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Recreational Reconstructions

By Andrew Clifford

In the time since Jack Kerouac went *On the Road* in post-war America, the art of the road-story has become almost ubiquitous. Of course, there are countless earlier examples - John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, *Don Quixote* or even Matsuo Basho's 1694 tale of a wandering poet samurai - but it was the automobile's entry into road-culture that propelled an entire generation into motion, making travel a recreational pursuit and turning every journey into a series of anecdotal exploits.

The pairing of fast cars with the moving images of cinema seems obvious, especially when considering that the two arrived almost simultaneously. Although *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Vanishing Point* (1971) signalled a tarnishing of America's utopian road-based development, the big-screen never ceased its love affair with the meandering plotlines and thrills-and-spills of automotive adventures.

Often an excuse for existentialist navel-gazing, where the protagonist occupies a perpetually shifting environment to compare his usually static existence against, road movies can also be an exploration of landscape and culture. German director Wim Wenders specialised in this kind of investigation with early works like *King of the Road* (1976), which utilises a western idiom to explore the East-West German border and reveal the increasing colonisation of American iconography in the German landscape. Cultural archetypes were further blurred with his trans-continental *Alice in the Cities* (1974) and his American production *Paris Texas* (1984).

Although not as vast, the New Zealand landscape has inspired its own share of travel tales and even quintessential kiwi painter Colin McCahon has a series of works titled *On the Road*. Geoff Murphy's *Mini-odyssey Goodbye Pork Pie* (1980) recalls an era where, armed with a wrench and a little ingenuity, anything on four wheels could get you across the country. As with *Easy Rider*, *Vanishing Point*, and more recently, *Thelma and Louise*, Murphy's hero finds that the road is no longer an endless utopian escape route into a non-place free of restrictions.

Heading for the hills with the kids and a caravan might not be the kiwi tradition it once was, as recreated in Christine Jeffs' *Rain* (2001) or lampooned in *Savage Honeymoon* (2000), but it's a tradition preserved in countless dusty boxes of yellowing photos, slides and 8mm film footage.

David Stewart's sail is embedded with forgotten narratives of holidays past. Woven into a the form of a sail, the film no longer runs in linear strips but now runs continuously; a kind of loop without beginning or end. As well as referencing New Zealand's other recreational vehicle of choice, the sailboat, it also alludes to his earlier works that diffuse the typically binary nature of cultural debate. Constructed with traditional weaving techniques, Stewart has crafted a waka sail.

Boats, and particularly sail-boats, are an archetypal object common to most cultures and are imbued with multiple histories. Once a functional necessity for transportation, with the advent of powered craft and other forms of transport, their role is now almost exclusively recreational.

Taking fragments of found film footage - memories preserved with light to be relived through the vicarious experience of cinema - Stewart has transformed these nostalgic traces into an actual artifact that inhabits the corporeal world beyond the virtual realm of the cinema screen.

Chris Hargreaves' works also straddles the border of real and virtual experience. Constructed from clear acrylic tubing, his glider is actually a 1:2 scale model that only references the idea of an actual glider. Although solid and three-dimensional, its translucence reduces its physical presence to a bare minimum.

This 'real' glider has also been translated into a digital glider through 3D modeling software. It is the digital glider that can fly, endlessly re-enacting a return journey across diagrammatic representations of landscape, reminiscent of early flight simulator games. The route that the glider travels along connects with a darker presence in New Zealand's collective memory - the 1979 Erebus disaster in which Air New Zealand flight 901 crashed in Antarctica leaving no survivors and few, if any, households unaffected.

Although Antarctica is a continent with an almost entirely utilitarian existence and history, occupied mostly by scientists and explorers, Air New Zealand had found a way to turn it into a commercial destination by offering a regular daytrips from Christchurch for tourists. This service was immediately discontinued after the 1979 accident.

Hargreaves' animation resurrects and retraces the Air New Zealand itinerary, recreating the flight path from downloadable PDF files available on the internet and extruding the terrain from scanned topographical maps. Rather than re-enacting the ill-fated final trip, the glider returns to Christchurch, endlessly playing out its looped journey like a persistent memory.

By providing only the barest of details, Hargreaves' work leaves room for the viewer to fill in the details, much like the embellishment of an old travel story, told and retold over successive dinner parties as the facts fade with memory and the virtual version - the anecdotal recreation takes over. Stewart's sail contains actual documentation of holiday exploits but these too are only fragment - snapshot remnants to be claimed from the processing lab, providing a skeletal framework to hang increasingly blurry narratives on.

