

ON THE ROAD TO “SOME” PLACE: SOFIA COPPOLA’S DISSIDENT MODERNISM AGAINST A POSTMODERN LANDSCAPE¹

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Post-modernists may be said to have developed a paradigm that clashes sharply with [my definition of modernism]. I have argued that modern life and art and thought have the capacity for perpetual self-critique and self-renewal. Post-modernists maintain that the horizon of modernity is closed, its energies exhausted—in effect that modernity is passé. Post-modernist social thought pours scorn on all the collective hopes for moral and social progress, for personal freedom and public happiness, that were bequeathed to us by the modernists of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. These hopes, post-moderns say, have been shown to be bankrupt, at best vain and futile fantasies, at worst engines of domination and monstrous enslavement. Post-modernists claim to see through the ‘grand narratives’ of modern culture, especially ‘the narrative of humanity as the hero of liberty.’ [...] I [try] to open up a perspective that will reveal all sorts of cultural and political movements as part of one process: modern men and women asserting their dignity in the present—even a wretched and oppressive present—and their right to control their future; striving to make a place for themselves in the modern world, a place where they can feel at home.

(Berman 1988: 9-11)²

Coming on the heels of *Marie Antoinette* (2006), her highest-budget film (and biggest box-office disappointment), Sofia Coppola’s next feature film, *Somewhere* (2010), has consistently divided (and confounded) audiences and critics alike since its release. Such a divide is not limited to this particular film. As Belinda Smaill has documented, the “unique” nature of Coppola’s “brand or name” has led to

“different narratives that construct Coppola’s public image”, conflicting narratives of “significant success and also derision and reproach” that are almost always linked to the perception of her “important position as a female director of independent features” (2013: 149). That said, the critical reaction to *Somewhere* was particularly divergent, even for Coppola. The film won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, led to Coppola receiving a special honor from the National Board of Review, and earned intense praise from major critics, such as the *New York Times*’s A.O. Scott, who called the film “exquisite, melancholy, and formally audacious” (2010). The negative responses, however, were not mild. Tom Long’s *Detroit Free Press* review, titled “Coppola’s *Somewhere* Takes us Nowhere”, claims the film “dares to have nothing very interesting at all going on, unless you find cigarette consumption fascinating” (2011). Kyle Smith titled his *New York Free Press* review “Audiences Would be Better Off Somewhere Else” and proceeds to claim “this isn’t an artistic effort, it’s a vacant lot whose signpost reads: ‘Space available. Movie can be made here. Or not. Whatever’” (2010). *Slate*’s Dana Stevens is more direct, asking if “maybe Sofia Coppola is more of a tastemaker than a filmmaker” (2010). In short, the response to *Somewhere* followed the precise pattern of Coppola’s first three feature films, only at an ever increasing volume.

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One of the few things that critics from both sides of the divide seem to agree upon, however, is that this is Coppola’s most “European” film³, in terms of subject matter, pace/style, cinematography, and, more than anything, its enigmatic nature. A large number of reviews make direct reference to the Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni, and almost every review comments (often at length) about the film’s unique and off-putting first scene —a 150-second still shot of a Ferrari inexplicably driving in circles in the desert— which seems, for critics, to embody both the film’s enigmatic nature and its decidedly “European” type of filmmaking. And, to be clear, the references both to Antonioni and to European film in general, are entirely fair and worthy of further discussion. But what I find most interesting about this film is that its enigmas may be *best* understood not in the film’s relationship to European cinema, but, rather, in its relation to philosophical debates between modernism and postmodernism, with regard to American films such as *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin 1936), *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols 1967), and *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson 1970), and, even more importantly, in its relationship to one of the oldest and most dominant tropes in US literature and culture —that of the hobo-hero. In fact, both *Somewhere*’s iconic opening and its even more mysterious final sequence seem to make most narrative sense when viewed within the context of these conversations. Coppola therefore creates a film that subtly invokes —and comments upon— American identity, the postmodern culture of Los Angeles/Hollywood, and one of the central questions

of modernity, outlined at the end of the epigraph that prefaces this article —the ability (or inability) of individuals to “make a place for themselves in the modern world, a place where they can feel at home”.

Early in this article I will offer a brief examination of what I argue is a dominant trope in US modernism, a trope in which the figure of the lowly hobo is elevated as a means of preserving, at least in imagination, an integrated sense of self. Once I have explained that connection, I will return to Sofia Coppola in order to look at *Somewhere's* use of the hobo-hero in order to ask a more far reaching question: is there a way in which the hobo-hero can allow modernism to openly defy postmodernism itself, even while expressing and exploring a postmodern landscape, a postmodern world? In the epigraph that precedes this article, Marshall Berman begins to re-define a dissident version of modernism that poses questions in response to many of postmodernism's assumptions. Elsewhere in the same preface, Berman writes, “Lionel Trilling coined a phrase in 1968: ‘Modernism in the streets.’ I hope that readers of this book will remember that the streets, our streets, are where modernism belongs. The open way leads to the public square” (1982: 12). For at least a century and a half, American literary modernism has attempted to use those streets and roads, that quintessential search for an open way, as a means of preserving individuality in the face of a crushing modernity. And still it remains one of the most apt means of making such an assertion amidst —and against— a postmodern urban landscape. Surprisingly, one of the most articulate and pressing examples comes from the most unexpected of sources: Sofia Coppola.

1. Sofia Coppola's fourth feature film

For the better part of two decades, Coppola has been both one of the most divisive and original filmmakers to work within the Hollywood system. The daughter of Francis Ford Coppola (arguably the most important filmmaker in US film history), Sofia Coppola has been blessed with the financial ability and social connections necessary to retain more autonomy than most Hollywood directors, and certainly far more than most female directors. As outlined at the beginning of this article, such privilege and “brand” has dominated both the public and critical discourse surrounding her films, and that discourse has almost always been sharply, and uniquely, divided between soaring praise and scathing attacks.⁴ As I argued in my article “Off with Hollywood's Head: Sofia Coppola as Feminine Auteur” (2010), Coppola's first three feature films all openly invoke, and question, feminist gaze theory as they provide the spectator with a young, female screen surrogate. In each case, the surrogate/protagonist is a young woman who searches, often in vain, for identity within an imposing landscape, constantly controlled both by her

environment (often architecture) and by how others see her —both within the film (other characters) and without (the spectator). Coppola’s approach is to ask us to neither sympathize with, nor criticize, these flawed heroines. Rather, we are simply asked to empathize with them on a human level. Other critics, such as Lucy Bolton and Pam Cook, have likewise argued that Coppola has developed a model for challenging male-dominated cinema. For Cook, this model emerges in *Marie Antoinette* as fashion and travesty become a means of exposing the manner in which society —and film— codes and constructs feminine identity. Meanwhile, for Bolton, the manner in which Charlotte “becomes” a woman in *Lost in Translation* (2003) —instead of being presented as a projection of the male-other— works as an embodiment of Luce Irigaray’s ideas of femininity as self-fulfilling, ideas Bolton posits as a potential roadmap for contemporary feminine auteurship.

Following her third feature film, *Marie Antoinette*, which was her most ambitious project, her most heavily funded project, and which garnered the most divisive responses so far in her career, Coppola retreated and made a low-budget, concept film ostensibly inspired by European cinema. It was also her first film in which the screen surrogate is a man. On its surface, *Somewhere* seems to be entirely about stasis. The film is set almost exclusively at the Chateau Marmont, the hotel that has stood as an iconic getaway for the Hollywood jet set for over fifty years. The film follows Hollywood star Johnny Marco, played by Stephen Dorff, as he lives a life of stasis, surrounded by a plethora of visual, sexual, and culinary consumption —in a sense, the typical Hollywood star, living the dream associated with it. But, in spite of the surface appearance of a lifestyle of excess, the film is mostly about emptiness, lack, and the overwhelming nature of depthless stimuli. Drawing upon the cinematic style and themes found in her two most successful films, *Lost in Translation* and *Marie Antoinette*, *Somewhere* seems to follow a narrative in which the main character will experience some sort of “coming-of-age” transformation. However, the spectator is denied the culmination of such a transformation, as the film ends with the main character walking away from the vehicle that has driven him through his postmodern urban landscape as we wonder what he will find on the road before him, if anything at all.

Whether Johnny finds something at the end of the road —echoing the promise of many a Hollywood hero before him— is not at all Coppola’s focal point in *Somewhere*. Instead, as in her previous films, it is the imagistic landscape that compels Johnny Marco away from stasis and toward movement as he attempts to flee his environment. As Anna Backman Rogers points out when she likewise tries to situate *Marie Antoinette* vis-à-vis the director, Coppola’s films all seem to contain a “lost adolescent who wields little power over her own destiny”. Coppola’s style, she therefore argues, *seems* superficial because it focuses on how diegetic

spaces affect characters. In *Marie Antoinette* specifically, Backman Rogers shows how Coppola rejects classical Hollywood films “that often cite the female body as the site of spectacle”, instead of attempting to depict “how that body is harnessed and regulated via ritualistic processes: how it is *turned into* a spectacle and, by extension, a commodity to be owned by a patriarchal institution, and then, by the state” (2012: 82). While Johnny Marco is not a French queen controlled by the environment and people of Versailles, he is controlled and commodified by the image-machine that is Hollywood. Instead of showing the construction of history with elaborate costumes in the halls of Versailles, Coppola reveals how culture creates spectacle via images that Johnny fails to live up to. Thus, her depiction of Johnny trapped by an empty world of room service and strippers acts as a treatise on the denied potential for movement in a postmodern world. Her Los Angeles is anything but the “paradise” that some postmodern critics, such as Jean Baudrillard, describe, and Johnny Marco’s powerful Ferrari that circles LA’s freeways never gets him anywhere. He spends most of his time static, on his couch. When he is in motion, usually in his car, his movement always follows cyclical patterns —until, at the end of the film we are offered the *promise* of linear/forward movement. In other words, it is a crisis of identity depicted almost entirely along spatial lines.

2. The industrial metropolis, the hobo-hero, and filmic modernism

American identity, traditionally, has also been imagined as spatial. As a nation of immigrants, it should come as no surprise that, since the earliest attempts to define themselves, Americans have often linked their identity to images of mobility. Such an allegiance to a fluid identity —rather than a fixed one— echoes Ralph Waldo Emerson’s claim that “there are no fixtures in nature. The Universe is fluid and volatile” (1841: 302). One particularly clear expression of this imagination can be found in Thomas Wolfe’s *You Can’t go Home Again*, when he proclaims “Perhaps this is our strange and haunting paradox here in America —that we are fixed and certain only when we are in movement. At any rate, that is how it seemed to young George Webber, who was never so assured of his purpose as when he was going somewhere on a train. And he never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there. It was only when he got there that his homelessness began” (1940: 53). Such an ethos has dominated American letters from the earliest, colonial writings,⁵ and, “Song of the Open Road” can be seen as one of the major driving forces behind the most “American” of American poets, Walt Whitman.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the rise of the modern metropolis only worked to strengthen the perceived threat to individuality that had been present

in American culture for decades. To quote an influential 1903 speech by the German sociologist Georg Simmel “the deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life” (409). Literary realists and naturalists similarly used the city as a symbol for the crushing and deterministic environment they imagined everywhere around them. American literary modernists such as John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, Willa Cather (and many others)⁶ drew upon *that* representation in order to then draw upon America’s spatial identity in order to heroicize characters who left urban landscapes, choosing a life of misery in order to remain in motion, thereby not succumbing (at least without a struggle) to the modern, destructive “technique of life”. In my article “Bob Dylan’s Highway Shoes: The Hobo-Hero’s Road through Modernity”, I call such a figure a hobo-hero —defined as someone who is “portrayed as heroic because he rejects the society that entraps them, instead choosing a life of ceaseless wandering. In other words, if the human condition is one of uprootedness to begin with —as modernism claims— then the hobo-hero at least retains a *sense* of agency unavailable to his static counterparts” (2009: 40). For these modernists, however, the hobo-hero is not wholly a happy, romantic figure; vagabondage will not lead him to joy, success, or an epiphany. The hobo-hero does not search for Jack Kerouac’s “road to Heaven” (1957: 181). Instead, the hobo-hero is an ambivalent figure who is only redemptive because, at great cost, he constantly attempts to assert his autonomy with no hope of success.

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Marshall Berman’s positing of a modernism that unites mankind via a “unity of disunity” (1982: 15) as we each seek, often in vain, to find a home, or a place of comfort and connection, is utterly linked to the image of the hobo-hero. As the epigraph at the beginning of this article hints, such attempts are often futile, and the experience “wretched” and “oppressive”. Yet, like Whitman and Dos Passos before him, Berman places more emphasis on the struggle. To quote Berman, “if we think of modernism as a struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world, we will realize that no mode of modernism can ever be definitive” (1982: 6). Thus, even modernism itself is often imaged as existing in a constant state of motion, ranging from Zygmunt Bauman’s definition of modernism as an “obsessive march forward” (1991: 12), to Gilles Deleuze’s discussion of a state of constant “becoming” across a “rhizome” (1987). Effective modernism, this implies, must be with no destination in sight, simply “a hundred miles down the road” (Dos Passos 1936: 447), “away from any Here” (Steinbeck 1962: 10), “to see nothing anywhere but what you may reach it and pass it” (Whitman 1856: line 173).

The imagination of authenticity as part of a destinationless voyage has also dominated US film history as characters find themselves leaving the film frame toward a place that remains unknown to both themselves and the spectator. Such a trope dominates the road-buddy genre, but one of the earliest examples is Charlie Chaplin's iconic *Modern Times*, which tells the comic tale of a factory worker (Chaplin) and his "gamin" (Paulette Goddard) as they repeatedly attempt to make a "home" amidst a bleak modern cityscape. The film opens by visually comparing factory workers to sheep led to slaughter and proceeds to invoke questions of individuality amidst a technical, mechanical, and clock-driven world reminiscent of Georg Simmel's warnings about the rise of the modern city that I quoted earlier, not to mention Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). Chaplin's character comically attempts, and utterly fails, to achieve success as a factory worker, a repair mechanic, a night watchman, a longshoreman, a waiter, and a singer/entertainer. Amidst this failure, the couple imagine a Utopian image of house and home that they can never quite reach, as all of their attempts to create an actual home, literally, fall down around them. In a mostly silent film in which only machines have voices⁷, Chaplin's character is rejected in each of his attempts at success because he cannot adequately adapt his individuality to the mechanized world that surrounds him. In one scene, he is fed through a machine with neither agency nor autonomy. In a scene of great irony, the closest Chaplin's character ever comes to achieving a romanticized version of "home" is in jail. Finally, rejected by all sectors of society, unable to find a home, the couple takes to the road and a life of vagabondage. Their future is uncertain, but when the gamin asks "what's the use of trying?", Chaplin's character replies with a non-answer answer: "Buck up —never say die. We'll get along!". The couple then happily walk up the road in a classic final shot, with a hobo's bundle draped over one of their shoulders. Having already shown that the factory worker's optimism is not matched anywhere within the modern world in which they live, the film still ends on an optimistic note in terms of written text, music, and cinematography. The hope, however, is entirely in the search.

Chaplin's factory worker and gamin thus serve as prime examples of Berman's description of men and women who are heroic because they struggle to make a home in a world that condemns them. That is the same primal drive that this article attempts to diagnose within the ontology of the hobo-hero. The hobo-hero is, in my opinion, the embodiment of the dissident strain of modernism that Berman describes. In the words of John McGowan, modernism has a distinct quality that stems from "its strategies of engagement with the enemy, [...] Doubtful whether victory can ever be won, the modernist *either* struggles without hope or (more usually) retreats to a barricaded world of art where he or she can work in peace and associate only with those of similar views" (1991: 8). The latter

choice includes the likes of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. The first choice, in which the modernist “struggles without hope”, can be found in works as divergent as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937). But one of the most common, and complex, expressions of that strain of modernism has repeatedly come from use of the hobo-hero, ranging from Walt Whitman to John Dos Passos, from Bob Dylan to Gillian Welch, from the final sequence of Bob Rafelson’s *Five Easy Pieces* to Luisa’s journey at the end of Alfonso Cuarón’s *Y tu mamá también* (*And Your Mother Too*, 2002), and even in the laughable couple at the heart of Chaplin’s comedy. The hobo-hero draws upon American myths to try to forge an expression of selfhood in the wake of the overwhelming obstacles posed by modernity.

3. Postmodernism and Los Angeles as Utopia achieved

By contrast, many would claim that such an expression of hope through desolation seems almost to disappear within postmodern art. To return to McGowan, “Postmodernism is distinguished from modernism by the belief that artistic autonomy is neither possible *nor desirable*. Postmodernism questions the efficacy of strategies of transformation associated with autonomy, declaring that modernism inexorably reaches a dead end. The modernist hope that intellectuals can occupy a space outside capitalist society is not only illusionary but also artistically and politically sterile” (1991: 25). Such a sentiment is alluded to even within the epigraph that precedes this article; the idea that somehow the “hopes” of modernism “have been shown to be bankrupt, at best vain and futile fantasies, at worst engines of domination and monstrous enslavement”. Such pessimism infuses postmodern representations of the road story, seen in novels by writers as diverse as Don DeLillo, Cormack McCarthy, and Paul Auster,⁸ and in films as diverse as David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1990) and Jean-Luc Godard’s *Week-end* (1967).

The idea that the postmodern road story proclaims the death of modernist hopes of authenticity is what compelled French cultural critic Jean Baudrillard to go in “search” of America in the late 1980s by taking to the road, particularly the cyclical highways of metropolitan Los Angeles, as he sought what he called “Astral” America, defined by him, as “the lyrical nature of pure circulation [...] not social and cultural America but the America of the empty absolute freedom of the freeways, not the deep America of mores and mentalities, but the America of desert speed, of motels, and surfaces” (1988: 27, 5). While the hobo-hero set out with no particular destination in sight, “away from any Here”, the modernist still saw the journey as “getting” him somewhere on an ontological level. He was preserving his autonomy, or, at the very least, attempting to do so. Baudrillard’s

empty, “pure circulation” rejects such an ontology by embracing not movement, but speed; not the desire for a home, but the temporary comfort of motels; not a desire for depth of feeling, but the newness of surfaces.

Thus, Baudrillard romanticizes his travels specifically because of this surfaceness, a shallow image. For Baudrillard, it is redemptive precisely because his car can pull away “effortlessly, noiselessly, eating up the road, gliding along without the slightest bump, riding along as if you were on a cushion of air” (1988: 54). He sees such easy travel as a “collective propulsion” (1988: 53) in which he has absolutely no autonomy over which exit or direction to take. “Why should I tear myself away to revert to an individual trajectory, a vain sense of responsibility?” Baudrillard posits (1988: 53). Not only does this assertion specifically deny any responsibility to fight for autonomy such as was earlier asserted by modernism, but it *rejoices* in that denial of responsibility. To Baudrillard, there “are no lies because it is only simulation” (1988: 85). In summation, Baudrillard asks:

But is this really what an achieved Utopia looks like? Is this a successful revolution? Yes, indeed! What do you expect a successful revolution to look like? It is paradise. Santa Barbara is paradise; Disneyland is a paradise, the US is a paradise. Paradise is just paradise. If you are prepared to accept the consequences of your dreams —not just the political and sentimental ones, but the theoretical and cultural ones as well— then you must still regard America today with the same naïve enthusiasm as the generations that discovered the New World. (1988: 98)

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Baudrillard thus implies not only that Los Angeles represents a Utopia achieved, but, also, that if we can simply push aside our biases, be they Romantic or Modernist, we would realize that such a Utopia is the natural and logical end-point of the American journey. Sofia Coppola's *Somewhere* refuses to accept such consequences as a natural product of the American dream. In fact, it seeks to openly defy such a supposition by making visible the temptation of surfaces and speed and demonstrating how it destroys the individual as her protagonist speeds by every opportunity to know himself or make meaningful connections with those around him—even his own daughter.

4. Sofia Coppola's dissident modernism

In many ways *Somewhere* is Sofia Coppola's Los Angeles movie, and the film's interest in surface pleasures, as well as the city's cyclical highways, are reminiscent of what Baudrillard most admires about LA. *Somewhere* is, aesthetically speaking, a postmodern film that is about images—the degree to which they are shallow, the degree to which they both attract and repel us, and the degree to which they dominate our identity.⁹ But what is so interesting about *Somewhere* is that it is a

postmodern film that expresses a desire to return to modernist efforts to preserve autonomy. Although such attempts are still seen as nothing more than depthless images, the film finds such images preferable to remaining in a hell that Baudrillard describes as “paradise”.

Time and again, Coppola’s films open with an unorthodox first shot, always in front of a still frame, that sets the thematic tone for her entire movie.¹⁰ *Somewhere* begins with a still camera in the California desert and no non-diegetic sounds. For an awkward *two and a half* minutes we watch a Ferrari drive in circles while listening to the engine. It disappears off screen to the right, reappears crossing to the left, disappears, and reappears over and over again, as the driver, Johnny Marco, inexplicably drives round and round, getting nowhere. Coppola then immediately cuts to a shot of Johnny at the Chateau, coming downstairs with a party. He slips, falls, and breaks his wrist. We then proceed into a largely silent twenty minutes of film, that matches the empty tone of the entire story, as we see Johnny wallow in isolation and fleeting pleasures within the hotel’s confines. He parties, he drinks, he gets massages, he plays video games with his daughter, but, all the time, the camera is still, the soundtrack silent, and Dorff’s facial expressions emphasize the utter lack of connection, of comfort and pleasure he finds in these activities. At one point early in the film, we watch for nearly two minutes as he stares at a wall, absently smoking a cigarette. Two separate scenes invite the spectator to watch twin strippers for upwards of five minutes, to the point that their actions become banal and dull —matched by Marco’s reaction of either falling asleep, in the first scene, or slow, methodical clapping in the second. The film silently shows Marco as he shaves, eats hamburgers, sees random women flash him their breasts simply because he is famous, walks past models at a photo-shoot as if it were an everyday occurrence, and falls asleep while performing oral sex on a woman he picks up at a party. All of these interactions are depicted as equally banal, and all work in a cyclical pattern to return Johnny to his couch, alone and directionless. Johnny’s professional life is shown to be no more fulfilling, as he blankly answers insipid questions about his new action film and sits, silently, for three minutes as a facial mold that will be used for his next film solidifies around his face. Surrounded by an environment of excess and consumption, not unlike *Lost in Translation*’s Tokyo and *Marie Antoinette*’s Versailles, Coppola again attempts to show such boundless “pleasure” as being, simultaneously, alluring and superficial. Living in a hotel that has recently undergone refurbishment in order to preserve a Hollywood golden age image of itself, surrounded by every possible type of pleasure, Marco is hopelessly adrift and hopelessly bored. Even the film’s most ambitious, albeit brief, vacation from the Chateau Marmont, when Johnny takes his daughter to Italy, ends inside another famous hotel where sex leaves Johnny unfulfilled. His professional life is represented by receiving a joke award in

which he does not even have a voice in accepting, and his daughter swims laps in a ridiculously short pool, again, getting nowhere.

Although the film is ostensibly set almost entirely inside hotels and is seemingly about a life of stasis, a single prop acts as the dominant trope in the entire movie: Marco's black Ferrari. From the moment the film opens with Marco driving, literally, in circles, the image, and the sound, of his Ferrari is never allowed to stray too far from the spectator's consciousness. We see him endlessly driving around Los Angeles's roads, highways, and freeways, always with the sound of the engine, and his smooth change of gears as he accelerates, as the only soundtrack. The camera follows his car in long tracking shots as he slides, smoothly, on and off LA's thoroughways, driving underneath road-signs that never represent any actual destination because, time and again, the camera next finds him right back where he started: the Chateau Marmont. Such seamless, easy, fluidity of movement matches Baudrillard's imagination of these same spaces, as he claims driving in postmodern LA to be

a total collective act, staged by the entire population, twenty-four hours a day. [...] The machines themselves, with their fluidity and their automatic transmission, have created a milieu in their own image, a milieu into which you insert yourself gently, which you switch over to as you might switch over to a TV channel [...] Thus the freeways do not de-nature the city or the landscape; they simply pass through it and unravel it without altering the character of this particular metropolis. And they are ideally suited to the only truly profound pleasure [in it], that of keeping on the move. (1988: 52-53)

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The question for Coppola's film, however, is just how pleasurable such circulation actually proves to be. While I have already glibly pointed out that both in the plot of the film and in its opening sequence, his driving takes him nowhere (both in terms of actual and metaphorical movement), his "smooth" drives are even more empty than I imply. In one scene, for no apparent reason, and without further comment, when Johnny pulls out of the Chateau's parking lot, the camera oddly juxtaposes his car with another, wrecked car. Elsewhere, while driving from mundane shopping location to mundane shopping location with his daughter, his car breaks down, causing him to call a cab. Earlier in the film, Marco pulls up at a red light next to a pretty woman in a convertible, to whom we can tell from his facial expression he is attracted. Then, borrowing from a common Hollywood trope in which the male driver pulls out of a red light in order to follow an attractive woman, Marco begins to tail her. Such a trope, traditionally, ends in either sexual conquest or comic sexual rejection. In Coppola's film, however, we follow this woman for a minute and a half until she pulls into her driveway. Her gate closes and she apparently never even sees that Johnny is following her. The film then immediately cuts to him staring at models in the hallway at the Chateau. Instead

of conquest or refusal, Johnny's sexy car chase ends in, quite literally, a nothing. A closing of a gate, in which nothing has happened or changed. There is no point, no pleasure, no success, no rejection —simply wasted gas and a cinematic cut to another image of femininity, the models, whom Johnny walks by uninterestedly with barely a glance. While the Ferrari in *Somewhere* works as a trope not dissimilar to Baudrillard's discussion of LA's highways, Coppola does not see implicit pleasure in the figure of the car. Just like the hotel, it is one more location in which one is asked to view, pass, and consume superficial images that bring neither fulfillment nor connection, simply banality.

In short, the film is, at its heart, about the lack of authenticity and connection available in a postmodern world. For instance, early in the film, Marco reacts badly to a masseur who wants to give an *image* of an "authentic" connection via a massage set to eastern music and given in the nude, intended to "meet [the client] at the same level"—a process, he asserts, that is explained "in-depth" on his website. Such lack of authentic connection is also evidenced by his relationship, or lack thereof, to the series of women he sleeps with, the mother of his child, his agent, his own mother, his friends, and his co-stars. Nowhere is this lack of authenticity more evident, however, than in the film's driving plot device —his relationship with his daughter whom he gets roped into looking after for a few weeks on short notice. While the movie's pattern tempts the spectator to think the film is going to be about Johnny's transformation, and although the ending hints that Coppola is interested in a desire for authenticity and change, all of which are sparked by the time spent with Johnny's daughter, it is important to remember that we do not actually see Johnny undergoing such a transformation. When his daughter cries, he has nothing to say. When she takes him to see her new ice-skating routine, he tells her he was unaware she knew how to skate, to which she replies "I've been skating for three years". When, in their last scene together, he wants to apologize for the distance between them, she does not hear a word he says because of helicopter noise.¹¹ She smiles and waves, happy for the time they have spent together. But, there is no scene of transformative connection. Johnny, similarly, returns to the Chateau, and we see the same, empty, silent shots of him in his hotel room that began the film —a damning indictment of Baudrillard's cyclical "paradise".

The depiction of Johnny's car and the depiction of the hotel room(s) therefore work, in tandem, to create a cyclical pattern that is not broken until the film's final, linear sequence. A movie that opens with two and a half minutes of driving in a circle becomes, more or less, an hour and a half of a metaphorical circle —a circle that is in every sense lacking in depth (which is precisely what Coppola's critics claim her films to be). But that is precisely Coppola's point. Much as the body of

Chaplin's *Modern Times* (and Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* for that matter) is solely interested in depicting a deterministic, industrial modernity that prevents the protagonists from finding their "home" (thereby justifying the film's final sequence), Coppola's film is primarily interested in depicting a no-less deterministic postmodern landscape that forces Johnny Marco into his shallow life/identity, and in depicting that environment in a manner that wholly overwhelms the spectator. One is made to actually feel, and experience, the emptiness. And it is important to focus on the manner in which that cyclical, empty pattern returns to the space of a hotel room. Hotels offer the *promise* of home—a place to sleep, to eat, to make your own. This is especially true of Johnny's hotel because he is a long-term resident, knows all the staff, and because the hotel is completely cordoned off from the outside world and is particularly self-sufficient—for example, his daughter is even able to order ingredients from room service to make Eggs Benedict. But Coppola's cyclical pattern works to emphasize just how far removed a transient hotel room is from any sense of "home". Johnny Marco is no closer to finding a space "where he can feel at home" than Chaplin's prison cell. And the film's style and its cyclical pattern invite the spectator to be fully aware of that fact, and will not allow us to distance ourselves from that awareness. In the scene where Johnny is fitted for the facial mask the camera slowly creeps closer and closer to Johnny's face. It is a reverse of an important scene in *Marie Antoinette* where the camera slowly pulls back, allowing the façade of Versailles to overwhelm Marie, thus emphasizing her isolation and lack of agency. Johnny is shown to have no more agency and to be no less isolated, but here the camera forces us *into* that emptiness. Coppola makes us experience the postmodern hell Johnny is living firsthand, trapped in his transient, and empty, hotel life.

What proves particularly interesting about this film, I argue, is that her indictment of postmodern Los Angeles, through a postmodern film aesthetic, ends by returning to a very modernist ethos that draws upon the trope of the hobo-hero. In a movie in which actual, transformative movement within society is shown to be impossible, the closest we get to redemption or transformation is a rejection of that society and the beginning of a journey toward an undisclosed destination. Upon Johnny's return to the Chateau, and Coppola's repetition of the empty shots of his empty life from the beginning of the film, the only sound we hear is that of the cars going by outside in the street. Wallowing in his own self-pity, and his own inability to cook a successful meal as his daughter had, he calls his daughter's mother in tears, complaining "I'm nothing. I'm not even a person". When she refuses to come over, but suggests that he should chase the prototypical Hollywood image of "volunteering", he hangs up and cries alone—unable to connect to any person and not satisfied by the suggestion he engage in an image-based activity meant to offer him direction. We then see Johnny drifting, à la *The*

Graduate's Benjamin Braddock,¹² alone, in the hotel pool, just as he had with his daughter previously. Unlike Braddock, however, he is allowed to drift entirely outside the frame. Next, he calls the front desk and informs the receptionist he is checking out but, as of yet, has no forwarding address. We then follow his car, and its engine, in tracking shots as he drives through the Los Angeles interstates, which slowly devolve, shot by shot, into locations that are more and more rural. Finally, we follow him as he drives on an empty two-lane road with nothing but fields and mountains as far as the eye can see. We hear the car's engine sputter and slowly run out of gas as he pulls over to the side of the road. He gets out of the Ferrari, and we hear the disturbing, off-putting noise of the car beeping at its lack of occupant with keys still in the ignition. Johnny then walks toward the horizon in a shot reminiscent of the end of *Modern Times* (as well as *Five Easy Pieces*¹³). As the film suddenly fades to black —Johnny still walking toward the horizon— a loud, upbeat, non-diegetic song (Phoenix's "Love Like a Sunset Part 2") immediately begins and takes over the scene's mood, dominating the spectator and seeming to offer redemption, as Johnny presumably continues to walk toward a destination that the narrative suggests not even he can know or understand. The film's sound and cinematography may ask the audience to find this action redemptive, but the film's narrative does not at any point provide a reason (or an answer) as to exactly *why* the spectator might feel moved in this way. It relies, as Coppola's films often do, entirely upon mood, and upon the spectator's assumed/implicit relationship to the American trope of the hobo-hero, which allows the mood at the end of the film to be so effective.

Coppola thus openly questions postmodernism's assertion that attempts to preserve authenticity are "neither possible nor desirable". By not showing, emphasizing, or showcasing any actual moment of transformation or connection—in fact she denies both—Coppola seems to accept the basic postmodern tenant that authenticity is impossible. That image is all. But, unlike Baudrillard, she refuses to accept that such surface imagery is a desirable destination. While the film's ending may well copy an *image* of authenticity borrowed from literature and film traditions, namely the ontology of the hobo-hero, Coppola's film seems wholly aware of that fact. The ending uses linear movement to defy the film's heretofore cyclical patterns, but Johnny's actions do not make logical sense within the narrative; even if one wants to chuck everything and begin a new life, one does not drive toward a horizon until the gas runs out and then proceed to walk toward that horizon. As such, the meaning of the ending (and of the film) can best be understood as a parable—a parable made richer because it is an allusion to such literary and filmic traditions and images. Yet, faced with a postmodern world in which *everything* is a shallow, baseless, non-redemptive image, this particular image, of a hobo-hero claiming to preserve a sense of integrated self by turning to a life of wandering, seems preferable to Coppola.

Johnny is not heroic, nor are we asked to completely identify with or admire his position. Instead, we are asked to empathize with him at a human level, and to find hope in his rejection of Los Angeles, the Chateau Marmont, and the society they embody. Marco's destination is unknown, the whole of the American continent lies before him, and the film does not offer any solution, other than the bleak, and nondescript, refusal of all that his society has to offer. He embodies the qualities of the hobo-hero, demonstrating the possibility that such an ontology still provides, insisting upon its continued pertinence to the American condition. His destination is, quite literally, 'some'where, or anywhere, other than the postmodern hell that is nowhere.

Notes

¹. I would like to thank Ashlie Sponenberg, of the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, for her input on this project.

². This quotation, along with all of the quotations I use from Berman, comes from Berman's preface to the Penguin edition published in 1988. I choose to draw from this later preface because it allows Berman to place his 1982 treatise on modernism in direct conversation with the postmodern theorists and philosophers that dominated the decade.

³. For example, to quote Peter Travers's positive review, Sofia Coppola "gives *Somewhere* the hypnotically deliberate pace of a European art film" (2010). Conversely, Tom Long's attack concedes "she manages to make it count for something in a totally oblique, European angst kind of way" and *Reel Review's* James Berardinelli claims, "Coppola has strayed into an area of pretentiousness that we have rarely seen since the height of the French New Wave" (2010). Similar comments can be found in almost all reviews of the film.

⁴. For detailed examples and discussion of these responses, see both my article "Off with Hollywood's Head: Sofia Coppola as Feminine Auteur" (2010) and Belinda Smail's "Sofia Coppola: Reading the Director" (2013).

⁵. For an example, see the writings of French immigrant, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who almost completely defined American identity by the fact that the only common factor to be found in a varied population was that all the inhabitants shared an uprooted history.

⁶. For just a few examples, consider Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930, 1932, 1936), Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* (1962), Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), and Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925).

⁷. Made nine years after *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *Modern Times* is both a sound film and produced in the sound era. But it follows the aesthetics and structure of a silent film. However, while we do hear diegetic noise, the only spoken voices included in the film stem either from machines or machine-reproduced human voices, such as record players, radios, and a futuristic video/voice monitoring system the factory boss can use to spy on, and communicate with, his workers. The lone exception to this claim comes when Chaplin's character, in the penultimate scene, finds his "voice" as a performer, but what he utters is nonsensical and nontranslatable. In short, he discovers the words do not matter.

⁸. For just a few examples, consider DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) and *Cosmopolis* (2003), McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), and Auster's *The Music of Chance* (1990).

⁹. Such themes are present in all of Coppola's films, but she returns to them most directly in her fifth feature film, *The Bling Ring* (2013).

¹⁰. This is particularly true of *Lost in Translation* and *Marie Antoinette*, films that both attempt to make us aware of our complicity in the male gaze. *Lost in Translation* opens with a close-up of Charlotte's (Scarlett Johansson) panty-clad rear end that lasts a full thirty-six seconds—long enough to become completely unnerving and awkward for the spectator. *Marie Antoinette* opens with the young Queen (Kirsten Dunst) reclining in a low-cut bustier and licking cake icing from her finger. At the precise moment she wholly embodies the object of "the gaze", Marie Antoinette breaks the filmic fourth wall and returns the gaze back to the spectator. She then cocks her head and gives him a quizzical look as if to ask "What are you looking at?". As with *Somewhere's* opening shot, the scene is entirely removed from the rest of the narrative.

¹¹. This scene has been the site of attack from critics who repeatedly claim it is too similar to *Lost in Translation's* famous ending, in which the audience is unable to hear the words that Bob (Bill Murray) whispers in Charlotte's ear. The scene in *Somewhere*, however, works in a very contrary manner. In the former, the spectator is removed from the couple. What is shared between them cannot,

the film implies, be translated to the spectator/voyeur. It distances the spectator from the screen couple. In *Somewhere*, we hear precisely what Johnny says. It is Cleo, on screen, who cannot understand her father. This has the effect of assuring that the spectator's screen surrogate will remain Johnny, and emphasizes Johnny's lack of ability to connect or communicate.

¹². The shots of Johnny drifting in the pool are a direct match for, and I would argue direct reference to, *The Graduate*—shot from the same angle and with the same tone. *The Graduate* is a film that is also about a protagonist who is "lost" and must search for identity, rejecting the images of identity with which he has been provided. *Somewhere's* final scene, in which Johnny's car engine sputters as he runs out of gas, is also highly reminiscent of Benjamin Braddock's car running out of gas as he races to interrupt Elaine's wedding. And it is further worth noting that *The Graduate's* opening sequence sets Braddock on a moving walkway that, because of the take, makes it seem as if he is not "getting anywhere".

¹³. *Somewhere's* ending sequence seems a direct allusion to Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces*. In their final scene together Johnny and Cleo play ping-pong next to the pool reminiscent of multiple scenes in *Five Easy Pieces*, and the final sequence of Rafelson's film, in which Robert Dupea (Jack Nicholson) gives up all earthly possessions before hitchhiking on a logging truck headed toward an undetermined destination, is eerily similar to Coppola's. In fact, *Five Easy Pieces* is a great text for discussion of the ontology of the hobo-hero in its own right.

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