

## A Road Movie by John Gillies

Therese Davis

John Gillies' latest video work is about cars: a portrait of a seething mass of steel-cased bubbles and the people inside them who are hurtled along at high speeds only to come to a crashing halt and find themselves stuck in the drawn-out nothing time of the traffic jam. It's a collage of the small gestures of driving that flesh out this everyday activity and the collections of objects that fill the world of cars, the worlds we create *within* cars. It's a video about cultural attachment to the car, the identification of self with cars. It invokes the grand twentieth century dream of taking the exit lane, hitting the open road, escaping, moving, changing, *moving on* ... And it's about the end of that road.

Like most of Gillies' recent work, *Road Movie* is a powerful cultural response to a social pressure point. In the face of the catastrophic effects of climate change, Western societies are witnessing an urgent and widespread re-imagining of the relationship between humans and cars. Speed is everything. How fast can we reduce greenhouse gases? What level of change is required? Some say 100% in 20 years. Imagine that! What would be the impact of a zero-carbon modern economy? A world without cars – is it a dream or a nightmare? It is precisely this question that drives the protagonist of Gillies' road movie as he takes the exit lane and, like many travellers before him, heads away from the city and out on to the open road.

It is no surprise that as Gillies' work moves deeper into the world of narrative cinema he should choose to engage with the road movie format. This genre is about movement and change, and being transformed through physical mobility. In the past, Gillies' video works have meticulously explored the mechanics and techniques of the moving image. He is known for his spectacular montage forms in earlier works such as *Techno/Dumb/Show* (1991) and *She Says, The Grooves Speak* (1988). Adrian Martin correctly attributes Gillies' particular 'sensitivity' to movement to his working knowledge of modern practices of sound/music montage.<sup>1</sup> *Road Movie* opens with a richly textured montage that demonstrates Gillies' current refinement of this sensitivity as he explores the visual and aural resonances between the super-fast paced, glossy TV car advertisement and the evenly paced rhythms of the classical road movie. It is a conscious tactic in what French film critic Raymond Bellour calls

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Martin, 'Collage and Montage in Australian Experimental Film and Video' in Arthur McIntyre, ed. *Contemporary Australian Collage*, Craftsmen House, Sydney, 1990, p.59-60.

the 'battle of the images' – the complex relationship between film and video.<sup>2</sup> Bellour does not shy from convergence and its hybrid forms. 'All we have is incertitudes', he says. And in this work, Gillies embraces incertitude. Drawing widely on his knowledge of video and cinematic forms and techniques, he carries out an intensive investigation of processes of colourisation to create a saturated hyper-real vision that registers the changing perception of the car as a machine, as a beloved personal attachment.

In this particular stretch of what will be a longer journey<sup>3</sup>, Gillies lovingly recreates the atmosphere of the road movie in digital video through colour, lighting, rhythm and performance. It is made for large-scale cinematic style projection, and, as with its classical model, this road movie gives the car the lead role as an object of power and fascination. It pays respect to the generic idea of the road as something that provides a protective anonymity. The protagonist of *Road Movie* acts alone. But *Road Movie* also disrupts the internal logics of this popular cinematic genre. As the road opens up for the lone protagonist, as the constant loud noise and frenetic pace of the city is displaced by quietness and stillness, the narrative departs from the generic script and stages an unexpected and absurd dead-end. This is, we learn, the end of the road for the car.

At this point, the video shifts into a different emotional and atmospheric register, employing a performance-oriented mode of image making that Gillies has developed over the years in various collaborative projects connected to the physicality tradition (*Mary Stuart Tapes* 2000; *Divide*, 2006). The fast cutting of the opening of the work is replaced by a slow accretion of images that display the surface detail and rhythms of a human body engaged in the highly physical process of burying a car. The absurdity of this physical act produces a startling image of petrification and immobility. We have become accustomed to seeing cars immobilised in various states of wreckage: car crashes on TV news and sports, the mountains of crushed metal of the car wrecking yard. But this is an entirely different image, for here the car is perfectly intact. It is a pristine yet nevertheless dead and discarded machine. Much more than a protest piece, the video invites us to *feel* the full weight of this action, to sense the particular kinds of bodily adjustments and human effort that are required to undertake the act of detaching ourselves from the car and to leave it behind. In its elegiac mood, this short video is a terrifying glimpse into the nothingness of oblivion and inaction. But there is also hope. As an imaginative metamorphosing of a cinematic form, the

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Bellour, 'Battle of the Images', *Art Press*, 262, p. 48-52.

<sup>3</sup> *Road Movie* (2008) is part of a larger solo project, 'The Parramatta Road Project'.

video itself suggests that our future lies in our ability to constantly re-imagine and transform the relationship between humans and technology and between technologies.

Bio:

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