Driving in Cars with Words

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Resumen

"Driving in Cars withWords," escrito por Will Straw, es un artículo enfocado en la conexión cinemática de la tecnología, el movimiento y el paisaje, y en la intersección entre el automóvil como forma tecnológica y el paisaje plástico como un medio a través del cual el vehículo avanza. El autor se refiere, específicamente, a las secuencias en las cuales un auto se mueve contra el paisaje, mientras que los créditos de la película se despliegan sobre ambos. Por medio de una revisión de ejemplos de películas estadounidenses, canadienses y mexicanas, Straw se pregunta acerca de la manera en que la cultura nacional incide en la idea de viaje y cómo se relaciona ésta por conceptos como la libertad, la interrupción, la dificultad o la rutina; hasta dónde los paisajes constituyen espacios de contemplación lejana o sitios amenazantes o lugares de oportunidad sumamente codificados; qué tanto el viaje se considera como una actividad de exploración individual, o bien como un movimiento colectivo burocratizado.

1. Introduction

It is appropriate to the themes of this book that I begin with a film whose narrative trajectory joins together the three largest nations of North America. In 1954, Tony Curtis starred as a racing car driver in a Hollywood film entitled *Johnny Dark*. This little-known movie deals with a car race between the Canadian and Mexican borders. As the race begins, Canadian Mounted Police hover in the background, conveying in short-hand fashion that we are in Canada. Indeed, both Canada and Mexico appear for only a few seconds in the film, the latter as the end point of the race, similarly signaled by stereotypical features of national architecture and dress. Although it is minor by almost any standards, this film offers a combination of visual elements that, I will argue, has become central to the experience of cinema. This combination is that of technology, movement, and landscape—of the automobile as technological form and the picturesque landscape as that through which an automobile moves. In this combination, I will suggest, the movement of an automobile justifies an extended gaze upon a landscape, while the pictorial qualities of the landscape compensate for the limited narrative information contained in the image of a moving automobile.

This essay is concerned with a more limited variation of this relationship, how-ever, one in which a vehicle moves against a landscape while a film's credits unfold over both. I will call such scenes "driving credit sequences," though the sequences to be discussed include a few in which the moving vehicle is a train and the film's central characters are passengers rather than drivers. From the 1950s through the 1980s, one of the most common ways to present a film's credits was against the visual backdrop of a human figure moving through a landscape, in or upon a transportation vehicle—a car, train, or motorcycle. While this particular cinematic figure has roots which reach back into the 1920s, it would become particularly common in the decades following World War II.

2.   Genealogies of the Driving Credit Sequence

The emergence of the driving credit sequence is one event within the cinema's long negotiation of its relationship to the written word.[1] The credits of films are examples of what Gérard Genette has called "paratexts," elements of textual structure whose relationship to the main body of a text is uncertain and often the source of a certain cultural anxiety (Genette 1). Part of this anxiety stems from the extent to which words or titles employ materials of expression (typeset or scripted words) which, by con-vention, are not part of a film's fictional world and, as a result, challenge its coherence or specificity. The precise function and effect of film credits has been the focus of new interest on the part of film scholars, many of them European, over the past decade (cf., for example, Innocenti/Re; Tylski.) Recent theoretical writing has argued, for example, that credits occupy a luminal, transitional function within film, mediating between the world outside the film (that of the spectator, sitting in a darkened theatre) and the film text itself. As Valentina Re suggests, film credits facilitate the passage between the time before a film begins and the point at which the events of its narrative are set in play.[2]

If credit sequences may be designated "rituals" of opening, the most common of such rituals, from the 1920s through the 1950s, took their models from other media. Film credits would be designed to resemble (or even to represent) the title page of a book, the opening of a theatrical curtain, or the emblematic slide common in 19th-cen-tury lectures or magic lantern shows. Such credit sequences usually contained little movement, concerned as they were with reproducing a stable viewing experience asso-ciated with theatrical spectatorship or the act of reading. The static character of these credit sequences added to the sense of their autonomy, of their difference from those scenes featuring movement (of human characters and objects) that indicated the com-mencement of a film's narrative. From the 1920s onwards, however, we find increased experimentation with a variety of means for reducing the autonomy of the credit

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[1]   I have analyzed this relationship elsewhere, with different emphases. Cf. Straw.

[2]   Cf., for example, the extended discussion of these issues in Re.

sequence. In films set within theatrical worlds, credits might be displayed on theatre marquees, with the implicit suggestion that such marquees were part of the world of a film's narrative. In other films, credits might be inscribed in sand on a beach, or revealed as the pages of a magazine whose pages are flipped. Credits increasingly borrowed the supports and typographic forms of urban textual forms like the newspaper or the billboard, in a practice that smoothed the passage from credit sequence to narrative space (Straw).

During and after World War II, in the national cinemas of several countries, credits would be bound more and more to the movement of humans. Occasionally, this movement would take the form of walking, with characters encountering credits as pieces of advertising or graffiti affixed to the sides of buildings (e.g., *The Lady is Willing*; *Open Secret*). A much more common tendency set credits against the movement of technologically-mediated forms of transportation. From the 1940s onwards, credits might unfold against the movement of an inter-city bus, which dropped off its main character just as the credits ended (*The Fallen Angel*; *Some Came Running*). Other films would use the geometries of the railroad train (its serpentine shape, or the rotation of its wheels) to give graphic unity to the words of the credits (*Night Train to Paris*; *Charade*) The movement of motorcyclists along highways or freeways would hold attention during the credit sequences of such films as *Medium Cool* and *The Takers.*

The most frequent use of technologically-mediated transportation in credit sequences involved the use of automobiles and their movement. Within the hundreds of credit sequences which have used automobile journeys, since the 1940s, subdivisions are easily identifiable. There are credit sequences designed to be seen through the windshield of a moving car (*Kiss Me Deadly*; *Hour of Glory*; *125 Rue Montmartre*; *Hell is a City*), others in which we watch police cars rush out of a parking garage into city streets (*On Dangerous Ground*; *Blueprint for Murder*), and others still in which a car pulls up to a remote house in which mysteries will be unveiled (*Le Monocle Noir*; *Cause to Kill/Sha ji*; *Dead of Night*). In one of the most common uses of automobile journeys, cars will drive to or from airports during credit sequences, as a means of tracing the travel with which narrative lines are initiated (e.g., *A Fine Pair*; *Come Fly With Me*).

Across this rich and varied history of the driving credit sequence, we may observe several shifts of sensibility. Imagery from the 1940s of trucks, bus or automobiles rumbling in bumpy fashion along highways would give way, in the 1950s, to the steady urgency of automobile journeys prompted by criminal acts or investigations. In the 1960s, driving credit sequences were often marked by the smooth gliding of contemporary sports cars or limousines, in scenes which conveyed the luxury, freedom or elegance of silent, unconstrained movement. In at least some small way, then, the history of driving credit sequences is tied to changes in automobile technology, but of course this is not the whole story. The great driving credit sequences of the 1960s (for example, *The Italian Job* or *A Man and a Woman* (Un Homme et une Femme) are

clearly part of a new culture of heightened speed and technological sleekness in which the sports car has become pre-eminent. At the same time, driving credit sequences such as these partake of the mannerism and pictorial extravagance of 1960s cinema, marked by an indulgence in unusual and extended visual effects. Key stylistic gestures of this period, like the splitting of light from points in a landscape or use of narrative ellipsis, will often find their fullest development in scenes of individuals driving cars.

By the late 1950s, credit sequences in films of the United States and several other countries had become longer. In part, this was because credit sequences were increasingly accompanied by title songs, which were becoming key elements in the marketing of films and whose complete unfolding they must accommodate. At the same time, the growing number of film personnel for whom credit was now common and required stretched the duration of the credit sequence. Under these conditions, the credit sequence became the pretext for exercises in audiovisual form. One of the best known of these exercises was the animated credit sequence, in which a film's key thematic and narrative elements were usually condensed in a prologue lasting from two to five minutes. (The animated credit sequences to the Pink Panther films of the 1960s are the best known of these.) The other exercise, which concerns us here, was the driving credit sequence, in which credits unfolded against the backdrop of a moving automobile or some other mode of transportation. While, in the early 1950s, images of moving automobiles were simply means for beginning a narrative before a film's credits had concluded, a decade later the driving sequence had become the pretext for extravagant visual exercises with little precise narrative function.

In the 1960s, the driving credit sequence became emblematic of the cinema's capacity to evoke movement and to set this movement against picturesque landscapes which exploited the ascendant use of widescreen filming and easily available color processes. Driving credit sequences, with their low levels of narrative detail, justified a sustained gaze on landscapes both urban and natural. The increase in international co-productions during the 1960s made the driving credit sequence a useful pretext for the display of photogenic locations (like the Swiss Alps) and touristic cityscapes (like those of Rome or Paris.)

From its earliest days, as noted, the cinema had turned to other media (like the book or theatre) for devices to be employed in a film's own rituals of opening. If we treat the automobile window as itself a medium, through which vision is framed and flattened, we may consider it one of the last media to which the cinema has turned in its ongoing experimentation with such rituals. (If it is not the very last, it is because a range of films now use computer screens or other new media forms to present their credits, as with the "digital rain" of letters employed in the credit sequence of *The Matrix.*)

2.1   Landscape and the driving credit sequence

In his book *Cinéma 2: L'Image-Temps* (*Cinema 2: The Time Image*), Gilles Deleuze quotes the French critic Serge Daney on the differential status of movement in the films of different geographical regions. In a 1982 article in the newspaper *Libération*, Daney argued that "the Americans have taken the study of continuous movement a very long way … through a movement which empties the image of its weight and its material" (Deleuze 75, n. 12). Daney contrasts this tendency of U.S. cinema with the treatment of movement within Eastern European cinema. In films of the latter, he suggests, the cinema works to slow down movement, to document the accumulation of matter and of historical encumbrances to change. While Daney's reference to the cinema of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is precise here, we may borrow these ideas for a broader examination of national differences in the sorts of movement conveyed in credit sequences.

In 1942, Luchino Visconti opened his film *Ossessione* (Obsession) with a long sequence in which we watch the highway pass through the window of a truck, as the letters of the film's credits appear in sequence. This convention was not unprecedented, even in 1942. Nevertheless, we might see this film as helping to inaugurate a distinctive version of modernity in the cinema. This modernity is characterized by the silent passing of a landscape which, while clearly outside of any city, lacks the picturesque qualities of the natural or pristinely rural. The sequence of credits—of written titles—gives the scene a purpose, but the words are the pretext, as well, for a contemplative relationship to a degraded landscape. The speed of movement of this scene is not a speed that is required by dramatic narrative action (this is not a chase scene, for example.) Neither, however, is it the casual, variable speed of the walking stroller. Rather, our attention is held within a controlled velocity which feels at least slightly constraining. Our estrangement from the background of dirty highways and seemingly neglected fields is doubly generated. In the first place, this estrangement is thematized as the detachment of the invisible driver from a landscape which is presented as aged and uninviting. Arguably, that landscape bears the weight of natural and human histories, of the sort described by Serge Daney in the passage quoted earlier. At the same time, the automobile moves just fast enough for the images of landscape to dissolve at various moments into abstraction. In a great many driving credit sequences, landscape has this double function, then: as a signifier of geographical and historical context, and as a play with abstract forms.

In her book *L'Image paysage: iconologie et cinéma* (The Landscape Image: Iconology and Cinema) Maurizia Natali argues that "no filmic landscape can resist, for very long, such things as montage, filmic time, narrative rhythm or the appearance of human characters" (16). If the static landscape invites (or even requires) the quick intrusion of cinematic movement and temporality, a whole set of impulses in the history of cinema have sought to linger on the landscape and prolong its autonomy from any narrative time or movement. The driving credit sequence, arguably, is one partial resolution of this tension. The passage of a moving vehicle brings a sense of time, of mov-

ing towards an end, to the visual experience of landscape. This same movement authorizes a sustained gaze upon that landscape and a foregrounding of its pictorial qualities. The sequence of credits, with which we are usually familiar, locates us at any moment in temporal relation to a conclusion which we know is inevitable.

3.   The Driving Credit Sequence: U.S. Examples

I would like to pursue these ideas further through a look at three credit sequences from U.S. films and television programs, one each from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s. In the credit sequences to the film *The Pawnbroker*, the film's central character, a Holocaust survivor who manages a pawnshop in Harlem, drives in to work from one of New York City's outer boroughs. The landscape through which he passes is one of semiotic clutter (signs, both commercial and official, of various shapes) and of a diversity of material forms constitutive of urban infrastructure, many of them obviously in a state of decay. The dominant features of this sequence were repeated in the credit sequence that opened each episode of the television program *The Sopranos*. (Indeed, the credit sequence to *The Sopranos* seems clearly an homage to that of *The Pawnbroker*.) Both the eponymous main character of *The Pawnbroker* and Tony Soprano drive with purpose and self-possession through this landscape, wielding their respective automobiles as instruments of a secure mobility. In our third example, from the 1980 film *American Gigolo*, Richard Gere drives in a convertible through a luxurious southern California landscape as the credits unfold.

In all three of these examples from U.S. texts, the male persona is given what literary theorists might call characterological depth. His silent concentration invites us to ascribe to him a reflective, contemplative relationship to the landscape, all the while setting in place an uncertainty as to his moral and psychological state. We are given extended time in which to contemplate these male characters, but their own attention is focused elsewhere, on the act of driving and on the substance of their inner life.

These kinds of sequences represent particular ways of representing moving vehicles, like automobiles, and of offering a sustained view of natural or industrial landscapes. At the same time, these sequences work to produce a distinctive image of the human figure and to induce, at the very least, a mild curiosity about that figure's psychological interiority. It is typical of the *topos* of the driving credit sequence that the human figure, most often a man, remains silent. It is as if the man is rendered mute by the printed words of the credits, as they follow their familiar sequence, and kept silent, in many cases, by the unfolding of a self-contained piece of music.

The pieces of music in these three sequences have different relationships to the spectator's project of ascribing an interiority to the main character. The Blondie song, "Call Me," which runs over the *American Gigolo* credit sequence, represents the clearest example of song and film promoting each other, but its precise resonance with the film's key themes is inconsistent, in part because the singing voice is female. The theme song to *The Sopranos*, "Woke up this morning," with its 2nd person mode of

address ("You woke up this morning, got yourself a gun"), catches one of the predicaments of Tony Soprano himself—his entrapment within familiar relationships and expectations—but this only partially illuminates his character in the series. Quincy Jones's wordless music for the credits to *The Pawnbroker* suggests a tension and turmoil that one may ascribe either to the main character or to New York City itself, but this is left unresolved.

This topos of the driving credit sequence consists, we might say, of various layers of form in which the human figure is wrapped or enclosed. In the three examples just offered, this figure is contained in a vehicle, but he is also covered over, in a sense, by written words and by music which works to banish other sounds from the scene. Typically, in these scenes, the arrival of the human figure at his destination coincides with the appearance of the final credit—that which identifies the film's director. At that point, both the moving human and the printed words of the credits typically disappear, and the music concludes. The human being is returned to a social world in which dialogue is necessary and in which the introspection conveyed in the driving credit sequence is interrupted.

The urban and suburban landscapes in which the driving credit sequences of *The Pawnbroker* and *The Sopranos* unfold move in and out of a state of visual abstraction. In one moment, that landscape is a signifier of industrial and architectural clutter and decay; in another, it has become a set of hazy, aestheticized forms. (*American Gigolo*, in contrast, is content to leave the clichéd beauty of the southern Californian coastline in its most clearly legible and enjoyable condition.) The specific temporality of these sequences is often uncertain, further enhancing their abstract, metaphorical qualities. Some driving credit sequences are about a specific instance of driving but most are about the typicality of a repeated act, offered in something like a filmic equivalent to the imperfect tense in language.

The quick, determined movement of characters through these landscapes recalls Serge Daney's reference to cinematic movement which removes, from the image, any sense of material weight (Deleuze 293, n. 12). The concrete and metal freeway structures filling the credit sequences of *The Pawnbroker* and *The Sopranos* are obviously weighty in a material sense, but man and automobile glide through them with ease and purpose. It is not in their automobiles that these men confront the thickets of personal history and narrative entanglement that will dominate the stories which follow. Rather these histories and entanglements come as the characters leave the protective shells of their automobiles and enter the world of others.

4.   The Driving Credit Sequence: Mexican and Canadian Examples

Serge Daney's remarks on the status of movement in different cinematic traditions invite us to look specifically at the driving credit sequence as a filmic figure in which culturally specific investments in movement are laid bare. While the risks of cultural essentialism and distorted samples in this exercise are obvious, I want to develop some

observations concerning those credit sequences from Mexican and Canadian films in which a character partakes of technologically-mediated movement. In the very different cinemas of Mexico and Canada, I would suggest, we find tendencies distinct from those of U.S. cinema. In Mexican cinema, driving credit sequences show a tendency to present mobility as an encounter with menacing forces. In Canadian cinema, mobility is the allegorical rendering of social change, and it is typically constrained and interrupted by forces, bureaucratic and otherwise, that work to limit a character's freedom. In neither national cinema does one find, as one does in the American cinema, a preponderance of images of technologically-mediated movement suggestive of self-sufficiency.

In the credit sequence of the Mexican film *La edad de la violencia* (The State of Violence), the members of a motorcycle gang ride, side by side, through the streets of Mexico City's Centro Historico and from there out to one of the city's main thoroughfares. In their smooth, seemingly unconstrained mobility, these riders offer an image of night-time freedom, and of their domination of these streets. At the same time, of course, the logic of the exploitation film requires that this same freedom convey a sense of menace and of the somewhat cynically constructed "social problem" of youth. (These reactions are underscored by the official voice which provides voice-over narration and by the "crime jazz" music which runs throughout this scene.)

Three of my other Mexican examples take place at night, as well, and we might see the cinematic night as a chronotope—a temporal territory—full of menace and unexpected adventure into which each film's main characters ride. In the 1953 *lucha libre* (Wrestling) film *El Enmascarado de Plata* (The Man in the Silver Mask), the wrestler hero rides his motorcycle into the night (against an obviously back projected landscape) while the credits unfold. The psychological thriller *Vagabundo en la lluvia* (The Tramp in the Rain) offers its credits over images of a woman who, having left a costume party, drives a car through a threatening and barely visible landscape on the edges of a city. *Karla contro los jaguars* (Karla Against the Jaguars), one of a series of Mexican films that often used Columbian locations and Argentinian personnel, similarly opens with an automobile voyage into nocturnal obscurity, as does the first episode in the anthology film *La Puerta y la mujer del carnicero* (The Door and the Butcher's Wife). A daytime driving credit sequence serves as an interlude in which the main characters flee a bank robbery in the comedy-thriller *Persiguelas y ... alcanzalas!* (Chase Them … Get Them!). The driving which unfolds behind the credits to Arthur Ripstein's much more serious *Lecumberri* (Lecumberri) takes place in the day, but we must wait some time before the scene moves from the darkness of the police van to the daylight image of the prison to which the characters are being transported.

This corpus is limited, but it consists of all the driving credit sequences found in a sampling of fifty Mexican films from the 1940s through the 1970s. In none of these Mexican films is the landscape against which movement and credits unfold rendered as picturesque in any pleasing sense. The obscuring of landscape in several of these films is clearly a result, at some level, of reduced budgets, but this adds considerably

to the sense of disorientation and menace that marks these driving credit sequences. The blurring of terrain at the periphery of an automobile or motorcycle, which might, in an American or European film, represent an indulgence in visual abstraction, serves here to produce a threatening sense of dislocation and oppressive placelessness.

One of the most extended and conventional driving credit sequences featuring a Canadian landscape does not appear in a Canadian film. In the 1958 British thriller *Intent to Kill* assassins have come to Montreal to kill the President of a South American country who has gone to Canada for medical treatment. The credit sequence follows the killers as they drive from Montreal's Dorval airport through suburban throughfares and into the middle of the city, in an extended vision of snowy urban landscapes. In an examination of films produced in Canada by Canadian interests, there are a few surprises. Canonical Canadian films associated most strongly with travel, mobility, and escape, like *Goin' Down the Road*, *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, and *Highway 61* do not have driving credit sequences. Indeed, one is struck, on reviewing these films, by the extent to which movement is less important than its consequences; scenes of travel, in these films so clearly remembered as "road movies," are briefer and less central than the much longer scenes in which those characters reflect upon their displacement.

Across the limited sample of films examined here, some differences between the driving credit sequences of Mexican or Canadian films, on the one hand, and U.S. driving credit sequences on the other, become immediately apparent. In the films of Mexico and Canada, the range of vehicles seems greater, for one thing. There are more motorcycles in the Mexican examples, and a greater variety of modes of transport in the Canadian films. Women were more likely to appear as the mobile human figures in Mexican and Canadian credit sequences than in those from the United States. The image of the lone man in an automobile, which dominates the American corpus (and, incidentally, that of Western European cinema as well) is much less predominant in the films of Mexico and Canada.

The lead character of the Canadian film *Why Shoot the Teacher*, played by the diminutive actor Bud Cort, is dwarfed in that film's credit sequence by the much larger trains that carry him to a small prairie town as an agent of bureaucratized development. A train-ride credit sequence opens Denys Arcand's *Gina*, a film in which, as in so many other Quebec films of the 1960s and 1970s, female characters are the tableaux on which social change is registered. The lead character's introspective look out the window of a train, as she travels through a landscape of small working class Quebec towns, anticipates her own assumption of active subjecthood which occurs later in the film.

Eulalie, the central female character in Joyce Wieland's *The Far Shore*, sets off newly married, in an automobile, as that film's credits unfold. The ride is bumpy, however, and interrupted by farm animals. As viewers familiar with English-Canadian films, we watch this sequence in the certainty that its promises of freedom and mobility will soon be destroyed. As Emily West argues, with respect to Canadian historical

films and television series, these almost inevitably play upon the gap between the enlightened present of the viewer and the ignorance or unrealized hopes of characters whose lives are set in the past (West). The failure of smooth mobility in these films is thus one index of ameliorative lessons to be conveyed and learned in the historical gap between a film's historical period and the present. In other Canadian examples, credit sequences present images of technologically-mediated movement that is similarly frustrated and doomed: the driver in congested traffic during the credits of *The Rubber Gun*, or the bumbling snow removal vehicle operator, hounded by his wife, boss, and neighborhood children as he tries to do his job, in the title sequence of *La Vie heureuse de Léopold Z* (The Merry World of Leopold Z).

5.   Conclusions

We may trace some of these differences outlined here to the particular conditions of film production characteristic of each country. In Mexico, the use of the driving credit sequence coincided with the waning of the *epoca de oro* or Golden Age in Mexican cinema, and with the turn towards popular genres like horror, the fantastic adventure film, and the film of youthful rebellion. The motorcycle functions effectively as both the familiar vehicle of the juvenile delinquent and the perfect accessory of the crime-fighting superhero. The narrative dispatching of a female character to confront various kinds of menace would be a recurrent pattern in these films. In Canada, the situation is almost diametrically opposed. Canadian films of the 1960s and 1970s were usually made as "art" films—as highly subsidized pieces of social commentary which did not belong to popular genres. As a result, these films were often historical, and were more likely than American popular films to have females as their central characters. In the driving credit sequences of Mexican films, characters drive into spaces of enigma and uncertainty because, as genre films, these work to delay the revelation of their film's secrets. In the Canadian examples, in contrast, films made only after significant economic struggle strain to show off their resources, and to foreground, through multiple registers of irony, the historical failures of bureaucratic or technological promise. In the driving credit sequences of American films, as in the American cinema more generally, characters move to demonstrate their control over expanses of territory and to enact changes in their lives. In the Canadian films I've looked at, characters often move as the agents of broader socio-historical changes of which they are often little more than tokens.

We can say, of the driving credit sequence, that its specific variations within different national cinemas are symptomatic of different aspects of those cinemas: Driving credit sequences suggest the extent to which, in a given national culture, travel is marked by freedom, interruption, difficulty or routine. They convey the extent to which landscapes are spaces of detached contemplation or highly codified sites of menace or opportunity; they insinuate something of the extent to which travel is an activity marked by individualistic exploration or bureaucratized collective movement.

In broader terms, driving credit sequences are distinctive unities of cultural expression through which the aesthetic, social, and political meanings of human mobility are foregrounded.

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