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BOOK REVIEW: *Crossing New Europe: Postmodern Travel and The European Road Movie* by Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli

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Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli. *Crossing New Europe: Postmodern Travel and The European Road Movie*. London: Wallflower Press, 2006. Pp. 245. Cloth, \$75.00. Paper, \$25.00.

It is frankly astonishing to read that, according to the back cover of *Crossing New Europe*, this new text represents “the first comprehensive study of the European road cinema.” But recalling for a moment all the titles that discuss films such as *Kings of the Road* (1976, Wim Wenders), *La Strada* (1954, Michelangelo Antonioni), and *Pierrot le fou* (1965, Jean-Luc Godard), I indeed came to the realization that no monograph thus far has attempted to group these “road films” as such within the history of European cinema. One might speculate a reason as to why. Perhaps it is due to the way in which the postwar New Waves have been repeatedly figured in opposition American Hollywood. The “European Road Movie” would fall uneasily under the Europe side of this binary, but would probably be perceived to be “inadequately” radical to resist the dominant Hollywood style (*Easy Rider* [1969]). This is unfortunate. While there is no question that the European Road Movie is in many ways a variation on an American theme, it is perhaps high time that these films be placed within a context that do not simply see this work as simply countering Hollywood, or, for that matter, inadvertently reinstate other restrictive aesthetic binaries that co-extensively limit the range of critique.

Crossing New Europe: Postmodern Travel and the European Road Movie, co-written by Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli, should be seen within this context. Their work establishes a genre category long overdue within the field of Film Studies. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the new international division of labor, the adage of “ever closer union”: all are shown in this book to have ramifications for the cinema. We see that they shift debates within Film Studies away from an insistence on radical aesthetics, and instead toward issues which will best reflect the circumstances of this more transnational Europe: displacement, migration, exile, diaspora, and the status of the nation-state in a context of ever increasing globalization. In this, Mazierska and Rascaroli’s new book is warmly welcome, providing a solid introduction to a very interesting category: the “European Road Movie.” It shows that such issues are important and relevant, not only for the most recent European cinema, which is their main focus, but also for the postwar New Waves.

The book is divided into two sections, “Authors on the Road” and “Geographies.” The first discusses the work of four European directors – Aki Kaurismäki, Eric Rohmer, Patrick Keiller, and Werner Herzog – reading individual films as well as identifying common issues within a filmmaker’s oeuvre that thread their way from one film to the next. The second is much more broadly organized; its chapters are essentially thematic in nature. Here they also number four: nomadism, the post-communist diaspora, gender and female mobility, and marginalized European subjectivities. This section impressively gathers together a wide range of filmic texts in a relatively rigorous way, while moving easily and naturally from one example to the next. In the acknowledgements we read that Mazierska and Rascaroli were each responsible for generating different chapters in the text. This came as a bit of a surprise, for the prose, in both style and tone, reads as if it were written by a single author.

Their analyses of the films move for the most part by illustration. That is, they show how particular moments in each film can be seen to illustrate a broader concept having to do with travel or mobility. Towards this, many subtle connections are made clear and understandable. In a chapter called “The Road to Authenticity and Stability: Holidays, Relocation, and Movement in the Films of Eric Rohmer,” they note that while in much of this filmmaker’s work, such as

Pauline at the Beach (1982) or *The Green Ray* (1986), tourism and going on holiday serve as representative of excitement and possibility, “we can detect in Rohmer’s holidaymakers a certain hostility towards tourists or, more precisely, towards those whom they regard as typical or common tourists” (34-5). A quote from Léna, a character in *A Summer’s Tale* (1996), is evidence of this, when she flat out tells her boyfriend: “I hate tourists.” Mazierska and Rascaroli then follow with a critique of common attitudes revolving around the topic of tourism, a digression of a sort that signals the perceived inauthenticity, commodification, and kitsch when one travels on a “package holiday,” and the danger of cliché when traversing paths well-worn by many previous tourists. “Traveling” is often seen as the antidote to tourism, for travelers, they assert, “are individuals: they go where they want and stay in a chosen place for as long as they please. Moreover, they are guided by some personal quest, not by a published guide” (35). Mazierska and Rascaroli’s approach throughout such passages is sober and clear-headed, but it is at the same time self-evident where their sentiments lie.

A chapter called, “Out of Europe: Werner Herzog – the Cinema as Journey,” weaves together films that have received much critical attention as well as those that have not, allowing both similarities and differences to illuminate new insights into this German filmmaker’s vast oeuvre. The jungle in *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972) is, they put it pejoratively, “an exotic stage on which the battle for survival of a white Westerner is performed and filmed by a Western director for a Western audience” (99). Aguirre’s colonizing gaze (and perhaps Herzog’s by co-extension), it is implied, should be seen in contrast to the main subjects of two later documentaries, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997), and *Wings of Hope* (2001). “Dieter and Juliane do not attempt, as Fitzcarraldo did, to superimpose a map on the jungle, thus defeating/straightening the thick and impenetrable woodland, as an eighteenth-century forester” (99-100). *Wings of Hope* follows Juliane Koepcke, the sole survivor of a plane crash in 1972, as she recreates her journey out of the Peruvian jungle. She believed that by following waterways, she would eventually make it back to other human beings. Here the discursive differences in regards to looking are clear. While Aguirre objectifies the chaos of the jungle with the intention of conquering it, Juliane reads its signs in order to navigate a way through this very chaos. But her look is seriously problematized when, with a bird’s eye view offered by the camera, it is revealed to the viewer that if Juliane were to continue to follow water, she would never have escaped, for the waterway would have left her wandering in circles. In this Mazierska and Rascaroli note the repeated trope of circular movement throughout Herzog’s films, linking it back not only to the idea of journeys that lead nowhere, but also to irrational and even insane psychological states. Such senseless circles are “like traveling in vain” (100). These connections decidedly widen the horizon of critique that may be brought to bear on Herzog’s work as a whole. Their implications are perhaps tastefully left unelaborated, but nevertheless remain suggestive, pointing to uncharted areas of further analysis.

Section two operates in very similar manner, reading individual films in order to illustrate and call attention to a series of social as well as aesthetic issues. Perhaps one of the more overlooked themes in the critical literature around the road movie is the role of women. In their American guise, films on the road are almost uniformly about male traveling while females are generally left behind. And when they do travel, women often function inconsequently as passive passengers and/or erotic diversion to the active, male protagonists. Mazierska and Rascaroli discuss three Eastern European films that deviate from this American trope. In Jan Svěrák’s *The Ride* (1994), Anna joins two men in their twenties who are out looking for “simple sex.” She soon ends up instilling fear and respect in her fellow passengers, literally taking the wheel of the

car and frustrating their intents to sexually objectify her. Michal Rosa's *Paint* (1998) depicts a woman in her late teens, Farba, who, we come to know, is on a journey to find her grandmother. But it soon becomes clear that for her "travel for travel's sake appears to be a reason at least as important to her as finding her relative" (170). In Urszula Urbaniak's *Track-way* (1999), Marysia and Krystyna dream of escaping their claustrophobic jobs to travel on the open road. They come to realize, however, that their escape can only be made possible with the assistance of men. All three of these examples demonstrate how often in such films, one moral code is assumed for women and another for men. Mazierska and Rascaroli play up this stark difference, showing how women's efforts toward mobility and movement often end in disappointment. But they rightly attribute this "failure" to an underlying, societal patriarchy that dictates and structures such double standards.

A few criticisms are in order. While the two section structure might suggest that at least two approaches might be in store, this is actually not the case. This is perhaps the major drawback of this book. Mazierska and Rascaroli discuss the films consistently on a purely narrative level, perhaps to a fault. One misses in their account the films' specific conditions of production, how they were funded, how the films were distributed and exhibited, and what kinds of audiences went to see the films. Throughout, this reader could not help but to notice that the analytic means deployed in *Crossing New Europe* are limited strictly to what can be identified in the image, and their narrative consequences. There is little speculation on the notion of travel and mobility itself, and their possible connections to the specificity of the filmic medium – a medium that exists, one should even say "travels", in time and movement. Indeed, Mazierska and Rascaroli end up inspiring this very important question: can parallels be made between the thematics of movement depicted in the films and the nature of the filmic medium itself? Unfortunately, such questions remain unanswered. But this is perhaps forgivable. *Crossing New Europe* is less of a ground-breaking, theoretical speculation on notions of travel and the ontology of the cinema, and more a systematic attempt to legitimate a genre category as reflective of an increasingly transnational Europe.

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