“Roads for Traveling Souls” Spirituality and the American Road

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ABSTRACT

In the latter part of the 20th century, the road in American culture has been identified with independence, mobility, and speed, but in his seminal poem, “Song of the Open Road,” Walt Whitman characterized road journeys as simultaneously physical, intellectual, and spiritual, a view embraced by Vincent Van Gogh whose *Terrace of a Café at Night* illustrates in paint what Whitman said in words. Others such as Jack Kerouac in *On the Road* followed in Whitman’s tradition, one taken up even more recently by David Lynch, whose films are best known for a condemnation of American suburban life, but whose *Straight Story* evokes a profound spirituality as part of the road. This essay explores spirituality in these various texts.

Key Words
road in American culture, spirituality, traveling soul, journey

In late 2008, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City mounted an excellent exhibition, “Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night,” focusing on Vincent Van Gogh’s sun-down and night paintings such as *Starry*

Night and *Starlight over the River Rhone*, which were linked to other 19th-century paintings, artists, and writers, among them Walt Whitman. Maite Van Dijk and Jennifer Field (2008) note that:

> The night proved to be a catalyst of philosophical, religious, and poetic thoughts for Van Gogh, and in his letters he associated the celestial sky with such qualities as infinity, faith, conviviality, and hope. The subject of the poetry of the night was not unique to him; in countless nineteenth-century poems, books, and tales the night is characterized as a time for contemplation. Van Gogh read avidly and was well aware of this literary tradition. He cited several passages from contemporary writers such as Victor Hugo and the American poet Walt Whitman, in whose texts the night was a central concern. The French writer Alphonse Daudet epitomized the spirit of the night in his short tale *Les Etoiles,* with which Van Gogh was familiar: "If you have ever slept under the stars, you will know that a mysterious world awakens in solitude and silence as we lie sleeping." (129)

As Lewis M. Layman (1984) and Hope B. Werness (1985) observe, Van Gogh owes a great deal to Whitman in his deep attachment to nature, its rhythms of life, and deep spirituality, and as van Dijk and Field (2008) elaborate, the meaning of *The Starry Night* "carries on the Romantic tradition of the sublime and spiritual in nature. This subject was explored by Whitman, whose 'visionary excitement, . . . expansive, bursting energy, and absorption in swift cosmic rhythm' evoke Van Gogh's exterior night scenes, especially *The Starry Night"*(144).[1] This feeling of nature filled with divine mystery is well illustrated in the night sky of *Starry Night* and *Starlight over the River Rhone,* but also in "Song of the Open Road," suggesting that, under that night sky, roads and other avenues of transportation put people in communication with each other, carry them to new places, and give them new experiences.

1) They are citing Werness, 1985, 39.

Van Gogh (1853-1890), a late contemporary of Whitman's (1819-1892), found an affinity with the latter's evocation of landscapes, waterways, and roads that carried people to exciting new places, but also with his presentation of "a world of health, of generous, frank carnal love—of friendship—of work, with the great starry firmament, something, in short, that one could only call God and eternity, put back in place above this world."[2] While night as "a time for meditation and self-reflection, a moment of repose that is fertile with metaphysical and introspective questions" (Pissarro 46) can be seen and felt in the brilliant white stars and Prussian blue background of Van Gogh's starry night canvases, this other combination of the physical, sensual, and spiritual is better expressed in *Terrace of a Café at Night,* which has that same feature of the dark blue night sky filled with stars, but also a wonderfully golden café, suggestive of those much-needed "moments of physical rejuvenation, stimulated by ample drinking and smoking within the low-life contexts of brothels, night cafés, and entertainment venues such as dance halls and cabarets" (Pissarro 2008 46). In Pissarro's words, the "spiritual contemplation, boundless creativity, and the convivial enjoyment of life" (2008 46) become "a path, a road, a map . . ." (Pissarro 2008 58). The combination of spirituality and physicality as "a path, a road, a map" is central to Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" (1856), Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), and David Lynch's *Straight Story* (1999). All evoke a profound physicality and spirituality as related to the road, especially underneath the night sky. In the remainder of this essay, I would like to discuss this spirituality of Whitman, Kerouac, and Lynch.

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2) Cited in Sjraar van Heugen, et al, *Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night* (2008 17). This quotation is a reformulation of the same letter from two editions, the first from letter 674 in *De Brieven van Vincent van Gogh,* ed. Han Van Crimpen and Monique Berends-Alberts, and the second from/W8 in *The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh.*

Whitman's "Song of the Open Road"

In "Song of the Open Road," Walt Whitman was the first American to celebrate the road and travel in their complexity and diversity. He divides the poem into two parts, the first an address to the road itself and the second an invitation (*Allons*!) from the narrator to the reader to travel the road together, share experiences, and mutually explore perceptions and insights.

Near the opening of the poem, the narrator apostrophizes the road, speaking in the language of a supplicant to a deity:

> You road I enter upon and look around, I believe you are not all that is here,
> I believe that much unseen is also here.
> Here the profound lesson of reception, nor preference nor denial . . . . (2.16-18)

This deity is not remote, aloof, or housed in a temple but physical and immediate, meeting the speaker in and through the fields and forests, humble dwelling places, and human beings of infinite variety. As he sets out on this road and begins his encounter with spirituality, the speaker escapes the straight-jackets of convention that would prevent total enjoyment of the experience and deny a rounded spiritual wisdom and the "efflux of the soul":

> From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
> Going where I list, my own master total and absolute,
> Listening to others, considering well what they say,
> Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
> Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me. (5:53-57)

Freeing himself from the bonds of conformity and roaming at will in nature, the speaker can discover the secrets of life identified closely with the earth itself:

> Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons.
> It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth. (6:71-72)

As the narrator saunters forward in this leisurely and meditative journey, he approaches the earth as a lover who can provide him with wisdom and be persuaded to share the divine secrets of life:

> The earth never tires,
> The earth is rude, silent, incomprehensible at first . . . ,
> Be not discouraged, keep on, there are divine things well envelop'd
> I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell.
> (9:116-119)

> This "earthy" experience of nature and the understanding it brings lead to profound spiritual wisdom:
> Here is the test of wisdom.
> Wisdom is not finally tested in schools,
> Wisdom cannot be pass'd from one having it to another not having it,
> Wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof,
> Applies to all states and objects and qualities and is content,
> Is the certainty of the reality and immortality of things, and the excellence of things;
> Something there is in the float of the sight of things that provokes it out of the soul.
> (6:76-82)

This experience is of the day and the night for both yield deep insights of their own, but night itself in Whitman's canon, as with Van Gogh, is especially the time for contemplation, meditation, and spiritual

understanding. These secrets drawn from the earth and the diurnal patterns of the day and the year are nicely encapsulated in the metaphor of the journey of life:

> Journeyers over consecutive seasons, over the years, the curious
> years each emerging from that which preceded it,
> Journeyers as with companions, namely their own diverse phases,
> Forth-steppers from the latent unrealized baby-days,
> Journeyers gayly with their own youth, journeyers with their
> bearded and well-grain'd manhood,
> Journeyers with their womanhood, ample, unsurpass'd content,
> Journeyers with their own sublime old age of manhood or womanhood,
> Old age, calm, expanded, broad with the haughty breadth of the universe,
> Old age, flowing free with the delicious near-by freedom of death.
> (12:158-165) [3)]

3) Indeed, some of Whitman's American contemporaries also saw the links between the journey, nature, and spirituality in similar terms, but did not go as far as Van Gogh in including explicit sexuality as part of the spiritual journey. Henry David Thoreau in Walden is one case in point, but I would like to include briefly another:the American Hudson River artist, Thomas Cole (1801-1848), an early contemporary of Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and similarly influenced by European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. He painted a series of four remarkable canvases, showing four stages in the journey of life－Childhood, Youth, Manhood, and Old Age－with the subject travelling in a boat through various forms of sublime nature, accompanied by a guardian angel. In the painting of Childhood, the subject floats out of a cave on calm waters into a verdant and spring-like nature suffused with morning light. This light is intensified in the second of the paintings as the Youth, again on calm waters, follows a vision that illuminates the daytime sun-filled sky. In Manhood, the mood changes: the water becomes troubled, the sky darkens, and a rock formation partly obscures the afternoon light, but the subject seems able to negotiate the waters with the help of his guardian angel. In Old Age, the journeyer is again on calm waters, and, helped by his attending angel, he is almost completely surrounded by prescient clouds of the late evening through which "god-light" streams, mediated by another angel beckoning in those clouds. It is clear from these paintings with their symbolically luminous

Having their own selfhood and open to interrogation, the road, the journey, the travelers, and the landscape simultaneously become participants in communion and communication, the subjects of meditation, and repositories of wisdom, fusing physicality, sexuality, egalitarian communication, and spirituality.

Whether night or day, the speaker is aware of the other travelers who undertake this journey as well. His list of those he encounters on the road—"the black with his woolly head, the felon, the diseas'd, the illiterate person, are not denied" (2.19)—makes it clear that not all the walkers and riders are among the socially privileged; he includes those believed to comprise the underbelly of America at that time—those who were poor, black, sick, uneducated, and criminal. Given that vagrants were becoming a recognizable part of the road, as Kenneth Kusmer has observed in *Down and Out: the Homeless in American History,* Whitman was both observant and unusually inclusive in celebrating them as equals in his spiritual quest. According to Kusmer, vagrants on the road consisted of previous military men, former or escaped slaves, runaway servants or those who had completed their indenture, apprentices who had escaped their masters, and men expelled from small towns for laziness or irresponsible behavior.[4] The reader, too, is invited to share in this group of travelers:

> Mon enfant! I give you my hand!
> I give you my love more precious than money,

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tones that the subject and boat located in nature are meant to suggest that spiritual transformation from an innocent perspective to full spiritual comprehension happens in the journey through the earth and the evolution of the planet because nature is in itself spiritual, and it is at the onset of the darkness when spiritually is at its zenith.. Nature, humanity, and the journey thus assume a common spirituality.

4) Kenneth L Kusmer, *Down and Out: The Homeless in American History.* Oxford et al: Oxford UP, 2002. p. 13-22.

I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live? (17.227-230)

In including this vast variety of travelers, Whitman creates the template for a road literature of inclusivity, diversity, equality, and social conscience that becomes broadly equated with spirituality.

For those who set out, the road takes on many forms and shapes various messages as part of the speaker's inclusive vision: it is the pathless and wild sea (10.124), the wilderness path, the country road and city street (12.151-154), the metaphorical path of life from past to present or youth to death and immortality, and the universal way of spiritual progress. It is, then, the traveler's task

To take the best of the farmer's farm and the rich man's elegant villa, and the chaste blessings of the well-married couple, and the fruits of orchards and flowers of gardens,
To take to your use out of the compact cities as you pass through,
To carry buildings and streets with you afterward wherever you go,
To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter them, to gather the love out of their hearts,
To take your lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave them behind you,
To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads, as roads for traveling souls.

(13.175-183)

This makes the road special: it is not just a place for individual travel, panoramic views of nature, and cultural observations, but a locus of community, the sustainer of life and instigator of change, and a source of physical and spiritual energy.

In this way, Whitman's poem shapes many of the elements that have become critical to the road in American culture: the road itself, the mode

of transportation (ship, walking, carriage), the physical journey, the identity of the traveler, the social community formed along the way, the sights encountered, the insights gathered, the progress of civilization, and, importantly for our purpose, the journey of the soul away from the ordinary and familiar to the spiritually meaningful and unknown.

Kerouac's *On the Road*

Part of the "Beat" counter-culture, rejecting mainstream cultural values and hoping to find new paths away from the shackles of convention, the young Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) emerged from World War II anxious to put the war and the Eastcoast behind him and travel westward to discover the heart of America. Unlike Whitman who wanted to travel leisurely and thoughtfully, Kerouac was in a hurry to experience life as quickly as he could. The previous generation had readily adopted the automobile for business and leisure, but Kerouac's generation had to postpone that opportunity because of the Great Depression and the war, and they were anxious to make up for lost time. "Speed" represented their desires, both *literally* in going fast to leave behind old haunts, conventions, and ways of understanding, and *figuratively* in taking drugs to gain new psychological perceptions and spiritual insights; these were the new hip "trips" of the young, and, if the means and velocity differed from Whitman's, the intention was similar—to seek a special understanding through the senses and an engagement with nature and travelling companions. This is part of a personal understanding for Jack Kerouac and his characters, and it becomes a national obsession as well, so much so that Carlo, one of the characters in *On the Road*, asks a question that resonates through the volume: "What is the meaning of this voyage . . . ? I mean, man, whither goest thou? Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?" (114).

Sal Paradise, Kerouac's own narrative persona in the book, answers Carlos's question by referring to "the purity of the road" (128) and by maintaining that "the road is life" (199), clearly spiritual affirmations to the question of meaning. Even more specifically, Sal equates the road with spiritual meaning when relating a conversation with Dean Moriarty, his special friend and spiritual mentor. Dean says,

> "You spend a whole life of non-interference with the wishes of others, including politicians and the rich, and nobody bothers you and you cut along and make it your own way," to which Sal responds, "I agreed with him. He was reaching his Tao decisions in the simplest direct way. 'What's your road, man?—holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It's an anywhere road for anybody anyhow. Where body how?'" (237)

This Beat talk of the Tao clearly links the "holyboy road" and spiritual realization.

As with Van Gogh and Whitman earlier, a major part of the meaning of Kerouac's road is the importance of nature, especially under the night sky and often with very specific spiritual references. These are especially associated with Colorado. As Sal rides inside a truck in Iowa on his first trip across the United States, he "could see Denver looming ahead of me like the Promised Land, way out there beneath the stars, across the prairie of Iowa and plains of Nebraska, and I could see the greater vision of San Francisco beyond, like jewels in the night" (19). In the same journey, he directly experiences the exhilaration of life under the stars when he rides with a bunch of other hitch-hikers on the "flatboard" truck driven by the boys from Minnesota. He feels the drivers' generosity, his companion's camaraderie, and the overarching sky blazing with stars: "And soon I realized I was actually at last over Colorado, though not officially in it, but looking southwest towards Denver itself a few hundred miles away. I yelled for joy. We passed the bottle. The great blazing

stars came out, the far-receding sand hills got dim. I felt like an arrow that could shoot out all the way" (29). Still riding on the same truck as they get even closer to the mountains, he alludes to Buddhism and adds that "the stars overhead were pure and bright because of the increasingly thin air as we mounted the high hill of the western plateau, about a foot a mile, so they say, and no trees obstructing any low-levelled stars anywhere" (32). These stars "wheeled the night" (210) in the same way that Sal and his friends wheel the day in their cars, both seemingly part of a cosmic plan and dynamic universe.[5)]

Comparable splendid visions of the west beneath the starry night are repeated several times throughout the book (37, 170, 210), emphasizing this new spiritual revelation, but Sal also refers to his own star (56), indicative of his destiny. Part of what he experiences in the night is the desire to get out of his white body and enjoy life as a Black or Hispanic: "I wished I were Joe. I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (170). At the time this book was written, the desire to be a black man instead of a white man was perverse to many people, but Kerouac here follows in the tradition of Whitman and Van Gogh in simultaneously finding beauty under the stars and comfort in the cultural rhythms of people completely different from him.

As with Van Gogh earlier, it is not only the starry night that hints of revelation but also the colors (and perfumed air) of sunset and sundown. When Sal crosses the border between Colorado and Utah, he says: "I

5) That cosmic plan does not preclude problems because humans are like "the Prince of the Dharma who's lost his ancestral grove and journeys across the spaces" looking for peace in the midst of conflict (210). Sal does not hesitate to tell of "the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night, the hell of it, the senseless nightmare road" (239) because to do so would be to distort the tragic that is part of the strange balance in the universe.

saw God in the sky in the form of huge gold sunburning clouds above the desert that seemed to point a finger at me and say, 'Pass her and go on, you're on the road to heaven'" (171). He does not always equate these moments with God as such, but still thinks of them as special and mysterious. For instance, in Bakersfield, California he is struck by the sensuousness of dusk: "Soon it got dusk, a grapy dusk, a purple dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields; the sun the colour of pressed grapes, slashed with burgundy red, the fields the colour of love and Spanish mysteries. I stuck my head out of the window and took deep breaths of the fragrant air. It was the most beautiful of all moments" (77). He has a similar sensation in New Orleans where he finds the air "so sweet . . . it seemed to come in soft bandannas; and you could smell the river and really smell the people, and mud, and molasses, and every kind of tropical exhalation" (133).

The journey or road trip and experiences with nature especially at night are, then, fundamental to these traveling souls as they crisscross the USA in search of new visions and perceptions, but the road can never be separated from those who travel on it. Sal Paradise makes this quite clear as he opens the first of the five parts in the book, comparing himself to his friend Dean Moriarty and his frenetic, enlightened mobility:

> I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off. Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he actually was born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy. . . . (7)

Before he takes to the road, Sal is unactualized, ill, "weary," "dead,"

(7) even "haunted" and a "ghost" (21). But the idea of the West gives him new vitality, and his friend Dean, especially, represents the new visions and possibilities of the road: he is the mad, "holy con-man with the shining mind" (11), who "was BEAT—the root, the soul of Beatific" (184). Sal notes the importance of that quality by affirming that "the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars . . ." (11).

Dean is so Beat, mad, and filled with physical and spiritual ecstasy that even the normally slow process of parking a car turns into manic energy: "he can back a car forty miles an hour into a tight squeeze and stop at the wall, jump out, race among fenders, leap into another car, circle it fifty miles an hour in a narrow space, back swiftly into tight spot, *hump*, snap the car with the emergency so that you see it bounce as he flies out," and so on (12). This kind of energy is sign and symbol of Dean's life in general, which Sal equates with the coming of a messiah: "his 'criminality' was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides)" (13). This new messianic purpose and sense of spirituality is not part of a middle-class American religious tradition for Dean "is wrapped up in a fast car, a coast to reach and a woman at the end of the road" (217): that is his soul. It is this that Sal as the initiate has to learn and that Dean as the master has to teach, but, like life and divinity themselves, Dean can be a mystery: his madness sometimes overtakes him and proves frightening to Sal—"I had a vision of Dean, a burning shuddering frightful Angel, palpitating towards me across the road, approaching like a cloud, with enormous speed, pursuing me like the Shrouded Traveller on the plain, bearing

down on me" (244)—but then, almost immediately, he softens, becomes a more traditional angel (248) and eventually even God (268).

As an initiate, the narrator Sal rides with others who often better know the way: he hitchhikes across the country on trucks and cars, takes buses, and rides with and learns from buddies such as Dean, who do drive cars. Dean is almost always the driver when he is in a car, metaphorically the one who follows his own destiny and does not depend on others, though he may run afoul of the law because of it. Sal is the passenger and learner, though he does occasionally drive, most noteworthy in Part 4 in Mexico, when near Hidalgo he compares this experience to "driving across the world and into the places where we would finally learn ourselves among the Fellahin Indians of the world, the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity that stretches in a belt around the equatorial belly of the world" (264). As he drives, he not only meets others more exotic than himself but seems to travel back into the dawn of civilization before the whites dominated the planet. This, of course, is a modern instance of the classic paradigm that Deborah Madsen (1998) discusses with reference to Frederick Jackson Turner, in which the frontier becomes a return to the primitive as part of a process of an "exceptional" personal and national restoration: "it was from the experience of perennial rebirth, fluidity of social institutions, continual development and proximity to 'the simplicity of primitive society' that there arose the forces that dominate the American national character" (123). In this mythology "the process of self-transformation from corrupted European [or, in this case, New Yorker] to perfected American has been central to New World mythology since the seventeenth century . . ." (123).

In Mexico, Sal's driving and return to the primitive is integrated with a drug experience so that once again in the night he sees "streams of gold pouring through the sky and right across the tattered roof of the poor old car, right across my eyeballs and indeed right inside them; it was everywhere" (268). That experience is a prelude to his sleeping on

top of the car in the tropical night, when he "realized the jungle takes you over and you become it. . . . For the first time in my life the weather was not something that touched me, that caressed me, froze or sweated me, but became me. The atmosphere and I became the same" (277). He adds, "I didn't even know if branches or open sky were directly above me, and it made no difference. I opened my mouth to it and drew deep breaths of jungle atmosphere. It was not air, never air, but the palpable and living emanation of trees and swamp" (278). His journey deeper and deeper into the primitive jungle and the exoticism of the Indians allows him to become one with nature, humanity, and the divine origins of life. Driving and sleeping on top of the car dissolve the distinction between humans and technology, uniting Sal, technology, nature, and the origins of life in a spiritual cosmology.

Perhaps because the journey goes ever deeper into nature, human relationships, and the primitive origins of life, the technicalities of the travel stay in the background, while the travelling companions and nature are in the foreground. Sal is usually careful to name and personalize the kind of car they drive, but seldom to name a truck. Also, seldom does the narrator actually refer to the number or name of the road except at the beginning of the book, though city streets are often identified by number and name. It is as if the mystic road cannot be named and tied down to the actual; the important thing is that the road is physical and spiritual at once, and a too-strict naming of vehicle and transportation system would negate that.

Lynch's *The Straight Story*

What seemed wholly liberating and promising about Kerouac's cross-country journeys began to run into trouble both from the establishment and the hipsters themselves, and Kerouac's generally upbeat views of

life were replaced within a decade by the impending sense of tragedy, despair, and spiritual malaise reflected in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Easy Rider* (1969), and a host of other films that challenged the way the '50's culture saw the road and America.

As Peter Fonda, the lead actor of *Easy Rider,* remarked, "the time was right for a really good movie about motorcycles and drugs" (Cagin and Dray 1994 47), and, as Barbara Klinger (1997) added, this was "the road to dystopia" (179-203) that glorified rebellious freedom but resulted in tragedy. This, of course, was not the pattern established by Van Gogh or Whitman, though it is connected to the social reality they saw and the social critique in *On the Road.*[6] It is not my purpose in this essay,

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6) The film itself begins with the smuggling and sale of cocaine followed by a sequence of Western road shots as Billy and Wyatt (the self-styled Captain America) travel along Route 66 going East—not West—to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. This is a film that self-consciously evokes America and reels back the sense of optimism that going West created in previous films and novels and instills a new wariness about the safety of travel on American highways of those who think and look differently than mainstream middle-class people. In this way it defined the edginess felt by those who identified with the counter-culture in the 1960s—especially those who were young, black, or anti-war. Although this was a counter-culture road film that belonged to a particular era, it reminds us that the road is always already about the nation. It may have its roots in many different cultures, but it is inspired by, and infused with, the culture that it inhabits and is especially identified with the USA.

This sense that the film is not just about being on the road, but about nationhood, made it an icon of cultural and political dissidence that the Republican administration was happy to see go away some 20 years later. As Klinger notes:

> In 1988 George Bush proudly noted that the United States had made a successful recovery from the excesses of the 'Easy Rider society' of the 1960s . . . . In the Reagan-Bush era, reference to *Easy Rider* (1969) instantly conjured up demonic images of the hippie counter-culture with its long hair, experimentation with drugs and sex, and violent social protests. For this more conservative

however, to analyze *Easy Rider,* but to move the discussion to the new affirmation by film makers such as David Lynch.

The fault lines of *Easy Rider* involved the discrepancies in spiritual longings, the emptiness of American middle-class life, and the social prejudices against "the Other"—non-standard looking, dressing, and acting people. David Lynch (1946-) is one who expressed this dilemma in such landmark productions as *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet* that explore the gaps between the ideals of well-groomed, brightly lit, middle-class suburban landscapes and the reality of the violence, brutality, and darkness underneath the surface. This is what many know of Lynch's films, but there is another Lynch as well. As Chris Rodley notes of *The Straight Story* in the revised edition of *Lynch on Lynch* (2005),

> *The Straight Story* is not 'wiser', 'happier' or 'more mature' David Lynch. It is, however, *pure* David Lynch. It's just that we don't often experience this version of him. The presence of this other Lynch in *The Straight Story* is, crucially, due to the fact that the film was developed and co-written by Lynch's 'sweetheart' Mary Sweeney, who also produced and edited the film—as she does all of his work. 'To me, there's a real continuum between *The Elephant Man* and *the Straight Story*. That's the other side of David—it's like an Irish, lyrical, poetic side that is emotional without being sentimental, and full of grace.' (246)

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political era, such images represented a permissive degeneracy and destructive militancy that had to be eradicated for the nation to thrive.

Klinger makes clear that this film marked the "serious rifts between counter- and dominant cultures" so that it was cause for national celebration when society no longer seemed to be so divided and films no longer had to take such a cynical stance. Bush in 1988 spoke too soon, however, for only three years later *Thelma and Louise* appeared, showing that, if there were no longer a divide between counter- and dominant culture, there certainly was a massive fault line in cultural expectations surrounding gender.

For Lynch, then, middle-class hypocrisy and subterranean violence are only one part of a larger picture that must be apprehended: "Well, we all have at least two sides. One of the things I've heard is that our trip through life is to gain divine mind through knowledge and experience of combined opposites. And that's our trip. The world we live in is a world of opposites" (2005 23). This larger picture not only helps to present the totality of that balanced reality on earth but hints at an after-life as well, something that Lynch himself believes in. According to Lynch, "I believe it is *not* the end when we die. . . . It's like going to sleep: you wake up in the morning and you start a new day. That could be a symbol for a bigger picture: you die and you have a little time in a dream and, *by golly,* you come back!" (2005 243). Lynch calls this totality of oppositions the "unified field":

> Modern science has discovered the unified field. They say it's there. It's known by many different names of course—'the absolute', 'the unmanifest', 'pure bliss consciousness', 'transcendental consciousness'—many names. It is unity. It's the thing that never had a beginning, and will never have an end. It's knowingness. It's pure creative intelligence. It is the one and only thing. It's the universe and it's all of us, and it permeates all manifestation. (2005 261)

Lynch's films explore these oppositions and this unified field, but this examination of the world—being on the road—must be done slowly, deliberately, and reflectively. Lynch himself practices transcendental meditation (2005 261-62) and believes in moments (sammati) that force human beings to stop, reflect deeply on reality, and "transcend into the absolute" (2005 261): it is when "the boat stops—or even slows up—down you go in the deep water. And that's where the good ideas are" (2005 27).

One of these good ideas was filming the true story of Alvin Straight (Richard Farnsworth), a 73-year-old who decided that he wanted to travel

300 miles from Laurens, Iowa to the well-named Mount Zion, Wisconsin, to visit his brother Lyle (Harry Dean Stanton) who has had a stroke and from whom he had been estranged for ten years. Alvin was partly blind, had a bad hip and difficulty walking, and had no drivers' license, so that he was not able to drive, but he also did not want to travel on the bus. So, he fit out a lawn tractor, attached a large wagon to carry his possessions, and set out at five miles an hour on a six-week road trip. According to Lynch (2005), Alvin's journey "was about forgiveness and making something right. So it's not a sprinter's movie!" (258). Straight did arrive at Mount Zion in time to reconcile with his brother, but he also discovered genuinely good people on the trip itself—the kind of common Midwestern "folk [who] have to rely on each other help each other" (Lynch 2005 251). These are human beings who Van Gogh, Whitman, and Kerouac would admire, including: Straight's buddies in Laurens; the housewife hanging out the wash; the John Deere salesman who sold him the tractor and another who later arranged for repairs and offered to drive him to Wisconsin; the young, unmarried girl who ran away from home because she could not tell her parents about her pregnancy; the bicyclists who welcomed Straight to their camp; the woman who inadvertently hit 13 deer in seven weeks on the highway; the old man with whom Straight shared war experiences; and the priest who offers to share dinner with Alvin and tells him about his brother. Several of these are very intense encounters beside the ever-present campfire at night, and Alvin himself serves as a kind of confessor for others. "Fire, in Lynch's cinematic universe," Orgeron notes (2006 175), "is an important symbol and one that has everything to do with the family." Straight's is a liberating and deeply emotional journey for everyone (including the audience) as he makes his way northward in the late summer.

Apart from the interesting and impressively humane people he meets, it is nature in *The Straight Story* that demonstrates spirituality similar to that of Van Gogh, Whitman, and Kerouac. As Lynch himself noted,

"It's gorgeous in a realistic way. I like nature and man working together" (2005 258), and, as Lynch's editor notes, in this way Lynch's consummate artistry shows through:

> From the opening shots of *The Straight Story,* you know you're right in the heart of a rural version of Lynchland. The painterly attention to texture, colour and composition is unmistakable. Following in Alvin's lawnmower tracks, Lynch is able—more than ever before—to take a good look at the American landscape. Not even a European director—besotted with this mythical country—could achieve Lynch's palpable sense of wonderment. The face of Richard Farnsworth, as Alvin Straight, becomes a geological feature of that landscape—craggy, weather-beaten and endlessly fascinating. (Rodley 2005 246)

As he travels northward to Wisconsin during September and early October, the colors are reminiscent of Van Gogh's harvest landscapes—the golden colors of the ripened wheat and corn, the dark green of late-summer trees turning red as the autumn advances, the bright green and yellow of the John Deere tractor moving steadily down the highway, the contrasting white homes and red tavern, the ripening sun following its path from sunrise to sundown, and the orange flames and sparks of the campfire at night underneath the dazzling Midwestern stars. These colors promise an abundant harvest and the rich continuity of life, and they are very like those of Van Gogh—as Lynch would surely know. As Sjraar van Heugten (2008) remarks of Van Gogh, "To him the sower and the wheat sheaf, associated with the never-ending cycle of growth, blossoming, and the end of life (the harvest) were symbols of the eternal" (70), and "complementary contrasts (primarily yellow and purple, and red and green) give [*The Sower*] . . . extraordinarily expressive power . . ." (74).

As with Van Gogh, Whitman, and Kerouac, part of the larger picture is expressed through the representation of darkness, which has a fascinating beauty for Lynch, especially in his own painting. He says:

> It's the darker things I find really beautiful. I guess I haven't learned to paint the light parts of life in a way that's pleasing to me, although I think it can be done—Rousseau does it, and so does Richard Diebenkorn, in a way. But all my paintings are organic, violent comedies. They have to be violently done and primitive and crude, and to achieve that I try to let nature paint more than I paint.
> But there's the relationship of shapes, one to another, that are pleasing. (2005 22)

Indeed, the way in which Lynch depicts the beauty and balance of darkness in *The Straight Story* shows the marks of an earlier grammar of representation going back to Van Gogh. While daytime in the film is achingly beautiful in its illumination of nature and human life, the darkness is surprisingly beautiful and deeply spiritual. In fact, the film opens and closes with a fantastic view of the starry night, interrupted only by the film credits, and much of the rest of the film takes place in twilight or nighttime. When Alvin Straight rests from his days on the road, and when he talks quietly with others, it is in the darkness beside the campfires underneath the dark night sky. In the darkness surrounded by nature these "beautiful souls" and "strange, wonderful, innocent guys" thrive in a cosmos alive with spiritual intelligence (Lynch 2005 103).[7]

Conclusion

Although by popular reputation David Lynch may seem the furthest removed from the spiritual ideals and pictorial, poetic, and prosodic rhetoric of Van Gogh, Whitman, and Kerouac, in *The Straight Story* he seems immersed in these earlier representations of the road. Jennifer Field (2008)

7) When the hero dies in Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, he is similarly shown in his darkened bedroom underneath a blazing canopy of stars,

notes that "Van Gogh was always in search of unspoiled country life without industrial progress and pollution" (111), and, while Whitman and Kerouac often celebrated the technological achievements of America as divine, they liked an unspoiled countryside as well. Lynch, too, celebrates the simple and uncomplicated country and small town life in *The Straight Story*. The fields of Arles, the shores of Long Island, the high plains of Colorado and tropical forests of Mexico, and the roadways of Iowa and Wisconsin are picturesque, nature is verdant, the night stars are stunning, and the villages quiet and unassuming. The journeys of these artists and their characters toward spiritual illumination include the road itself, the vast nature that surrounds it, a humanity comprised of the common and the lowly, and even an overt physicality and sexuality that are at once part of the spiritual.

It is not, then, merely nature, nighttime, and the palette of colors that these road artists share, but a similar attitude to the working underclass. In Van Gogh, these are the honest, hardworking peasants who sow the fields in the spring, harvest the grain in the fall, and conduct their lives with humility and simplicity. In Van Gogh's eyes, "they stood closer to nature than educated or more civilized people, and were strongly linked to the cycles of life" (Field 2008 102). While Whitman and Kerouac do less with farmers per se, their characters are part of that same human network offering help, solace, and comfort and representing the spiritual clothed in human form. In Lynch, they are honest hardworking housewives, farmers, mechanics, and such who not only manage the homes, plant, and harvest but repair the machinery essential to modern life. They are a part of the road that helps the travelers to see nature in new ways, find individual and social identity, offer compassion and psychological healing, and give hints of spiritual unity.[8)]

8) Cf. A. O. Scott. 2005. "Healing Road Trips in Cinematic America." *International Herald Tribune* (Tuesday, October 25), 9.

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