Film Review: 'On the Road'

Film Review of 'On the Road', released in Britain, 12 October 2012

Jack Kerouac's seminal 'beat' novel *On the Road* was first published in 1957. It has finally made it to the silver screen in a faithful adaptation by Walter Salles (director of *The Motorcycle Diaries* about the young Che Guevara). Salles captures the excitement of youth in search of 'kicks' in the shape of sex, drugs, jazz and travel in the early years of the 'beat' generation. The story is autobiographical and concerns the adventures of would-be writers and poets Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, their involvement with Neal Cassady in the years 1947-50 in New York City, Denver, New Orleans, Mexico and their transcontinental journeys.

Kerouac is sensitively portrayed by Mancunian actor Sam Riley who was excellent as Ian Curtis in the Joy Division film, *Control*, while Cassady is played to the hilt by Garrett Hedlund who was Patroclus in *Troy*.

Cassady represents for Kerouac the lust for life which he described as ‘the only people for 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’.

In the film Cassady is reading Proust's *Swann's Way* which is given him by Kerouac. Proust and Joyce were major influences on Kerouac as a writer, while Blake, Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*, and Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* were literary influences on all the 'beat' writers. Philosophically, they were influenced by Nietzsche and Spengler's *Decline of the West*, and advocated Rimbaud's 'New Vision' for their writings and his 'derangement of the senses' through drugs. Salles film includes scenes of marijuana smoking and 'speeding' on Benzedrine plus straight and gay sex scenes.
The outstanding performance is by Kristen Stewart as Mary-Lou, and her performance in this film is in stark contrast to her role in the right-wing teen vampire films of the *Twilight* series. Viggo Mortensen as Burroughs has only a brief cameo performance, but watch for Joan Burroughs sweeping the lizards out of the tree!

Jazz, particularly the be-bop revolution of the 1940's as personified by Charlie Parker, was an influence on the ‘beats’. In the film there is a ‘scat’ jazz vocal performance by Slim Gaillard portrayed by Coati Mundi.

The ‘beat’ generation was a reaction against the consumerism and materialism of post-war American capitalism, the puritanism of bourgeois morality, the conformity of middle-class life, the fear endemic in a post-Hiroshima world of the military-industrial complex, the racism and prejudice in society, and the general lack of spirituality. The ‘beats’ advocated a ‘second religiousness’ and pursued alternatives to Judeo-Christianity in eastern religions such as Buddhism.

In *On the Road*, Salles and Kerouac's sensitive portrayal of the Mexican fellaheen is fundamental to Kerouac's statement about land and indigenous peoples: ‘The Earth is an Indian Thing.’

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