# Nomads of the Technical Sublime

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**Abstract**

The Recreational Vehicle – emblem of the highway and of the outback, of affordable home-steading as well as unfettered exploration, of connection or escape. Motorhomes play an interesting role in the movies, and their history parallels the history of cinema. These homes on wheels allow projections of desires and distractions, exemplifying the affinity of tourism and cinema as mass phenomena of distraction, and illustrating the technological sublime of contemporary landscapes.

**Keywords**

motorhome – RV – mobile home – modernity – landscape – cinema – automotive culture – mobility – home – travel – tourism – migration – nomad – automodernity – technical sublime

> To have a feeling for landscape, you have to lose your feeling of place.
>
> JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD

Why is the Recreational Vehicle RV so telegenic? Just what is it that makes motor homes so different, so appealing? Is there more to it than the paradoxical promise of leaving traffic behind by hitting the road? A dozen years ago, a group of Orange County, CA college graduates decided to hit the road in an old run-down 1972 Winnebago to figure out what they wanted to do with their lives. As they travelled around the country from Laguna Beach to Chicago and from Maine and Vermont to San Francisco, they interviewed people from all walks of life about their passion. Three months and 17,000 miles later, they decided to turn their 84 interviews into a documentary, *The Open Road* (2001). Their concept hit a nerve, and was soon turned into a public television series called *Roadtrip Nation* (2004–2010); each season the producers recruited a new group of curious graduates to board the green RV with fresh questions.[1]

1 See http://roadtripnation.com and http://www.pbs.org/wnet/roadtripnation (accessed February 1, 2015).

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One of the main reasons new protagonists flocked so readily to this reality TV show was that the RV had become associated both with film and television production on set and with iconic American exploration over the post-WW2 decades. In Nicholas Ray's 1952 Western *Lusty Men*, Robert Mitchum stars as a rodeo bum, but arguably the plot revolves just as much around a lowly mobile home. Major cable television hits like *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) are likewise trafficking in the archetypes of the RV as an emblem of the open road and of the outback, of affordable independence and home-steading but also of unfettered exploration alike, of connectedness and techno-libertarian escape alike. In short, motorhomes play an interesting role in the movies, and the history of the recreational vehicle in many ways parallels the history of cinema. By the same token, these rolling living rooms, beds on wheels, and uprooted houses allow projections of desires and distractions onto the screen of mobile media that can exemplify, or transcend, certain modes of visual reception: as both an escape from, and return to, the strictures of screen media, the psychology of the film viewer, and the technological sublime of contemporary landscapes.

*Tracking Shot.* It is one of the less closely observed cinematic conventions that the plot gives way to landscape, as Giuliana Bruno demonstrates in the early history and prehistory of film (Bruno 2002, 75). Her media archeology of 'site-seeing' since the arrival of the Lumières' train 110 years ago tracks the rise of early cinema out of the tourist arena, when moving images thematized travel, transportation, motion (Musser 1991; cf. Musser 1990). Among panoramas and world expositions, between colonial photography and postcards, cinema inherited the legacy of motion studies, dioramas, and magic lanterns (Schivelbusch 1983). Just as Walter Benjamin considers passages cities in miniature, dioramas open up to the world; film studies amply documents what the camera does to the spaces of modernity (Dimendberg 2005). But the affinity of tourism and cinema goes further: as mass phenomena of distraction, they open onto a horizon of experience that emphasizes spectacle and entertainment based on temporary movement in space, constituted in, before, and through landscapes that are related yet different from the everyday. In either case, cross-overs and cultural encounters offer the manifold juxtaposition of known and unknown, the extraordinary and the ordinary. As Bruno writes:

> Mobilizing its encompassing embrace, film has absorbed the touristic drive to ascend to take in the larger 'scape' as well as the desire to dive down to ground level and explore private dwellings. In such a way – that is, by incorporating a multiplicity of viewpoints – cinema has reinvented the traveler's charting of space. (2002, 84)

However, cultural contact under the auspices of media increasingly means television on the back seat of the van, DVD videos in the headrest, satellite radio in a rental car, computer screens in the center console above the gear-shift. To the extent that the travelers' view tends towards the monotonous – a thousand miles of tail lights, street signs, advertising, rest stops – the media display can screen over the landscape passing outside the window. The strange, the unknown, the other are replaced by the difference between property or self-determination and the fear of being exposed to placelessness. Arguably, this aspect of media culture does not posit a new definition of global society, but constitutes the elimination of localized criteria of differentiation. Automobility is merely one instantiation of this effect, whereby the monad of the cockpit promises to realize the bourgeois dream of personal autonomy: the more one strives to exclude the exterior, the more one can indulge in illusions of self-determination – even in the middle of a traffic jam, as Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993) illustrates. When the life-world shrinks to a two-dimensional perspective of the windshield, the interior becomes the penumbral viewer's cell, and only thus can vehicles mark our levelled public spaces as habitable: 'a kind of giant armoured bed on wheels that can shout the driver's dwindling claims upon the world into dead public space.' (Gilroy 2001, 96–97) In his anthropology of 'super-modernity,' Marc Augé analyses a series of such non-places – mere transitory stations, where radios play, television inserts itself into gas pumps and elevators, in waiting rooms and into the rolling abode. Everything proceeds as if there was no history before the 'news' of the last 48 hours (Augé 1995, 104). The highway is the archetypal landscape of mediatic ubiquity, not even 'in the middle of nowhere,' but constantly displaced geographically and semantically. Thus when, in *About Schmidt* (2002), the lonely widower played by Jack Nicholson drives his Winnebago Adventurer from Omaha, Nebraska to Denver, Colorado to escape his large empty house and to find himself, he only experiences the monotonous landscape of the Midwest and of his own aging. It is true, of course, that even if superficially, it seems to offer no more than boredom and isolation, each route has its history, and its associations with work, life, commuting – which may or may not be archived and accessible through its visual representations (Merriman 2004).

*POV*. Such passages do not draw academic attention to themselves: driving past, gliding on the seductive surface of a time that never manifests itself fully as the present and always withdraws into an inaccessible past that may never have been, under the pavement. Certainly the 'home' constitutes the antithesis of travel on the one hand, and on the other hand its beginning and its end: one needs these terms, if only to get away from them or to search for them (Abbeele

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1992). Yet the mobile home might be said to flatten that dialectic relationship, to eliminate the tension between absence and return – living in an RV is no longer dwelling in an existantially rooted sense, it is not even a station on the way: 'the more the outer world is excluded, the more this dream seems to be realized.' (Stallabrass 1996, 127) It may seem as if, in a motorhome, one can be the pilot of one's fate – you carry your house on your back, neither guest nor host: yet this ideal of complete autarchy, founded on a distinction between private and public that American mass culture relies on in its cultural self-image, elides the differences between any type of travel or motion as means and as end. Perhaps the most radical embodiment of this ethos is Slab City, an unincorporated area along the Salton Sea, in the desert near the border between California and Mexico. The 640 acre former military compound 120 feet below sea level has been occupied by RV dwellers since the 1960s, and serves as a kind of unofficial headquarter or capital of the RV movement.[2] The development of vehicular traffic goes hand in hand with that of the Western cultural landscape (as illustrated even by a major box office flop like *Honky Tonk Freeway* from 1981), and so what Virilio writes about the TV as a stationary vehicle is also true for cinema, as Bruno states succinctly: 'Cinema is a lived documentation of cultural (dis)location. It is a vehicle of our inhabitation and a house that moves at the speed of our travel in space. Filmic movement is a cultural passage.' (Bruno 2002, 95; cf. Virilio 1999) Cinematic topography is a cultural study of mobile living; at the same time, trailers and motorhomes are part of the American film industry since the early years. Actors at the movie set and on the national political stage like to use trailers or RVs. Extant, for instance, is a 'HouseCar' from the year 1931 in which the film star Mae West travelled the continent; powered by a six cylinder Chevrolet, it offered beds for four, a stove and sink, table, bath, and even a kind of balcony. Today it is owned by a collector who also bought the RV used for the second election campaign of President George W. Bush.[3]

*Close-up*. Mobile living, as the post-war propaganda of the journal *Trailer Travel* sought to sell it, is quintessentially American:

> Who is it today, like the pioneers in their covered wagons, feels the desire to dip over the horizon – who but the trailerite? Like the pioneers he, too,

2 http://www.slabcity.org (accessed February 1, 2015).

3 David Woodworth, www.driveamodelt.com (accessed February 1, 2015). – During 2005, Matthew McConaughey went in an RV on a tour of camp grounds, military installations, and Nascar races to gather attention for his adventure movie *Sahara*.

> is hardy and self-sufficing – he can live and thrive wherever he goes [...]. He is independent, entirely democratic.[4]

Indeed, movies like *Blues Brothers* (1980) and Clint Eastwood's *A Perfect World* (1993) foreground this ideology of pioneer independence – sheriffs and outlaws, country musicians and city slickers resort to the RV. Hollywood also likes to show female mavericks in a trailer, masking anxieties about class and gender with the 'hardy and self-sufficing' spirit of the loner, as seen in Jody Foster in *Contact* (1997), Charlize Theron in *Trial and Error* (1997), or Lucy Liu in *Charlie's Angels* (2000/2003). In the comedy *Stripes* (1981), Bill Murray as desperate soldier misappropriates an 'urban assault vehicle,' a military-style RV, to go behind the iron curtain by mistake. In *Tango and Cash* (1989), the 'RV from hell' resembles nothing more than a fortified minivan with a cannon mounted on one side; an interesting feature is a video uplink to the gearhead who built this vehicle and can help the protagonists (Sylvester Stallone, Kurt Russell) activate its special features. Yet another fortified RV takes Jeff Goldblum's film family through the 'lost world' of *Jurassic Park* 2 (1997). The vehicles featured in *Mad Max* (1979/1981) and *Damnation Alley* (1977) are certainly close relatives of these motorhomes, and the survivalist character adheres also to the trailers of the simple and heroic folk in movies like *Independence Day* (1996) or *Mars Attacks* (1996), in *Raising Arizona* (1987) or *Tomb Raider* (2001). The success of the RV in the US can certainly be ascribed to the folksy ideology of independence, to the point where one in twelve households owns a motorhome, with the average age falling and the average income rising. Despite all stereotypes about vagrants, RV travel is squarely middle-class, as countless movies also clearly reflect. *Lost in America* (1985), for instance, has Albert Brooks suffer a midlife crisis: when the long-expected promotion fails, the advertising executive wants to drop out; after his wife gambles away their nest egg in the nearest casino, even before they renew their vows for the road, the two of them spend the remainder of the feature in a downward spiral trying to survive 'on the road' – until they give up, move to Manhattan, and he goes back into marketing. At the same time, their errant tour of the continent shows as well as any RV movie how the landscape between Las Vegas and New York on the whole consists of suburbs, rest stops, and freeways; the few highlights of their travel are bridges and dams – the technological sublime.

4 'The Trailerite is the Typical American.' *Trailer Travel*, July 1945, 5. – The *Outdoor Life Network*, a cable channel, cites in its promotional material a 2002 University of Michigan study which estimates that about 8 per cent of US households own an RV.

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*Deep Space*. Untrammeled mobility is not only an attribute of the poor, but in the new world order certainly applies equally to the wealthy, to the point where modernity is almost synonymous with mobility. The car, whether as archetypal product of industrial capitalism or indeed as post-industrial object of desire, serves thinkers like Lefebvre, Debord, Barthes, or Baudrillard as symbol of modernity, of Americanization, of consumer society, of the colonization of the everyday, announcing and bringing about the victory of geometric space over nature. By the same token, total mobilization has brought with it certain side-effects and cultural practices, and in media society, the constantly accelerating social, local, virtual, and auto-mobility are ever more closely interrelated. Where do politics, news, entertainment, advertising find their target audience? As the content of mass media reacts, so do the delivery systems; the challenges mobility poses for media economics also affect other regions of the cultural landscape (Urry 2004). Despite the threat of gridlock, Americans still consider it a basic right to go freely where they please, and so it is the unavoidable consequence of motorization, as Richard Sennett states, that 'landscape' is only what can be observed from a vehicle: 'the effect on public space, especially the space of the urban street, is that the space becomes meaningless or even maddening unless it can be subordinated to free movement.' (Sennett 1977, 14) Signaling freedom, speed, security, success, the car is a primary index of social status and consumption, along with the 'right' address. As automobility is associated with class, its costs have risen to the second largest household expense after rent or mortgage – and so it might be only logical to merge the two: the driveable house was inevitable.

In North America in particular, motorized vehicles have trumped all other ways of transportation like walking, bicycling, trains, tramways or subways (Bauman 2003, 98). This means that landscape is relegated to the background, and the more it recedes, the more complicated it becomes to access: the highway to the beach covers the beach with tar, and parking lot in the hills negates the view, the gas station in the forest blocks the clearing. What appeared necessary for radical mobility has thus effected a shift in notions of landscape, not just since the Beat poets, road movies, or John Steinbeck's famous RV novel, *Travels with Charley* (1961). Steinbeck, recovering from a minor stroke, wanted to explore America; in honor of Don Quixote's horse and in memory Robert Louis Stevenson's *Travels With a Donkey* (1879), he christened his a sailboat cabin on a truck 'Rocinante' and took along only his poodle Charley. The book details not only the random encounters with small-town America, but also the creature comforts and

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travails his motorhome presented him with. Along the freeways around American cities, advertising promises: 'If you lived here, you would be home by now.' In an RV, this has become true of nearly every paved square meter, and it helps explain how many jobs – salespeople, insurance agents, journalists, photographers, writers – are now increasingly mobile. While it may eliminate the endless commute, it also eliminates the last vestiges of a distinction between leisure time and work. The downtrodden RV in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* (1989) hints at this aspect of a mobile life-style. In Barry Sonnenfeld's eponymous comedy '*RV*' (2006), Robin Williams takes his family on the road without informing them that it was in fact his boss who sent him to Colorado – on business. They soon meet another RV family, full-timers who work and live on the road year-round. As Benjamin notes:

> 'To dwell' as a transitive verb – as in the notion of 'indwelt spaces'; herewith an indication of the frenetic topicality concealed in habitual behavior. It has to do with fashioning a shell for ourselves.
>
> BENJAMIN 1999, *221; cf.* BENJAMIN *1982, v. 1,* 292

This is indeed what can also be seen in the latest gadgets installed in RVs – from garbage compactors and washer-dryers to microwaves, automatic load balancers, rear view cameras, ice makers and built-in barbecue grills, electric curtains, alarm systems, massage chairs and extensible walls that can double the interior space of a parked RV. In *The Call of the Simpsons* (1990), an episode from the first *Simpsons* season, Homer is jealous of their neighbor's RV – especially after Ned Flanders lists all the gadgets it features, including a satellite dish on the roof. The Simpsons decide to go camping in their own motorhome. Cowboy Bob, the RV salesman (Albert Brooks), shows them the high end: a two-story behemoth with a fireplace, a giant TV, a full-size refrigerator, crystal chandeliers, etc.; they cannot afford it even on credit. So they buy a rust bucket on credit, but Homer drives it off the road, almost into a lake, through bushes, and onto the ledge of a cliff. Everyone slides out, and the RV falls over the cliff. As the Simpsons's RV passes woods and lakes, the soundtrack in the background is from the famous 1959 musical, *The Sound of Music*. Other animated motorhomes, such as the one in *The Wild Thornberrys*, likewise lag behind the state of RV technology: indeed contemporary motorhomes feature generators and solar panels, climate control, flat screen TV and surveillance systems, satellite receivers and video game consoles, special antennae for two-way radio and telephones, GPS and internet connections – and it is a ratty RV from which, at

the end of *View to a Kill* (1985), Q is spying on James Bond and his girl in the shower.[5] To help understand this feature-laden list, one need only think of *Meet the Fockers* (2004), which shows the aging paranoid ex-CIA father-in-law (Robert de Niro) holed up in a secret command center in the belly of his RV, where he can communicate with his old buddies. This control freak uses his computers, remotes, and cameras to terrorize his in-laws; every weekend trip becomes a new test of technology and of human adaptation.

*Truncation*. Of course 'landscape' is no longer regarded as a timeless representation of cultural values: 'All natures we now can identify are elaborately entangled and fundamentally bound up with social practices and their characteristic modes of cultural representation' (Urry 2000, 202). Whatever we may consider 'nature' in late capitalism is fundamentally constituted by social and cultural modes of representation (Nye 1999). Thus just as film actors transform their 'screen test' into a human, landscape is constructed on screen (Benjamin 1968, 228; cf. Benjamin 1982, I.2, 449–451). Especially before the highly armed gaze of the camera, film is less a projection of the alienation of labor than an insistence on human agency under the conditions of technology. By the same token, the audience participates in the media network and invests in authenticity under the conditions of mechanical reproduction and repetition – 'any man today can lay claim to being filmed,' in Benjamin's snarky formulation (Benjamin 1968, 231). Cultural critique rightly observes that the adventures of the road tend to dissolve into aimless wandering, that the escape from the pressures of bourgeois self-preservation will not succeed simply by putting the middle-brow home on wheels. Millions travel in mobile homes – not only in their retirement or on vacation, and certainly not the homeless or underemployed, but families who home-school their children, commuting from one workplace to the next, carrying everything they have with them. As Adorno quips,

> the countless people who suddenly succumb to their own quantity and mobility, to the swarming getaway as to a drug, are recruits to the migration of nations, in whose desolated territories bourgeois history is preparing to meet its end. (2005, 140)

But instead of flirting with more nomadic metaphors, one must admit in the end that this kind of mobility is neither subversive nor marginal, and certainly not revolutionary. 'The sedentary man envies the nomadic existence, the quest

5 RV clubs estimate that at least a quarter of the eight million RV owners in North America go online from the road; cf. Brown 2005.

for fresh pastures, and the painted waggon is the house on wheels whose course follows the stars,' as Adorno mocks (ibid., 170) – and at the same time, the particular success of American RV culture demands closer attention.

*Re-establishing Shot*. In a study of North-American landscape and the history of architecture, John Brinkerhoff Jackson distinguishes dwelling in a permanent structure that becomes part of the land from living in a manner that remains legally and aesthetically independent from land ownership. American pioneers would give up their homes to move on 'to where prospects seemed brighter: better soil, better returns, better neighbors.' Ever since, American construction still revolves around timber structures, 'built, occupied, and eventually disposed of as commodities, merchandise designed and produced to satisfy a definite market.' (Jackson 1984, 96–97) This may indeed be one reason for the continued rally of the US realty market, as housing, just like computer and cars, are understood as circulating until they wear out. Yet given the financial commitment necessary to own an RV on the one hand, and on the other hand given the tax advantages of owning what is treated for tax purposes as a home, it is hardly surprising that mobile homes are used and kept much longer than cars or computers – already in the 1970s, their life cycle grew to 16 years (Drury 1972, 71). This longevity in turn pivots on the fact that a large number of features in a motorhome are multi-functional. In *Wheel Estate*, a history of mobile living in America, Allan Wallis describes the functional, processual logic of the RV as constantly adapting an object to a changing use (Wallis 1991, 241). As a consequence, the light construction of mobile homes borrows from architecture as well as from automotive industry, particularly in the loose structure of elements – their categorical transformation, mobility, and exchangeability make RVs possible: a table with two benches also serves as a bed and as storage; the whole bathroom turns into the shower. This trend starts already in the 1930s, for instance with the light-weight mass-produced German folding trailer 'Haus Dabei' from 1935 developed by Hans Berger that preceded the larger and sturdier 'Karawane' model offered starting 1939. Manufacturers emulated the space- and weight-saving techniques of boat and plane design, and many kidney-shaped trailers became iconic. However, during WW2 German companies like Dethleffs, Berger, and Westfalia (later also well known for its modified VW camper van) turned away from civilian uses, although some found a niche in making trailers for cartographers or war journalists.

*This is Nowhere*. In the aftermath of WW2, mobile homes truly took off. Manufacturers like Mikafa, Austermann, Lloyd, Airstream provided new impulses, and soon the modification of buses and trucks competed at the higher end of the market. Yet for Adorno, 'dwelling, in the proper sense, is now

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impossible' – bombings were mere executors of 'what the immanent development of technology had long decided was to be the fate of houses. These are now good only to be thrown away like old food cans.' Instead he enumerates 'leaf huts, trailers, cars, camps, or the open air. The house is past.' (Adorno 2005, 38–39) Thus the mobile homes roll in the slow lane, stop overnight in the mall parking lot, and are gone in the morning: Einsteinian travellers, never quite sure whether they move or whether space-time curves its way around their window-screens. Adorno's comments on this inauthenticity ('it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home') overlook that the motorhome completely levels even this dialectical resistance. Habits are no longer static or stable (Flusser 1992, 56–57). What architectural concepts like John Hejduk's 'Mobile Housing Unit' of 1986 still carted around has become auto-mobile in installations by Andrea Zittel; one carries whatever one likes. Debord echoes Corbusier's evaluation of the commute as surplus labor which reduced free time; yet he blames city planners who made private transportation unavoidable and thus created the urban desert of gigantic malls without a center (Debord 1989, 56; cf. Debord 1995, 123). It is no accident that the owners of today's pricey RVs prefer to stay the night not in total wilderness but in the familiar zone of the shopping mall, under the watchful gaze of the closed-camera surveillance network. Supposedly, Walmart founder Sam Walton himself was an RV fan, and the spacious and well-lit parking lots of the chain have become a top destination for RV travellers.[6] *This is Nowhere* (2002), a documentary for Montana Public Television, shows a transcontinental RV culture, following the seasonless schedules of the Walmart directory: parking is free, and shopping inexpensive. As the supermarket-chain parking lot becomes the 21st century equivalent of the nature preserve, the irony of this pseudo-nomadic lifestyle documented on DVD sells on RV websites. According to this documentary, three million Americans live in their RV year round; the film cites them asking 'were we there or did we only see that on TV?' They demonstrate the gadgets and computer software that help them track their itinerary; they praise the controlled and orderly life they lead, and the absence of neighbors.

*High-angle shot*. Bourdieu describes consumption as a play of difference which incites the classes to compete for status, honor, or cultural capital. He considers

6 The chain of course recognizes the travellers as captive customers – see Draper 2005: '"There are those nights when you're forced to drive in the dark to find someplace to park and you just don't know what you're going to find', said Chuck Woodbury, who publishes RV-related articles on the Internet. You say to yourself, 'There's a Wal-Mart over there. I'm going to make life easy for myself."'

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the vehicle a demonstration of inequality in the symbolic hierarchy, while the Frankfurt School describes this kind of consumption as a cover-up and obfuscation of social relations. When mass production takes control of culture and subjects it to the exchange of goods, it reduces the quality of products to the smallest common denominator; this is certainly true for the supposed difference between Cadillac and Chevrolet (Adorno 2005, 119). But as soon as living and transportation complicate the play of class distinction, it is less self-evident how the staples of cultural critique apply to the astonishingly diverse world of the RV. Barthes thus recommends replacing the concept of automobility as an object relation with the combinatory rhetoric of *auto couture*, pointing to French post-war films such as *Lola* (1960), *La Belle Américaine* (1961), and Godard's *Weekend* (1967) (Barthes 1970, 150–152; cf. Barthes 2002, 234–242). Baudrillard also describes the paradoxical ambiguity of the vehicle which is both abode and transport, motion and stay – it represents a protective zone of intimacy and a contact surface, combining the appearance of comfort with projectile intensity (Baudrillard 2000, 737). The engineering that goes into this domesticated mobile command center allows it to function as a workplace or a night's rest, a refuge or a means of confrontation, and always a highly technical zone that constantly demands new feats of adaptation. What about the differences, one might object, between trailer and RV? Even more than cars, they are positioned between two architectural positions of modernity – the suburban family home as imagined by Frank Lloyd Wright and others, and the urban aesthetics of a machine for living after Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller, or Walter Gropius. The alternative vision of the mobile home combines this disparate heritage in what Smith calls a kind of 'Machine Usonia' with reference to the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright (Smith 2003). By the same token, it combines a series of conceptual pairs from post-war social code: car and house, technology and nature, mobile and rooted, design and everyday life, 'masculine' exploration and 'feminine' domesticity, the bourgeois home and its undermining by credit and mortgage. Smith's detailed reading of one symptomatic film tries to sort out whether those conceptual pairings are stable enough to support an interpretation of *The Long, Long Trailer* (1954), a budget production that became one of the biggest financial successes of the year. Repeating the successful formula of *I Love Lucy*, TV stars Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, partners in front and behind the camera, play newlyweds who intend to spend their honeymoon in an RV. The protagonists seal their wedded bliss with the purchase of a long trailer to tow behind their color-coordinated car, without noticing how badly the mustard yellow paint clashes with the surrounding landscape they intend to discover on their travels. The title of this film is programmatic for the film industry and for the RV industry, as both serve up the fantasy of the

American idyll, colorfully packaged like the many wedding presents that are largely responsible for the fatal excess weight they tow. As soon as the new kitchen is put to use, things go awry, as the roles of traveler and cook are not easily compatible – within moments she is covered in food while her husband keeps on driving. Soon the outdoors enter the idyll through doors, windows, and other crevices – and this contamination dissolves the vision of a mobile and independent existence.

> Our heroes realize their conjugal 'felicity' by buying a mobile 'home', an immense trailer painted an aggressive yellow. How this itinerant touch of yellow clashes with the decor of the landscape; how the external world penetrates this world and ravages everything.
>
> NAREMORE 1983, 46

By the same token, the movie demonstrates that the impending separation of Ball and Arnaz is a direct consequence of the collision of business and pleasure; the commercial union that sells the traditional values of private life fails once the private union fails, and so their screen romance ends simultaneously with their private romance.

*The long, long mortgage*. Under the technical conditions of mass production it is not surprising that trailers and RVs have become more popular: the postwar years saw the introduction of mortgages that required not 50% but a mere 10% down payment and were to be paid off over 30 years like homes, rather than over a maximum of ten years like cars. A study by Margaret Drury dates the year-round use of mobile homes to 1955, when wider models were introduced. By the end of the 1960s, the proportion of mobile homes rose from 6% of new homes to over 20%; they were mostly found in smaller towns (Drury 1972, 6 and 36). But as a bizarre little exhibition in the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles documents, the idea of a house on wheels was of course already within reach in the earliest decades of automobility, and not just for Hollywood incomes: the miniatures on display are dated to 1933 and credit the invention to Mary Elliot Wing, a seamstress from Roanoke, Virginia. Her apocalyptic mobile home miniatures are obviously inspired by a modern Noah's ark, but legible also as a reaction to the social and economic revolutions of modernity:

> Mary Wing carefully and lovingly equipped her trailer with all such things as would be needed to preserve life against the devastating economic storm that raged outside the protected confines of her land ark.
>
> ALJASMETS 2002

No doubt it is this storm that is also fundamentally upending the sociocultural landscape in films like *The Long, Long Trailer* and afterwards – it certainly holds true f or more recent fare like the RV movie *What Alice Found* (2003): a young woman flees from the consequences of a theft in Vermont, and on the way to a friend in Florida is picked up by people who run a kind of bordello on wheels out of their mobile home. Even children's movies like *Escape to Witch Mountain* (1975) or parodies like *Spaceballs* (1987) show RV drivers as grubby excentrics who spring into action only to help other drifters in need. And the rich heritage of the horror film genre likewise demonstrates that there is greater danger to humans from other humans than from vehicles, monsters, or the undead. However, George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005) also shows that even slow and plodding zombies can still learn: while the protagonists in the beginning keep their pursuers in check by launching fireworks from an RV they call 'Dead Reckoning,' soon the hypnotic effect of the explosions on the zombies loses its effect, and the militarized motor home and its passengers meet with their inevitable end; it is merely a question of time when the zombies take driving lessons.

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