

David O. Russell's *Flirting with Disaster*: Survival of the Family Unit on the Road

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A road narrative, first of all, responds to the breakdown of the family unit, that Oedipal centerpiece of classical narrative (1997:2).

Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark's statement has certainly proved to be the case in most road movies up to our days, from Dennis Hopper's archetypal *Easy Rider* (1969), to more recent representatives of this genre, such as Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991). In these films, a required, shared condition for riders to get on the road was the absence or absolute denial of the responsibilities of domesticity: marriage, motherhood and employment. However, David O. Russell's road film *Flirting with Disaster* (1996) constitutes a remarkable exception to this generic rule. The aim of this paper is to analyse the innovating appearance of the family unit in the road movie genre as presented in *Flirting with Disaster*, but specially to show the survival of the married couple and the happy family after the threat posed by the transformational road adventure.

The presence of the romantic love story of a heterosexual couple inherited from the *film noir* and the gangster genre in such films as Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night*, (1948), Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy*, (1950) and Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, (1967), is a recurrent element which has proved fashionable throughout the history of the road movie genre. A second reinvention of this antidomestic outlaw couple is to be seen in a great number of films of the 90s like *Wild at Heart* (David

Lynch, 1991), *Kalifornia* (Dominic Sena, 1993), *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994), *Mad Love* (Antonia Bird, 1995) and *Feeling Minnesota* (Steven Baigelman, 1996), to name but a few. However, most of these romantic couples were not married and certainly none of them constitute what we traditionally understand by the term 'family'. Road films up to now have only presented fragmented and/or broken families escaping on the road, like the leading one in Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas*, (1986). Apart from the odd example of films presenting the journey of two siblings (Barry Levinson's *Rain Man*, 1988, and Lisa Krueger's *Manny and Lo*, 1996), the starring formula only-parent-with-child (real or surrogate) is the closest a road movie has been to the traditional concept of family. *Paper Moon* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1973), *Alice in the Cities* (Wim Wenders, 1974), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (Martin Scorsese, 1974), *Love Field* (Jonathan Kaplan, 1992), *A Perfect World* (Clint Eastwood, 1993) or the most recent *Tumbleweeds* (Gavin O'Connor, 1999), constitute some illustrations of these films where a one-sided parental relationship is either built up or recovered during a transforming trip. *Flirting with Disaster*'s originality therefore lies first of all in its introduction of an entire family as protagonist of a road movie and secondly in the unexpected survival of the institutions of marriage and the family that it represents.

As Tina (Téa Leoni), the main threat to the leading couple's marriage, remarkably states in the film:

Every marriage is vulnerable, otherwise marriage wouldn't mean anything, would it?

Her words indeed sum up the main theme in this road movie: the vulnerability of the institution of marriage and the risk of a family break-up, which as the very title of the film suggests is the oncoming disaster the protagonists will be flirting with. Following Hollywood's tendency to identify stars with particular genres, Ben Stiller and Patricia Arquette's presence as main protagonists Mel and Nancy already warns the viewer of the kind of film he/she is going to watch. Stiller indeed possesses a long background as a comedian, remarkably exploited both on TV (its best illustration being *The Ben Stiller Show*, which he wrote, produced and starred for MTV) but also in such big screen comedies as Bobby and Peter Farrelli's *There's Something about Mary*, (1998), and Jay Roach's *Meet the Parents*, 2000). In addition, Arquette's recurrent appearance playing wild and wily women in action and road films (Tony Scott's *True Romance*, (1993), and David Lynch's *Lost Highway*, 1997) help build up the background for a film cleverly publicised as a road comedy. In *Flirting with Disaster* these two actors star as the leading young married couple who set to the road from New York to San Diego with their 4-month-old baby and an adoption-counsellor in tow, Tina, so as to meet Mel's natural mother. The ultimate motif for this journey to occur is a genuine one: Mel Coplin, an adopted entomologist, suffers from an identity crisis which remarkably stems from his rather unstable family references –both from his lack of roots and especially from his paranoid, overprotective adoptive parents. This crisis prevents him from finding a name for his own baby and, allegedly, might be having a negative effect on his marriage, which is going through a bad sexual patch. Mel and Nancy are shown to form a modern couple which seems to follow Virginia Wright Wexman's model of

companionate marriage,

"which stresses partnership and communication in the domestic sphere, replacing the depiction of heterosexual romance as the Victorian notion of two separate spheres" (1993:13).

We witness the couple's discussion and shared decision to get to the road in search of Mel's lost identity in a scene remarkably sealed by a classical element marking the beginning of their journey: the kiss, 'a privileged element associated with romantic transaction' and 'a significant moment of change' (Wood, 1984:18). The hero's inner search links mobility and action in a journey which does not constitute a mere travelogue but a being and experiencing on the road. And it is the characters' metamorphical travelling experience, distinctive of the road genre, that matters in this journey. Mel and Nancy do not aim at getting to know distant locations or reaching a particular destination, but at discovering Mel's genetic roots, something which he will eventually understand as absurd. Nevertheless, this road experience, made of events but especially of significant encounters, will exert a transformation in the protagonists which calls for deep analysis. From the very beginning of the film we are presented with marriage and family put in danger by the couple's problems in the sexual sphere, surprisingly coming from Mel's side after Nancy's new condition as mother. They have resorted to arranging sex-dates, just what Tina, herself a brand new divorcée, mentions as a symptom of her dead marriage. Unaware of his own wife's sex appeal, Mel straight away feels a strong attraction towards Tina, an ex-dancer turned training counsellor for an adoption agency. All along the journey a mixture between early mid-life crisis and 'seven-year-itch' leads him to an inner fight between sexual extramarital pleasure and faithfulness to a loving wife and caring mother, a dilemma the audience is invited to share. Therefore, disaster in the form of infidelity is here forecast with the appearance of repressed sexuality. As Robin Wood rewrites from Freud: 'In a society built on monogamy and family there will be an enormous surplus of repressed sexual energy and that which is repressed must always strive to return' (1984:80). Mel's potential infidelity is presented through the constant contrast between the two heroines he is involved with. Nancy is a blonde, petite career woman and new mother who looks quite unsophisticated and sexually unappealing when compared to her opponent now she has lost her pre-pregnancy figure. She is shown as a long-suffering mother and supportive wife who is not afraid to get to the road with her baby to help her husband sort out his crisis. Tina, a tall, blue-eyed brunette with a powerful sexy look and body and a refined taste for hairstyle, clothes and lingerie is a new divorcée whose dilemma is whether to seduce Mel or find herself an intelligent male to get pregnant with and build a life of her own. Nancy soon starts to feel jealous after understanding the danger in Mel's attraction to Tina, a danger Mel's foster-mother cleverly guesses and mentions early in the film: 'This woman strikes me as being very dangerous'. Contrary to expectations, hostilities between these two female characters are kept to the minimum, perhaps due to their shared condition as suffering women craving for the love and attention they lack from a male partner. The parallelism between these two heroines helps build up an increasing sense of

oncoming chaos in the married couple, a chaos exploiting a humorous perspective whereby Nancy is taken for the nanny and Tina for Mel's wife.

To make matters worse, the probabilities of an imminent adultery will be on the increase thanks to the timely appearance of Tony, Nancy's old-school friend and secret admirer. After a failed family reunion in San Diego, the leading trio-with-baby head for Michigan, where an incident with a lorry takes them to the police station. It is there that they meet Tony and Paul, a couple of bi- and homosexual federal cops who surprisingly join them on their bizarre cross-country trip, to New Mexico this time. Jealousy, sexual innuendo and potential infidelities are multiplied with the appearance of this new couple, who dangerously increase the threat to the family unit or 'flirtation with disaster'. Contrary to the average Hollywood horror film's formula, normality in this film is not threatened by the monster (Wood, 1984:79). Remarkably enough normality –here a heterosexual monogamous married couple and their family– is threatened by the social institutions that should support and defend its welfare: an adoption counsellor-in-training and a federal policeman, (whose alliterative names Tina and Tony emphasize their common quality as sexually tempting and family threatening). After a parallelism between female opponents we face the contrast and suggested choice between Tony and Mel, now in a tug-of-war for Nancy's love. Tony's main success consists of providing Nancy with the yearned-for affection her husband has denied her and also of proving his sympathy towards female issues, especially those related to motherhood, his own personal frustration. This film certainly offers a positive gay reading, since it presents Tony, a bisexual male, as a good father, (if it wasn't for his recidivist unfaithfulness, recurrent every eight months, as his boyfriend Paul claims). Mel's suitability as a father is put to question by his constant dreams of extra-marital sexual intercourse with Tina. In addition to this, he seems to abide by Kathlyn Rowe's conclusion that nowadays 'femininity is gauged by how little space women take up' (1990:413). His public humiliation of his wife by saying that she is always hungry shows that he may have lost his attraction and love for her merely because she has put on some weight. And, paradoxically, the presentation of food as Nancy's antidote to sexual frustration is a symptom that he is the one to be blamed for it. Now he is placed in Nancy's shoes as 'potentially betrayed' the tables turn and it is he who is fraught with jealousy to see that other men still find her sexually attractive. With this behaviour he makes a fool of himself and even shows his homophobic side, when he snatches his son from Tony's arms after he learns that he is a bisexual.

Moreover, the interference in the action of two secondary couples, those formed by Mel's adoptive parents (Mary Tyler Moore and George Segal) and his natural ones (Lily Tomlin and Alan Alda), will add to the chaotic situation. The casting of four great TV icons of the 60s and 70s for the two sets of parents shows the director's nostalgia for the films of that period which he confesses as his inspiration: 'they were original, subversive and had big movie stars in them' and moreover provides the film with a cultural referent, since as he states: 'they resonate culturally' (...) 'they are the fantasy parents of a generation' (May, 1997). From the very beginning of the film we are presented with Mel's feeling of lack of belonging, of incompleteness at not knowing his real parents. His exaggerated eagerness to integrate in a family background, as seen through his attempt to bond with his newly discovered mother, is a symptom that he

is not fully content with his current parents. He keeps making a fool of himself trying to mimetise with his new relatives until Nancy reminds him that:

We have to be open to them but be do not have to become them!

Just as the film's workings had previously demanded our positioning as viewers regarding the two competing pairs, whether female (Nancy and Tina) or male (Mel and Tony), we are now invited to see through Mel's eyes and inevitably produce some value judgment after comparing the two parental couples. We are firstly inclined to dislike his adoptive parents since they constitute a clear illustration of the old regressive values of Jewish conservatism and are full of neurotic obsessions and prejudice, as seen in their overprotective parenthood and their nasty rejection of homosexuals. A good illustration of this general distaste for Mel's parents is shown by means of a character outside the family. Tina's reaction to Mel's complimentary phrase where he tells her that she reminds him of his mother will be a strong slap in the face, for she finds this remark highly offensive. On the opposite side of the scale, we finally get to know Mel's genetic parents: a couple formed by a Jewish scientist and a member of the Hell's Angels who were forced to give their baby away since 'indisposed' in jail for drug dealing. We first of all feel attracted to this couple of modern, liberal, artistic parents, representatives of the subversive values of the 'flower power' and 'easy rider' culture. Later on, however, we are disappointed at facing a couple of professional drug dealers who have built one of those 'expelling, pro-acid, kind of non-smoking homes', as Tina states. Moreover, they have proved unsuccessful in their role as parents of a neurotic, autistic-looking son, Lonnie, the sort to put some big drug dose in an unknown brother's dinner out of sheer jealousy. Once again, the viewer is presented with some parallelisms, in this case that between two male brothers, Mel and Lonnie, the latter a mirroring alter-ego, a freakish incarnation of Mel's destiny, had he not been adopted.

The presence and the interrelation of these four couples, with all the sexual cross-pollination this could imply, makes the risk of disaster reach its maximum peak. However, before analysing how the film sorts out this extreme situation, the position and subsequent message it offers the viewer, we need to analyse the element which best emphasizes the overall feeling of chaos prevalent all along the film: its comic tone. As I mentioned before, this road film participates to a high degree from the comedy genre too, which as Yvonne Tasker remarks, facilitates its transgressive depiction of shocking sexual issues and social satire:

Comedy does have a particular relationship to authority and to the transgression of social conventions; it provides a space in which taboos can be addressed, made visible and also contained, negotiated (1998:163).

The director's own statement explains the approach to the comic he uses in *Flirting with Disaster*:

I was inspired by films like The Heartbreak Kid or Shampoo, the credo of which is you do everything with deadpan naturalism –you play down everything. You never put on a comic face; you avoid everything that is obvious and forced. You take natural situations and push them into the outrageous, but you never leave a sense of reality— (Los Angeles Weekly, 1996).

This ‘pushing of natural situations into the outrageous’ is built up in an increasingly gradual, rhythmic pace, which provides humour all along the film. Worth of mention are two main comic sources: the physical, visual gag, which makes us think of the classical screwball comedies of the 40s and 50s, and the witty, verbal humour best exemplified by the one-liners or amusing, brief comments of the characters. A recurrent illustration of the physical gag is the fall. Mel and Tina lose balance after some unexpected Indian thumbwrestling in the wrong mother’s house and knock over an expensive glass bric-à-brac collection. They also find themselves in an awkward physical position after smooching around in a narrow corridor of a guest house. No wonder critics have successfully compared Tina to Lucille Ball thanks to her ‘genial willingness to fall down’. Mel’s eagerness to please his macho new father figure makes him insist to be taught how to drive a lorry and ends up in the destruction of a rural post office. Significantly, the characters’ bodies are also used to great physical comic effect and nearly always hold strong sexual connotations. Illustrations of this abound: we laugh at Mel’s failure to hide an ‘unfaithful’ erection, at Mary’s (Mel’s natural mother) lifting of her blouse to show Nancy the power of a good bra to fight sagging breasts so as to keep one’s husband, at her flossing her teeth while making love, the amazing sight of Tony licking Nancy’s armpit, the shock of the early scene where Nancy practises a fellatio while Tina waits next door and the baby keeps crying, to name but a few. This series of offbeat characters, awkward situations and unexpected reactions, together with some recurrent mistakes, shenanigans and complications keep up the film’s witty humour up to the end credits. At a deeper level we also find a smart social satire focusing on the varied lifestyles introduced by this road film. *Flirting with Disaster* mocks both the conservative and the liberal stance through gags on republican presidents, Jewish couples, hypocritical North Europeans, good Samaritans, Hell’s Angels, ex-hippie drug-dealers and even such social institutions as federal officers and adoption counsellors. The characters’ gender relations and sexual tendencies also constitute a good source of humour, for by means of this sample community of divorced, married or single, and hetero-, homo- or bisexual characters, (which some critics call a view of Middle America), the capriciousness of human sexual politics is hereby denounced. Indeed, humour involves every character, except remarkably, Nancy, who, baby at hip and neglected by her self-absorbed husband, is the only person who inspires pity rather than laughter.

However, it is no less surprising after an impending disaster to see that the director’s final choice for the film is the survival of marriage and family. But how is the survival of the couple achieved? What is the film’s main message to the viewer about marriage, sex and gender relationships?

A spontaneous first answer to these questions could be that the film’s autobiographical nature may account for its ‘feel-good ending’. The autobiographical traits in *Flirting with Disaster*, also allowing for a sense of reality within chaos, are clearly explained by the director himself:

The whole movie is a snapshot of my life two years ago. I had just had a son, and I was disoriented in my marriage, and my adopted sister had just found her biological parents. It sort of filtered down in a way, I took the strangest, most embarrassing parts of myself and created an entire character around that (Los Angeles Weekly, 1996).

A second simple explanation of the survival of the traditional couple may be Russell's need to twist towards a more moderate stance after his incest-themed débüt *Spanking the Monkey*, (1994), whose title indicates a euphemism for masturbation. Thus, this Sundance Festival award-winning film, though generically different, clearly shares one thing with *Flirting with Disaster*: the director's predilection for the subversive approach to the themes of sex and family. Whether focusing on masturbation and incest or faithfulness and sexual temptations, they both share the prevalence of the sexual discourse –‘the new motif force of the film industry’ – according to *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (1996:496). It is significant too that sex in *Flirting with Disaster* is not only a problem endangering the couple when repressed but significantly its solution when eventually appeased. Like the ending in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), this film presents a healthy sexual life as the key to a harmonious love relationship. The moment Mel and Nancy, at long last, manage to have sexual intercourse, disaster in the form of family threat disappears. In addition, we also witness the two parental couples as stable and longlasting since still sexually active, either spiritual style or babysitting their grandson. It is also very telling to understand that the only couples or characters with poor sexual lives are those whose lives seem more unbalanced. Among these, we find Mel's brother, Lonnie, a dangerous, hyperjealous neurotic and, especially, Tina, who, sexually rejected, finally appears as a bad person when she spitefully tells Mel that he is an ‘inappropriate husband because he has got a messy life and he doesn't earn enough money’. We also see Tony and Paul's relationship as an ailing one, since they do not make love and are suffering from a promiscuity problem on Tony's side. He is indeed a character whose obsession with sex makes it his only topic of discussion –from circumcision to nipple irritation and breast-feeding position, to his humming tip for a better sex and the risk factor in homosexual sex.

If the formula ‘Good Sex equals Good Marriage’ is the key to prevent ‘disaster’ for The Coplands and symbolically, for any couple, it is no less true that a positive family background is presented as a factor which also facilitates the survival of marriage. Despite their neurosis and prejudice, Mel's adoptive parents are all in all honest, loving parents. They care not only for their son, but also for his current family members. They do not hesitate to run after Mel and Nancy when they feel they are in danger or to contribute to their wellbeing by babysitting for them so that they can make love and thus preserve their threatened marriage. Thus, a positive, though imperfect, family background is presented as a necessary support in the development of marriage and new parenthood.

On top of that, the film's remarkable depiction of Mel's direct family, that is, Nancy and their baby, as main characters present all along the journey is another factor holding a great positive influence on the survival of their family. Nancy has been assigned the role of wife but also that of mother, which, as Tasker states, is one of the three main roles for women in action films of the 90s, together with ‘macho/masculine and others’ (1998:69). Moreover, the only lifestyle to keep its dignity and sanity throughout the film is the one related to motherhood that she represents, following Griffith's classical stereotype that ‘the good woman is always a mother’ (Wright, 1993:49). Indeed, the appearance of mother-cum-baby all along

the film asserts Wood's concept of the child as 'a symbol of new growth and regeneration' (1984:167). Their baby stands for a new beginning, a new future for the Coplands back home and a great reason to fight for their couple. Once Mel has realized the aimlessness of his trip for roots it is time for the whole family to go back to New York, where they belong. And here we find what Robin Wood denominates 'an obstinately recurring motif of the American cinema, the line (invariably spoken by the man to the woman) 'Let's go home' (1986:21), or variations on it' in this case:

'I wanna go home tomorrow'.
 'So do I, and get out of here'.

The couple's stated wish marks the end of the journey, a return to the cyclical structure of classical films, atypical of the road movie genre but generic in the comedy, which returns the protagonists to their home or original situation after a series of significant trials and adventures have allowed for the recovery of the status-quo.

To conclude:

Apart from its comic exploitation of such relevant issues as love and family relationships, parenthood, adoption, drugs and the volatility of sexual attractions, the main point in *Flirting with Disaster* is to show that Mel's inner search was wrongly focused on the search for his biological parents in the first place. The journey's ostensible goal has proved illusory, but his road experience has somehow taught him where to find his true identity and how to readdress his life. Therefore, the trip does not prove fruitless after all, since it has enabled the protagonists to strengthen their love and family relationship and moreover it has made Mel appreciate and come to terms with his share of both wife and original, adoptive family. Eventually he learns to be content with what he has, may that be plumpish wife and crying baby or neurotic adoptive parents. They all constitute his identity, his home, back in New York, and he can now feel happy to understand that Dorothy was right in saying that 'there is no place like home'.

On the whole, *Flirting with Disaster* is an innovative road movie, deviating from generic stereotypes by presenting an entire family on the road, searching for the identity of a confused father. From now on marriage and parenthood are an option in the genre. The transforming journey can give a new direction to the drifting lives of a whole family, here The Coplins, for they can also join this trip towards personal evolution. If, moreover, the trip includes an attractive chaperone and the crisscrossing of three other secondary couples with their subsequent problems, anxieties and sexual potential, disaster is ready-to-watch. In addition, the neverending range of possible encounters, dilemmas, attractions and chaotic events is cleverly framed within a comic perspective and with a powerful sexual content. However, after all, this imminent chaos symbolized by a potential marriage and family break-up which is built up all along the film does not go beyond the level of 'flirtation'. Neither Mel nor Nancy have an affair and they eventually reconcile with each other after a healing sexual session and Mel's awareness of his own identity: himself, his wife, his baby and his adoptive parents. No adultery is committed and the classical values of the US American traditional family unity are therefore upheld by this road film. The film's autobiographical and more remarkably, comic nature,

its upraisal of a healthy sex life, and of a positive, supporting family background, together with its significant depiction of motherhood, constitute the main factors facilitating the survival of the couple after a frantic but transforming road journey.

Despite its subversive depiction of controversial sex and gender issues through a successful comic perspective and its significant presentation of a companionate marriage and family as protagonists, *Flirting with Disaster* recovers Hollywood's classical closure, regarding both form and content. Its cyclical structure leading back home, together with its traditional promotion of marriage and the family and the harmful effects of promiscuity and drugs, though laudable and unexpected, may disappoint the viewer who may have found disaster, that is, the presentation of the characters picking up the pieces of a broken marriage and family, as a more realistic and interesting option, or, at least, more in accordance with the traditional conventions of the road movie genre.

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ABSTRACT

Instead of the usual denial of the responsibilities of domesticity: marriage, motherhood and employment David O. Russell's road comedy *Flirting with Disaster* (1996) presents a family as road protagonist. The aim of this paper is to analyse the innovative appearance of the family unit in the road movie genre as presented in *Flirting with Disaster*, but specially to show the survival of the married couple and the happy family after the threat posed by the transformational road adventure. Despite its subversive depiction of controversial sex and gender issues through a successful comic perspective and its significant presentation of a companionate marriage and family as protagonists, *Flirting with Disaster* recovers Hollywood's classical closure, regarding both form and content. Its traditional, unjustified promotion of marriage and the family may disappoint the viewer who may have found disaster as a more realistic option, more in accordance with the traditional conventions of the road movie genre.

RESUMEN

Flirting with Disaster (1996) es una comedia de David O. Russell que presenta a una familia como atípica protagonista de una película de carretera, género cuyos protagonistas normalmente rechazan las responsabilidades de la domesticidad: el matrimonio, la maternidad y un trabajo fijo. Este artículo pretende analizar la presencia innovadora de la familia como protagonista de una película de carretera y especialmente cómo sobreviven la familia y el matrimonio al viaje transformacional. A pesar de su presentación subversiva de temas polémicos de sexo y género a través de una inteligente perspectiva cómica, *Flirting with Disaster* recupera el final clásico del cine de Hollywood, tanto en forma como en contenido. El desastre anunciado por el título del filme y avalado por las convenciones del género de carretera se ve sustituido en esta película por una injustificada y tradicional exaltación de las instituciones del matrimonio y de la familia.