaving suburbia and his family behind, his journey leads him to a Pacific Inn that fuels his disappointment in the American Dream and its empty consumer promises:

[Todd]: Got something better than a credit card. I've got over 800,000 frequent flier miles. I've been wanting to take advantage of your room credit offer for years. [Concierge:] I'm sorry, sir, but we don't have any mileage credit rooms available this evening. . . . [T]he earliest I have available is in six weeks. . . . We take MasterCard, Visa or AMEX (*Duets*).

Such rejection represents a recurring theme throughout the movie leading to Todd's enlightening climax – his “error in judgment” – similar to Foster’s “point of no return,” after which he cannot go back and accept the life as he knew it (*Duets; Falling Down*). Todd qualifies as another madman, who wants to bring a societal message across. He emphasizes America’s physical deterioration that creates the unbearable sameness and insignificance he is trying to escape causing his fascination with karaoke.

Todd pays and starts to explore the hotel. He comes across the bar where he sees Sheila, a random girl singing on stage. After complimenting her performance, they start a conversation which reveals once more Todd’s dull and trapped suburban life maintained by his job in sales. When Sheila is trying to convince him to sing and asks if he is “in sales at the moment,” his answer of being “out getting a pack of cigarettes” makes him realize that he does not know where he is. Arizona? New Mexico? “Close enough. Same – they’re right next to each other” (*Duets*).

It confirms once more the phenomena of America’s sameness and its insular culture. While focusing on the next island, he did not recognize the sign or the regional difference, an accusation Bierbaum used to make against the train in which “we are hauled at speed that completely eliminates the possibility of welcome sights” (qtd in Sachs, 1992, p. 93). As mentioned earlier, Bierbaum was trying to defend and encourage the development of the automobile not knowing that this vehicle will cause a landscape of nowhere. Additionally, Todd’s confusion illustrates the traumatic and trancelike state of the driver who passes the country unaware of regional differences that slowly disappear due to America’s extreme adaptation to the car. It leaves a homogenized landscape behind resembling Todd’s existence which he temporarily tries to forget with

the help of karaoke: “[Sheila]: Oh, it’s a rush like you wouldn’t believe it. It’s like you get to be a star for three minutes” (*Duets*).

After Sheila handed him some beta blockers to “chase all [his] fears away” and gave him an encouraging kiss, Todd gets on stage and starts singing Todd Rundgren’s “Hello, It’s Me” metaphorically underlining his longing for recognition and attention, especially from his wife who just not seems to care:

I thought about us for a long, long time. Maybe I think too much but something’s wrong. . . . I take for granted that you’re always there. I take for granted that you just don’t care. Sometimes I can’t help seein’ all the way through. It’s important to me. That you know you are free! (qtd. in *Duets*).

The rush of performing confirms his urge to simply break out of the chains he used to live in and as Bob Graham (2000) summed it up perfectly: “[O]ff comes the suit, in goes an earring, and he’s off and running, hopped-up and more frantic than he knows.”

Todd gets his ear pierced, speeds throughout the country, takes pills and drinks beer while listening to rock music on his drive to nowhere resembling typical road movie behavior. At this point, his nostalgic side seems to take over strengthening his belief that his longing for freedom can simply be satisfied by hitting the road. He buys into the escapist promises of commercials and movies celebrating America’s icon of mobility and freedom. He falls for the lure of their “great wheeled god,” a worship symbolized by his new earring: a dangling cross (Casey, 1997, p. 8).

Additionally, by breaking the chains that his environment and job put on him and really exploring places he has never been before, he exhibits a certain “pioneer spirit,” a typically American characteristic (Ireland, 2003, p. 475). It puts him in line with Foster

who was standing up for his rights as an American citizen before realizing that most of it is just an illusion. More specifically, Todd's urge for escape makes him celebrate his American rights in a rather territorial manner. He relives "the nation's democratic characteristics" that Frederick Jackson Turner already attributed in 1893 to America's "vastness and purported emptiness, and the consequent high degree of mobility of its people" (qtd. in Seiler, 2008, p. 21). Such historical values still find their reflection in current advertisements and movies making the car more than just a means of transportation. Advertisements promise: "'That's how you feel behind the wheel . . . like a hero all over again'" (Alvord, 2000, p. 47). They sell the option to travel as a demonstration of freedom and autonomy (Seiler, 2008, p. 21). It makes Americans believe that "'auto tourists could not only vicariously reenact the nation's pioneer history but also embrace the democracy and independence of the open road . . . reaffirming their true American character'" (p. 49).

In accordance with the cinematic road genre, which frequently uses "myths and symbols of the American west frontier, such as references to cowboys, hostile Indians, pioneers, gunslingers, . . ." (Ireland, 2003, p. 475), contemporary advertisements increasingly contain Western attributions. A study by Elliott West (1996) revealed that although "[w]estern themes, with allusions to restless power, have been staples of auto ads for sixty years," during the last quarter century they have become even more common (p. 42). This observation possibly hints at America's loss of their historical ideals of freedom, individuality and mobility due to the car-related transformation of the country putting it in chains and getting the individual lost in the mass. It could be seen as an

expression of America's longing for the old days, which is cinematically reflected in *Duets*.

After Todd expressed his longing for freedom in his karaoke premiere, his nostalgic feelings take over. He rediscovers America and flies over empty roads as no car ad could have ever pictured better. In a certain way, his drive throughout uncivilized nowhere reminds of the groundbreaking depictions of *Vanishing Point* (Sarafin, 1971) sending Kowalski, "der '*letzte amerikanische Held*'" 'the last American hero,' on a trip from Denver to San Francisco to deliver a white Dodge Challenger (Mihm, 2006, p. 126). He is chased across the U.S. by the police who are unable to catch him. This heroic journey might have inspired Todd to cross the country in search of ultimate freedom. But like Kowalski, who is carrying the American myth of irrepressible freedom to the grave (p. 126), Todd has to encounter the "high cost of the relationship" to his vehicle of freedom that is unable to keep its promises (Casey, 1997, p. 8).

Besides perceiving and criticizing the physical impact and general consequences of worshipping the automobile as deity and sacrificing the country, Todd does not realize his own deification and worship. This paradox shows itself when he picks up his companion, hitchhiker Reggie Kane: "[Reggie:] Where you going? [Todd:] Nowhere. I'm actually out buying a pack of cigarettes" (*Duets*). Once more, it shows his fascination with the car's promise of escape sending him on a trip to nowhere in search of a pack of cigarettes or ultimate freedom possibly to be found on the road. As their conversation continues, his breakout of society finds its verbal expression in his statement that "this

whole country should loosen up”¹⁰ – a country that makes frequent flyer mileage offers without being able to fulfill them and denies customers breakfast because they are three minutes too late. It confirms the early interpretation that he is trying to break out of this homogenous and restrictive society by simply disregarding its regulations. He drinks while driving, ignores the speed limit, and takes drugs to widen his horizon. He claims that he was put long enough in chains like “Ramada, Sheraton, Motel 6” without identifying the real “chain” limiting his perception to a tunnel vision, and creating his despised landscape of nowhere (*Duets*).

As mentioned before, this movie and especially this dialogue represents a cinematic equivalent of Casey’s (1997) literary findings. It addresses America’s love affair with the car which reached a crisis throughout the years and at present is defined by a certain “ambiguity and complexity” making people “contemplat[e] the difficult choice of reconciliation with the car or life without vehicles” (Casey, 1997, p. 8). Foster decided for the latter option and abandoned the car. Todd, on the other hand, still believes the automobile is the *ur-American* icon, as the next phase of his journey shows.

Thus, his realization of the “high cost[s]” is initiated by his escape from the environment it created (Casey, 1997, p. 8). At the same time, he appears to be blind to the real consequences of the “Faustian deal that goes with this bird machine,” as Sebastian Lockwood (1998) put it while analyzing America’s “love/hate” towards the car (p. 52). He refers to Baudrillard’s *America* and his description of driving as “‘a spectacular form of Amnesia’” which “erases the past and consumes the future” momentarily sending Todd on the wrong track (p. 52). In addition, he claims that “roughly 70 percent of all the

¹⁰ (See Appendix B: Excerpt 2).

energy put out by humans goes into the making, sustaining and fueling of cars” (Lockwood, 1998, p. 52). It indicates the actual burden or chain the car represents while being celebrated as liberating instrument.

5.3.3. The road of trials

A rare American unable to drive and his rite of initiation

In reality, “[t]here is no escape from the car” in American society, Lockwood (1998) continues (p. 53). This fact is reflected in Todd’s indignation about Reggie’s inability to drive: “You don’t know how to drive? . . . How bizarre!” It confirms Todd’s persistent belief in the car’s promise of freedom, independence, and individuality representing values this nation is based on and thereby ensuring his rights as American citizen. On their way to another bar, Todd offers to teach Reggie how to drive because he believes “[i]t’s pathetic” that a man Reggie’s age “[doesn’t] even know how to drive” (*Duets*). It reminds of Margaret Thatcher who once said that a man who relies on the bus after the age of thirty, can count himself a failure in life (Böhm, Jones, Land, & Paterson, 2006, p. 8). This statement emphasizes the low status of public transportation anew and marks Reggie as dysfunctional part of a society which is following the existential credo: “I drive therefore I am” (Clarke, 2007, p. 9).

According to Flink (1987), “automobility became an integral part of American life” during the first decade of the twentieth century (p. 18). It became “as American as apple pie, the Declaration of Independence, and the stars and stripes” (Flink, 1987, p. 17). Today, it is “essential to shaping the dominant meanings of ‘America’ and ‘American,’” wherefore Reggie’s immobile character appears as un-American outcast of society (Seiler, 2008, p. 7). Hence, Todd’s driving lessons represent Reggie’s opportunity to

become part of society because “getting behind the wheel for the first time [is] a rite of initiation into adult American society” (Simmons, 1983, p. 154). It came to represent a “rite of passage universally valued by every youthful driver,” giving him “freedom from the family and the family’s schedule” and making him a real part of American society (Vaughan, 1990, p. 80; Lutz & Lutz Fernandez, 2010, p. 20). Todd initiates Reggie’s “rite of passage.” He relieves him from his dependency on other “people for rides” and gives him a chance to end his life as an outcast and accordingly “failure” (*Duets*).

Narcotic substitute for dependent independence

Free from the constrictive contexts of the day-to-day, life on the road brings what anthropologists have called a ‘liminal’ process of ‘midtransition in a rite of passage’ . . . where people in motion are suspended not only in space and time but between what they think they know about the past and what they have reason to suspect will be inevitable when they get home (Primeau, 1996, p. 69).

Primeau’s (1996) analysis of literature and the American highway addresses the automotive “rite of passage” in a quite different sense. He shows that highway travelers usually give up or get released from “a social structure that impinges upon dreams and aspirations” and claim that they receive “wisdom, power, and infusion of new energy” on their journey as “[r]oad heroes” (p. 69). Thus, highway traveling and the “liminality on the modern road” can be compared to a pilgrimage which offers an “opportunity to start over and discover one’s inner resources and potential” seemingly resembling Todd’s motivation to hit the road (Primeau, 1996, p. 69).

In contrast, this study also referred to literary works indicating that self-discovery on the road turned into a myth unachievable in today’s society:

Once upon a time, the road did symbolize freedom, opportunity, expanse, adventure; it was a place to find oneself. . . . While everybody looked the other way, however, that myth became a saleable commodity and the metaphors changed. The open road encouraging self-reliance turned into a consumerland of trendy conformity. Left with a realization that we have been uprooted with no sense of a future, the only adventure left involves ransacking the past. . . . [T]he myth still lives on – but as nostalgia rather than an ideal or a sense of achievement (Primeau, 1996, p. 100).

In this way, Primeau (1996) provides a quite fitting interpretation of contemporary cinematic journeys. Especially Henry Miller's *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945) and Tom Engelhardt's *Beyond Our Control* (1976) represent early depictions of the car-related issues Foster and Todd have to face. Miller, who "tried to imagine the pioneers' experience . . . had to settle for traffic jams," while Engelhardt's story opens as "'classically American trip from coast to coast' . . . but runs up against 'the vampirization of everyday life by corporate America'" (Primeau, 1996, p. 99).

More specifically, Engelhardt (1976) hits the road "to break out of something and into something else," at first being "committed to 'the virtues of movement'" and thereby doomed to find out that "'the 'On The Road' mystique had [him] fooled'" (Primeau, 1996, p. 99). Similar to Todd, he came across the fact that "Whitman's open road was now cluttered with mass produced food, prepackaged camping, franchised experiences, freak shows, the worship of commodities, the 'mechanical abomination' of recreation vehicles" making everyone and everything talk and look alike "as on a giant ocean-to-ocean TV screen." The "lure of discovery" turned into "'traveling in quicksand'" using

roads which were ““auctioned to corporate America”” creating an unachievable myth that Todd encounters (Primeau. 1996, p. 99).

Engelhardt’s *Beyond Our Control* revealed the “persistent American habit of confusing movement with progress” being hidden underneath the illusion of a road journey that drivers, authors, and readers are lured into soon perceiving “motion itself as a narcotic substitute for real freedom” (Primeau, 1996, p. 100). He sees the problem in the fact that Americans set out to change their location rather than themselves and thereby keep “[d]rifting from one mediocrity to another through a succession of prefabricated experiences” enjoying “the illusion of progress as the car rolls along.” By leaving everything behind and going out for a quest, “lost, confused, and alone” characters like Todd simply avoid problems by driving throughout the country which gives them the feeling of getting somewhere (Primeau, 1996, p. 100).

While pronouncing the “closing up of the open road, Engelhardt affirms . . . the enduring power of the highway mythos.” Furthermore, “[t]he lure of motion, the need to escape, the mystique of the quest, and even the multiple intrusions of media and spectacle – all have been woven into the American experience through the symbolic power of roads and cars” that Todd seems to fall for (Primeau, 1996, p. 100). Hence, his claim of “flying on freedom” shows how he uses continuous movement as “a narcotic substitute for real freedom” (*Duets*; Primeau, 1996, p. 100). It confirms his mythical belief and illustrates the source of America’s persistent love affair with the car making them blind to its negative impact and empty promises.

As Primeau’s (1996) study indicates: ““Americans choose myth over reality every

time;” a claim that cultural studies seem to confirm by addressing the values and promises the media created around the automobile in contrast to its reality (p. 60). “Far from being a mere means of transport, automobiles crystallize life plans and world images, needs and hopes, which in turn stamp the technical contrivance with a cultural meaning,” and in America’s case, the promise of independence and mobility especially hits their national roots (Sachs, 1992, pp. 91-92). As indicated in earlier elaborations, the car’s liberating power was mostly explained in comparison to the railway. It was celebrated as “genuine auto-mobile, a self-propelling craft, which troubled one with neither schedules nor preset routes, a pledge of freedom and individual pleasure.” It established a “feeling of independence” the railway could not offer (Sachs, 1992, p. 97).

Taking a closer look though, such independence does not come without its burdens. According to Wolfgang Sachs (1992), mass motorization actually generated “a new form of dependence behind the independence” (p. 101). He points out that eventually “all of these ‘independence machines’ depend on streets and power lines, pipelines and radio waves, which in turn bind the individual with multiple ties to industries, power plants, drilling rigs, and broadcast stations.” The car created “a dependent independence,” a consequence Bierbaum was probably not aware of while “toast[ing] the automobile with hymns of freedom for having released him from existence as a passenger” and turned him into a driver (Sachs, 1992, p. 101). Being stuck “in tight columns on the city freeways” of today, America has to realize “that even self-propelling vehicles can form a transit system organized according to impersonal requirements” turning the driver once again into a passenger, “even if self-propelled” (Sachs, 1992, p. 101). Not the option of alternative transportation made the car appealing for American

society, but the promise of “solitude and independence” as the media continuously celebrates (Sanger, 1995, p. 710).

Lutz and Lutz Fernandez (2010) found out as well that “[a]cross the country, there is evidence that convenience is not necessarily at the root of our love of the automobile” (p. 4). Their study shows that Americans still drive to work even when public transportation or carpooling would be less of a hassle and cheaper:

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, . . . thousands of office workers drive downtown every day even though they pay four times more to park in a garage than they would spend to take a city bus that would drop them off at the same corner. In one office building in Providence, Rhode Island, many employees drive to work rather than carpool or walk, even though the available parking comes with a two-hour limit, requiring them to leave the building two or three times a day, sometimes slogging through rain, sleet, or snow to circle the area looking for another spot (Lutz & Lutz Fernandez, 2010, pp. 4-5).

Their study supports the claim that the car’s handiness and convenience represents a rather illusive perception than actual truth being linked to America’s “potent desire to drive and the government policy preference for cars over other modes of transportation.” It is reflected in the relative size of the mass transit fleet comprising just 129,000 vehicles nationwide as well as the fact that “[f]or every eight public dollars spent on transportation, only one goes to public transit; the other seven dollars go to car-related needs” (Lutz & Lutz Fernandez, 2010, p. 5).

Despite such critical studies questioning the car’s liberating powers, commercials “do their best to keep it alive” by persistently “wrap[ping] the automobile, as a

commodity, in a cloak of meaning that . . . opens up their purses” (Sachs, 1992, p. 108). Slogans claiming that “Toyota gives you the freedom to get off the beaten path!,” try to sell the feeling of being far removed from civilization while exploring the nature as “hero of freedom and independence” out on an adventure (p. 108). Ironically, such ads cause America’s mass motorization and thereby make their promises unaccomplishable:

If everyone is breaking free, the joy of distance may well decline; if all are driving off in search of foreign experience, . . . those very distinctions for which they quest become hazy, and distant goals prove strikingly similar to home. Universal mobility takes the magic out of distance (Sachs, 1992, p. 109).

Deborah Lupton (1999) confirms the “irony of the mass-produced and mass-consumed car” (p. 61). According to her study, marketing strategies attribute “freedom, power, autonomy, success, potency . . . and mastery” to the product to make it appealing for Western societies that long for “[a] sense of space and the freedom to move.” It results in “city streets being choked with traffic, as everyone seeks to exercise their ‘democratic right’ to drive” (Lupton, 1999, p. 61).

In accordance with Sachs (1992), Lupton (1999) indicates that television and print media ads try to promote the freedom that is supposed to come with driving by showing single cars “gliding silently along country roads or freeways which are mysteriously empty of other cars” (p. 61). It offers an idea of a real freeway, but unfortunately, only their freeway is a “free-way” as Foster and Todd have to discover. Katie Alvord’s (2000) comments on escape advertisements such as: “‘You don’t have to blaze through the forest, hug trees and grow a beard to escape the cruel grip of civilization,’ perfectly address Todd’s dilemma (p. 49). This SUV ad is trying to convince one that the purchase

will bring ““solace from all things urban,”” a promise Alvord (2000) was trying to understand coming to the conclusion: “Perhaps that means solace from the profusion of freeways, parking lots, and automotive din that have made cities unlivable because they are inundated with cars like the one the ad is selling?” (p. 49). Advertisements distract from the proliferation of cars and their continuously spreading infrastructure which often turns out to be the actual cause for the longing to ““escape civilization”” (Alvord, 2000, p. 49). This cultural observation is portrayed in Todd’s contradictory escape with the actual “metal demon” that created the landscape he criticizes (Alvord, 2000, p. 18). This contradiction and self-made dilemma as well as the unaccomplishable promises cultural theorists point out, are revealed on their next stop at another hotel rejecting Todd’s frequent flier dream anew.

5.3.4. The elixir: “Bam, . . . JohnWayne I am!” says the automotive cowboy

Throughout the movie, every attempt to use his 800,000 frequent flier miles is dismissed with the explanation that the offer does not apply to the day he wants to use it, or in this case, “the offer ended” the day before.¹¹ This rejection represents Todd’s “final straw” and causes an emotional outburst similar to Foster’s Whammy Burger-scene addressing America’s illusive consumer culture. He snaps, draws the gun and verbalizes his frustration:

[Todd]: This offer never really existed anywhere, right? . . . This whole offer is just like every other pipe dream in the U.S.A., right? Just another cynical stock-job sucker punch on us poor, dumb commercial believers. It’s a 90s version of religious persecution, you know (*Duets*).

¹¹ (See Appendix B: Excerpt 3).

His verbal expression is followed by actions. He starts shooting furniture to express his breakout of this restricting society he no longer wants to be a part of. Like Foster, he lost his belief in society and its promises and takes revenge for the lies and dreams they fed him with over the years.

However, the rush of firing a gun, breaking the rules and thereby becoming an outlaw of this consumer society seems to hinder Todd's full enlightenment. Still thrilled by his new trigger-happy outlaw status, he enters a gas station while Reggie is asleep in the car. He behaves like a rebel, drops things, and encourages the clerk to make a hostile comment followed by: “[Todd:] I've lived my life in sales. Being hostile to a consumer is very counterproductive” (*Duets*). It indicates that he is not planning on returning to his life in sales. He wants to continue his outlaw path finding its expression in the ski mask and sunglasses he puts on just before he stumbles into merchandise. This enrages the clerk and ends in a gunshot.

When Reggie runs into the gas station, he finds Todd pointing the gun at the clerk and water sprinkling out of the soda machine. He manages to disarm Todd while the clerk gets his own weapon culminating in a duel similar to *Falling Down*. This time, the enlightened hero survives possibly indicating the incompleteness of his disenchantment. By reenacting outlaw-like behavior to escape such homogenous mass of commercial believers, Todd follows the cowboy fascination fueled by countless car ads and media depictions. His “error in judgment” turns him into one of the worshippers of America’s consumer and car culture again: “[Todd:] Bam, bam, bam! John Wayne I am! It’s a viable alternative to life in sales.” His fascination with heroic characters and the “power

of life and death” drives the consumer promise to an extreme and brands him as a real outlaw similar to Foster (*Duets*).

In contrast, Foster was trying to reveal the lies he was following for years after having his enlightening moment that crushed his world view. It guided him out of the cave he used to live in to encounter the real world. Todd seems to be aware of the real world with its sameness and dislocation from the start. At the same time, he lives out the consumer promises by escaping and now reenacting the pioneer spirit. Just like ads and movies continuously taught him, he seems to believe that the automobile offers “flight into vacation from the routine” or “flight of the criminal from a closing trap” (Sachs, 1992, p. 107). It signals a change of scene showing “the hero screeching away in a car [which] has replaced the cowboy of old riding off into the setting sun, majestic music rising in the background” (p. 107). As West’s (1996) study of Western images in advertisement shows: “For the price of a modest sedan and tank of gas, an American could indulge all sorts of free-ranging fantasies that meshed beautifully with mythic themes of escape toward the setting sun” (p. 42). Wild West images became an integral part of car sales strategies making it possible to relive the American frontier experience. It evokes the question if Todd really got lost throughout his critical journey, as most critics claim. Is he really riding through the country he despises with the actual instrument that caused this homogenous environment and does not realize it or is that part of his critique culminating in a John Wayne-reenactment?

Todd becomes aware of the meaninglessness of the frequent flier dream he bought into for years symbolizing another “pipe dream in the U.S.A.” – “Just another cynical stock-job sucker punch on us poor, dumb commercial believers” (*Duets*). Therefore, it

seems confusing why he would still buy into cowboy ads selling automobiles as “gateways to freedom” (Alvord, 2000, p. 49). Possibly, this reenactment represents an extreme way of revolting against this illusive culture built on unachievable promises embodied by Todd’s frequent flier dream. By living out what commercials depict and driving it to an extreme, he marks himself as a real outlaw. It shows how dysfunctional these promises are, if really pursued.

His “error in judgment” caused by his disappointment in society, turns Todd into an outcast like Reggie who knows that “doom” is the only thing that follows (*Duets*).¹² As mentioned earlier, Todd was the first person who gave Reggie a chance to become part of this society by teaching him how to drive. During their ride through the night after the fatal incident, Reggie hears about Todd’s family and decides to bring him back on the right track – make him a part of society again – since he still has someone to return to. He calls his wife to come to Omaha, the last station of their trip.

5.3.5. The return: The end of the road and the return to society

[Todd:] What’s this? [Reggie:] It’s the end of the road [Todd:] They got karaoke? . . . Oh, this hotel has a mileage upgrade offer . . . Will you look at this place? We could be anywhere. . . . [Concierge:] . . . I’m sorry. We’re not accepting this right now. But we do accept all major credit cards (*Duets*).

They enter another hotel that rejects Todd’s frequent flier miles and looks like all the others. They reach the end of the road which brings them back to where it started.

Additionally, Todd sees his wife again, another reason for his escape, who tries to listen this time:

¹² (See Appendix B: Excerpt 4).

[Todd:] You know, I have actually computed in my head the odds of getting the same rental car twice in a lifetime of business travel, and do you know what they are? Do you know how many actual sense memories I have of being in the same off-white Chevy caprice from the Alamo people in the Dallas-Fort Worth area alone? . . . It would blow your mind. It's nothing either one of you people can obviously ever comprehend. . . . I say we take the country back from the McDonalds and the Pizza Huts and the Wendys. I say . . . we get back in touch with the inner core (*Duets*).

Todd emphasizes his life revelations by pulling out the gun. This turns out to be too much for his wife who runs away in tears while Reggie shakes his head and calls Todd “plain insane” instead of simply “crazy” indicating that he might have gone too far (*Duets*).

Back in their hotel room, Todd apologizes to Reggie who realizes that the journey of his “friend” needs to be over because the rebellious rush lead Todd to the fatal conclusion that he is “through livin’ in a middle-class prison.” Reggie, who is trying to keep Todd “from throwing [his] life away,” slaps him and makes him aware that “[he doesn’t] know anything about livin’ in prison.” He indicates the difference between the middle-class prison Todd chose himself and real imprisonment he could not leave if he wanted to.¹³ This metaphorically reflects America’s self-made imprisoning carscape. Reggie encourages Todd to leave his self-destructive “path” while he still can, unlike Foster who had no companion to hold him back (*Duets*).

While the police are looking for the man who shot the gas station clerk, Reggie dedicates his last song to “a friend of mine, he taught me to drive.” When the applause

¹³ (See Appendix B: Excerpt 5).

for his interpretation of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird" is still going on, he draws his gun and thereby encourages the police to shoot him. He takes the blame for Todd's "error in judgment" and enables him to return to his family as his final words for Todd indicate: "go home." He gives Todd a chance to return to a normal life, just like Todd did by teaching Reggie how to drive and thereby adapting him to this society like nobody did before: "[Reggie:] I never met anybody like you" (*Duets*).

After the showdown, Todd's wife returns with a pack of cigarettes finally saying that she loves him. She gives Todd the attention he was longing for. Furthermore, he gets his frequent flier miles dream fulfilled when he buys plane tickets for both of them. As mentioned in the beginning, this in a certain way "dark tone shift" towards the end of the movie being followed by a somewhat happy ending for Todd, "throws it way off kilter," destroys a potential direct societal critique, and evokes reviews describing *Duets* as a movie unable to "find the right rhythmic balance" (Zacharek, 2000). It looks like the madman, who was supposed to offer cultural critique, gets reintegrated into the society he despises making its message questionable. On the other hand, Todd's frequent flier miles are used for plane tickets and still no hotel room. It underlines America's obsession with movement being embodied by the automobile and the landscape created around it.

CHAPTER SIX: HOW THE AUTOMOBILE TOOK OVER THE MIND

[Vincent:] Millions of galaxies of hundreds of millions of stars and a speck on one in a blink. That's us. Lost in space. . . . Someday? Someday my dream will come? One night you'll wake up and you'll discover it never happened. It's all turned around on you,

(*Collateral*, 2004)



Figure 4: A mystical encounter in the streets of L.A. signifying the “collateral” American existence in their self-made “asphalt nation” expelling humanity.

6.1. *Collateral* (2004): “It Started Like Any Other Night”

[Max:] First time in L.A.? [Vincent:] No. To tell you the truth, whenever I’m here I can’t wait to leave. It’s too sprawled out, disconnected. . . . 17 million people. If this was a country, it would be the fifth biggest economy in the world and nobody knows each other. I read about this guy gets on the MTA here, dies. Six hours he’s riding the subway before anybody notices his corpse doing laps around L.A., people on and off sitting next to him. Nobody notices (*Collateral*).

Disconnected. Anonymous. Indifferent. This is how *Collateral*¹⁴ depicts the life and people in Los Angeles, one of the most populous cities in the United States, where nobody knows each other, and does not seem to care either. It tells the story of Vincent, a mysterious calculating contract killer who happens to meet Max Durocher, a random cab driver with big dreams, whose services turn out to be less passive than expected. “[O]ne night, five stops, five hits and a getaway” is the promise of the movie (*Collateral*). What they are trying to get away from, they have to find out first. It turns a fateful encounter into a journey that changes both of their lives, whereby their means of transportation plays a major role.

The movie takes place in L.A., where Foster already tried to disguise America’s illusive culture; a culture based on luring “poor, dumb commercial believers” – as Todd put it (*Duets*) – with promises of freedom, mobility and individuality into sacrificing their country and even their mind to the “great wheeled god” (Casey, 1997, p. 8). It provides the basis for this chapter and especially Max’s journey that offers another perspective on America’s car culture by focusing on its psychological impact. Furthermore, it questions

¹⁴ (See Appendix C: Plot Synopsis).

America's persistent belief in the vehicle of freedom in contrast to cultural theorists addressing the physical and mental entrapment it caused. In accordance with cultural studies, *Collateral* illustrates through Max how still to this day American society disavows the truth and buys into the automotive dream to justify their car-dependent existence.

A *Boston Globe* columnist claimed in 1995 that “[a]t the deepest level, our cars are a tangible expression of our most important values. Freedom. Choice. Privacy. Individualism. Self-reliance” (Jacoby, 1995). Such values are rooted in American history, wherefore this technological innovation was and is celebrated in the U.S. like in no other country. But even early celebrants of American mobility like George W. Pierson (1964) had to realize its unforeseen, disappointing effect: “Looked at in the large, our empty continent was supposed to foster individualism of action and belief. . . . But in the long run mobility overruns space, and the circulation and recirculation of peoples induces conformity” (p. 972).

Accordingly, Alexis de Tocqueville talked of a “‘democratic’ withdrawal into privatism” bringing about an “‘immense and tutelary power’” that is supposed to “‘secure [citizens’] gratifications and watch over their fate . . . [while] it daily makes the exercise of free choice less useful and rarer”” (qtd. in Seiler, 2008, p. 141). Cotten Seiler (2008) picks up these early fears and hints at a striking resemblance to Theodor W. Adorno’s theory of a so-called culture industry by claiming that “practices intended to control the subject and reproduce dominant ideology are never . . . articulated as such; instead, such practices . . . would be characterized as the maximization of individual agency” (Seiler, 2008, pp. 142-143). For Adorno, such “practices” include the

consumption of products of the culture industry. The automobile turns out to be one of these products sold with the promise of freedom and individuality.

Furthermore, Adorno (1982) describes the car as phenomenon of *ersatz* individualism that “may ultimately become a mere ideological veil” covering a society that is in reality characterized by “standardized, opaque, and overpowering social processes which leave to the ‘individual’ but little freedom for action and true individuation” (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1982, p. 349). Adorno (1991) – who refused to learn to drive – sees in automobility just another pseudoindividualistic social process that promised its driver freedom and transformation but effected only “successful adaptation to the inevitable,” confirming earlier elaborations (p. 59). According to Seiler (2008), Adorno calls the car “an effective tool for the centrifugal regulation of the subject” (p. 143). This resembles Cassirer’s (1946) comments on the empowerment of tools worshipped like actual Beings, losing their primary function, and in this case, turning into the opposite.

Following these early observations, contemporary cultural and literary theorists¹⁵ encounter the consequences of this development. They discover that the longing for individualism and privacy creates conformity as *Duets* showed by sending Todd on a journey to fight his insignificance. Ironically, it also results in isolation; the death of public life causing closer relationships between drivers and vehicles than among people. These intense bonds between humans and machines lead to their blurred perceptions of reality and passive lifestyle on the go – or rather on the driver’s seat.

¹⁵ Such as Primeau, 1996; Casey, 1997; Holtz Kay, 1998; Paes de Barros, 2004; Seiler, 2008; Sperling & Gordon, 2009; etc.

Falling Down and *Duets* hinted at such psychological phenomena which seem to find their climax in Mann's story about a cab driver who gets tired of waiting and seeing his life go by his windshield. *Collateral* features America's self-made isolation and passivity. Max's journey illustrates the mental entrapment that came with America's worship of their Faustian machine promising one thing and causing the other (Lockwood, 1998, p. 52); or as Mark Osteen (2008) put it in reference to *White Heat* (1949): "Cars seem to be a criminal's best friend, but, like Pardo/Fallon, they are really Trojan horses" (p. 190).

6.2. Cultural Phenomena

6.2.1. "In L.A., nobody touches you": Individualistic isolated carsons

As the opening quote indicated, *Collateral* offers a depiction of America's "individualist's symptoms" caused by the celebration of the car as liberating vehicle (Seiler, 2008, p. 142). It shows how the longing for individualism and privacy created isolation and detached people from each other physically as well as mentally: "Quarantined by the car culture, we barely notice that the privacy of the automobile leading to the detached suburb at the end of the highway has created the malaise of the good-hearted" (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 50). Holtz Kay (1998) points out in *Asphalt Nation* that America's auto-oriented design "nullifies walking and intermingling" and thereby destroys public space, "the [real] stage of social life" (pp. 50-51). Consequently, everyday intercourse disappears and "we no longer rub shoulders with our neighbors." The car-driven privatism "account[s] for the death of public life" and "breed[s] the death of common concern," a development Vincent's MTA-story hints at (Holtz Kay, 1998, pp. 50-51).

In accordance with *Duets*' depiction of suburbia, Ron Powers – another critic of the social order – confirmed the solitary patterns that came with the car and the single-use suburbs it serves, eliminating what he called ““the last great space”” (qtd. in Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 51):

The pubs, the coffee shops, the communal collage vanish. Cordon us from community life, the car accentuates an environment of exclusion. The mall café is our vacuous symbol. Its umbrellas lack breeze or sun; . . . its architectural island walled by the automobile offers access only to the licensed shopper. No public realm here (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 51).

These observations appear to be quite ironic considering early cultural theorist like Flink (1987) describing America's general adoption of the automobile – especially by farmers – as a promise to break down the isolation of rural life (pp. 39-40). Looking at contemporary critics again, the same supposedly liberating vehicle created a new kind of isolation, extending from the physical to the psychological level. According to Vanderbilt (2009), it created anonymity on the street and detached people from each other who start to lose the sense of reality and the actual “sense of touch” as another movie announced in 2005 (p. 44):

[Graham:] It's the sense of touch. – Any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people. People bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other just so we can feel something (*Crash*, Haggis, Harris, Moresco, Cheadle, Yari, & Schulman, 2005).

Vanderbilt (2009) refers to this cinematic quote from *Crash* as realistic depiction of today's impact of the automobile on the American lifestyle (p. 44). Indeed, it seems to pick up perfectly what Holtz Kay tried to express by saying that people "no longer rub shoulders" (p. 50). Therefore, the phenomenon of a crash between vehicles – and accordingly people – appears to be a relieving and in a certain way reconnecting action finding its resemblance and deeper application in *Collateral*, as the closer analysis will show.

At the same time, *Crash* (2005) continues what *Duets* (2000) began to address with Todd's rebellious plan to tear down all these strip malls that put this country literally in chains in order to "get back in touch with the inner core." Both movies address the failing and unachievable American Dream, whereby *Crash* is laying bare the racialized fantasy of it, an area not necessarily essential to this thesis focusing on America's mislead longing for freedom and individuality. This longing ironically created entrapment and insignificance. It initiated Todd's nostalgic journey displaying America's frontier myth as source of America's obsession with individuality. *Collateral* seems to acknowledge such observation as well. Whenever Max leaves the garage to start his shift, he drives towards a wall covered with old Western scenery. It shows a cowboy being harassed by a bandit representing a quite metaphorical depiction of the beginning of his pioneering journey.¹⁶

In general, American history appears to be an essential component of justifications of their striking sense of individuality as the cultural theorist Laski (1999) points out. As mentioned in the literature review, Laski (1999) claims that one has to

¹⁶ (See Appendix C: Screenshot 1).

bring three things to mind to understand Americans: the American war of independence; the American democracy as well as the principle of equality, a principle Foster still celebrated and worshipped with his illusive idea of the American Dream achievable for everyone who tries; and the individualism Toqueville encountered as a feeling of freedom due to limitless movement (pp. 137-139). Such feeling provided hope, energy, and the belief in endless horizons which is characteristic for the ability to adapt to continuously changing conditions (Laski, 1999, pp. 137-139).

In other words, Americans believe in the freedom to go where they want to whenever they want to. This hope seemed to find its fulfillment in the automobile, the archetype of such freedom and individuality. Norbert Mühlen (1977), another cultural theorist contemplating about American individualistic longings, uses the same explanation. Furthermore, he does not only see the automobile as chance to go wherever whenever and thereby relieve Americans from territorial and timely restrictions. In his opinion, it also enables them to “adapt to continuously changing conditions,” as Laski (1999) put it, by actually detaching and isolating them from these. It allows them to protect and encapsulate themselves from the natural environment like in a tank: “‘My car is my castle’” (Mühlen, 1977, p. 43).

Mühlen (1977) defines the American “*Unbehagen an der Natur*” ‘unease in nature’ as one of the causes for the victory of the automotive revolution because it allows to stay away from nature even if one has to cross it; in the vehicle one can stay within his own four walls (p. 43). In this way, the car offers an extreme form of privatism, a feature often used to celebrate it as American icon in contrast to public transit that requires

shared space. It turns into the driver's castle protecting him from the environment and accordingly people.

Thus, the car became essential to the daily routine as more than a simple means of transportation. It offered unlimited mobility, protection from external threats, symbolized success, and became an equivalent to people's home (Riesman, 1966, p. 80). David Riesman (1966) came across comparisons of the car to people's living room, record player, jet plane and bathroom in 1966 (p. 203). Correspondingly, Marsh and Collett hint at the Ford brochure of 1949 which "declared that 'The 49 Ford is a living room on wheels'" (qtd. in Urry, 2006, p. 23). From the start, the car resembled very private and comfortable attributes that survived until today as various studies show. Sam Kazman (2006) claims that "[w]hen you get into your car and close the door, you have incredible control over your environment. . . . It may well exceed the bathroom as a privacy enhancing chamber of twentieth-century life" (p. 28). It confirms Bull's (2001) study of automobile habitation which describes the car as "your time capsule, . . . your living room, your mobile living room" (p. 197). In 2007, some of his participants still claimed: "I shut my door, turn on the radio and I'm home" (p. 100).

Hence, the car detaches the driver completely from the outside. This phenomenon is portrayed in *Collateral* when Max prepares his cab for work. He cleans the interior of the car, checks all the lights, sets up his ID and then closes the door which creates complete silence eliminating the noise he was exposed to before. In this way, it defines the car as noise protecting bubble similar to the opening scene of *Falling Down*, whereby Foster's bubble did not offer protection for very long. Additionally, Max's work routine indicates his close relation to the cab making it as comfortable as possible for the time he

is going to spend in there. His behavior found its verbal expression in *Blue Valentine* (Howell, Orlovsky, & Patricof, 2010) when an enraged cab driver warns a kissing couple to stop because: “This is my car, this is my home now.”

Furthermore, Max’s business plan of “Island Limousines” – “more than just a ride, . . . a cool groove. Don’t want it to end” – offers another representation of the car as extension of the comfortable home (*Collateral*). It confirms America’s insular structure transforming the automobile into a “boat” shipping passengers from one island to the other. Even worse, it turns the car itself into an island that people do not want to leave reaffirming the American unease in nature. The consequence of such phenomenon is the death of the public sphere ending human interaction and intensifying the relationship between vehicle and driver. It turns the wish for individualism and privatism into isolation and detachment from the people whose “sense of touch” the movies’ characters are longing for.

“[T]o drive and to park” became “Ur-words of daily life” and “replaced the primary gestures of social intercourse” (Ingersoll, 1990, p. 149). Accordingly, Richard Ingersoll (1990) concludes that driving has become “the key to American existence, as our principal form of identification is the driver’s license” (p. 149). In this way, the car, the “insulating horse [that] offers protection against threats of external elements,” also protects from social contact and defines American identity with the ability to drive, as illustrated in *Duets* (Primeau, 1996, p. 83).

“To be American is to drive; it is also to have a car” – The interrelation between car and American identity is so strong that an American without a car equals a “‘sick creature,’” or is compared to “‘a snail that has lost its shell’” (Clarke, 2007, p. 167). The

automobile became “a badge of identity, an extension of our homes, clothes, jewelry, weapons, and fantasies” (Primeau, 1996, p. 83); or as Jan Jennings (1990) claimed even earlier: “Overall, we saw automobiles as extensions of ourselves, a second skin we could live in” (p. ix).

This “extension” does not remain on the physical level as elaborations on road raging behavior – Mr. Walker turning into Mr. Wheeler – showed. It becomes an extension of the driver’s psyche as well giving his aggression wheels (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 18).

When we drive a car, it responds to our bodily movements and becomes an amplified part of our body. . . . As a result, the car tends to be thought of as part of oneself, both physically and psychically. Advertisements for cars often seek to represent them in these ways, as merging into the body/self or engaging in a synergistic interrelationship of self and machine in which the boundaries between each entity blur (Lupton, 1999, p. 61).

Lupton’s (1999) study of road rage and cyborg bodies captured how the driver’s castle, which was supposed to protect and liberate him, turned into a metal cocoon. Lutz and Lutz Fernandez (2010) call it: “psychological ‘encapsulation’ in which cars shuttle individuals in a metal casing, closed off from others, ‘between controlled and enclosed zones,’ from office park to shopping mall to gated community.” It results in a “‘logic of hyperindividualism’ that makes carpooling . . . anathema even if it is highly rational,” confirming earlier elaborations (p. 146).

Accordingly, Lupton (1999) assumes that this detachment from society culminates in the mergence between the driver’s body as well as psyche and the car. It

creates a “synergistic interrelationship of self and machine” often labeled as carsons – a blending of car and person – or cyborgs (Lupton, 1999, p. 61; Vanderbilt, 2009, p. 39). Consequently, Americans lose the sense of touch with other human beings while getting rid of their very own “human touch.” Blurred boundaries start to obscure who is actually driving: Did the servant really become the master and did the driver become not only insignificant but also “collateral” as Max labels himself (*Collateral*)?

6.2.2. Waiting in the “yellow-and-orange prison”: Passive autists behind the wheel

In the early 1900s, the automobile was perceived as phenomenon that promised to “raise significantly the quality of life and to restructure American society through technology along lines dictated by traditional cultural values” (Flink, 1987, p. 38).

According to Flink (1987), “[i]ndividualism – defined in terms of privatism, freedom of choice, and the opportunity to extend one’s control over his physical and social environment – was one of the important American core values” the car promised to preserve and enhance; “[m]obility was another” (p. 38). It confirms earlier elaborations relating privatism and freedom to the American longing for individualism which contributed to the rapid development of America’s car culture. Additionally, Flink (1987) emphasizes “control” as appealing automotive characteristic which contemporary theorists still seem to pick up. Thomas Kühne (1996) defines the domination of technology, nature and human beings as feelings the car conveys (p. 203). He describes the car as instrument of domination of time, space, and people (p. 210), reflecting once more the comparison of the car to a tool whose ownership and empowerment Cassirer (1946) called into question evoking further inquiries.

Steffen Böhm, Campbell Jones, Chris Land, and Matthew Paterson (2006)

address the indicated ambiguity of domination by taking a closer look at the cars promise of automobility itself evoking the question if the driver still is in control or ever was.

They realize that “[a]utomobility is ultimately impossible in its own terms” (p. 11). More specifically, “the very combination of autonomy and mobility” is contradictory.

According to Böhm et al. (2006), any attempt of a subject to move requires external interventions like technologies that need to be deployed or space that needs to be made available: “Cars need roads, traffic rules, oil . . . the more cars are around, the more rules have to be invented . . . to allow the regime of automobility to work ‘normally’” (p. 11).

Such “normality” contradicts with the idea of “completely autonomous movement” turning into an illusive promise. Instead of creating “an autonomous subject that moves freely in space,” as advertisements claim by depicting “cars on traffic-free mountainous roads with their drivers enjoying the freedom of movement,” it increasingly disciplines them (Böhm et al., 2006, p. 11). Baudrillard’s (1988) “must exit” sign dictating where to go, might represent the best metaphor for this development (p. 53). Furthermore, *L.A.*

Story (Melnick, 1991) offers its cinematic reflection with Harris Telemacher who receives love advice from L.A. traffic signs illustrating how the car culture dominates the life of Americans.

In addition to the restrictive system that came with the adaptation to the automobile not providing “automobility,” Böhm et al. (2006) call attention to unresolved tensions in the term itself addressing its psychological impact. Their analysis indicates the ambiguity of the “autonomy in movement” referring to machine or person: “Is it the auto that is mobile or moved by the driver?” (p. 12). It is questionable if “the motor of

movement . . . (literally the engine)” or actually the desires of the “immobilized body of the driver” determine the direction and trajectory of movement. This ambiguity evokes discourses of “hybrid subjectivities” – “‘carsons’” – which analyze the control over or rather “of” the vehicle (Böhm et al., 2006, p. 12).

Instead of providing “Freedom. Choice. Privacy. Individualism. Self-reliance,” as Jeff Jacoby (1995) pronounced in the *Boston Globe*, “the car system seems to constrain freedoms and dictate the very choices it appears to offer” (Latimer & Munro, 2006, p. 36). In this way, cars take over mentally as well by dominating this hybrid relationship. They start to “‘consume’ the very population they serve,” as Elizabeth Shove argues: “[T]hey eat up time, they steer people towards different sorts of lives, they structure everyday routines, and they dominate the management of time and space.” She describes cars as “‘Frankenstein-like devices that structure and constrain their ‘users,’ and ‘live’ in a sort of symbiotic – but perhaps unequal – relation to their makers’” (qtd. in Latimer & Munro, 2006, pp. 36-37).

Once again, the tool turned into a “Being in its own right, endowed with powers of its own,” dominating physical mobility as well as life in general, as Max’s condition depicts perfectly (Cassirer, 1946, p. 59). His job is defined by his vehicle, a job he thinks he needs to exist and to be able to reach the dream of his own business someday. At the same time, this job and thereby the vehicle dominates his life and hinders him from ever reaching this goal. “What began as a vehicle to freedom soon became a necessity. . . . a prerequisite to survival” (Interrante, 1983, p. 100). The promise of independence turned into dependence – on the car.

The car transformed American space and regulates its time – often spent on the road, and most likely in traffic jams. It dominates and defines American life, takes over physically and psychologically, and starts to outnumber drivers making them collateral. Max reaffirms Pettifer and Turner's (1984) early observation and picture¹⁷ rousing the impression that “the car . . . has inherited the earth and that man is here to serve it” (p. 101). Looking at current technological developments, these assumptions turn out to be less metaphorical than intended. In 2008, General Motors stated that they “will begin testing driverless cars by 2015,” and they could be on the road by 2018 (Squatriglia, 2008). This deepens the collateral condition of human beings and literally “drives” early fears of human passivity and autism to its extreme.

Virilio presaged the mental decay that came with the car transforming the landscape and its perception. His works “*Fahren, fahren, fahren . . .*” ‘Drive, Drive, Drive . . .’ (1978) and “*Rasender Stillstand*” ‘Rushing Stasis’ (2008) provide the grounds for this study by hinting at the actual entrapment and stasis America’s car culture caused while trying to increase freedom and mobility. He addresses the contradiction between mobility and “being moved” as well, claiming that the vehicle promising movement actually takes away any proper motion. The force of the drive does not offer any option other than further acceleration and loss of the immediate (Virilio, 1978, p. 80). According to Virilio (1978), the enormous adoption of the car in America created “*die Logistik des Durchfahrens*” ‘logistics of passing through,’ keeping the human material of the nation going, as their lifestyle indicates (p. 15).

¹⁷ (See Appendix B: Illustration).

Furthermore, Virilio (2008) asks how it can be possible to move without actually moving addressing the concept of the immobile driver being moved by his vehicle and thereby becoming a passive passenger (p. 32). He claims that the initially unleashed nomadism due to the vehicle of freedom, returned to motionlessness and to the ultimate settledness of society (p. 42). The car offers mobility without moving (p. 50). Its spray webbing – “*KOKONISIERUNG*” (p. 114) – turns the promised lifestyle on the go into continuous parking and waiting culminating in freeze framing (Virilio, 2008, p. 43). In accordance with Robert M. Pirsig (1974) who describes the driver as “passive observer” watching the world “moving by you boringly in a frame” (p. 4), Virilio (2008) compares the driving experience to watching a movie. He states that every mobile (or automobile) vehicle feeds a certain vision, a certain perception of the world which in this case is only a product of its continuous movement. Since the dynamic vehicle turns out to be static considering the passengers state, it is hard to differentiate the car from audio vision – another instrument creating movement without moving (Virilio, 2008, p. 43).

In 1978, Virilio defined this condition as self-created sickness; as a sclerosis of behavior which he exemplifies on urbanized humanity turning into a sitting human kind that watches life go by instead of being on the go (p. 38). This concept finds its cinematic embodiment in Max, the cab driver, who is probably one of the most mobile people in this city, but he actually never goes anywhere. His “temporary” job of driving other people to their destinations traps him on the driver seat and affects his perception of reality. It makes his dream of “Island Limousines” nothing but a dream that he keeps waiting on while life goes by (*Collateral*).

Mobility and motility of the body were supposed to enrich human perception and thereby enable to create a sense of self. Virilio's (1978) elaborations indicate that the slowdown of this dynamic mobility or its removal can result in personality disorders and deterioration of the perception of reality. The loss of kinetic and tactile impressions, which direct movement still offered, cannot be replaced by mediated impressions like the passing pictures along the windshield, in the movies or on TV (Virilio, 1978, pp. 38-39). Virilio calls (1978) such passing impressions illusive substitutes, similar to Fahr (1993) who elaborates on the driver's filtered perception. He defines it as "*Tunnelsicht*" 'tunnel vision' only allowing the view through the windshield lacking noise, smells, heat, and cold making the driver perceive "*die wattierte Wirklichkeit als Illusion*" 'the padded reality as illusion' (Fahr, 1993, p. 26).

*"Im Auto sind wir Autisten: Menschen, die sich von ihrer Umwelt absondern und sich vorwiegend in der Welt ihrer eigenen Vorstellungen und Phantasie bewegen."*¹⁸ Fahr (1993) labels drivers as autists who detach themselves from their environment and predominately live in their world of imagination and fantasy (p. 26). The car turns into a darkroom and the continuous flickering of speed creates temporary blindness of its passengers – offering a possible interpretation of Max's glasses as the analysis will show.

Virilio (1978) claims that the drive from one destination to the other turns into a pure indisposition of waiting on the arrival (p. 25). Regional differences do not matter to the autistic driver who only stops for basic needs at the motel or airport restroom. Automobility spread autism with the excessive overproduction of fast vehicles (Virilio, 1978, p. 34). It created indifferent and passive human beings which pass the world in a

¹⁸ 'We are autists in the car: Human beings who detach themselves from their environment and primarily move around in the world of their own imagination and fantasy.'

certain state of drowsiness or lightheadedness. Virilio describes the drowsiness of the passenger in his bolide to the snoozing of the opium addict, being somewhere else but easy to reach. He believes he is free like the wind, but in reality, control is close on his heels; he seems to be “flying on freedom” while entrapping and deceiving himself (Virilio, 1978, p. 40; *Duets*).

These elaborations show how the initial sclerosis turned into a coma; a medical condition when the patient loses relation to the outside world (Virilio, 2008, p. 122). Accordingly, the increasing immobility was a first indicator of a technical form of coma. The blurring of perception and loss of the sense of reality made the state complete. It is just a matter of time before this vegetative state turns into “*Leichenstarre*” ‘rigor mortis,’ wherefore Americans need to stop disavowing the truth and awake from their automotive dream, as Max’s journey illustrates (Virilio, 2008, p. 139).

6.3. An Analysis of Max’s Awakening Journey

6.3.1. The call of adventure: Frontier spirit on a dreamy island in L.A.’s bloodstream

Primeau’s (1996) literary study shows that by entering the “long tradition of travel literature,” the automobile added “its own unique merging of the frontier spirit and the worship of the machine” and began to represent more than just a means of transportation: “[I]t is what John Keats has called the insolent chariot and what Marshall McLuhan pronounced to be the mechanical bride” (Primeau, 1996, p. 5). *Collateral*, and especially its first scene introducing Max, offers a perfect cinematic reflection of these two concepts. As mentioned before, it opens with a significant camera shot of Max leaving the garage in his cab heading towards a big Western scenery which depicts a cowboy on a

horse attacked by a bandit on foot.¹⁹ Besides illustrating frontier spirit, this image offers a metaphor of the two leading characters whose destinies get intertwined due to the “big white horse” – their means of transportation – which they need to fulfill their jobs.

In addition, this scene shows Max’s preparation for his shift. He makes his “insulating horse [that] offers protection against threats of external elements” ready for the ride in cowboy-tradition by grooming his horse – wiping the dash board with paper towels – and putting on his saddle – his ID card (Primeau, 1996, p. 83). At the same time, this passionate routine characterizes Dettelbach’s (1976) findings. She describes the American attitude toward the automobile as “one of the most graphic examples of twentieth-century tool-worship” with its ritual acts of washing, polishing and Sunday outings performed by the average American (p. 99). After performing his ritual, Max closes the door and is embraced by immediate silence confirming earlier elaborations on shell-like characteristics of the car. Interesting about the depiction of Max’s “shell” is the recurring close-up of the ad display on top of the cab which gets broken, temporarily repaired, and broken again throughout the movie. It hints at the decreasing protection Max’s shell or “armor” offers.

Besides its initial protecting powers, his shell also provides Max with isolation going back to America’s so-called unease in nature as well as America’s mythic history which literary theorist Deborah Paes de Barros (2004) addresses. She describes the road story as “a manifesto of American cultural consciousness; it is the mythic representation of history and ideology” based on the idea of going where you want it when you want it like the cowboy in the American West (p. 2). Unfortunately, “the road was a space that

¹⁹ (See Appendix C: Screenshot 1).

celebrated individuation but also cursed the hero with an attenuated loneliness.” While passing unfamiliar territory often alone, “the hero traveled a road that was both glorified and feared” (p. 6). According to Paes de Barros (2004), “[t]he road was both the space of the lost Garden and a devilish landscape” emphasizing once more the automotive ambiguity this thesis is supposed to show (p. 6). Additionally, it provides a basis for Max’s close relation to his car since his life is branded by isolation from society due to his job. He is encapsulated in his protecting bubble that turns him into an ignored piece of furniture as the first customers reveal by talking about intimate issues like nobody could hear them. Thus, the cab represents the only permanent entity in Max’s life continuously accompanying him. It turns into his ““mechanical bride,”” as McLuhan put it; a bride Americans need to divorce to end this dysfunctional relationship entrapping Max and causing his insignificance (Alvord, 2000).

When his shift begins, the camera shows various aerial shots following his car through Los Angeles illustrating Vincent’s description of it. Such shots recur throughout *Collateral* cinematically reflecting the human insignificance America’s car culture created and Todd tried to fight. Moving cars define the aerial view of the city transporting passive human beings in their isolated cubicles to their destinations. It makes the movie scenery look like a game which two new players are about to join.²⁰ Max picks up his first significant customer, Annie Farrell, a U.S. Justice Department prosecutor on her way to work. She enters the cab while talking on the phone and thereby ignores Max like every other passenger. When he makes a suggestion about a faster route, his passion and knowledge evokes her interest and they start a conversation addressing the source of his

²⁰ (See Appendix C: Screenshot 2).

ambition: “[Max:] Limo company I’m putting together. Island Limos. . . So, I do this part-time to get my Benz off lease – staff up, get the right client list. You know, things like that.” Max tells Annie about the business plan he is pursuing while driving his cab “temporarily” to “pay the bills” (*Collateral*). This “temporarily” turns out to be twelve years showing the contradiction in itself later on.

Their conversation is followed by silence which Max tries to break by shifting the attention towards Annie, whose profession is marked by all-nighters and crying. It leads him to the conclusion: “[Max:] You need vacation. [Annie:] I just had a vacation on the Harbor Freeway. [Max:] No. Not in a cab. I mean, you need your head straight. Gotta get your unified self up. Get harmonic” (*Collateral*). He negates the comparison of a cab ride with vacation, a claim his future business “Island Limousines” seems to be built on. It emphasizes the dream-like character of the plan he has been pursuing or waiting to come true. He gives her a postcard displaying a picture of an island which he uses to relax from the daily routine because she needs it more than he does. In addition, he tells her to get her head straight, advice he should take himself as his frustration indicates whenever Annie leaves.

Apparently, this island picture only offers him comfort and escape from his insignificant and passive existence. By following his dream, he remains detached from the real world outside of his cab, a world he only observes through the windshield blurring his perception and enhancing his continuous comatose state. Again, the camera work illustrates this condition. It shows the inside of the cab offering a blurry picture of its surrounding that is marked by passing lights. Once more, aerial shots capture moving

lights reminding of Baudrillard's (1988) insignificant lemmings and allowing comparisons of American traffic to a bloodstream as various theorists acknowledge.²¹

According to Cathrine Gudis' (2004) study of the American landscape, “[t]raffic had emerged as the key to prosperity,” whereby its power is often described biologically as “blood stream of social and economic life of the community” (p. 117). Cars resemble “the white corpuscles of the blood” rolling along the “traffic arteries” and “carry[ing] health and strength to all parts of the body” (Gudis, 2004, p. 117). Such biological descriptions started with “nineteenth-century engineers that spoke of urban spines, arteries, and lungs” (Ingersoll, 1990, p. 149). Ingersoll’s (1990) elaborations on “The Death of the Street” – particularly in Houston – show that the demands of the car brought about a new creed among planners and city officials. Beginning in the 1920s, they asked for a practical rather than beautiful city; “the general trend was to lose sight of individual urban spaces in the effort to conceive of a greater whole governed by the imperative of circulation” (p. 149). Consequently, the street was substituted by arteries and urban spines and “[d]esign interventions” were described as “surgery rather than art” (Ingersoll, 1990, p. 149).

Collateral offers various shots of traffic arteries being flooded with automobiles rolling along like the white corpuscles of the blood. Earlier movies picked up this comparison as well and offered further interpretation. *The Italian Job* (De Line, 2003) cinematically showed that these “arterial highways formerly seen as the endless, frictionless frontier for auto-friendly commercial expansion [actually] became a congested morass”; the “arterial growth” created “‘roadtown’ based on the prioritization

²¹ (See Appendix C: Screenshot 3).

of the car and commerce over social and communal facilities” as depicted in *Duets* (Gudis, 2004, p. 159). It “contribut[es] to the automotive way of life” that a character in *The Italian Job* attributed to “*Berufsverkehr, Stau, der reinste Verkehrsinfarkt*” ‘commuting, traffic jam, a pure gridlock’ (Gudis, 2004, p. 160; qtd. in Vanderbilt, 2009, p. 154) – or “traffic infarction,” to stick with biology which will become more significant for Max’s journey later on.

Annie returns and gives him her business card which takes the place of the postcard attached to his sun visor. Thereby, it becomes a new dream in Max’s life, a dream that actually turns out to be achievable unlike the business dream he pursued for twelve years. The crucial factor causing such possibility is embodied by his next customer, Vincent, a contract killer sent to Los Angeles to eliminate five witnesses in an unspecified criminal case. Max is still admiring Annie’s business card when Vincent asks him for a ride and then moves on, wherefore Max has to call him back. This fact is significant considering later conversations when Max asks Vincent why he picked him. It indicates that Max actually chose Vincent as passenger while being the passenger himself waiting for a wake-up call.

6.3.2. The departure into the unknown: Therapy on the road

Vincent gets into the cab, tells Max his destination and both ride off into the night starting their awakening journey. The camera work underlines this scene with a shot from behind the cab driving away with the two cowboys riding off into the setting sun. This image is followed by an aerial view of the slowly moving white corpuscles of L.A.’s bloodstream – Vincent and Max being one of them. It metaphorically confirms Vincent’s insignificance speech which is followed by a conversation addressing Max’s supposedly

temporary job anew: “[Max:] I’m not in this for the long haul. Just filling in, you know. This is temporary while I’m getting some things shaped up. This is just temporary.” Max repeats what he told Annie. This time though, Vincent asks how long he has been driving and “[w]hat other things [he has put] together” so far. Max refuses to talk about it causing Vincent’s sarcastic observation: “You’re one of these guys that do instead of talk. That’s cool” (*Collateral*).

Their conversation ends in a rather hostile silence in comparison to Annie to whom he proudly explained his business plan. Vincent’s responses and critical questioning hint at the illusion Max believed in for twelve years and the ironical description of Max as “doer” instead of “talker” completely reveals his deception. Max’s unwillingness to talk further about that topic shows his own frustration with his stuck situation which Vincent starts to make him aware of. It indicates that their means of transportation momentarily turns into “a psychiatrist’s couch of therapeutic healing, a shrine of displaced theology,” as Primeau (1996) defines it (p. 83). His analysis of road literature shows that: “[w]hether explicit or implied, the built-in listener is prominent in all American road narratives. Some listeners start out as companion; others may join the trip along the way or for even a short time as hitchhikers” (p. 80). According to Primeau (1996), the car allows psychiatry along the road and *Collateral* seems to offer the cinematic confirmation for this assumption, whereby the clear differentiation between listener and talker vanishes throughout their conjoined journey.

When they reach Vincent’s destination, he offers Max six hundred Dollars for driving him to five appointments he is supposed to meet to close a real estate deal in one night. Max accepts. After Vincent left, he makes himself comfortable while waiting. He

looks once more at his new “island picture” – Annie’s business card. The camera shows his whole CD collection. Max starts to eat a sandwich while skimming through a limousine magazine. This behavior and interior display the close relation to his automotive castle which is about to be invaded. Literally, out of the sky, a man falls on the top of the cab. It cracks the windshield and ad display and thereby damages Max’s shell. He jumps out of the car and does not know what to do. He tells Vincent what just happened and has to realize that Vincent is responsible for this incident. He points the gun at Max and tells him to calm down: “Red light, Max!” expressing the merging between identity and automobile (*Collateral*).

Max tries to talk his way out of it and even offers to give up his cab, since his broken shell does no longer offer any protection. Vincent forces Max to put the corpse in the trunk turning his car into a coffin, a connotation earlier elaborations showed. They clean and fix the cab and get back on the road where Max tries to clean the interior as well, to save what is left from his home on wheels. Vincent stops him and explains that they have to move on, even if things do not work out the way they were supposed to: “We’re into plan B. . . . Now, we gotta make the best of it. Improvise. Adapt to the environment. Shit happens. I Ching. Whatever, man. We gotta roll with it” (*Collateral*). Thus, Vincent affects Max’s life like no other passenger. He calls his temporary job and business dream into question, damages his current island on wheels, messes up his mind like the interior of his car, and offers him a new philosophy of life – Improvisation – which is essential to the rest of their journey.

6.3.3. The road of trials

“I’m in the cab, man, I’m stuck!” yells the trapped passive observer

They reach Vincent’s next destination where he ties Max to the steering wheel to hinder him from escaping. It reflects Max’s psychological condition defined by his entrapment in the car which is emphasized by a conversation with Lenny, Max’s boss, who heard about the accident from the police. He calls to check on the status of the cab and force Max to pay for it. Surprisingly, Vincent helps Max and frees him from the exploitation of his boss.²² Furthermore, he tries to make Max aware that he does not need this so-called temporary job to pursue his dream. It traps him in an illusion that finds its physical expression in the actual bonds Vincent puts on him.

When he leaves the cab, he glances once more at Max with a smile on his face convinced that he helped. The door closes; a soft “Crazy” can be heard similar to the other movies. This leads to the assumption that insanity is involved in America’s awakening that begins with Max calling out his actual condition without fully processing it yet: “I’m in the cab, man, I’m stuck. . . Hey, look, I got to get out of here. . . I’m trapped, . . . let’s get me out of here” (*Collateral*). He tries to escape by making other people aware of his situation. It shows that Max did not become aware of his real entrapment yet, which he can only escape by himself. It indicates America’s general self-made entrapment due to their deceiving car culture that transforms the driver into a “passive observer” who watches the world “moving by . . . boringly in a frame” (Pirsig, 1974, p. 4).

²² (See Appendix C: Excerpt 1).

According to Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), you are always in a compartment in a car, "and because you're used to it you don't realize that through the car window everything you see is just more TV" (p. 4). He claims that "[o]n a cycle the frame is gone"; the driver is "in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming" (p. 4). Pirsig's (1974) opening quote expresses best what Max has to become aware of: "The real cycle you're working on is a cycle called 'yourself.'"

Max's scream for help results in a stolen wallet containing ID, credit cards, etc. It expresses how his human identity vanishes with his automotive entrapment. Vincent shoots the thieves, returns the wallet, and unties Max from the steering wheel. He gives him another chance to become active, transform from a talker to a doer, and make things happen instead of watching. It resembles the new life philosophy Vincent continuously mentions: "Improvise. Adapt to the environment. Darwin. Shit happens" (*Collateral*). More specifically, Charles R. Darwin's (1859) theory of natural selection claims that those organisms that are best adapted to their environment will survive and multiply. Only the superior being can survive – Max or Vincent – and get with the girl – Anne. It reminds of the "Darwinian struggle"-theme Smith (1983) came across in earlier movies, whereby *Collateral* puts emphasis on spontaneity to overcome passivity (pp. 182-184). Max seems to consider this philosophy as useful when Vincent elaborates more on it in the context of jazz.

"Let's just play a little jazz" – Imperfect improvisation

"[Max:] I never learned to listen to jazz. [Vincent:] It's off melody. Behind the notes. Not what's expected. Improvising, like tonight. . . . Most people, ten years

from now, same job, same place, same routine. . . . Just keeping it safe over and over and over. Ten years from now. Man, you don't know where you'll be ten minutes from now" (*Collateral*).

Max's inability to "listen to jazz" resembles his life. Vincent's explanation indirectly defines Max as one of these people doing the same thing for ten – or twelve – years to keep it safe and not risk any failure. Max keeps waiting on his business dream because "[i]t's got to be perfect," as he continuously states. This perfect dream might never happen if he sticks with his routine and never attempts to play "off melody", a new concept Vincent introduces to him and Max begins to consider as viable alternative (*Collateral*).

Vincent is facing his next target and is about to ask the ultimate question deciding between life and death when Max interrupts him: "You're the one talking about improvisation. You like the guy, you like how he plays. Let's – Let's just play a little jazz." It surprises Vincent who counters: "Improvi – That's funny coming from you," and finishes his job (*Collateral*). He addresses once more Max's stuck and passive lifestyle representing anything but improvisation. His trapped condition is embodied by his car defining his life and telling him where to go as Baudrillard's (1988) elaborations on the "must exit" sign showed. Max just follows where the streets lead him to among the other "lemmings plunging suicidally together" in America's bloodstream (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 53).

Max lets things happen instead of acting, wherefore the man gets shot in front of his eyes while he elaborates on jazz. He runs out of the room completely confused about the situation, in which he was trying to improvise, but nothing changed because he was

still only talking and observing things passing his windshield. Such realization seems to set in when he yells at Vincent: “Find you another cab . . . I’m collateral, anyway.” It expresses how his identity is defined by his car turning him into a replaceable human being; a passive observer being moved, rolling along America’s arteries. This connection between Max’s identity and his car finds further expression when Lenny contacts them anew to tell Max that his worried mother called, whom he visits every night at the hospital. Vincent decides to go there together because: “You don’t show up, it breaks routine. . . . So, people start looking for you, this cab.” It indicates how Max’s identity merged with his vehicle (*Collateral*).

They visit Ida Durocher, Max’s mother, who starts talking about him like he is not in the room – like his customers. It makes him mad because she indirectly confirms his passive lifestyle defined by talking instead of acting, a lifestyle he seems to pursue since he was a child: “[Ida:] Max never had many friends. Always talking to himself in the mirror. It’s unhealthy.” She tells Vincent proudly about Max’s own business “driv[ing] famous people around” while pointing out that “[y]ou have to hold a gun to his head to make him do anything,” a fact Vincent is already aware of (*Collateral*).

Hence, besides reassuring himself that his business dream will come true someday while “talking to himself in the mirror,” Max lets his mother believe that it already happened. Thereby, *Collateral* incorporates the “mirror” metaphor as well indicating that Max believes in the shadows he is presented with instead of seeing reality. Max deceived himself for years with the island postcard substituting the mirror in his car. He used this picture during his shifts to ensure himself of his “Island Limos”- business dream; a dream that turns out to be just an illusion and talk as Vincent persistently criticizes. After

introducing himself as “a friend” to his mother, she elaborates on Max’s business to Vincent’s surprise: “[Vincent:] Famous people. Limousine companies. Now, that’s quite an achievement,” indirectly disguising Max’s self-delusion.²³ Furthermore, it shows similarities to *Duets* where Reggie calls himself a “friend” during their journey, just before it reached its climax when both characters merge and the insanity factor starts to jump over.

In effect, Max starts to “improvise” by acting spontaneously. He grabs Vincent’s briefcase, runs out of the hospital and onto a pedestrian bridge over an expressway where he tosses the briefcase over the fence. Thereby, he finally becomes active after his business plan was revealed as an illusion and the irony of Vincent’s initial comment – defining Max’s as doer instead of talker – became clear. His action makes them even because it destroys Vincent’s work in exchange for his damaged vehicle and bursted business dream, wherefore Vincent starts wondering “what else [Max] can do” (*Collateral*).

His metamorphosis can be seen in the scenery as well when Vincent attacks Max. They are both lying on the concrete, Vincent on top of Max, the freeway in the background with its passing blurry lights. It shows how Max starts to raise himself from these insignificant corpuscles. Additionally, Max’s background is marked by red and Vincent’s by white lights possibly expressing once more the switch of insanity. This interpretation relates to Vincent’s increasing humanity throughout the movie. It started at the jazz bar, where he caught the target’s head after shooting him. At the hospital, he bought flowers for Max’s mother and back in the car, he starts a conversation addressing

²³ (See Appendix C: Excerpt 2).

childhood experiences, whereby the therapeutic skills seem to switch. While talking about his father, who “[h]ated everything [he] did. Got drunk, beat [him] up, foster homes . . . [and] died of liver disease,” he puts Max into a superior position, which he tries to regain by directly questioning Max’s business plan anew: “So, what is this ‘driving a cab temporarily.’ It’s just all bullshit? . . . Twelve years isn’t temporary, Max” (*Collateral*).

After encountering Vincent’s emotional side, Max seems to feel comfortable enough to talk about his business plan which is more than “just simply get the car and put asses in the seats. . . . Because Island Limos is more than just a ride. It’s like a club experience. . . . Don’t want it to end. It’s got to be perfect” (*Collateral*). While talking, Max starts smiling because the idea still comforts him showing that he is not completely awakened yet. Whenever he says that it has to be “perfect,” a striking headlight of a following car interrupts the close-up of his face. It indicates how he cannot get rid of this blinding dream because he does not “want it to end.” He still does not see the real source of his dilemma: the “island” itself (*Collateral*).

6.3.4. The elixir: Coyotes on the run liberated from automotive akinesia

To finish his job, Vincent forces Max to talk to drug lord Felix Reyes-Torrena to retrieve the information for the final two targets. Max tries to back out, Vincent responds: “Out of options, Max. Just take comfort in knowing you never had a choice,” like he did throughout his life. He follows Vincent’s order and successfully pretends to be the calculating hitman justifying his actions with his new philosophy of life: “Shit happens. Got to roll with it. Adapt” (*Collateral*). The switching of roles reminds once more of *Duets*, where Todd momentarily turns into the outlaw he picked up on his way. In addition, Max takes off his glasses while talking to Felix. He pretends to be Vincent who

has a different understanding of life in contrast to Max's delusive perception defined by his tunnel vision.

Their next target leads them to a club called "Fever", also representing the boiling point of the movie. The ride to their next destination offers another emotional and crucial moment marked by complete silence embracing the two leading characters lost in thought. "You gonna call her? . . . Your lady friend. The one who gave you her business card," Vincent asks pondering about the finiteness of life: "Life's short. One day it's gone. You and I make it out of this alive, you should call her" (*Collateral*). This truly emotional moment seems to indicate how Vinson starts to find his own reflection in Max or at least a real companion. This is emphasized by the most striking scene of the movie: Two coyotes warily crossing the dimly lit streets of Los Angeles. Max stops. Both characters appear baffled starting to question their own existence metaphorically embodied by these two outlawed creatures.

Additionally, Audioslave's "Shadow on the Sun" starts to play when the second coyote stares into the headlights turning the scene into an eye-opening moment (*see fig. 4*):

Staring at the loss, looking for the cause and never really sure. Nothing but a hole to live without a soul and nothing to be learned. I can tell you why people go insane. I can show you how you could do the same. . . . I can tell you I'm a shadow on the sun (qtd. in *Collateral*).

The song underlines Max's insignificance and contradicting existence – a cab driver, one of the most mobile people in L.A. being stuck in his "dream." This paradoxical condition is expressed by the metaphor of "a shadow on the sun." At the same time, the song

addresses Vincent's identity which is based on a mysterious anonymity and a profession that requires indifference towards his mortal assignments and the emotional consequences. It leaves him with "[n]othing but a hole to live without a soul and nothing to be learned"; a fact Max's presence makes him aware of. Furthermore, the song hints at the factor of insanity keeping their relationship going and about to bring Max to his complete enlightenment. While staring at Max, Vincent starts thinking and realizes that he is the only companion he ever had. A close-up of the damaged ad display on top of the cab indicates once more Max's broken shell Vincent invaded. The illusion of the liberating vehicle spread by America's consumer culture is crushed resembling Max's broken belief in this dream machine offering no insular escape but turning into a Trojan horse, promising reward but causing failure.

They reach the club. Vincent tells Max what to do and even safes his life like a real companion. However, he shoots Fanning, the only person who knows about Max's real identity, and runs to the cab. Vincent yells: "Go, drive! Drive!" It emphasizes that driving is the only thing Max is good for underlining his passive existence determined by his vehicle. Max hesitates but follows. When they drive away, Max hits several parked cars expressing his frustration about his current condition. He keeps damaging the vehicle that does no longer offer protection or a dream but simply defines his trapped identity and life. Max also has to realize that the only person left, who can help him, is himself. The comment from his mother – "You have to hold a gun to his head to make him do anything" – is about to come true because he finally stops to "take comfort in knowing [he] never had a choice" and becomes completely active instead of waiting for things to be "perfect" (*Collateral*).

Vincent expects Max to thank him for saving his life like a friend but gets confronted with the question: “[Max:] Why didn’t you just kill me and get another cab driver? [Vincent:] Cause you’re good. We’re in this together. Fates intertwined. Cosmic coincidence, you know.” Max calls him “full of shit” enraging Vincent because ironically, Max himself is “a monument of it” who “even bullshitted [him]self” by believing Vincent “is taking out the garbage killing bad people.” Max’s question for the real reason of his murders reveals Vincent’s indifference followed by mystical music:

[Vincent:] There’s no reason. There’s no good reason or there’s no bad reason to live or to die. [Max:] Then what are you? [Vincent:] Indifferent. . . Millions of galaxies of hundreds of millions of stars and a speck on one in a blink. That’s us. . . . The cop, you, me – Who notices? (*Collateral*).

It continues Vincent’s opening speech addressing human insignificance in America’s car culture which Max finally becomes aware of. He turns the therapeutic session around and questions Vincent’s indifferent and meaningless existence: “[W]hat were you? One of those institutionalized raised guys? The standard parts that are supposed to be there in people, in you – aren’t.” Vincent, who is surprised that “[o]f all the cabbies in L.A. [he] get[s] Max: Sigmund Freud meets Dr. Ruth,” calls on Max to “[l]ook in the mirror” and question his own existence built on a comforting lie that turned his life into continuous waiting:

[Vincent:] Paper towels clean cab, limo company someday . . . my dream will come? One night you’ll wake up and you’ll discover it never happened. It’s all turned around on you. . . . Suddenly you are old. Didn’t happen and it never will because you were never gonna do it anyway. . . . All it ever took was a down

payment on a Lincoln Town Car. Or that girl. You can't even call that girl. What the fuck are you still doing driving a cab? (*Collateral*).

This speech triggers Max's realization that he "never straightened up and looked at it . . . [him]self. [He] should have."²⁴

He starts speeding lost in thought and crazily rambles about the "perfect" lie he created for himself: "It's got to be perfect. . . . I could've done it anytime I wanted to." Vincent tells him to slow down – "[Vincent:] Red light!" – but this time Max does not stop. He realizes that his existence is not defined by his car. He is done following the rules and restrictions the car put on him, and begins to "improvise" because: "It doesn't matter anyway. . . . We're all insignificant out here in this big-ass nowhere. Twilight Zone shit. Says the badass sociopath in my back seat." Max stops following the rules and Vincent's commands who tells him again to slow down, this time pointing the gun to his head. It encourages Max even more to finally do something, as his mother had previously indicated. He becomes active, and takes control over the situation because he realizes that Vincent should be the passive passenger and not himself: "You going to pull the trigger and kill us?" (*Collateral*). Max becomes aware of his power in this situation and makes the final decision to wreck the cab releasing him from the chain that dominated his life and perception.

This scene shows once more Vincent's enlightening role in their relationship. He makes Max aware of the dream he has been waiting on for years giving him comfort while pursuing his passive and deceived lifestyle. In this sense, the act of crashing the car

²⁴ (See Appendix C: Excerpt 3).

and leaving it behind – his physical as well as psychological entrapment – represents a liberating act as earlier movies like *Duel* (1971) and *Falling Down* (1993) portrayed.

Max's entrapment was primarily based on the psychological effect of the car on his life, wherefore the crash displays certain awakening characteristics leading back to biology. It allows Max to awake from the comatose lifestyle he used to pursue and gives him a chance to restart his life free from this detached perception of the world. The comparison of the incident of a crash with rebirth was done before by Mikita Brottman and Christopher Sharrett (1999) in relation to Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996). They defined an accident as an active attempt to separate from the mother's body: "In most cases, this yearning to escape from the womb is associated with strong desires for autonomy and the establishment of an independent identity" (p. 284). Such desires seem to be applicable to Max whose identity is determined by his car. Brottman and Sharrett's (1999) further interpretation addresses a rather sexual content Cronenberg's movie illustrates not necessarily offering the cultural critique this thesis is aiming for. Nevertheless, the cinematic rebirth-metaphor appears to be valid considering various interpretations of cultural theorists.

Clarke's (2007) study of automobile culture in fiction analyzes the term of "automotive maternity" defining the mother's role in car culture "as driver and as vehicle" (p. 77); a comparison that Virilio (1978) makes as well. He describes women as first carriers of humanity and the man as passenger of the woman, not only during birth but also in their sexual relationship, showing similarities with Cronenberg's interpretational direction (Virilio, 1978, p. 74). The result of sexual relationships finds further elaboration in Paes de Barros' (2004) study by describing not only the car as

womb but also the journey on the road as a “process of pregnancy” (p. 112). This interpretation is reinforced by vocabulary such as: “Infants travel down the birth canal and after months of bearing the burden of their bodies, mothers finally arrive at ‘their time.’ Mothers then labor to ‘deliver’ their children” (Paes de Barros, 2004, p. 112).

Accordingly, Clarke (2007) indicates “a disconcerting slippage between uterus and car,” which she exemplifies on a minivan – the “mom car” – that “‘evoke[s] feelings of being in the womb,’” as Clotaire Rapaille, a psychological analyst with Chrysler, claims: “‘Stand a minivan on its rear bumper and it has a silhouette of a pregnant woman in a floor-length dress’” (qtd. in Clarke, 2007, pp. 77-78). Lupton’s (1999) study discovered such comparisons in billboard and magazine advertisements. They displayed “a close-up of a heavily pregnant woman’s naked stomach to symbolically represent the car in question, arguing that the car was as safe, secure and comfortable for its occupants as the uterus is for a foetus” (p. 60). In accordance with Max’s experience, Lupton (1999) points out that we are not only “enclosed within the body of a car when we drive it, we are also one with the car, just as foetuses are with the women who carry them” (p. 60). And just like a foetus, Max is waiting on his life to start while being secure in the nurturing womb, being passively moved by his “protective mother.”

Lupton (1999) continues that by seating ourselves in the car, “we enclose our bodies within its metal frame, generating . . . a private space in a public space”; it creates an “illusory feeling of safety, of being isolated in one’s own little capsule from the harsh realities of the world outside” (p. 60). These feelings are emphasized by car interiors that create a “universe of perfect accommodations” and establish “a soft, uterine environment to nurture the driver through the journey” (Richards, 1994, pp. 70-71). Barry Richards

(1994) describes the car as “a combination of hard, phallic, thrusting machine that enhances our capacity for movement and mastery, and comforting, warm, enclosing object that seems to enfold us safely within it” (p. 69). His description combines “both hegemonic masculine and feminine sexualities” reflecting the contradiction this chapter addressed with the automobile’s deceiving quality as Trojan horse (Richards, 1994, p. 69). It was supposed to allow mastery and domination of time, space, and people (Kühne, 1996, p. 210.). But it took over the driver and made him “collateral” by enfolding him in his “comforting, warm” environment and determining his perception.

Max appears to be the cinematic embodiment of this critique of America’s car culture which dominates the landscape as well as the mind. Empty commercialized promises created a god-like idea of the automobile that cannot be maintained. When Max crashed the car, the advertisement display on top – which was damaged when the awakening journey started – now completely fell off. It expresses Max’s liberation from such comforting illusions. He does not only free himself from this entrapping capsule dominating his lifestyle. He also gets rid of the deceiving perception it offered turning its drivers into passive observers. Max finally made a decision instead of waiting for things to be perfect. He became active and as the showdown indicates, turns out to be Darwin’s superior being among these coyotes on the run.

6.3.5. The return: Darwinistic duel in the MTA

Max follows Vincent, who is on the way to shoot his last target, Anne Farrell. He runs through the city, steals a phone displaying outlaw like behavior. He passes streets like a stray “dog wandering in the road,” as Baudrillard (1998) put it; an image that is quite fitting considering the encounter with the coyotes (p. 58). He reaches Anne’s

building, wounds Vincent and helps her to escape. They leave the building and try to run away having the choice between the exit to the street or to the MTA. Max drags Annie towards the MTA because he is aware now that the street does not offer escape anymore.

Vincent follows them just to find out that his opening MTA-story is about to be his own. It gives his character – whose last name is never mentioned – once more a certain mystical quality indicating that the only reason for their encounter was to wake up Max from his miserable passive condition. In *ur*-American cowboy duel tradition, Max shoots Vincent who quotes his own story once more while they are facing each other. Max takes off his glasses underlining his awakened condition and new perception – he does not see the detail through the little window anymore but the whole surrounding the windshield's view never offered. He turns into the hero, the superior being who gets the girl. By following the philosophy Vincent was preaching, he gets rid of his physical and mental chain – the automobile. It defined and dominated his life as his journey taught him; a journey which offers a cinematic awakening that should find its application in real life making Americans aware of their self-made entrapment, which they can only escape by themselves.

CHAPTER SEVEN: WHERE IS AMERICA GOING, AND BY WHAT ROAD?

We drive often, we drive nearly everywhere, and we drive even unto death. It's almost reached the point where we don't need to leave our cars at all: from the time we're conceived . . . to the time we die. . . . 'It may be time for humans to retire the car before it retires us.'

(Alvord, 2000, pp. 54-63)



Figure 5: A scrapyard in New York emblematising America's damaged automotive dream and turning into the "graveyard" for their "great wheeled god."

7.1. Results & Conclusions: Summary of the Media/Cultural Analysis

““What America drives, drives America”” – the opening quote of Holtz Kay’s *Asphalt Nation* (1998) captures perfectly what defines the country today (p. 1). Her study shows how the automobile took over America and turned into their ““purpose of life”” as Jane Jacobs already concluded in 1961 in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*: “[t]he purpose of life is to produce and consume automobiles”” (qtd. in Alvord, 2000, p. 54). Alvord (2000) reaffirms this claim and hints at its early cinematic illustration in *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life* (Goldstone, 1983). His seventh chapter “Death” shows a scene of the Grim Reaper picking up a group of people whose time has come. They decide to take their cars wherever they go, even if the destination is doom.

This “comic vision of luxury cars pursuing the Grim Reaper to heaven is not so different from reality” (Alvord, 2000, p. 54). It indicates that “[w]e drive often, we drive nearly everywhere, and we drive even unto death . . . from the time we’re conceived . . . to the time we die, we can do nearly everything there is to do” inside of this life-defining vehicle:

Some of us are born in cars. We spend much of our early lives strapped into car seats. Parents drive us around until we’re old enough to go through what’s become the primary rite of passage. . . . Soon we find ourselves driving to work, and working to drive. We eat while driving, dress while driving, shave, put on makeup, . . . watch movies, purchase food, purchase gas, get flu shots, get married, and attend funerals. A significant number of us die in cars, and our bodies are carried away in cars to a final resting place . . . (Alvord, 2000, p. 54).

It sums up the findings of this media/cultural study which addressed the cultural impact of the automobile on America and its cinematic reflection illustrating how it shapes national values, transforms the landscape, and defines their lifestyle.

More specifically, *Falling Down*'s (1993) depictions of rush hour traffic, urban decay, rudeness and ill will toward the common man, support the overall assumption that movies reflect society and accordingly the negative impact of the automobile on America. By illustrating automotive phenomena and developments, it follows critical movies like *Christine* (1983) and *Mad Max* (1979) defining the car as Frankenstein's monster from Detroit causing chaos, death, and wars, and in *Falling Down*'s case, turning into the weapon itself. It features contemporary phenomena like drive-by shootings and road rage, wherefore various cultural theorists refer to the movie as quite authentic impression of "urban reality" and not just a "tale."

Additionally, a closer look at Foster's journey showed various car-related incidents revealing the contradiction and empty cliché of America's "vehicles of freedom" (Mills, 2006, p. 19). His enlightening journey was initiated by an inescapable traffic jam calling the liberating powers of the car into question and indicating the actual "motorized stasis" it caused (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 8). It encouraged Foster to abandon his former freedom machine and walk home. This decision branded him as outcast in a pedestrian-unfriendly country. It made him encounter the car-related decay of America embodied by the "loser-cruiser" and the rejection of "not economically viable" citizens; phenomena that remained unnoticeable behind the windshield. Such encounters shattered his idea of America – the land of the free and equal rights. It made him aware of the

illusions and false promises this country is based on finding its climax in the “American Dream on four wheels” (Gudis, 2004, p. 5).

Duets (2000) addresses this American Dream and its delusive consequences as well by illustrating America’s physical deterioration that came with the automobile. It depicts contemporary cultural phenomena like America’s carscape, its sameness and dislocation in accordance with elaborations of various cultural theorists. Following in Foster’s footsteps, the movie portrays how the car took over the country with false promises of freedom and mobility – historical values this country was founded on. It made them celebrate the automobile as national icon – their “great wheeled god” – and transform America’s landscape according to its needs – building the “altar” (Casey, 1997, p. 8). People turned into automotive worshippers falling for the lure of the open road which promises escape and liberation while it deepens America’s actual entrapment.

Todd, one of these worshippers, realized the entrapping qualities of the former land of the free and tried to escape by hitting the road to nowhere. His nostalgic journey marked him as commercial believer buying into the liberating myth and the commercialized pioneer spirit he tried to reenact with the help of the car. His persistent critique of America’s environmental decay and illusive consumer culture in contrast to his getaway vehicle, illustrates the current ambiguous feelings Americans have towards the car. Torn between “nostalgia and bad feeling,” they start to become aware of “the high cost of the relationship,” but seem to not be able yet to give up the automotive dream they followed throughout decades determining their existence (Casey, 1997, p. 8).

Collateral (2004) continues such reflection and criticism with the help of the contradictory character Max, the cabdriver, who is following his dream of a limousine

business while stuck in his life-defining vehicle. The movie illustrates phenomena like isolation and passivity that came with the urge for individualism. It caused closer relationships between driver and car than among people resulting in contemporary theories about “carsons” and “autists behind the wheel” (Vanderbilt, 2009; Fahr, 1993). The automobile turned the driver into a passive observer of the world that goes by his windshield in contrast to the former liberating and empowering automotive promises. *Collateral* emphasizes the psychological impact on American culture and shows how the car took over the mind.

Especially, the analysis of Max’s awakening journey revealed the trapped condition Americans caused themselves by persistently believing in the automotive dream that gave them comfort about their lifestyle and landscape. The commercialized celebration of the getaway myth surrounds them everywhere, reassures their belief, and hinders them to encounter the truth as Foster did. Passively isolated behind glass and metal, the driver only sees shadows passing by which he perceives as reality without realizing his stuck and trancelike condition. Max woke up, and the nation still has to. They need to become aware as well that their dream vehicle caused stasis rather than progress; that it turned into “the medium of parking” instead of fulfilling “the romance of the getaway” (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 233).

Thus, the movie portrays cultural phenomena while offering further critique on America’s self-made automotive entrapment. By introducing the concept of “jazz” as well as pieces of “Darwinistic philosophy” in a car-related context, *Collateral* addresses the limited and preset lifestyle Max and Americans choose for themselves. The movie recommends improvisation and alternative thinking – the ability to adapt best to

environment and perceive the “unframed” reality – to stand out from the crowd and escape America’s bloodstream. In accordance with *Falling Down* and *Duets*, *Collateral* attacks America’s automotive enchantment providing them with a blurred and delusive perception of the world. It gives them comfort in their current submissive existence; an existence marked by their worship of the automobile, which takes over their land and mind causing akinesia instead of liberation.

These findings confirm the assumption that contemporary movies offer a rather negative portrayal of America’s car culture in accordance with the observations of cultural theorists (**RQ1a**). The analyzed movies focus on the entrapping truth in contrast to its former liberating characteristics (**RQ1b**) by depicting William Foster who tries to fight his way through a pedestrian-unfriendly environment; Todd Woods ironically escaping his homogeneous and enchaining life with the vehicle that created it; and Max Durocher who embraces isolation and passivity while waiting on his dream to be fulfilled.

Their individual journeys illustrated a decreasing affection for the automobile offering characters that rather abandon the car (**RQ2b**) than hold on to its liberating illusion (**RQ2a**). Foster leaves his car behind in traffic to walk home; Todd ends his nostalgic journey in a reunion with his wife and the purchase of a plane ticket; and Max crashes the vehicle that dominated his life for much too long. The differing areas of critique indicated a certain trend throughout the movies culminating in a new phase of cinematic critique on America’s car culture that reached a comatose or rather opiate state. The analyzed sample seems to presage an end to America’s automotive love-affair (**RQ2**)

– in contrast to the ““ROAD TO HAPPINESS”” Smith (1983) came across in early movies like *Putting the Bee in Herbert* (1917) using the car as financial tool in their “Darwinian struggle” (pp. 182-187). The conclusion of a “less happy” ending becomes more obvious in the context of previous findings which set apart a significant message of these contemporary movies.

7.2. Discussion & Future Prospect: Critique Throughout the Years Culminating in the Automotive Madmen

It started as an innocent love affair “in a run-down red brick building on Woodward Avenue in Highland Park, Michigan,” and turned into a flourishing relationship that “reshaped America’s landscape and its society with suburbs, interstate highways, fast-food restaurants, shopping malls, and drive-in everything” (Ingrassia, 2010, p. 14). The evolving love affair made America blind to reality and ensured their continuous belief in the beloved “vehicle of freedom,” while it slowly “metamorphosed from servant to master,” as Flink presaged in 1987 (p. 215). It took over their landscape, determined their lifestyle on the go, and even started to make human beings “collateral” as movies as well as statistics fortify. Alvord’s (2000) study showed that “the number of cars grew three times faster than the human population” worldwide in the 1990s (pp. 54-55). Especially in the U.S., “car numbers increased an astounding six times faster than the population from 1969 to 1995”; and counting “unregistered vehicles not included in these statistics, the U.S. may be home to more cars than people” (Alvord, 2000, pp. 54-55). An additional look at the annual highway death toll sparks the impression that the automotive master even eliminates human existence; “an average of 112 people a day – the

equivalent of a nearly fully loaded passenger plane” in 2007 (Lutz & Lutz Fernandez, 2010, p. 181).

““It may be time for humans to retire the car before it retires us,”” Mark Hertsgaard proclaimed in 1998 in *Earth Odyssey* addressing the increasingly negative impact of the automobile on American culture (qtd. in Alvord, 2000, p. 63). It confirms Flink’s (1972) analysis of the changing relationship between car and American society providing the grounds for literary and cinematic studies. He showed that by the late 1950s, the car was increasingly perceived as a major social problem. People began to realize that “automobility was no longer an historically progressive force for change in American civilization” (p. 452). Casey’s (1997) literary study continued such observations and indicated that by the Sixties and Seventies, social revolutions “deflat[ed] the image of the great wheeled god, replacing it with an image of car as polluter and murderer” (p. 8). *American Graffiti* (1973) offered the cinematic equivalent of this critique by picturing the car as a deathtrap. *Mad Max* (1979) represented the cinematic metaphor for the petroleum crisis of the Seventies with its portrayal of society fighting for “*das schwarze Gold*” ‘the black gold’ (Rauscher, 2006, p. 155).

Hence, cinematic depictions provided an increasingly bad impression of the former vehicle of freedom throughout the years. They captured America’s feelings towards the vehicle that caused death, pollution, wars, and started to take over control as Stephen King’s *Christine* (1983) illustrated. These movies indicated that the innocent love affair turned into an unhealthy relationship that can only be solved by “divorce,” as Alvord (2000) announces. It reminds of Keats’ (1958) metaphorical description of the car

as “nagging wife,” the source of all evil that turned a promising love into a burden (pp. 11-13).

Keats made his announcement in 1958, and in 2000, Alvord still asks for divorce. It shows how America is not willing to give up their companion in life. Divorcing their significant other represents a loss of everything he brought into this relationship. Their automotive companion always provided comfort against “*die amerikanische Angst vor Behäbigkeit, Verharren, Stillstand*” ’the American fear of sedateness, abidance, stasis’ (Mühlen, 1977, pp. 142-143). It promised to raise their quality of life and restructure American society through technology along lines with traditional values like individualism and mobility (Flink, 1987). Americans seem not to be willing to give up the idea of such beneficial values. They reminisce about the love affair with their icon of freedom, disavow its real characteristics, and thereby continuously prevent a long overdue breakup.

Thus, despite the drawbacks of reality, Americans indulge themselves with good memories and keep the dream of freedom alive (Dettelbach, 1976), which provides the grounds for an addictive state as Alvord (2000) hinted at:

Given how much we drive despite its costs and problems, any candid self-help book might assess our automotive marriage and pronounce, ’This isn’t love, this is addiction! . . . the love affair has become a dysfunctional relationship – one we’re stuck in and don’t quite know how to leave (p. 1).

This is where contemporary cinematic critique comes in by revealing America’s illusive and dazzled perception of their automotive love or rather obsession. They illustrate the

dreamlike relationship Americans persistently maintain and therefore try to wake them up.

Contemporary movies attack America's drowsiness comparable to a snoozing opium addict who believes to be free like the wind – as Virilio (1978) put it – but in reality is controlled by his life companion. *Falling Down*, *Duets*, and *Collateral* propose liberation from the limited and blurred view through the windshield. They encourage their characters to leave their “chains” behind and encounter reality – the light they have never seen while rolling along America’s bloodstream (Gudis, 2004, p. 117). The journeys of these three movies invite their main characters to leave their insignificant lives, question America’s consumer culture and awake from their passive existence.

Furthermore, these movies indicate a change in the cinematic critique of America’s car culture. In contrast to earlier movies depicting the car as evil, as cause for chaos, pollution, death, and wars; contemporary movies seem to consider the fault of the human being. They indicate how the people created and fueled the myth of the open road – the automotive dream of freedom, mobility, and individuality. Not the car, but Americans themselves attached liberating and empowering attributes to this simple means of transportation that was supposed to support and not define their lives. The persistent celebration of an empty cliché created the “American Dream on four wheels” which the whole nation continuously bought (Gudis, 2004, p. 5).

This dream turned into their reality when they started to transform the land and their lifestyle according to the automobile’s needs celebrating it as a godlike entity. Thereby, they trapped themselves in their own empty promises and illusions (*Falling Down*), turned their land into an enchaining carscape (*Duets*), and became ensnared

passengers of their idealized vehicle, dazzled by their own dream world and its passing shadows (*Collateral*).

In accordance with cultural theorists, these cinematic critiques show that “[i]t is time to question the dream of mobility that has set us on an odyssey to nowhere” instead of a road to happiness (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 357). It is time to wake up and start over “released from mobile steel cages” defining life and perception (Holtz Kay, 1998, p. 358). It is time to acknowledge the self-made automotive cult causing America’s opiate state culminating in akinesia. Over and above, these contemporary movies seem to pick up a metaphorical notion various cultural theorists mentioned before. They offer its cinematic equivalent as well as a new interpretation possibly indicating social change.

Fortune magazine once noted – and cultural studies confirm – that ““the automobile became the opium of the American people”” (qtd. in Gudis, 2004, p. 48). In 1973, Roland Barthes described cars ““as almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals”” (qtd. in Holden, 1998, p. 30). Harry Crews claimed in *The Car* that “[w]e have found God in cars, or if not the true God, one so satisfying, so powerful and awe-inspiring that the distinction is too fine to matter” (qtd. in Sargeant & Watson, 1999, p. 6). Accordingly, Lewis Mumford called “automobility an American religion” (Casey, 1997, p. 166); a comparison Jens Peter Becker (1989), Wolfgang Sachs (1992) and Peter Fahr (1993) kept alive by defining the car as god – as an impressed machine which we worship like a deity because it has power over our lives (Fahr, 1993, p. 21).

Similar to religion, the car and the myths Americans created around it “have shielded [their] view of what the car system really looks like” (Lutz & Lutz Fernandez, 2010, p. 15). It turned into the new opium for the masses clouding the automotive

deterioration of the country and its people (Gartman, 1994). Hence, the main message of the selected movies is that Americans first have to become aware of their illusive condition, before they can make a change. They have to realize that their dream is just a dream (*Collateral*), and become aware of the impossibility of automotive promises turning into “a 90s version of religious persecution” (*Duets*). They need to leave their “chains” and “cave” to become active again (*Falling Down*).

These three movies initiate such an enlightening or rather awakening process with the help of certain incidents and especially characters. Most striking is the notion of insanity driving their journeys and causing their rebellion against the cult. Applying Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1972) once more whose monomyth – “*separation - initiation - return*” – provided the structure for the cinematic journey analysis, such outside influence brings the hero to the right track. According to his theory, “[a] hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won” (p. 30). Furthermore, he elaborates on the “dangerous crisis of self-development [which] are permitted to come to pass under the protecting eye of an experienced initiate” who “enacts the role and character of the ancient mystagogue, or guide of souls, . . .” (Campbell, 1972, p. 9). More specifically, the initiate’s role is “that of the Wise Old Man of the myths and fairy tales whose words assist the hero through the trials and terrors” of the adventurous journey. “He is the one who appears and points to the magic shining sword,” leads the hero to “the castle of many treasures” and “dismisses the conqueror, back into the world of normal life, . . .” (Campbell, 1972, pp. 9-10).

Such guide armed with the “fabulous” force of “madness” seems to be the striking influence in current cinematic journeys attacking the reign of automobility. In Max’s case, Vincent – the maniacal hitman without a past – was the crucial encounter in his life making him aware of his entrapped condition as well as the way out by leaving the determining streets and improvising. Todd picked up hitchhiker Reggie Kane, who was mysteriously branded by a murderous past, teaching Todd the difference between a self-imposed suburban trap and a real imprisonment one cannot escape. Both “crazy” initiates have to die after sharing their liberated perception because America does not seem to allow any “Free Bird[s]” (*Duets*). Foster’s death confirms this observation. His stuck condition triggered his enlightening journey which was initiated and guided by his own insanity. His anger issues made him see the world in a different light and turned out to be his doom because society is not ready to wake up yet.

These elaborations on enlightenment from “religious persecution” through “madness” make the direction of contemporary automotive critique quite obvious:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: ‘I seek God! . . . ‘Whither is God? . . . I will tell you. We have killed him – . . . But how did we do this? . . . Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? . . . Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? . . . God is dead’

(Nietzsche, Ansell-Pearson, & Large, 2006, p. 224).

Friedrich W. Nietzsche’s “Parable of the Madman” (1882) sends a madman into society to announce the death of god and tell people to become gods themselves, “that is,

autonomous players in the drama of existence” (Langer, 2010, p. 135). He is supposed to encourage autonomy and recognition that “all our alleged explanations and proofs are simply descriptions.” The world can be interpreted “in an infinite number of ways,” wherefore the automotive dream and the great wheeled god are self-imposed notions justifying America’s entrapping car-dependent existence (Langer, 2010, p. 135).

Accordingly, the madman calls for “inventors of our own values and the creators of our lives, without any . . . ultimate justification.” He is looking for traits like “independence and self-sufficiency” to reconquer the illusive decaying world (Langer, 2010, p. 135).

His search for active men who are aware of their religiously – and accordingly commercially – affected existence and determine their own life and values, seems to find its cinematic application in today’s critique of America’s car culture. By asking for active heroes, freed from their chains and blurred perception, the movies include Platonic and Darwinistic philosophy to indicate the necessity of enlightened and superior human beings; people who “master” their own life in today’s restricting and homogenizing car culture. To find them, they send cinematic “madmen” on the road with unknowing worshippers. This might indicate a social change in America’s perception of the car which first turned into the monster, they did not know how to tame, and now appears to be only a self-imposed and debilitating dream America needs to awake from. *Falling Down*, *Duets*, and *Collateral* indicate that the great wheeled god is dead (*see fig. 5*), the dream is over, and it is time for Americans to free themselves, become active, and take a new, unpredetermined road.

So, “[w]hither are we moving? . . . Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions?” (Nietzsche et al., 2006, p. 224). Considering recent cinematic developments, America does not necessarily seem ready for such new road yet and continues to indulge in memories. *Entertainment Weekly* announced that a film adaptation of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1955) is officially in process since August 2010 (Sperling, 2010). This adaption brings Kerouac’s open road back to live where America’s love affair once started. It represents another cinematic mythologization and indicates that the nation is not willing to give up their automotive dream confirming Primeau’s (1996) claim that “‘Americans choose myth over reality every time’” (p. 60). The idea that “[w]hen one feels trapped, freedom is no farther away than the car keys,” remains too comforting to face the truth (Primeau, 1996, p. 79).

Cultural theorists indicate such persistent myth as well; a myth Americans keep telling themselves to “reinforce [their] positive emotions about and intensive desire for the car, prompting [them] to focus on its real and imagined benefits” (Lutz & Lutz Fernandez, 2010, pp. 37-38). In 2005, *Washington Post* columnist Warren Brown still talks of “‘freedom machines’” in his article “For Many, the Road Still Represents Freedom” (qtd. in Seiler, 2008, p. 125). The governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, persistently claims in 2010 that “[c]ars provide mobility and personal freedom while trucks carry the goods that keep our economy humming”, as the foreword of Sperling and Gordon’s (2009) study reveals (p. vii).

“The car is America and America is the car” – the automobile is and seems to remain “the myth and metaphor for America” (Simmons, 1983, p. 153). In accordance with cultural studies, the movies indicate that “the road continues” (Paes de Barros, 2004,

p. 188). It fortifies the interpretation of the automotive madmen because Nietzsche predicted as well that “God’s shadow might persist for millenia” (Langer, 2010, p. 135).

[T]he madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. . . . he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. ’I have come too early, . . . my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men (Nietzsche et al., 2006, p. 224).

The time has not come yet. This rather selective cinematic analysis shows only the beginning of a realization process and social change that possibly continues throughout the years when more than just a few “madmen” abandon the roads.

A look at the movie’s box office scores confirms such slow and meandering realization process and validates the interpretation of “cinematic madmen” that are as randomly heard as they appear. According to *Box Office Mojo*, *Falling Down* (1993) turned out to be the number one movie during its first two weeks of release.²⁵ Following in the footsteps of *Mad Max* (1979) and *Christine* (1983), early cinematic illustrations of the increasing dissatisfaction that cultural theorists came across, Foster’s dramatic critique hit common ground and was embraced by an attentive audience. This recognition is reflected in numerous positive reviews as well as current *IMDb* ratings underlining its groundbreaking message.²⁶

²⁵ *Falling Down* made \$8,724,452 on the opening weekend, and grossed over \$40 million domestically (*Box Office Mojo*).

²⁶ Reviews for *Falling Down*: 75% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*; 56 out of 100 on *Metacritic*; 7.6 out of 10 on *IMDb* (*Box Office Mojo*).

Todd Woods, on the other hand, spoke to an audience that was not prepared, or simply not willing to listen to what he had to say according to the movie's scores. *Duets* suffered at the box office²⁷ and was not necessarily acknowledged with outstanding reviews²⁸ up until today. The uncomfortable shift to blaming the people who created and believed in the automotive dream instead of the vehicle itself, might have caused such ignorance. Abandoning the “madman” to a marginal plot line as well as disguising the critique with a comical style, contributed to a rather failed reception of the overall movie.

Only four years later, such misperception and critical atmosphere seemed to have changed overnight, turning *Collateral* (2004) into the number one movie at the box office.²⁹ Its financial success was reflected in countless praising reviews from critics as well as viewers³⁰ acknowledging the movie's outstanding depictions and turning Max Durocher's awakening journey into another indicator for America's torn feelings and meandering realization. *Collateral*'s big scale success might indicate that America is on the right road and more receptive and willing to listen to the “madman” if he continues to appear.

Holtz Kay's (1998) cultural study confirms these statistical indications: “Few realized what they had incinerated on the altar of mobility;” only a few worshippers are aware yet that “[t]he automobile had become the master of their universe,” as the small

²⁷ The first week's gross sales was \$2,002,588 and the total receipts for the run were \$4,734,235 (*Box Office Mojo*).

²⁸ Reviews for *Duets*: 40 out of 100 on *Metacritic*; 5.3 out of 10 on *IMDb* (*Box Office Mojo*).

²⁹ The film grossed \$24.7 million on its opening weekend. It remained in theaters for 14 weeks and eventually grossed \$101,005,703 in the United States and Canada (*Box Office Mojo*).

³⁰ Reviews for *Collateral*: 86% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*; 71 out of 100 on *Metacritic*; 7.7 out of 10 on *IMDb* (*Box Office Mojo*).

selection of critical movies in contrast to countless automotive manifestations³¹ shows.

Holtz Kay (1998) predicts as well that “protest would come only slowly as the servants to speed and sprawl saw what it had wrought” and movies continuously make aware of it: “The old consciousness is waning and with it confidence in our car-bound destiny” (p. 245). Maybe we are “at the opening of a new [cinematic] frontier” (Holtz Kay, 1998 p. 9)?

7.3. Limitations & Areas of Future Research: Extension and Validification of Qualitative Findings

The task of future studies should be to explore such new cinematic frontier by overcoming the limitations of this analysis as well as extending its findings. On the basis of extensive research, this study used a rather small sample for detailed qualitative research. Thereby, it provided a lot of material for an interdisciplinary assumption that had little previous investigation. Furthermore, the elaborate individual movie analyses served a rather illustrative purpose in the tradition of cultural studies. They confirmed the findings of earlier cultural and literary studies, showed their reflection in movies, and indicated a new path of cinematic critique of the automobile in America. This specific and limited qualitative research “allow[ed] “to gain a ‘window’ on a particular worldview” (Priest, 2010, p. 110). But these interpretative results need quantitative proof, a limitation that provides the grounds for further research.

³¹ *Gone in 60 Seconds* (2000), *Road Trip* (2000), *The Fast and the Furious* (2001), *Fast Lane to Las Vegas* (2001), *Crossroads* (2002), *The Transporter* (2002), *2 Fast 2 Furious* (2003), *New York Taxi* (2004), *Sideways* (2004), *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006), *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006), *Crank* (2006), *Gran Torino* (2008), *Fast & Furious* (2009), *Drive Angry* (2010), *Fast Five* (2011), etc.

By using a larger and less selective sample, future research could validate the results and observations of this study. The employed analysis strategies could serve as a foil for more quantitative approaches, possibly reflecting previous findings and confirming the increasing appearance as well as recognition of “automotive madmen” pronouncing the end of America’s love affair with the automobile.

APPENDIX A

Plot Synopsis: *Falling Down* (1993)

William Foster, an unemployed, divorced engineer for the defense industry gets stuck in Los Angeles traffic on a very hot summer day. He decides to abandon his vehicle and walk “home” through central L.A., where he encounters various levels of harassment and obstacles he has to overcome to make it to the birthday of his daughter.

His first stop is a convenience store where he tries to get change for a phone call. The unhelpful Korean shopkeeper refuses to give him change unless he buys something. Foster chooses a can of Coke. Shocked about the price, he begins a tirade against foreigners who come to America and charge outrageous prices culminating in a close fight when the Korean owner reaches for a baseball bat. Foster uses the bat to “roll back” prices, wrecks the store, pays a “reasonable” price for the soda, and leaves.

Moving on, he finds himself in “gangland” approached by two gang members trying to charge him for trespassing. When they threaten him with a knife, Foster counters with the baseball bat he just acquired and chases them away. He trades the knife they dropped for the bat and moves on to another pay phone to call his wife not noticing that he was followed. The gang members attempt a drive-by shooting to take revenge on Foster which ends in their own death. They miss their target, hit bystanders and crash their car. Foster goes up to the wreckage, admonishes them for missing him by shooting one in the leg. He picks up their gym bag filled with guns and continues walking.

Hungry, Foster stops at Whammy Burger and orders breakfast. His request gets rejected because they stopped serving breakfast five minutes earlier. Enraged about their ignorance of “the customer is always right” - policy, he pulls out one of the machine guns, threatens everyone, and then decides to have lunch instead. After complaining about the “sorry, miserable, squashed” hamburger he received that looks nothing like the advertisement, he leaves.

His actions attract the attention of a retiring cop, Detective Prendergast, who gets involved with the case on his last day. He follows the path of “D-Fens,” as he calls him throughout most of the movie based on his license plate. In between whiny calls from his wife who wanted Prendergast to take a desk job first and now to retire, he starts to notice a pattern. The Korean store owner came in to complain, and the detective heard about the daylight shooting attempt as well as the Whammy Burger incident. He looks on an L.A. map and sees that the mysterious man in a white shirt and a tie is walking towards Venice.

Foster, who is increasingly disturbed, goes into an Army-Navy surplus store to buy boots since his shoe has a hole on the bottom. While he is trying on a pair, police detective Torres comes in asking for a man in a white shirt and a tie. The store owner

distracts her and, after she leaves, takes Foster down to his basement where he stores his real “treasures.” He shows Foster equipment from the Second World War because he assumes Foster is a racist who is attacking nonwhites. Foster corrects him about this and calls him a “sick asshole,” wherefore the enraged store owner attempts to handcuff Foster and turn him over to the police. Instead, he is knifed and ultimately killed. Foster puts on a military outfit and moves on.

He cuts through a nearby golf course and runs into two elderly golfers yelling at him for trespassing. He curses at them for wasting such lovely green space on a silly game, shoots up their golf cart causing a heart attack of one of them.

He finally reaches “home,” but his wife leaves just in time. Prendergast, who has put the whole puzzle together, rushes to the scene with Detective Torres. Foster shoots Torres, wounding her. Prendergast grabs her weapon and chases Foster onto the pier where it comes to the final showdown. He shoots Foster and decides to keep his job.

Excerpt 1: *Falling Down*

Sheila: Rick, there is a customer that would like to speak with you.
Rick: Yes, sir.
Foster: Hi, I'd like some breakfast.
Rick: We stopped serving breakfast.
Foster: I know you stopped serving breakfast, Rick. Sheila told me you stopped serving breakfast – Why am I calling you by your first names? I don't even know who you are? I still call my boss ‘mister,’ and I worked for him for seven and a half years, but I walk in here and all of a sudden, a total stranger I'm calling you Rick and Sheila like we are in some kind of AA meeting. I don't wanna be your buddy Rick. I just want a little breakfast...
Rick: We stopped serving breakfast at 11:30.
(Foster looks at his watch: 11:33am.)
Foster: Rick – have you ever heard the expression, ‘The customer is always right’?
Rick: Yea.
Foster: Yea well – here I am. The customer.
Rick: That's not our policy. You have to order something from the lunch menu.
Foster: I don't want lunch. I want breakfast.
Rick: Yeah, well, hey, I'm really sorry.
Foster: Yeah, well, hey, I'm really sorry too.

APPENDIX B

Plot Synopsis: *Duets* (2000)

Duets is a road-trip comedy intertwining the stories of six strangers from all walks of life who have one thing in common: a passion for karaoke that leads all of them to Omaha, Nevada, site of the national \$5,000 Grand Prize Karaoke Contest.

It tells the story of Ricky Dean, a seasoned karaoke hustler earning his money by pretending he cannot sing and then talking contestants into devious bets. After one of his performances, he receives a call about the death of a former girlfriend. He takes the next plane to Las Vegas to attend her funeral where he meets Liv, an innocent showgirl that turns out to be the daughter he has never acknowledged. Her grandmother, “his mother in-law,” joins this reluctant reunion and suggests that Liv should accompany her newfound “dad.” They head out to the next karaoke contests to earn Ricky some money and qualify for the Grand Prize in Omaha.

Subsequently, the movie introduces Todd Woods, a stressed-out salesman who is trying to sell an amusement park to a zoning board in Orlando. When his elaborations evoke confusion among the listeners, he finds out that he ended up in the wrong conference room as well as the wrong State – Texas instead of Florida. He returns home to his family who greet him with ignorance adding fuel to his frustration about American society. He snaps and heads for the open road, where he gets confronted over and over again with hotels rejecting his frequent flyer miles. At the same time, he discovers in one of their bars karaoke as liberating experience giving him the chance to be a star for three minutes. Fascinated by the rush of singing, he heads to the next bar. On his way, he picks up hitchhiker and ex-convict Reggie Kane who is mysteriously branded by a past as a killer. When they reach a karaoke bar having a duets-night, Todd talks him into singing and finds out that Reggie has the voice of an angel. Their duet represents the foundation of their friendship and their qualification for Omaha. While heading to their next destination, Todd teaches Reggie how to drive deepening their friendship which is in danger when Todd discovers Reggie’s gun and starts to use it. They stop at a gas station where Todd points the gun at the hostile clerk. Reggie, who was sleeping in the car, hears a gunshot and runs inside to disarm Todd. In the meantime, the clerk reached for his own pistol. Another shot occurs followed by a conversation between Todd and Reggie about “doom” as a consequence of killing a person. Reggie decides to call Todd’s wife and tell her to come to Omaha as well.

Finally, the plot incorporates Billy Hannan, an underachieving cabdriver who aspires to Zen-like harmony in a disorderly world. He catches his girlfriend cheating with his friend and co-worker Ralph, wherefore he goes to a bar. While drowning his sorrows, he gets pounced on by Suzi Loomis, a streetwise small-town singer with dreams of

stardom. She is trying to hitch-hike her way to California and is not afraid to use her body to get what she wants, an offer that does not work on Billy at first. He changes his mind when she asks for directions unsure where she is.

All roads lead to Omaha where they all come together for the sing-off that gets interrupted by the police looking for the murderer of the gas station clerk. After meeting Todd's wife, Reggie decides that Todd needs to go home and takes the blame for his "error in judgment." After his karaoke performance, Reggie draws his gun while he is still on stage and gets shot by the police. It reunites Todd and his wife who finally says how much she loves him. Ricky acknowledges his daughter by calling her on stage to sing with her the favorite song of her mother. Together with Suzi and Billy, they move on to California.

Excerpt 1: Duets

Todd: Thought I was in Florida and I was in Texas.
Uh, can you imagine that? Now I come home and my own kids can't even say hello to me.
Jeez, wouldn't it be nice if once when I come home, somebody says hello to me?

Candy: Sure.
Just because you come home, you can't expect everyone to just drop what they're doing and give you their undivided attention.

Todd: Well – You know what I did for the last 18 month, Candy?
Hmm? I racked up over 200,000 frequent flier miles, jamming a bogus Pirates of the Caribbean village down some zoning board's throat in Shell Island, South Carolina. Took one of the last remaining pristine beaches on the eastern seaboard, and I turned it into Toonville – with fast food.
Not to mention the turtles.

Candy: Turtles?

Todd: Yeah. Goddamn Shell Island sea turtles. Oldest living amphibians in North America. But now extinct. Pffft! Thanks to me. Why? Because we needed their breeding grounds for a water slide.

Candy: But didn't you want their breeding ground?

Todd: Yes. No.

Candy: Honey, could you – I'm – I'm on-line here. Okay?
(*Todd leaves the room.*)

Candy: Where you going?

Todd: Sorry, Candy, but I'm going out for a pack of cigarettes.

Candy: But you don't smoke!

Excerpt 2: Duets

Todd: Pop us a couple of *cervezas por favor* . . . There you go. *Gracias*.
You're not having one?

Reggie: No, thank you. It's against the law.

Todd: You should loosen up, my friend.

Reggie: You think so?

Todd: Hell yes. You know, in fact, this whole country should loosen up. It's not even a country anymore anyway. It's just a big strip mall. McDonalds, Pizza Huts . . . Big strip mall from coast to coast.

Reggie: You're on cocaine?

Todd: I have a cold.

Reggie: You're flyin' on something.

Todd: I'm flying on freedom. – I scored some bennies off the shadow in this k-bar last night. I think it was Tucumcari.

Reggie: Shadow?

Todd: Yeah. It's K-talk. It's karaoke. Uh, I may need you to drive later on.

Reggie: I don't know how.

Todd: You don't know how to drive?

Reggie: No, I don't know how to drive.

Todd: How bizarre! Is this a result of heredity?

Reggie: Environment. I've lived my life in tiny rooms.

Todd: So have I, man. All owned by major chains.

Reggie: Chains?

Todd: Ramada, Sheraton, Motel 6. Chains.

Reggie: Huh. I'm no stranger to chains myself.

Todd: Well, now, aren't we lucky that we met?

Excerpt 3: Duets

Todd: This would be 800,000 frequent flier miles.

Concierge: And so?

Todd: So you've got a room credit offer.

Concierge: Um, no, we don't.

Todd: Oh, yes, you do, because I've read about it in a thousand in-flight magazines.

Concierge: Did you read about it yesterday?

Todd: No, I didn't fly yesterday. I drove with my friend here.

Concierge: Well, that's too bad. You might have read that yesterday the offer ended.

Todd: This offer never really existed anywhere, right?

Concierge: Listen, if you got cash –
(Todd draws a gun.)

Todd: Oh yes, I've got cash. I have got more credit cards than a New York debutante. I've got stocks, bonds, and a dozen lines of credit. But I have been buying this mileage dream with my poor addled brain for years now, and it turns out to be totally meaningless, doesn't it?
(Todd shoots.)
... This whole offer is just like every other pipe dream in the U.S.A., right? Just another cynical stock-job sucker punch on us poor, dumb commercial believers. It's a 90s version of religious persecution, you know? You people, you are terrifying!

Excerpt 4: Duets

Todd: I have never been more awake in my entire life. You're just mad because I'm on to your little secret.

Reggie: And that would be what?

Todd: Oh, the power of life and death. Bam, bam, bam! John Wayne I am! It's a viable alternative to life in sales.

Reggie: Hm.

Todd: What? Tsk. I know that look. That is the Candy Woods look of disdain, isn't it?

Reggie: I wouldn't know. Never met her.
(Todd shows him pictures of his family.)

Todd: Hey – uh – here. Candy Woods. She specializes in plastic runners.

Reggie: These your kids?

Todd: Mm-hmm. Julie and Carson.
(Reggie checks his business card for a telephone number.)

Reggie: Kind of pretty.

Todd: You think so?
(Todd takes back the wallet and looks at the pictures himself.)

Reggie: I gotta use the bathroom. . . . Stay in the car.

Todd: Fine.

Reggie: You know what the hangover is for killing?

Todd: No. I give up.

Reggie: Doom.

Excerpt 5: Duets

Todd: What are you doing?
Reggie: Talk to your wife, man, not to me.
Todd: No. I wanna talk to you. What the hell do you think you are doing?
Reggie: Trying to save your life. I love you, man.
Candy: Are you gay, Todd? Is that what's happening?
Reggie: No, Mrs. Woods, we are not gay. Your husband has been kind to me. He's been a friend. But now he's headed down this path.
Todd: Oh, that's right. That's right. A path. For once in my life, it's a real path. It's not some cheap, plastic corporate illusion of a path. It's a real path to the real meaning of the real truth.
You know, I have actually computed in my head the odds of getting the same rental car twice in a lifetime of business travel, and do you know what they are? Do you know how many actual sense memories I have of being in the same off-white Chevy caprice from the Alamo people in the Dallas-Fort Worth area alone? – It would blow your mind.
It's nothing either one of you people can obviously ever comprehend.
Candy: I don't know what's going on, Todd, but I'm frightened.
Reggie: Don't be frightened, Mrs. Woods. Nothing's happened that can come back to haunt you, if he stops now.
Candy: Stops what? Huh? Who are you?
Reggie: I'm a friend.
Candy: Oh.
Reggie: Your husband has made an error in judgment. I would be pleased to take all the blame.
Candy: For what? Todd, what is going on? I'm getting really confused here and I don't get it because I ask you –
(Todd draws the gun again.)
Todd: I say we take the country back from the McDonalds and the Pizza Huts and the Wendys. I say we tear down all those strip malls and we get back in touch with the inner core.
Candy: Oh, my god, Todd! . . . I gotta go.
Todd: Why? You just got here. Did I say something that offended you?
Reggie: You're just plain insane.
Todd: I'm just a little tired of the American Dream.
(Back in the hotel room.)
Reggie: . . . Enough. I'm trying to keep you from throwing your life away.
Todd: Why? I'm through livin' in a middle-class prison.
(Reggie slaps him.)

Reggie: You don't know anything about livin' in prison.
(*Todd nods in agreement.*)

Todd: I'll – I'll – I'll be good, I promise. Let's just go downstairs.

Reggie: I never met anybody like you.

Illustration: Pettifer and Turner



"This bird's eye view of the Rose Bowl, Los Angeles, in 1949 underlines just how far Americans have been prepared to go to accommodate the car. Seeing this, a visitor from outer space might be forgiven for believing that it is the car that has inherited the earth and that man is here to serve it" (Pettifer & Turner, 1984, p. 101).

APPENDIX C

Plot Synopsis: *Collateral* (2004)

One night in Los Angeles, cab driver Max Durocher picks up Annie Farrell, a beautiful U.S. Justice Department prosecutor on her way to her office to prepare for her next trial. During the cab ride, they both start talking about their lives. Max tells her about his business plan “Island Limos,” a dream that keeps him afloat from the mundane reminder of his real job – taxi driver – he has been doing for twelve years. Annie confesses her nervousness over her upcoming trial appearance. When they reach the destination, Annie gives Max her business card and leaves.

A man in a gray suit, who just left the building that Annie entered, approaches the cab. Max almost does not notice him, but calls him back. He introduces himself as Vincent and ends up asking Max to be his only fare for the evening. For a flat fee of \$600, he wants Max to drive him to five stops in one night to close a real estate deal. Max somewhat reluctantly agrees and has to learn the hard way that Vincent is anything but a businessman. At their first stop, a body falls from a third story apartment window and lands dead on top of his cab. Vincent turns out to be a contract killer making his rounds.

Max tries to abandon his cab since he does not want to be involved in such barbarous mission. But Vincent forces Max to continue driving by pointing a gun at him. As the evening continues, Max delivers him to more places where Vincent shoots his targets. He has to kill five people by the end of the night. Meanwhile, LAPD narcotics detective, Ray Fanning gets involved when Vincent’s first victim is associated with a case in which Fanning is working undercover. He pieces together information and starts chasing the two.

Despite the circumstances, Vincent seems to take a liking to Max, who does not return the favor. When Lenny, Max’s boss, calls to check on the status of the cab and also notifies Max about his mother waiting for him in the hospital, Vincent decides to visit her to make this night look like any other. They get there, Vincent introduces himself to Ida Durocher as one of Max’s “friends” and she tells him about Max’s limousine business. It encourages Max to leave the room with Vincent’s briefcase that contains the material he needs to fulfill his job. Max runs towards a pedestrian bridge over an expressway and tosses the briefcase over the fence where it is run over by a truck. Vincent responds by forcing Max to go to the man who ordered these hits and retrieve the information. Max pretends to be Vincent and successfully convinces drug dealer Felix, who gives him a flash drive with the remaining information.

By this time, the FBI makes it to Felix’s club, notices the cab next to it and therefore assumes Max, the cabbie, is the killer. They start to follow the cab. Vincent and Max go to a busy night club to kill the next target. The FBI, LAPD, and Fanning also

show up. A massive gunfight takes place where Vincent kills his target and saves Max's life. Detective Fanning gets shot as well, eliminating the only person who had an idea about Max's innocence.

Max and Vincent escape. Max reaches his breaking point and decides to wreck his cab and thereby end this cruel journey. Vincent crawls out and leaves him behind. While on the ground, Max sees Vincent's final target on the computer screen: Annie. He races to her building and reaches her at the same time Vincent does. Max shoots Vincent, wounding him in the face and runs away with Annie. They head towards the subway and try to hide in one of the trains. Vincent chases them down and it comes to the final showdown. Vincent and Max fire their guns at one another; only Vincent gets hit and dies. Max and Annie leave the train together.

Excerpt 1: *Collateral*

Max: It was an accident. I'm not liable.
Lenny (v.o.): Bullshit. I'm making you liable. It's coming out of your goddamn pocket.
Vincent: You tell him to stick this cab up his fat ass.
Max: I can't do this. That's my boss. . . . I need my job.
Vincent: No, you don't.
Lenny (v.o.): You still there? I'm talking to you. Max. Max.
Vincent: He's not paying you a damn thing.
Lenny (v.o.): Who the hell is this?
Vincent: Albert Riccardo, Assistant U.S. Attorney, a passenger in this cab and I'm reporting you to the DMV.
Lenny (v.o.): Wow – let's not get excited.
Vincent: Not get excited? How am I supposed to not get excited, listening to you try to extort a working man? You know goddamn well your collision policy and general liability umbrella will cover the damages. Now what are you trying to pull, you sarcastic prick?
Lenny (v.o.): Look, I was just trying to –
Vincent: Tell it to him. Now tell him he's an asshole. Go ahead.
Max: You're an asshole.
Vincent: Tell him, he pulls this shit again, you gonna stick this yellow cab up his fat ass.
Max: And next time you'll pull any shit – I mighta – I mighta have to stick this yellow cab up your fat ass.

Excerpt 2: *Collateral*

Ida: Tell my son. You have to hold a gun to his head to make him do anything.
You must be one of Max's important clients.

Vincent: Client? I – you know, I like to think of myself as his friend.

Ida: Max never had many friends. Always talking to himself in the mirror. It's unhealthy. . . .

Vincent: I know. But I'm sure you're very proud of him.

Ida: Of course, I'm proud. He started with nothing, you know? Look at him today. Here, Vegas –

Max: Mom, mom. Mom, mom, he's not interested in hearing about all that, okay? I came to see you, I saw you, you look good, let's go.

Vincent: No no no, no no no – I am very interested, Ida. Please.

Ida: Limousine companies.

Vincent: Is that right?

Ida: He drives famous people around.

Vincent: Famous people. Limousine companies. Now, that's quite an achievement.

Excerpt 3: *Collateral*

Vincent: You're alive. I saved you. Do I get any thanks? No. All you can do is clam up. You wanna talk? Tell me to fuck off?

Max: Fuck off. You had to kill Fanning?

Vincent: Who the fuck is Fanning?

Max: Fanning, the cop. Why'd you have to kill him? He's probably got a family. Kids will grow up without him. He believed me.

Vincent: Oh, I should've saved him because he believed you.

Max: No, not that.

Vincent: Yeah. That.

Max: Well, yeah, that. What's wrong with that?

Vincent: It's what I do for a living.

Max: Some living.

Vincent: Head downtown.

Max: What's downtown?

Vincent: How are you at math? I was hired for five hits. I did four.

Max: Why didn't you just kill me and get another cab driver?

Vincent: Cause you're good. We're in this together. Fates intertwined. Cosmic coincidence, you know.

Max: You're full of shit.

Vincent: Holy crab, I'm full of shit? You're a monument of it. You even bullshitted yourself all I am is taking out the garbage killing bad people.

Max: Well, that's what you said.

Vincent: You believe me?

Max: Then what'd they do?

Vincent: How do I know, you know – They all got that 'witness for the prosecution' look to me. Probably some major federal indictment of somebody who majorly does not want to get indicted.

Max: So that's the reason?

Vincent: That's the 'why.' There's no reason. There's no good reason or there's no bad reason to live or to die.

Max: Then what are you?

Vincent: Indifferent. Get with it. Millions of galaxies of hundreds of millions of stars and a speck on one in a blink. That's us. Lost in space. The cop, you, me – Who notices?
(Mystical music starts playing.)

Max: What's with you?

Vincent: As in?

Max: As in if somebody had a gun to your head and said: 'You gotta tell me what's going on with this person over here or I'm gonna kill you. What is driving him? What was he thinking?' You know, you couldn't do it, could you, because – they'd have to kill your ass because you don't know what anyone else is thinking. I think you're low, my brother. Way low. Like, what were you? One of those institutionalized raised guys? Anybody home? The standard parts that are supposed to be there in people, in you – aren't. And why haven't you killed me yet?

Vincent: Of all the cabbies in L.A. I get Max: Sigmund Freud meets Dr. Ruth.

Max: Answer the question.

Vincent: Look in the mirror. Paper towels clean cab, limo company someday. How much you got saved?

Max: That ain't none of your business.

Vincent: Someday? Someday my dream will come? One night you'll wake up and you'll discover it never happened. It's all turned around on you, and it never will. Suddenly you are old. Didn't happen and it never will because you were never gonna do it anyway. You'll push it into memory, then zone out in your Barcalounger, being hypnotized by daytime TV for the rest of your life. Don't you talk to me about murder. All it ever took was a down payment on a Lincoln Town Car. Or that girl. You can't even call that girl. What the fuck are you still doing driving a cab?

(Max starts speeding.)

- Max: Because I never straightened up and looked at it, you know? Myself. I should have. I tried to gamble my way out from under, but that was just a born-to-lose deal.
- Vincent: Slow down.
- Max: It's got to be perfect. It's got to be perfect to go. Risk all torqued down. I could've done it anytime I wanted to.
- Vincent: Red light.
- (Song starts playing again.)*
- Max: But you know what? New news. It doesn't matter anyway. What does it matter anyway? We're all insignificant out here in this big-ass nowhere. Twilight Zone shit. Says the badass sociopath in my back seat. But you know what? That's the one thing I got to thank you for, bro. Because until now, I never looked at it that way. What does it matter? It don't, so fucking fix it. What do we got to lose anyway, right?
- (Vincent points gun at Max's head.)*
- Vincent: Slow down.
- Max: Why? You going to pull the trigger and kill us? Go ahead, shoot my ass.
- Vincent: Slow the hell down.
- Max: What the hell are you doing, shot me? You going to shot me now, you gonna kill us? Well, shot my ass then. Shoot me. You're right.
- Vincent: Slow down!
- Max: You know what, Vince? Go fuck yourself.

Screenshot 1: *Collateral*



Off to work (Night Shift-Scene, 02:57:00).

Screenshot 2: *Collateral*



Let the game begin (Night Shift-Scene, 3:47:00).

Screenshot 3: *Collateral*



America's bloodstream (Night Shift-Scene, 6:13:00).

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