

[Matthew A. Sheldon](#)

Introduction to the Road Film

Final Exam

12/15/12

## Final Exam

### Character Transformation Through Journey

One of the great things about the road film is its way of having the character's within the structural flow of the story make either sudden drastic changes or slow progressive changes throughout their characters while on their destination from point A to point B. Since the beginning of cinema the road has been an accessible way of telling a story that invokes character's to learn and grow so that by the time they reach that end of the destination, they have gone through a sort of metamorphosis within their character and either have found a new self worth or an exciting new identity that they themselves didn't know they had. Character transformations have been a large factor in the road films alongside the landscapes and the vehicles, and they have become so common and formulaic that most audiences either expect it or aren't surprised when it happens. Character transformations within the road film have started as far back as the early years of the cinema most famously with Frank Capra screwball comedy *It Happened One Night*. The two major films I want to focus on are *Thelma and Louise* and *The*

*Motorcycle Diaries*. Both of these films contain characters that make drastic transformations on the road, which will eventually lead them to a conclusion that they would originally never have expected when beginning their journey.

Ridley's Scott's *Thelma and Louise* tells the story of two protagonist's who decide to go on a cross trip, but not before making an unfortunate stop which ends in the murder of a potential rapist. What makes this film stand apart from other road films is that the two protagonists behind the wheel are both female and yet behave like men which takes this slight formulaic road picture and turns it into something much more unique and interesting. Like in Capra's road film *It Happened One Night*, the two characters in *Thelma and Louise* couldn't be any more different. Thelma is a very trusting, venerable and naive women who clearly isn't strong enough to stand up to her buffoon like husband Darryl who fits the negative stereotyped of all disgusting men; a man who would rather watch a football game than listen to what his wife has to say to him. Thelma's naivety on the dark agendas of males has her lose control and drink too much in the arms of a complete stranger, never questioning what his true motive for getting her alone is until it's sadly too late.

Louise on the other hand is much rougher around the edges, less trusting, more intimidating to men, and is hated by Darryl because he believes her empowering personality is a negative influence on Thelma. Even though Thelma was the one who was almost raped, Louise is the one who pulls the trigger and commits the murder, which causes the two females to now become outlaws from the law because no one will believe their rape claim. Louise is more of the rational thinker between the two characters and yet her choices of men aren't much better than Thelma. Her boyfriend Jimmy does seem to care for her more than Darryl seems to care for Thelma but when Louise refuses to tell Jimmy what her and Thelma are up to, he throws a

childish temper tantrum by angrily throwing around hotel furniture. And yet during this journey together from point A to point B, Thelma and Louise will make a character transformation that will change both of their lives forever.

When Thelma once again becomes too trusting to a handsome stranger named JD that she makes love to within her hotel room, she makes the fatal mistake of leaving him alone in there for him to be able to take off with Louise's entire savings to Mexico and leave the two women completely broke. Louise's tough exterior completely breaks down and she collapses to the floor and when Thelma realizes the severity in what she has done, she suddenly transforms as the dominant character in the relationship. She now takes a more active part in the two of them getting away and takes full control of the situation promising her friend she will get her money back. Thelma does as she promises and holds up a gas station and later even takes control once again when she forces a policeman at gunpoint to get in the trunk of his squad car, as she orders Louise to shoot the police radio with their gun. During the end of Thelma and Louise's journey the two of them have grown much closer and have influenced each other for the better. In the readings by Alistair Daniel, "Our Idea of Fun: Thelma and Louise on Trial," it explains how this journey together has made Thelma finally break free from her repressed shell, and find a new found sense of purpose, excitement, pride, and identity, if only for a short time.

Like Thelma's character in which the road trip gave her a new sense of identity, the same can be said for the film *The Motorcycle Diaries* directed by Walter Salles; in which a young medical student named Ernesto Guevara decides to go on a road trip that not only gives him a new found purpose and identity but it also changes his upcoming fate and the course of history as well. Once Ernesto says goodbye to his family in Buenos Aires he gets on a motorcycle with his friend Alberto and the two head off across Latin America. In the article written by Darlen J.

Sadler: "Leaving Home in Three Salles Films," Darlen states that the road trip the protagonists go on take them away from civilization and closer to the land of the people. In the beginning of their journey Ernesto is at first only thinking about his own personal needs which include reaching his girlfriend in a town in Argentina. Of course during much of their travels the two characters have difficulty in the reliability of the motorcycle as they either accidentally crash it or it repeatedly breaks down. The tone of their adventure greatly shifts when Ernesto and Alberto come across two homeless peasants who are on the run because they are communists. Ernesto seeing these two people struggling for work, food and shelter greatly opens Ernesto's eyes as he sees a cruel world he never knew existed because of living a life of money and luxury. It can be said that Ernesto's first major transformation in his character is when he gives the only money he had saved for the trip to the homeless peasants, realizing that they needed it much more than him and Alberto ever would.

When the characters finally make their road journey to point B which is at a leper colony down the Amazon River, Ernesto seems to have gone through a spiritual change. Even from the beginning Ernesto never plays by the books and always thinks with his heart first then his head. For instance, he bluntly tells an elderly man he has a tumor without ever thinking beforehand how someone could take such news. Ernesto also gives his harsh but honest critique on a book a close friend of his wrote telling him the book wasn't any good. When Ernesto arrives at the Leper Colony he purposely breaks the first cardinal rule and has direct hand to hand contact with the patients which eventually develops a much stronger bond between doctor and patient. Like Louis, Alberto changes throughout the journey as well but not as drastic as Ernesto. Ernesto now has come to the end of his journey and realizes his true purpose on this earth is something completely different then what he originally wanted. The night of his Birthday and before

Ernesto and Alberto head home, Ernesto risks his asthma by swimming across the river to celebrate his last few hours with the patients that he so closely has bonded with.

Like most road films, most protagonists usually have a moment in which their character changes throughout the journey, like for instance in films like *Rain Man*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Adventures of Priscilla* or *Alice in the Cities*. And yet, that is not always the case. The last film we watched in class was Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* which is a road film that consists of 10 different chapters that are set in the front seat of a car. The driver is a woman named Mania and each chapter includes various different passengers that Mania picks up which include her son Amin, her sister, a religious older woman and a prostitute. And yet during these ten chapters the character of Mania doesn't necessarily go through any particular transformation, at least one that we see. The film also breaks another rule of road films in which the character driving has no direct destination she is heading to and so there is no point A to point B. And yet I don't believe every road movie for that matter needs a change in a character for the story to be effective. Sometimes it doesn't have to be the characters within the story that make the transformation but the audience who watches it as their opinions and ideas can change and grow throughout the film.

The endings to *Thelma and Louise* and *The Motorcycle Diaries* are very different and also very similar because the characters from both films come to a decision and choose their fate. At the ending of *Thelma and Louise* the two women decide that there is no other way out from avoiding the authorities besides suicide, and so they choose to drive off the edge of the Grand Canyon. At the end of *The Motorcycle Diaries* it is said that Guevara decides to get involved with political activities as a Marxist revolutionist because of the social injustice he saw on his travels. Both stories can be looked at as tragic because we know the unfortunate endings for the

characters and yet we can also look at it as inspiring because the character's died fulfilling a purpose they believed in and what made them happy no matter how it ended up in the end. What makes character's transformations in road films so powerful and memorable is that in the beginning of their journey, none of these characters would have even expected their fates to end up the way it does. And yet during their time on the road, a sudden transformation takes shape and when the protagonists reach the end of the story their new thoughts and actions will have them do things they wouldn't have even thought of doing at the beginning of their journey; which makes these stories much more powerful and epic in scope.

Work Cited

Thelma and Louise. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis. Metro-Goldwyn Mayer., 1991. DVD.

The Motorcycle Diaries. Dir. Walter Salles. Perf. Gael Garcia Bernal and Rodrigo de la Serna. Focus Features. 2004. DVD. Introduction

It Happened One Night. Dir. Frank Capra. Perf. Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. Columbia Pictures, 1934. DVD.

Ten. Dir. Abbas Kiarostami. Perf. Mania Akbari. Key Line Productions. 2002. DVD.

Daniel, Alistair. "Our Idea of Fun: Thelma and Louise on Trial." *Lost Highways*.

N.p.: Routledge, London, 1998. 193-202. Print.

Sadlier, J. Darlene. "Leaving Home in Three Films by Walter Salles." N.p.:

Bloomington, Indiana University, 2005. 135-139. Print.