

Article

Reetamoni Das

What's on the Road? The Quest, the Intrigue, the Tales...



A brief summary of a few popular road movies

Ida (2014; Poland)

Directed by: Pawel Pawlikowski

Ida, titled after the leading character of the film relates the physical and metaphorical journey that Ida/Anna takes with her aunt to discover the roots of her family. Anna is an orphan and lives in a church orphanage. She is about to take her vows as a nun when the mother asks her to go to her only living relative, Wanda Gruz, her aunt who had so far been unwilling to take her in. The first thing that Anna learns from her aunt is that she is a Jew and her name is Ida Lebenstein. She learns about her parents from her aunt who initially seemed not much pleased by her visit. While Wanda, a judge by profession speaks, Anna prefers to be silent except an occasional answer or nod. Anna tells Wanda that she desires to visit her parents' grave and thus begins their journey to Piaski

where their family had spent their last days. The journey helps Anna and Wanda open up to each other. Anna learns that Wanda's son was also killed with the entire family, revealing the pain that she had been hiding. They find some remains of the family and Wanda decides to take them for burial to their family grave site. Anna and Wanda separate after the burial with a visible liking for each other. As Anna gets ready to take her vows, she becomes unsure of the decision. On the other hand, Wanda's wounds are once again wide open. She misses her family and her niece and one day jumps off her window. Being the only relative, Anna is once again back to her aunt's place. In a last attempt to relive the memories with her aunt, Anna puts on her dress and shoes, smokes, drinks, goes to a musical evening with the musician and makes love to him, all the things probably Wanda would do in a day. Having spent a day as her aunt would and Wanda would want her to, Anna takes the road back to the convent.



Rain Man (1988)

Directed by: Barry Levinson

Charlie Babbit is a second-hand luxury car dealer struggling to keep the business alive. Charlie's father dies leaving him nothing out of his multi-million dollar property except for the old convertible car and some rose bushes. Inside his parental home, Charlie reveals about his childhood fantasy about the 'Rain man' coming and singing to him.

Charlie sets out in the convertible and traces the trust to which the money was left and discovers his autistic (as described in the film) older brother, Raymond. He also learns that it is actually his brother who has inherited the fortune. Charlie takes off with Raymond from the facility on pretext of taking the latter to a baseball game. The rest of the film is a journey that Charlie and Raymond undertake. As they make stops at various motels, Charlie is overwhelmed to learn that Raymond was actually the 'Rain man' of his childhood. He also learns that Raymond was put in special care as their parents thought that he had tried to hurt Charlie. Raymond's extraordinary ability with numbers helps Charlie to win a big fortune in the lottery. Charlie's initial hostility gives way to brotherly love and he finds the family that he had been away from. He is ready to give away his claims to the fortune to be with Raymond. As Charlie learns to take care of his brother's special needs, the latter develops skills like learning to acknowledge the funny things. The two part with Charlie promising his brother visits to the facility.

The Darjeeling Limited (2007)

Directed by: Wes Anderson

The film starts with a man chasing through the streets of India in a hired taxi to catch a train. As he races behind the departing train another young man darts past him and boards it. The young man, Peter Whitman joins his two brothers, Francis and Jack, aboard the train, The Darjeeling Express on a trip across India. Francis tells his brothers that he wanted the journey to be about them bonding and spiritual discovery. As Francis takes charge of the entire trip Peter and Jack keeps away their little secrets from him. Francis had actually planned the trip to see their mother but keeps the truth away from his brothers. On the way to the Himalayan foothills, where their mother is, they make several stops. Peter carries some belongings of their father to which Francis raises



objection. They both break into a scuffle leading to their banishment from The Darjeeling Limited. The three brothers travel through the road with a number of suitcases belonging to their father. They come across three children trying to cross a canal as they make their way on foot. Francis and Jack rescues two of the boys after their raft capsizes but Peter is unable to save the third one leaving him visibly shaken. The story goes back to reveal that their father died in a road accident and their mother did not make it to the funeral. They plan to get back to their lives but decide against it in the last moment and visits their mother who though did not expect them is delighted. However, the next morning they find her gone and again make their way to see the country via train but this time loses the entire luggage they carried.

Dumb and Dumber (1994)**Directed by: Peter Farrelly**

Lyod is a limousine driver who drops off a beautiful woman, Mary at the airport and is impressed by her beauty. The woman is to leave a briefcase for pick up at a particular corner in the airport but Lyod catches



hold of it presuming she forgot it. He also crashes the limousine and loses his job. Meanwhile, his friend and room-mate, Harry also ends up jobless. Lyod and Harry possess intelligence that is below average. Their home is ransacked by the two people who was about to pick up Mary's briefcase. They decide to leave for Mary's place and deliver her the case. Thus, they set out on a road trip in Harry's van and their buffoonery creates some hilarious situations. The narrative reveals that Mary's husband is kidnapped and the money in the briefcase was for ransom. Lyod and Harry also learn about the content of the briefcase and buy themselves luxuries. The film goes through many hilarious situations after which the culprit is nabbed. Lyod and Harry once again take the road to their earlier lives.

Wild Strawberries (1957; Sweden)**Directed by: Ingmar Bergman**

The film narrates the story of Isak Borg, a retired professor who is going to be conferred an honorary degree to receive which Borg plans to make a road journey. His daughter-in-law, Marianne, offers to accompany him in his road trip. Borg and Marianne do not share a cordial relationship and she is planning to separate from his son, Evald. As they share their

thoughts about each other, Borg takes a small turn to show Marianne the summer house of his young days. Borg starts reminiscing his younger days, that he longs so much, and visualises his cousin, Sara in his mind who is still young and is wooed by his brother. Borg, starts visualising the entire childhood that he had spent in the house, now left empty. He is brought to reality by a young woman, Sara, seeking a lift. Borg, Marianne, Sara and her two companions soon take the road. In the course of the journey, they meet a middle aged couple, stops by Borg's mother and other acquaintances that pronounces about Borg's finesse as a doctor. Borg dozes off on the trip and has a series of weird dreams. As Borg and Marianne make it to the destination they find that Evald and Borg's housekeeper is already present. There Marianne and Evald come back on friendly terms. Borg and Marianne are no longer hostile but professes liking for each other. The film ends as Borg once again



reverts back to his childhood memories and tries to fall asleep.

A tale in every turn: analysing the road movie

Always about the development of character and plot, road movies feature the road (or the journey) as the dominant theme. It is a physical and metaphorical journey that the characters in the plot take and build the narrative. Like the road (or the journey), the road movie relies on unpredictability. Just when the viewer was about to assume that Lyod and Harry's (*Dumb and Dumber*) days as buffoons are over, we see them taking the road once again to re-live their earlier lives. They are met with a bus full of bikini contestants looking for two oil boys. Lyod and Harry fail to realise their providence and points the girls to a direction where they might hire the oil boys. While one might laugh at their lack of common sense, their

ignorant rejection of the gloss connects them to the pastoral. The fickle nature of the narrative is visible in *Ida* as well. *Ida*'s decision to abstain from the vow and go back to Wanda's apartment is only the prelude to what is to follow. *Ida* chooses for once to live sometime like her aunt but the film ends as she makes her way back to the convent. Similar is the story of *Rain Man*, where the brothers bond only to part in the end.

The stories on the road are those of quest, a search for the meaning of life and also an odyssey of pushing new boundaries (North, 2009). *Ida*, during her first meeting with her aunt learns that she is actually a Jew, living the life of a devout Christian and as a child she was named *Ida Lebenstein*, not her Christian name *Anna*. *Ida/Anna* could discover her roots only by taking a journey to the village where her parents lived before they were killed during the World War II. As she tries to hold on to the beliefs that she were raised with, *Ida* faces questions about faith from her aunt. She watches her aunt who is very different from her Christian upbringing in the orphanage. *Wanda* drinks, smokes and tries to bully her way into getting information about the family. An orphan Jew girl brought up within strict Christian rituals, the journey is exhilarating for *Ida*. The retired Professor, *Borg* in *Wild Strawberries* seems to be apprehensive of his advancing age. He longs for the youth that has been long gone by. *Borg*'s quest is a surreal one that he cannot achieve except in his dreams. In *The Darjeeling Limited*, the three siblings make an attempt to rekindle their kinship. Their journey in the spiritual land is assumed to be purging them from the western materialistic desires. Though they struggle, they are successful in letting go the past as is symbolically depicted by their losing the suitcases in the attempt to board another train. *Dumb and Dumber* and *Rain Man*, on the other hand, is overtly a quest that seeks the material perhaps in the spirit of man's need push the physical boundaries. The quest in the American cinema may be a reminder of the search for new lands that its earliest settlers set out for (North, 2009).

The search is at the same time is also fuelled by the love of freedom, that the road (or the journey) brings. The freedom of the road is also about

shedding ones inhibitions and overcoming fear. The freedom comes with the lack of the scrutinizing and judgemental eyes that would be there every day. On the road they are not answerable to any one, except their self. They do not have to fear a digression or an outburst because there is no one to judge them. *Charlie Babbit* in *Rain Man* is an impatient young man and has problems dealing with his brother's autism (as described in the film). They take a road trip as *Raymond* has a fear of airplanes. As they make stops at various motels, *Charlie* is overwhelmed to learn that *Raymond* was actually the 'Rain man' of his childhood. He also learns that *Raymond* was put in special care as their parents thought that he had tried to hurt *Charlie* as a child. *Charlie* overcomes his obsession with money and strives for a more warm relationship with his older brother. For *Lyod* and *Harry* in *Dumb and Dumber* the road trip is about an escape from their mundane and sorry lives. *Ida* despite her strict religious upbringing is ready to see the world in a different light and experience the things that life as a religious person would not allow her to. Her perceptions broaden and she is able to accept the life that her aunt leads. The freedom that the characters feel comes from a transition from within. The various turns and transitions that come through the journey helps in the development of their character. As *Tim Dirks* put it, "one thing they all have in common: an episodic journey or quest on the open road (or undiscovered trail), to search for escape or to engage in a quest for some kind of goal -- either a distinct destination, or the attainment of love, freedom, mobility, redemption, the finding or rediscovering of oneself, or coming-of-age (psychologically or spiritually). The road often functioned as a testing ground or proving ground for the main character(s)".

The journey is also about self discovery. It is not only relations that are realised but the self come out in the open. The hardships of the road test the limits of human tolerance and like the long years of survival, in the end they emerge victorious. With relationships mended, stronger resolution and realisation of the self the road facilitates the metaphorical journey to deliverance. The faith and beliefs are tried in the road and fate plays its course.

The journey that Anna undertakes ends in the discovery of Ida, the part of her self and identity that she was not aware of. The 'Rain man' that Charlie has been seeking is none but the older brother whose existence he has so far not known. When Borg thought that all that was left of him was old age, an old acquaintance reminds of his generous and kind self. On board a train the three brothers discover bonds that they have not known to exist. But the road is also deceiving for the ones who fail to read the signs. Though providence gives Lyod and Harry the opportunity to set on an exciting journey, they sum up that someone is going have all the luck.

As much as it is about self discovery, a search and a quest, the movies on the road tend to keep the end open. The films under analysis, *Ida*, *Rainman*, *Dumb and Dumber*, *The Darjeeling Limited*, *Wild Strawberries* do not provide a definite ending but leaves it open for interpretation. *Ida* having spent some time in the metaphorical shoes of her aunt makes her way back to the convent but we never know whether she decides to take her vows. Though it seemed that Charlie and Raymond might make the family that they have long been away from, departs only with a promise to keep in touch. Lyod and Harry, having played their part in providence takes course to their old lives that we may only guess gets better or not. The three brothers in *The Darjeeling Limited* shun their material belongings to embark on another

journey; achievement of their spiritual quest remains a mystery. Borg in *Wild Strawberries* again descends to the dreams of his youth to seek solace from the present. The end in the road movies is thus a resemblance of the physical road that is unending in nature and of life that is full of surprises and revelation. The string that binds the film to the road and life is the growth and development without the worry of a fairytale ending.

The road is also a great leveller. Rich or poor, old or young, stupid or intelligent, religious or promiscuous, an achiever or a loser all are equal on the road thus fulfilling the utopia of a society void of all status quo. Whether it is the very clever Charlie or the extremely dumb Lyod, they all have their moments of glory and shame.

The road movies in fact by the very nature of unpredictable twists and turns, and open endings are legends personified. Just like centuries of quest, the characters seek out in search for something and in the process are met with new surprises. The search in the road movies perhaps may be equated with the grail quest that has only led to the development of stories, tales and legends, yet the search is not over. The characters and the story in the road movies proceed to tell a new tale at each curve but the end is not definitive. It may also represent the unending chase of man for a definitive end, a salvation that has been as illusory as the legends of the grail.

References:

- Dirks, Tim. (2015). *Road Films*. AMC filmsite, Retrieved from <http://www.filmsite.org/roadfilms.html>
- North, Sam. (2009). *The Road Movie*. The international writers magazine. Retrieved from <http://www.hackwriters.com/roadone.htm>

☞ Dr. Reetamoni Das has a PhD in Cultural Studies and is currently working as a Guest Faculty at Rajiv Gandhi University.