

# Masculinity on the Road in the Films of Cédric Kahn

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## Abstract

Cédric Kahn is one of the most interesting directors to have emerged in France in recent years. A striking feature of a number of his films is the central place of the car and the act of driving. In *L'Ennui* (1998), *Roberto Succo* (2001) and most strikingly *Feux rouges* (2004) the car acts as both a motivating narrative device and a central metaphor for the protagonists' mental state. In this essay I look at the depiction of the road trip in *Feux rouges* and attempt to unpack the ways in which the trip is used to trigger and represent the central protagonist's masculine identity crisis asking what this can suggest to us about contemporary discourses of masculinity and society more broadly.

Cédric Kahn is arguably one of the most interesting young directors to have emerged in France in recent years. His early short film, *Le Bonheur* (1997), part of the *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge* series helps to position him as a new *auteur*, a definition furthered by a number of nominations for international festival prizes. However his films also engage in a reinvention of genre cinema and as we shall see, a rejection of some of those elements long held to typify French *auteurist* production. A striking feature of a number of his films, and my main interest here, is the central place of the car and the act of driving. In *L'Ennui* (1998), *Roberto Succo* (2001) and most strikingly *Feux rouges* (2004) the car acts as both a motivating narrative device and a central metaphor for the protagonists' mental state. What I would like to do in this essay is to look more closely at the depiction of the road trip in *Feux rouges* and attempt to unpack the ways in which the trip is used to trigger and represent the central protagonist's masculine identity crisis and what this can perhaps suggest to us about contemporary discourses of masculinity and society more broadly. Before so doing I will make some comments about the place of the car in French society, about the road movie and its apparent re-emergence in France in recent years and about some other examples of the genre which provide an interesting context for my discussion of *Feux rouges*. In other words, I propose to take a little road trip of my own which I trust you will not find overly long and which will ultimately lead us to Kahn's film.

The car, and the pleasures and perils of the road it affords, have of course been much articulated in French cultural production since the immediate post war period. In 1955 Charles Trenet sang of the joys of the *route nationale sept*:

De toutes les routes de France d'Europe  
Celle que j' préfère est celle qui conduit  
En auto ou en auto-stop  
Vers les rivages du Midi

Nationale Sept  
Il faut la prendre qu' on aille à Rome à Sète  
Que l' on soit deux trois quatre cinq six ou sept  
C' est une route qui fait recette  
Route des vacances  
Qui traverse la Bourgogne et la Provence  
Qui fait d' Paris un p' tit faubourg d' Valence  
Et la banlieue d' Saint Paul de Vence  
Le ciel d' été  
Remplit nos coeurs de sa lucidité  
Chasse les aigreurs et les acidités  
Qui font l' malheur des grandes cités  
Tout excites  
On chante, on fête  
Les oliviers sont bleus ma p' tite Lisette  
L' amour joyeux est là qui fait risette  
On est heureux Nationale Sept

The *route nationale sept* is of course the road that links Paris to Menton, crossing Burgundy, the north of the Auvergne, the Rhone Valley and the Côte d'Azur. Trenet's song tells of the joys of the road, of the journey by car from the grey pressures of Paris to the sun filled pleasures of the coast and the pursuit of leisure on vacation. The journey I want to discuss here, that undertaken by Antoine and Hélène, played by Jean-Pierre Darroussin and Carole Bouquet, in Cédric Kahn's *Feux rouges* also heads south from Paris. Whilst the couple do not follow the *nationale sept* as they set off for the *Landes* region via Tours rather than towards Menton and the Côte d'Azur, like the holiday maker in Trenet's song they too are heading for the imagined pleasures of the south. The film's opening scenes suggest only too clearly the pressures of work and city living. Antoine works in a grey, faceless open plan office in which the partitioning around individual work spaces creates a simultaneous sense of constriction and limited privacy. He is exhausted, his own unhealthy pallor echoing the greyness of his work space. His wife, Hélène, is extremely busy, arriving late to their planned rendez vous and as such provoking a tension in the couple which lies at the root of the ensuing narrative events. So the trip to the south to collect their children from a holiday camp and spend two weeks vacationing promises all the pleasures outlined so eloquently in Trenet's song. For Antoine in particular, the car and the journey it enables promises escape, freedom from the tedium of 'metro, boulot, dodo'. And yet this is a road trip which will ultimately bear no relation to that extolled by Trenet. Far from the idyllic journey down the *nationale sept*, this will prove to be an increasingly dystopian voyage of anger, violence and discovery.

As Trenet's song suggests, travel, leisure and vacation began to take on an important place in post war French culture and these new pursuits were to a great extent enabled by the increasing ease of access to the motor car. As Kristin Ross (1996) has so persuasively demonstrated, the motor car was a key element in the modernisation of post-war French society and thus in the prehistory of French post-modernism. As Ross states, "[i]n France at least, the car marked the advent of modernization; it provided both the illustration and the motor of what came to be known as the society of consumption" (39). The arrival of the motor car enabled and reflected changes in French society: the separation of home and workplace, the creation of a mobile workforce and a new acceleration in commodity production and circulation. Moreover the car in and of itself played a significant role in re-defining the French citizen as a mobile and thus available 'consumer', open to the lures of the market including of course the "newly commodified leisure of the countryside and the institution of *les vacances*, access to which is provided by the family car" (Ross 1996: 40). In other words, it was the car that opened up Trenet's *nationale sept* to a far greater proportion of the French population, it was the car and the consumer society it epitomised that made those holidays in the south similarly available.

However, just as the modernisation of post-war French society was experienced by many as a highly ambivalent process, so the motor car inspired decidedly mixed feelings. As Ross (1996) points out:

the car, as the commodity unlike any other, took center stage in cultural debate; it became the vehicle, so to speak, for dramatizing the lack of real social consensus around the French state-led modernization process, the favourite target of the numerous adversaries of the model of development France had followed since the war. And by a special irony, the expansion of the most vocal and organized of these adversaries, the Poujadist movement of the early 1950s, can in retrospect be seen to be completely dependent on the car. (23)

Ross (1996) argues that the centrality of the car in contemporary movies, novels and media largely precedes the car's later ubiquity thus the discourse is to a great extent anticipatory (27). This anticipation reveals a fascination with the car, a sense of wonder at its potential for speed, yet it also suggests a deep-rooted anxiety. A central plot device in many French films and novels of the late 1950s is the, often fatal, traffic accident—consider for example Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* of 1954 (Ross 1996: 29). Ross argues that it is only when the car stands on the verge of becoming a universal accessory that this sense of fascination and anxiety ceases to be such a central motif (1996: 29).

My sense is that while the car does indeed lose its fascination to some extent once it becomes a staple feature of the French consumer landscape throughout the 1960s, there remains a large degree of ambivalence around its impact which is explored in a number of key texts of the 1960s and 1970s. This ambivalence is perhaps as much to do with the car's status as consumer object *par excellence* as with the car itself, nevertheless it is, I think, worth pointing out that cinema in particular

continues to express this uncertainty. This is perhaps most famously represented in a number of Godard's films of the period, notably *A bout de souffle* (1959), *Pierrot le fou* (1965) and *Weekend* (1967). The journey undertaken by Michel Poiccard (Belmondo) at the start of *A bout de souffle* in many ways encapsulates the combination of fascination and anxiety described by Ross. The journey is exhilarating: Michel is alone and drives at speed and is filled with the excitement of getting to Paris, finding Patricia and escaping with her. Yet the journey is also fraught with danger: he is on the run and kills a policeman thus rendering his own position ever more precarious. By the time we get to *Weekend* in 1967 the sense of fascination has indeed disappeared. Cars become a perfect metaphor for the worst excesses of consumer culture and the celebrated eight minute tracking shot of traffic queuing behind a road accident underlines Godard's absolute rejection of consumerism and the American inspired technologised capitalism driving France's modernisation.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the car's particular position within French society has clearly been subject to a number of shifts and competing discourses, I think it is fair to say that its significance or 'usefulness' as a metaphor for consumerism, spatial relations and the relationship between individual and society continues to this day. This notion of the car as metaphor or symbol has arguably been explored most productively on film and I would suggest that this is no accident. The cinema offers a privileged site for the articulation of travel and movement largely due to the qualities shared by movies and the car (and indeed other forms of transport). It has been widely acknowledged that from the outset pre and early cinema provided audiences with a sense of vicarious movement or travel. As Giuliana Bruno (2002) has so persuasively argued:

At the onset of cinema, spatial boundaries and cultural maps were stretching. In the movie house, film spectators were enthusiastic voyagers experiencing the new mobility of cultural transportation. It is not by chance that in the early days of film the movie house was called in Persian *tamâshâkhânâh*: that house where one went sight-seeing and "walking together"—that is, literally, went site-seeing. Film spectators were travellers thrilled to grasp the proximity of far away lands and expansions of their own cityscapes. (77)

It is worth noting that the early development of cinematic technology went more or less hand in hand with the advent of the railroad. Both developments provided their 'users' with travel and spectacle, either real or virtual. For those who could not travel, pre-cinematic machines such as the panorama or diorama and then later filmed travelogues and 'actualities' provided the experience of distant lands and the sensation of displacement. As a writer states in a 1908 edition of the American magazine *Moving Picture World*:

The moving picture machine, for less than \$5 worth of admission tickets [. . . ] will take you on a journey into every quarter, nook and corner of the globe

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<sup>1</sup>The sequence also looks back to an earlier dystopia as it recalls images of roads crowded with fleeing French citizens in the exodus of 1940.

that has been discovered and show you scenes that even the most inveterate of explorers and globe trotters, who may have spent \$500,000 in their travels have never seen. (Cited in Griffiths 1999: 293)

This relationship between the cinema and travel is of course furthered by the advent of the car. Not only do both offer the possibility of movement and speed, the actual physical displacement of the automobile or Friedberg's "mobilized, virtual gaze" of cinema (1994: 2), they share the mechanisation and standardisation which situates them both as "key commodity-vehicles of a complete transformation in [ . . . ] consumption patterns and cultural habits" (Ross 1996: 38). In other words, both cars and cinema act as central elements in modernisation and the shift to a consumer society whilst also helping to shift perception, ways of seeing, enabling as they did a mobile gaze in which the viewer does not necessarily inhabit the same space as the object perceived. It is perhaps worth noting the shared terms used in English for cinema 'screen' and car 'wind screen'. In both cases we look at an apparatus, a defined screen space to see a series of moving objects through which we travel. In an interview added to the UK DVD version of *Feux rouges*, Kahn remarks upon this relationship. He stresses the highly cinematic qualities of the car journey and suggests that the windscreen so often central to the shot in *Feux rouges* can be compared to a cinema screen.

This relationship between cinema and the car is clearly fascinating and merits much more discussion than I have scope for here. What I hope these brief remarks have suggested is the central yet highly ambivalent role taken on by the car in French society since the post war period and its mobilisation to act as metaphor for the impact of modernisation, shifts in the relation between individual and society and changing social and cultural identities. I also hope to have suggested the privileged relationship between cinema and the car both in terms of their shared qualities and in terms of the recurring presence of the automobile across a number of different cinematic forms and genres. This relationship is perhaps most notable in the road movie genre. Whilst there are examples of non-American road movies as we shall discuss, it is essentially perceived as an American genre. Timothy Corrigan links its emergence to post-war American culture and specifically to the breakdown of the family unit and the resulting destabilisation of male subjectivity, and to the growing mechanisation of society in which the artefacts of this mechanisation become "the only promise of self in a culture of mechanical reproduction" (Corrigan 1991: 146). This clearly recalls Ross's (1996) comments about the increasing mechanisation of post-war France. He goes on to state that "as a genre traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women", the road movie promotes a male escapist fantasy linking masculinity to technology and defining the road as a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately contained by the responsibilities of domesticity, home life, marriage, employment (Corrigan 1991: 143). Whilst Corrigan's definitions are extremely suggestive, it is, I think, increasingly important to rethink the national boundaries in which he situates his remarks. The road movie is indeed generally considered to be an American genre

and yet, as Ewa Mazierska and Laura Rascaroli (2006) demonstrate, the road as a structuring motif can be traced well beyond the confines of Hollywood. The authors highlight a significant body of European road movies or 'travel films' and set out to analyse the extent to which these films produce a peculiarly European version of the genre or a reworking of the more firmly established American format. They argue that the main similarity between the two is that

directors on both continents use the motif of the journey as a vehicle for investigating metaphysical questions on the meaning and purpose of life. Travel, thus, commonly becomes an opportunity for exploration, discovery and transformation (of landscapes, of situation and of identity). (Mazierska and Rascaroli 2006: 4)

Mazierska and Rascaroli's (2006) interest in the European road movie is closely bound up with issues of European identity. They argue that

road cinema provides an excellent opportunity to explore [ . . . ] the variety and differences of European national and regional cultures; the common 'European identity', of which migration and travelling are often regarded as an important component; and the areas of potential conflict and domains of cooperation. It also offers the opportunity to re-examine and re-negotiate the relationship between the centre of Europe and its margins, which seems to us a crucial prerequisite for any meaningful discussion concerning a new, united Europe. (201)

Whilst I would not want to limit readings of the European road movie to an attempt to trace representations of European identity (as we shall see in a minute, this is not, I think, at stake in *Feux rouges*), the shifting boundaries of the 'new' Europe may indeed go some way to explaining what appears to be an increase in European films which make travel a central motif. If we look at the French context we can perceive a number of recent films which despite their apparent dissimilarity at the level of genre and form, place road trips or journeys of one form or another at their heart. These include Dominik Moll's *Harry un ami qui vous veut du bien* (2000), *Drôle de Félix* (Ducastel and Martineau, 2000), Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2000), Laurent Cantet's *L'Emploi du temps* (2001), and a number of the films of Manuel Poirier including *Chemins de traverse* (2004) and, perhaps most strikingly, *Western* (1997).

Both *Drôle de Félix* and *Western* can be seen to engage to some extent with the type of identity search within the 'new' Europe described by Mazierska and Rascaroli (2006). In each film the central protagonists are to some degree 'outsiders' and take on the identity of 'nomad' in a quest for roots and a sense of belonging. In Ducastel and Martineau's film, Félix, played by Sami Bouajila, is an HIV positive gay man, of mixed race parentage. Whilst he appears to be in a happy and stable relationship with his older partner, he sets out on a journey through France in an attempt to find the father he has never met. Strikingly his journey takes him south, towards Marseilles, yet ultimately he gives up on his search, reuniting with

his partner and setting off on a vacation to Corsica. However whilst this is far from a dark film, Félix's journey is not entirely the utopic trip described by Trenet. On route he witnesses the disposal of the body of a young immigrant, murdered by two racist thugs. His feeling of complicity in this crime as he fails to report what he has seen to the police seems in some ways to become part of the sense of identity he set out to discover, the realisation of the dangerous prejudice in a French society he had previously experienced in a positive light and his own potential precarity in that society. Set in optimistic counterpoint to this is the 'family' he meets during his travels. The people he encounters and forms a relationship with become his 'sister', his 'cousin', his 'brother'. In other words, the film seems to suggest that the emotional bonds we form are of more importance than biological parentage. It is they that will give Félix the sense of belonging and identity he seems to crave. Indeed it is the very act of travel and movement that enable these bonds. By leaving his partner he rediscovers the importance of that relationship and cements this by embarking with him on another trip. Via his travels he meets his surrogate family. He encounters a woman, played by Ariane Ascaride, who is taking her various children to visit their respective fathers. The children and their mother attempt to explain to Félix the shifting nature of paternity, the fact that it emerges from loving relationships rather than biological fact. Strikingly the mother describes her children as "les enfants de la nationale sept". Here we do perhaps see a reflection of the road lauded by Trenet although surely not in a manner he would have foreseen. These are the loved and loving children of travel and the road, suggesting to Félix and the viewer that identity and family ties can and should never be entirely fixed.

Poirier's *Western* can also be read as a negotiation of identity construction on the part of two outsiders. The film tells of the rather aimless journey of its two central male protagonists, Paco (Sergi López), a Catalan shoe salesman, living in France, and Nino (Sacha Bourdo), a Russian hitchhiker. Nino steals Paco's car and the shoe samples it contains causing Paco to lose his job but meet and fall in love with Marinette, an inhabitant of a Breton coastal town, Le Guilvinec. A series of events lead Paco to accept Nino's invitation to accompany him on the road. The two set off and the film's rather rambling narrative then deals essentially with the gently comic incidents that arise from Nino's fruitless attempts to attract women, set against Paco's seemingly effortless success.

Strikingly *Western* is a road movie without cars. Indeed it is the very removal of the car at the start of the film that sets the narrative in motion and leads to the protagonists' journey. Whilst according to Corrigan the car becomes central to male identity in the typical road movie, here it is the removal of the car that enables the friendship and love that lead to new forms of identity for Nino and Paco. Poirier similarly reconfigures the Western genre, most noticeably through his geographical shift from the American frontier to Brittany, the West of France. The choice of Brittany as the location for the film is rich with significance. By choosing to reference two essentially *American* cinematic genres, the Western and the road movie, in a film that embarks upon an exploration of the construction of identity, Poirier already suggests the role of American cultural products in the construction of Eu-

ropean culture. By making Brittany the 'West' of his 'Western' Poirier extends this discourse to an examination of the role of the United States in the construction of regional, national and European identities. The geographical space we see in the film is clearly France. On a very simple level this is made apparent by the fact that most of the characters, including Paco and Nino, speak French. Yet this is the very edge of France, France's own 'far west', a liminal space where France and indeed Europe meet the Atlantic. It is a space open to the Atlantic and to the lands beyond and this is underscored visually by the film's frequent shots of coastal towns, harbours, ports and boats coupled with the sound of seagulls' cries. In other words, France is shown to be somehow open and unfinished, defined by that which lies beyond her borders. By referencing the United States in the film's title and by using Cinemascope to create a vision of France, or more specifically Brittany, which recalls the vast landscapes of the American West, Poirier reminds us of that dominant other and its role in the construction of French and European identities. But of course Brittany is also a region with a strong sense of its own identity. This is made very apparent in the film as we hear the use of the Breton language and witness joyful manifestations of Breton culture. If Poirier's invocation of the United States via the Western recalls the macro-discourses that shape constructions of European identities, here we are shown the regional, micro discourses that arguably play an equally important role in this process.

In many ways the film appears to offer a very optimistic take on the characters' travels and attempts to put down roots. However, it would be misleading to read the film as a simple embracing of a multi-cultural Europe. Whilst the film may offer plurality and difference as natural and desirable forms of identity, it also suggests that rootlessness and transience are far from ideal. The journey undertaken by Paco and Nino is motivated by a search for love: Nino seeks the woman of his dreams, Paco tests his feelings for Marinette. This search for love is in itself symptomatic of a desire to put down roots. In other words, love becomes a motivating force in an attempt to anchor identity. This does not mean a rejection of plurality but rather an attempt to situate this plurality within a stable sense of community and self enabled by loving relationships. In this sense the film can be seen to echo *Drôle de Félix* where the central protagonist's journey is motivated by the search for his father and culminates in the apparent realisation of both the potentially precarious nature of his identity and the importance of a loving sexual partnership and a 'family' of true friendships as a defence against this threat. In similar fashion, the highly unusual but apparently loving family group in which Paco and Nino find themselves at the end of *Western*, a family group which in its diversity and multiple parentage mirrors the families of Ducastel and Martineau's film, provides them with the sense of belonging they have longed for.

Both these examples of recent French 'road' movies can then be seen to renegotiate and reinvent the genre in a European context whilst engaging with issues of identity within this context. Although neither film explicitly deals with the border crossing that Mazierska and Rascaroli perceive at the heart of many recent European travel movies, by making their main protagonists 'outsiders' of one sort or



another and having them set off on a journey which reveals the diasporic and/or potentially problematic nature of contemporary French social identity, the films can be located within the definition of 'road movie' as privileged site for the exploration of 'Europeanness', diaspora, displacement and migration outlined by Mazierska and Rascaroli (2006).

The films of Cédric Kahn, whilst similarly foregrounding travel to a greater or lesser degree, offer I believe a very different take on the road movie, one which is ultimately much closer to the genre's American forebears. In *L'Ennui* (1998), we are introduced to the central protagonist, Martin, played by Charles Berling, as he drives his car at furious speed, announcing: "I have always known I would die in a car crash". Thus the unravelling of the male psyche begins with a car journey and the film's narrative and the protagonist's obsessive infatuation with his adolescent lover comes to an albeit ambiguous conclusion as he crashes his car and finds himself in hospital. In *Roberto Succo* (2001) the eponymous central character, played by Stefano Cassetti, travels in an increasingly erratic fashion across southern France, the Alps and Switzerland as he attempts to evade arrest. Here travel or perhaps more appropriately movement are absolutely central to the film's narrative, revealing Succo's increasingly desperate attempts to escape the police and symbolising his highly unstable mental state. In a striking scene we see him at the wheel of a stolen car. He goes to the home of Léa (Isild le Besco) and drives at great speed around the square in front of her house. The camera follows him in a 360 degree pan and the sense of speed and arrogance revealed by his mastery of the car at that moment say much about the extremely complex and disturbing nature of the character.

However, it is in *Feux rouges* that the car and the road take centre stage. The film is based on a novel by Georges Simenon. As I have already mentioned, a couple, Antoine and Hélène (Darroussin and Bouquet) set off from Paris for the south to collect their children from a holiday camp. Even prior to their departure tensions in the relationship had begun to surface, largely due to Hélène's failure to meet her husband at the agreed time and his suspicions about the possible reasons for this lateness. In reaction he begins to drink and as they set off and soon find themselves stuck in the slow moving traffic of the *grands chassés croisés* of the French annual *départs en vacances*, he continues to down whisky after whisky as relations with his wife become increasingly fraught. She threatens to go on without him as he stops at yet another bar and when he emerges from the bar she is nowhere to be found. Things then spiral increasingly out of control. Antoine sets off in pursuit of his wife but continues to drink. He gives a lift to a man who turns out to be an escaped prisoner whose violent prison break has been widely broadcast on news bulletins. The journey concludes in a violent struggle between the two men in a dark wood and when Antoine wakes the next morning inside his damaged car but far from the wood it is not clear what was the final outcome of this fight. With the help of a friendly café worker, Antoine traces his wife who has been attacked and, it is suggested, raped on the train by the escaped prisoner. Antoine is shown photographs of the man's body by a police officer and is told that

he had been run over several times. The couple are reunited and agree to continue their journey as if nothing had happened.

The film can, I think, be described quite straightforwardly as a road movie. Unlike *Drôle de Félix* and particularly *Western* which go some way to reinventing the US forms on which it draws, it does not stray overly far from the American version of the genre typically perceived as defining. It is striking that the Simenon novel on which the film was based was set in the USA. In choosing to relocate the film to France, Kahn and co-script writer Laurence Ferreira-Barbosa seem to make a gesture to repositioning the film as a 'French' road movie. In an interview with *Time Out* in September 2004 the director complained about the growing influence of the American system on French production:

The French system is getting tougher. It's becoming Americanised in a way: over the last five or six years, people have taken much more heed of box office takings; investors are asking for scripts to be rewritten; we're getting away from a system where the auteur was king. That's good in a way, but it's done a lot of damage as well. (Kahn 2004)

However, rather than suggest a desire to protect 'French' cinema at all costs, he goes on to lament the rather limited subject matter of much recent French film, "depression, breakdowns, people with no desires in life" and the stifling nature of a protected film industry, "our protection has meant a lack of combativeness—that energy that exists in any form of art or expression when things are not easy" (Kahn 2004). Kahn goes on to state that "American cinema is best made by the Americans; and the more the French system kowtows to commerce, the more its filmmakers will have to fight: there's nothing freeing about capitalism" (2004). These remarks are revealing as they suggest a desire to reinvigorate French cinema via an acknowledgement of the strengths of American production yet a rejection of any attempt to directly imitate this practice. Thus his decision to make a road movie (arguably an American genre) based on a French novel and to relocate that novel's American setting to France can be seen as part of a wider agenda for his film-making and for French cinema. Nevertheless, the film's relationship with its American antecedents is striking and suggests a very complex negotiation of this cinematic dialogue. Whilst the film is indeed very clearly set in France—geographical locations are named and the media panic and traffic queues of the French holiday departures are familiar to anyone who has had the misfortune to participate in this yearly madness—it also references in a number of ways American movies and American locations. The neon signs which reflect in the car's windows and guide Antoine from bar to bar are highly reminiscent of the neon signs that signal the motels and diners of the American cinematic road. Particularly striking is the film's quoting of Hitchcock. The opening aerial shots of the architectural geometry of a city square suggest Saul Bass's credits for *North by Northwest*, the later shot of a crop plane flying over a corn field similarly recalls this film whilst the Debussy soundtrack is orchestrated to recall the scores of Bernard Herrmann.

Perhaps most notable of all is of course the presence, the absolute centrality of the car in a way which is arguably much more typical of the American road movie format than of its European counterparts. Kahn (2004) has stated that his focus on driving in *L'Ennui*, *Roberto Succo* and *Feux rouges* is part of a conscious attempt to express emotion through behaviour whereas in French films feeling is typically expressed verbally. In other words, Kahn seems to be using the car and the road journey in an attempt to undo the longstanding distinction between a 'verbal' European cinema and an American cinema of 'action'. In this sense we can see Kahn's films as an attempt to engage with cinematic identity. *Feux rouges* is then a European road movie which does not articulate the plural social and cultural identities of the 'new' Europe however it does suggest an interesting negotiation of French and European filmic identities.

Nevertheless the central process of identity negotiation undertaken in Kahn's films is a very complex exploration of masculinities in crisis. In the words of Nick Bradshaw:

Kahn's [ . . . ] films are all about kicking out; tales of male de-socialisation and delinquency, they're characterised by protagonists on edge or off-kilter, pushing at the limits or chomping at the bit, usually in the reflection of their own personal Other. (In Kahn 2004)

These central male characters are in many ways markedly different. In *L'Ennui* Martin is a philosophy professor, an intellectual who becomes obsessed by his impassive, apparently depthless lover. In *Roberto Succo*, Succo is a psychopath, a crazed and ruthless killer who deranges the forces of civil society that he claims will make a prisoner of him. Antoine in *Feux rouges* is a far more quotidian, recognisable figure. He is *l'homme moyen*, worn down by the tedium of his daily existence and the realisation of his powerlessness vis a vis his highly successful wife. Yet each one of these characters is a man in crisis, a man in search of his own identity. Here again we can see a close affiliation between Kahn's films and the American road movies which to a greater or lesser degree inspire them.

If we return to Timothy Corrigan's definitions of the US genre we will recall that he sees the road movie as a response to the breakdown of the family unit and the resulting destabilisation of male subjectivity and masculine empowerment, going on to argue that the genre promotes a male escapist fantasy which links masculinity to the car and defines the road as a space simultaneously resistant to and confined by the pressures of work and family. This definition of the road movie seems particularly apposite to a reading of *Feux rouges*. This is indeed a film which reveals the potential breakdown of the traditional family unit—Antoine is threatened by Hélène's professional success and he reveals that it is he who takes on the domestic duties of childcare whilst his wife pursues her career. As a result of these shifting power relations and his sense of weakness and inferiority, Antoine sets out to search for his own existence and to reassert his masculinity. Yet just as in Corrigan's definition, his escape through alcohol and the road is ultimately

contained by the reconciliation with his wife and the return to an albeit altered domestic life.

A key factor in Antoine's quest for identity and a new sense of his masculinity is of course his relationship with the escaped prisoner. As they drive together along the dark, empty road, Antoine seems to go into an almost trance like state, revelling in the freedom of the journey, his own sense of escape. Although it is never explicitly revealed that Antoine knows who he is taking on board when he agrees to give the man a lift, his knowledge of the identity of his passenger becomes apparent when they are stopped at a police road block and Antoine's nervousness is transformed to jubilation as they are waved through: "On est passés. C'est ma route, c'est ma route". The prisoner then becomes a symbol for Antoine's own 'escape'—he is a 'real' man, above the law and the petty rules of society.

Kahn sets up an interesting series of relationships between Antoine, his passenger and the film's spectators. Antoine identifies with the criminal and yet of course this is an identification shot through with guilt and ultimately this fascinating yet dangerous 'other' has to be destroyed. In a similar fashion we the viewers are asked to identify with Antoine. We see everything from his paranoid point of view. The nightmare sequence which occurs as Antoine sleeps before returning to visit Héléne in the hospital and which shows him discovering a bloodied corpse underneath his car reminds us of the extent to which we are absolutely within his tormented subjectivity. Indeed, it begs the question as to whether or not all we have seen is 'real' or simply a figment of Antoine's paranoid and increasingly inebriated imagination. Yet this is perhaps of little consequence. What is important is that we have shared these imaginings, we have shared Antoine's point of view, entered into his psyche and like him have thus identified with a criminal, a man who is in many ways as problematic and objectionable as his criminal passenger.

The film's representation of masculinity in crisis is in many ways complex and problematic. In being asked to identify with Antoine's subjectivity we are asked to identify with a man who identifies with a killer and then, in turn, becomes a killer himself. The film's ending poses particular problems. Antoine and Héléne are reunited at her hospital bed. He is once again in a position of powerlessness and isolation. Strikingly all the characters in the film, apart from the young woman in the café who helps him to trace his wife, act in a hostile fashion and increase his paranoia. In the hospital the nurse refuses his request and treats him with disdain whilst the young doctor is dismissive and shows little interest in his plight. He reassumes his domestic duties, speaking to his daughter on the phone, and offers an abject apology to Héléne for his behaviour, his drinking, his desire to take his anger and frustration out on her. In this sense the road trip and Antoine's escapist fantasy are indeed contained by the responsibilities of marriage and family in accordance with Corrigan's definitions. Yet Héléne halts his apology, offers him a look of affection that was utterly absent from their earlier relations and says: "Antoine, je veux vivre avec toi". The film closes with a shot of the couple back in the car, their loving, smiling faces in marked contrast to the tense bickering of the early scenes.

How then to read this ending? As an affirmation of the need to re-assert traditional constructions of masculinity? This would seem to me to be particularly problematic, especially given our knowledge of Hélène's rape by the prisoner, Antoine's double or 'other'. In his DVD interview Kahn suggests that the ending can be read optimistically: Antoine's quest has been played out at the level of fantasy and happiness is now possible. I am not convinced how 'optimistic' this is, particularly as the 'fantasy' involves the rape of his wife. It is striking that the road along which the car travels as the film closes is the road of Antoine's nightmare. This seems to me to suggest a rather darker and more ambiguous reading of the film's ending. The couple is reformed but the threat remains. Antoine has not told his wife of his encounter with the prisoner or of his involvement in his death so the relationship is based on secrets and non-communication.

It seems to me that the depiction of masculinity in crisis in *Feux rouges* and indeed *L'Ennui* and *Roberto Succo* suggests a similarly ambivalent response to contemporary French society and male identities. In contrast to *Drôle de Félix* and *Western*, these road movies focus resolutely on individuals, individuals who in a variety of ways have lost their place in society. Martin is a divorced philosophy professor who rejects conventional social interaction and is apparently unable to work. Succo is a psychotic criminal in violent conflict with all aspects of the society he only tenuously inhabits. Antoine rails against the confines of his daily life and perceives hostility and menace in those around him. This sense of a fragmented and unstable masculinity at once rejected by and rejecting the society in which it is situated can be read as a response to contemporary shifts in wider French society and masculine identity. Shifts in working patterns, in family life and the breakdown of traditional gendered roles and identities can all be seen to underpin Kahn's exploration of his males characters' troubled psyches.

Which brings me back to the car. It is surely not coincidental that Kahn should choose the car and the road trip as a privileged means of representing individual masculinity in crisis. Like so many examples of the road movie, the journeys played out in these films, however brief, are both physical and emotional and as Shari Roberts remarks in her analysis of the genre, "[i]t is not the case that the external journey replaces the internal quest, but rather that the two are instead interdependent" (cited in Cohan and Hark 1997: 54). Antoine's dystopian journey through France via a series of increasingly erratic and confusing detours is precipitated by his emotions and a subsequent destabilisation of the ego and as this journey proceeds the two become increasingly intertwined, the frenzy and the aggression of the physical movement mirroring his emotional insecurity and quest for a new sense of power. This mirroring of psychological destabilisation and complex spatial geography positions *Feux rouges* alongside other road movies which similarly appear to share a concept of space which acknowledges that it is rather more than a blank canvas to be filled by those who act upon and within it. In the words of Stuart C. Aitken and Christopher Lee Lukinbeal:

It is not difficult to argue that social relations constitute, form and manage space but, in a very real sense, space is more than an end product of these processes, it is itself a process. It may follow, then, that the reproduction of space parallels the reproduction of other forms of identity. (Cited in Cohan and Hark 1997: 351)

In other words, the dystopian journey along the road can be seen to symbolise a simultaneous and equally traumatic journey through the psyche. Finally, it is significant that in Kahn's film, a film which unlike *Western* and *Drôle de Félix* is not about plural identities and social bonds but instead fixes resolutely on the individual, the car remains at the heart of the trip. Whereas Paco, Nino and Félix are carless and thus journey on foot, begging lifts off passersby and thus forming connections with those they encounter, Antoine retains his car thus remaining closeted in his own world, his own mind, in that movable space which provides us with the illusion of privacy and enables us to separate ourselves from the society through which we pass. Rather than hitchhiking himself, it is Antoine who picks up a hitchhiker and the passenger he selects is as we have seen his 'double', the physical manifestation of his own repressed psyche. In other words, Kahn's film can be seen to offer a version of the road movie in direct contradiction to that outlined by Mazierska and Rascaroli in their account of the European construction of the genre. Whereas the films they describe suggest plural, diasporic processes, interaction across borders and communities, Kahn's film represents the individual journey, the car trip utterly cut off from that which surrounds it. Indeed the car becomes the means to destroy that which threatens the individual psyche. In this sense *Feux rouges* can be read as a revealing comment on the place of the car in the dismantling of earlier social and spatial arrangements.

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### **Filmography**

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