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ROAD

ON THE ROAD WITH KEROUAC & SARTRE:
THE CINEMATIC LANDSCAPE & THE LAST AVANT-

1

Picture them together, Jean Paul and Jack - the prodigal son of the exiled Quebecois - in a Hudson Terraplane, cruising along a two lane blacktop in a scenario jointly composed by Wim Wenders and Monty Python. Kerouac, the American outcast, whose books were once banned in his own home town, nevertheless became an icon of many things dear to the American soul - freedom, movement, the frontier, and a vision of a pastoral landscape which included the means of getting there. Sartre, that original 'dark angel of agony,' before Stanley Twardowicz, would have to drive, squinting through his Corb glasses over the too-high dashboard, because Jack liked to ride in the shotgun seat. Don't expect their dialogue to be little *bon mots*, these guys could be dead serious and capable of going just a little too far. One created and the other extended the parameters of existentialism - a life without place involving the cosmic decision of whether to accept suicide or merely go bowling.

It's a little harder to picture Sartre having tea with Jane Jacobs and J.B. Jackson¹, but in his analysis of North America he clearly summarized a vision of urbanity and landscape that they have worked hard to define.

While the meandering roads of Europe converge upon the city and end in an enclosed space, the gridded roads of North America run to the horizon and disperse the energy of the city to the countryside

- Jean Paul Sartre as interpreted in Phil Patton's Open Road

He saw the influence of his countryman Descartes in the gridding of the American city and the agricultural lands of the Midwest. And he saw that the road, and the commerce it supported, had usurped the function of the public square. Both of these visions are expressions of the ideology of Thomas Jefferson, who was so inspired by the Enlightenment that he made Cartesian charts to describe the availability of seasonal vegetables. Jefferson believed that a

'husbandry of the land' promoted ethical, moral, and social values supportive of a democracy. In a physical sense, Jefferson saw democracy as a kind of Cartesian mandala that might be impressed upon the landscape. The grid he created under the Land Act of 1796 was intended to sponsor a non-speculative, non-hierarchical land tenure in opposition to traditional European patterns. At the same time, Jefferson recognized that making places equally accessible was essential for this vision. On hearing reports of piracy along the expansion routes, he dispatched his Secretary of the Interior to investigate. When this official was murdered along the Natchez Trace, Jefferson decided to upgrade the trail to a highway, using the rationale that easy and secure travel was necessary for expansion, commerce and the national defense. Dwight Eisenhower, who ended World War II, engaged in a study of Germany's Autobahn. He resurrected Jefferson's



notion in creating the interstate highways that levelled the corduroy of mountain and valley, cleaving the core of many American cities, and turning the two lane blacktop² - where we left Jack & Jean Paul cruising - into a ghost strip.

*Well, if you ever plan to motor west
just take my way
that's the highway
that's the best
get your kicks
on Route 66*

-Bobby Troup, 1960

Of course this landscape had already been defined before Jefferson was even the proverbial gleam in some colonial daddy's eye. Although, this definition, in European terms, was a 'non-definition.' With few exceptions, North American aborigines lived very lightly on the land. Their philosophy revered the landscape's natural beauty (is it jingoistic to think that North America is somehow special among continents?) and expressed ideas of symbiosis with flora, fauna, and landscape. Faced with a paradox like Picasso's appropriation of the 'primitive' African mask to create an avant-garde art, can we see our aborigines as 'primitive' because they lived with the same mobility to which we aspire today?³ Through vehicles like James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of The Mohicans*, romantic stereotypes of Indians, colonists, and their landscape were big box-office attractions not only back in Europe, but even where the real thing was available. This began the tradition of accepting a simulation as being more real than the real, beginning with books like Cooper's

and leading through Hollywood towards Disneyland.

How the ideology of Jefferson and the North American aborigine might have influenced transcendentalists like Thoreau and Hawthorne is beyond the scope of this article, suffice to say, there is a shared idea of a pastoral continent, a kind of theme-park of nature's wonders, in their view of the landscape. Thoreau seemed unwilling to accept the compromise of the pastoral by the commercial which often

results from the overlay of capitalism. His opposition to this compromise can be defined as Romantic at best, or unpatriotic at worst, in the eyes of the larger culture. This categorization, which would continue and expand over the years, caused problems for Franklin Roosevelt when he attempted to develop the Tennessee River Valley as a public, rather than a private, exploitation of the natural landscape, as a means of providing employment for the public good. All of these notions are immanent in Frank Lloyd Wright's political exemplar Broadacre City:⁴ Jefferson's husbandry and the ethos of agriculture, Thoreau's retreat from urbanity, the car replicating the mobility of the horse, and the idea that the individual is celebrated over the collective in the suburban, non-existent city.



A diagram could be made to describe a system of overlays in the landscape ideology of North America, with certain shared characteristics and subsets which reflect interpretations in the American States, and in French and English Canada. While the States and Canada share a pattern of colonial development and use of natural resources, there are obvious differences in ideology, (the fur trade in Canada looks rather benign next to the slave trade south of the border) and patterns of settlement. Jefferson's grid was replaced in eastern Canada by the patterning of the concessions and seigneurial land divisions, as the St. Lawrence spawned a linear concentration reflected in the importance of the railroad, and later in the Trans-Canada Highway.

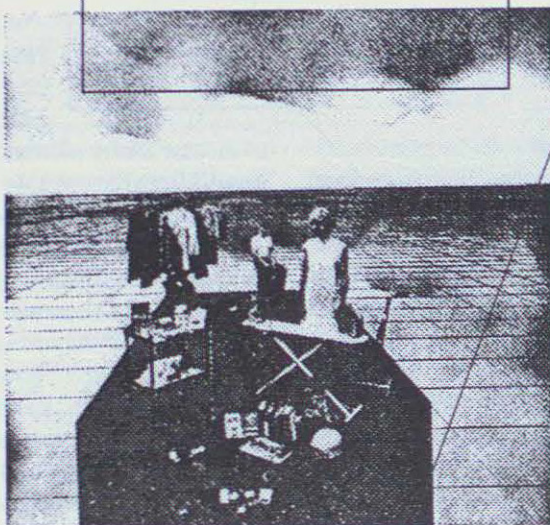
The family history of Jean Lebris de Kerouac moves through several of these subsets and provides a background for his vision of the landscape. His grandparents had immigrated from St. Hubert to find work in the New England textile mills. Jack's parents, Gabrielle and Leo, were able to raise *Ti Jean* (as Jack was called) within their ethnic family traditions through the framework of the church and the French schools of Nashua and Lowell. This sense of community and family tradition, which Jack abandoned for a life on the road, became increasingly significant to Kerouac as he grew older.

Jack Kerouac's first two published books define an evolution of the archetypal North American vision of urbanity and landscape. Inspired by Thomas Wolfe in *The Town and the City*, he tries to create a community of bohemians and hustlers analogous to the familial relationships in the working class mill town he knew as a child. But in *On the Road*, he moves his disaffected road warriors, Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise, out of the city and into the unbounded American landscape described by Sartre.

They rushed down the street together digging everything in the early way they had which later became so much sadder and perceptive and blank.

*Drivin' along in my automobile
my baby beside me at the wheel
cruisin' and playin' the radio
with no particular place to go*

-Chuck Berry, 1964



But then they danced down the street like dingedodges, and I shambled after as I have been doing all my life for people who interest me, because the only people who interest 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 and in the middle you see the center light pop and everybody goes... Awww! ⁵

While Kerouac eventually shared Thoreau's role as provocateur, *On The Road*, unlike *Walden*, accepted and even celebrated the compromise between capital and landscape. His characters were just as likely to be inspired by the glittering lights of Times Square in the October dusk as they were by a purple sun setting over the Rockies.

For Kerouac, the landscape of America was experienced by moving through it, and this sense of movement was more important than any particular vista. It is a cinematic depiction, rather than a painterly view and creates a literary metaphor for the colonial experience of discovery. The exploration accepts improvisation and chance (which preoccupies the art of the time from Jackson Pollock to Charlie Parker to John Cage), in the lack of a definitive destination, and in the type of movement: the societal exile of the hobo, the entropy of hitchhiking, and the middle class' acceptance of the automobile.

Kerouac's innovative methodology accompanies his vision. Parts of *On The Road* were written on a long scroll to replicate the continuity of the experience. The original manuscript was submitted as 175,000 words without punctuation. Influenced by the Bop music of Parker, Monk, and Gillespie, and by the broad gesture of contemporary painting, Kerouac called his writing technique 'sketching.' Fueled by alcohol and benzedrine, which exaggerated his depressive cycles, the author sought to commit words to paper in the same way Pollock

applied paint to canvas. The term 'beat,' as Kerouac saw it, had multiple meanings: the tired crash that followed exuberance, the rhythmic counterpoint essential to Bop, and, as a contraction of 'beatific', a kind of wonder, with roots in Kerouac's French Canadian Catholicism. The term came to define a new, uniquely American bohemianism that collected poets, writers, and painters, but for some reason, not architects.

Kerouac's literary invention of the mid-fifties took place at a time when architecture and urbanism were moribund and perhaps more disconnected from the other arts than at any time before or since. A Miesian vocabulary had become corporately institutionalized and increasingly included elements of a mannerist Classicism.⁶ While there were a few architectural 'outlaws' such as Bruce Goff and Buckminster Fuller, only Frederick Kiesler (creator of the *Endless House* and a friend of Jackson Pollock), had a connection to the ongoing experiments in literature and in fine arts. Perhaps the absence of an architectural wing of the Beat movement can be attributed to contemporary aspirations for a corporate, rather than artistic, identity. One interpretation of this nineteen-fifties malaise might be that architecture had yet to recognize an influence even more subversive than the book or the lure of the open road: television - the medium that brought the landscape inside the home. Kerouac became a sometimes eager, sometimes reluctant, spokesman for this movement which soon captured the fancy of *Time* and *Newsweek* as a curious, rather than threatening, exception to the 'what, me worry?' era of the nineteen-fifties.

III

There are direct and indirect connections between the subject of this essay and its author. I grew up in Northport, a coastal village sixty miles from New York City, with the burden of Dad being a little strange. There were disappearances, odd friends and 'the jogging.'

*You, who are on the road
must have a code
that you can live by*

-Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young
1972



In 1958, before *Nike* and Jane Fonda, adults found running in public were taken away to institutions. When I heard that someone, perhaps more peculiar than Dad now lived in our neighborhood, I was greatly relieved. The Kerouacs lived two blocks away and Gabrielle (*Mémère*, as Jack called her) sometimes gave us cookies sweetened, in the old world way, with molasses. I have no memory of Jack, but I know that there were encounters between him and my father - introductions by Stanley and Bill at *Gunther's*, a bayman's tavern where hefty clamdiggers would sometimes joust with outboard motors while they were running. Today, the shellfish and baymen are gone, victims of the pollution of Long Island Sound, but *Gunther's* remains - an anachronism whose new neighbours include a *Gap* store, and a 'pirate atmosphere' restaurant.

In 1955, my folks had a debate over whether to buy a Dumont or a De Soto. The television set and the used car were both \$500.00. Today a colour TV is half that price while the cost of a comparable vehicle has increased tenfold - the electronic age has conquered the industrial. The choice between these American icons was resolved in typical consumer fashion - we eventually got both. And while I continued to read, I somehow neglected the autographed copy of *On the Road* in the bookcase, for its dehorned, populist derivative on the tube. *Route 66* premiered in 1962 with Tod (Martin Milner) and Buzz (George Maharis) standing in for Jack and Neal Cassady. The beat Hudson had been exchanged for that icon of youth culture: a Corvette, and although Maharis was allowed just a little ethnic menace, these road wanderers were well-scrubbed. While the show initiated a new genre, with episodes entitled 'How Much a Pound is Albatross?', the subversive nature of *On the Road*'s cultural outlaws was exchanged for two nice boys gone to look for America on somebody's trust fund.

It was only when I arrived at university, along with a horde of similarly influenced Boomers, that I realized just how cool Jack was. In the sixties,

just after his ability to amuse their parents had faded, the young counterculture rediscovered Kerouac. Jack's narrative pointed to leaving home and going 'on the road,' escaping the gray flannel world of the nineteen-sixties. But this was a new scene, where instead of human interest articles in *Newsweek*, images of the music, the long hair, and the protests went out over the network to millions of potential acolytes. Where there had been maybe 5000 Beats in New York and San Francisco, there were now 5,000,000 Hippies coming from everywhere the signal reached. The age of the Revolution was now televised, from Chicago to Kent State to Patty Hearst and later to Tianamen Square.

The transmission and therefore the immediacy of these images made it impossible to maintain the kind of avant-garde the Beats had created in the nineteen-fifties. What had been a select circle now immediately became a populist movement with accompanying consumer goods like record albums and bell-bottom pants. However, the media revolution did spawn an architectural counterculture which attacked the tired remnants of Miesian Modern with a new media-conscious architecture.

In fact, for Britain's *Archigram*, Italy's *Superstudio*, and America's *Ant Farm*, the medium became the message in a series of projects that somehow extended Kerouac's legacy. *Archigram* proposed 'Instant Cities' unbounded by the materiality of buildings, a laughable idea until it happened a couple of years later at Woodstock. Then there was *Superstudio* representing our culture with endless Cartesian grids extending out into the consumer landscape - does this sound familiar? And what hyperbole would have come to Jack as he passed the thirteen Cadillacs embedded by *Ant Farm* in the railroad earth along the real *Route 66* in Texas?

IV

Had Kerouac wanted the glory, he could have led this revolution that he helped inspire, but physically and creatively exhausted from too much mileage, he returned to the embrace of a new wife and hometown. Ken Kesey, a bridge from Beat to Hippie, became the guru, recruiting a failing

Me and Saint Jack K.
*never had too much to say
 Its easy driving with your feet
 some good ole girl in the passenger seat
 watching the road all day
 Oh honey, what funny things you do say
 But while you're out of your head
 who's making the bread?*

-Everything But The Girl, 1990

Neil Cassady to reprise his role as driver, this time on the *Merry Pranksters* bus where the destination board read 'further.' Jack was not amused. He went on conservative William Buckley's TV show (drunk), to question the intellect, drug use and patriotism of former cronies Ginsburg, Ferlingetti, and Kesey as well as the generation that wanted him to be Saint Jack K.⁷

Kerouac felt that everything had become too easy, too accessible; one should have to work to establish an identity. Most of his circle forgave him this trespass, seeing a bitter, burned-out man trying to figure out what had happened to his bright star. Kerouac died in October, 1969 at age 46, at his mother's house in St. Petersburg, Florida, while watching television. The show on the tube was *The Galloping Gourmet*.

Jeffrey Hannigan is an Adjunct Professor at the School of Architecture of McGill University and a Lecturer at the University of Vermont. He was formerly associated with Robert Mangurian in the Works architecture group in New York.

Jeffrey Hannigan

Notes:

¹The nature of urbanism in North America is described in Jacobs' The Death and Life of Great American Cities. J.B. Jackson's view of the American landscape is contained in American Space and in his many essays on the subject.

²Descriptions of this most famous two lane blacktop, and the television show named after it, are contained in Route 66 by Michael Wallis.

³The naiveté of native Americans to the idea of land ownership was fodder for comedians for years. Ultimately this joke was on us - the idea that anyone, even a Donald Trump or Olympia & York might 'own' a place like Manhattan is clearly ludicrous - in a real sense we are all just passing through.

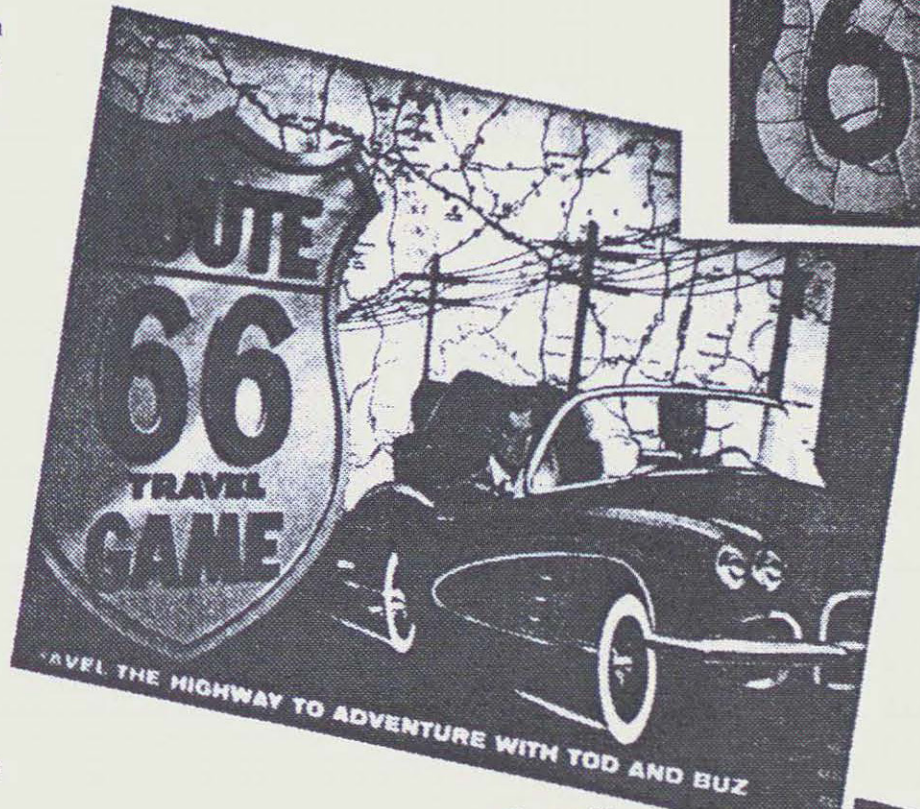
⁴Wright explains, with the usual density, his vision for "Broadacre City" in The Living City.

⁵On The Road, 1957.

⁶Is Philip Johnson's AT & T building really any different from his earlier Lincoln Centre?

⁷Kerouac, a video docu-drama of Jack Kerouac's life, created by John Antonelli in 1985, contains scenes from the William F. Buckley and Steve Allen television shows and includes interviews with many Beat celebrities (now available in video rental stores).

On the Road with Kerouac & Sartre



• There are two standard Kerouac biographies. The first, Kerouac: A Biography, by Ann Charters is strong on his life and associations and the second, Kerouac, by Tom Clark has good descriptions of his methodology.

• For a selection of works by Beat writers and poets, see Ann Charter's Beat Anthology.

Photo Credits:

Ant Farm, 'Cadillac Ranch'

Superstudio, 'Domestic Grid'

Archigram, 'Monograph'

Archigram, 'Instant City'

Route 66, Michael Wallis

The Route 66 board game

