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## **‘Wheels of Tragedy’: Death on the Highways in *Carnival of Souls* (1962) and the Highway Safety Film**

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*This article argues that *Carnival of Souls* (1962), is a foundational text in the ‘Highway Horror’ sub-genre. It directly confronts one of the most pervasive taboos in modern American life: the horrific death toll associated with mass automobility. In Herk Harvey’s cult film, the protagonist is killed but finds herself unwilling to accept her fate. As in the many similar films that followed, the highway becomes a purgatorial space between life and death. The blindness of the protagonists is linked to society’s collective willingness to overlook (or tolerate) the devastating frequency of the fatal car crash. The article also discusses the highway safety films of the 1950s and 60s.*

In 1962, Andy Warhol began a sequence of paintings that would become known as his ‘Death and Disaster’ series. Alongside enlarged pictures of newspaper headlines on subjects such as the atomic bomb, race riots, and suicides, he created silkscreen prints based on photographs ‘showing demolished ambulances and sports cars with crumpled and sightless bodies spilled on to the highway in pools of their own blood’ (Dillinberger 66). Warhol’s disaster paintings, as one critic notes, ‘have the macabre immediacy and pathos of random deaths of ordinary people occurring in the routines of everyday lives’ (66). Carnage on the highways, Warhol understood, was just another reality of modern American life.

As Catherine Lutz and Anne Lutz Fernandez (2010) observe: ‘We take the car for granted as a social good, which makes it nearly invisible as the source of a range of problems (xi)’. This ‘invisibility’ is most notable when it comes to the widespread societal acceptance of the considerable number of lives lost on the roads each and every year. On one level, we are of course very much aware, from both news coverage and, for many people, from harrowing personal experience, that fatal car crashes are tragically common event. Yet at the same time, it seldom occurs to most people to question the profound culture of car dependence which helped cause these deaths in the first place. We focus on the convenience, independence and ‘freedom’ associated with car ownership and modern road networks, but prefer not to confront the death, disfigurement, and sheer human misery that often follow in their wake.

One important forum in which the immense death toll associated with travel by car is however vividly dramatized, within an American context at least, is in the cinematic sub-genre of the ‘Highway Horror Film’.<sup>1</sup> ‘Highway Horror’ is an offshoot of the wider American horror tradition that dramatizes concerns specifically related to the societal impact of mass automobility and the creation of the Interstate Highway System (IHS). Although the ‘road movie’ more generally usually depicts travel by car as a means of gaining independence, self-knowledge, and personal fulfilment, in the Highway

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<sup>1</sup>This article is a revised and updated extract from my 2014 book *The Highway Horror Film*, in which my definition of ‘Highway Horror’ is expanded upon in considerable detail. The more recent films mentioned here are also discussed at much greater length.

Horror film, journeys made via the American highways inevitably lead to uncanny, murderous, and horribly transformative experiences. The American landscape, though supposedly ‘tamed’ by the highways, is by dint of its very accessibility rendered terrifyingly hostile, and encounters with other travellers (and with those businesses depend on a constant flow of traffic) almost always have sinister outcomes. Characters in Highway Horror movies usually travel for mundane reasons, but meet with circumstances on the road that are anything but. As in Warhol’s prints, everyday routine becomes a brutal nightmare, and one of the most pervasive taboos of modern American life – the fact that one of its greatest conveniences has also brought about the seemingly ‘acceptable’ death, disablement, and disfigurement of millions of ordinary citizens – is broken.

‘Highway Horror’ can be divided into four distinct sub-categories, each of which articulates a distinct form of anxiety about the role that the highway system plays in modern American life. The first involves murderous and uncanny happenings taking place in and around highway stopping places such as motels, rest areas, and gas stations. It began with the 1960 release of Hitchcock’s seminal motel-set shocker *Psycho*. The second, the ‘Highway Nemesis’ sub-category, involves narratives in which middle class highway travellers have threatening encounters with murderously resentful (and usually blue-collar) adversaries. The founding film in this tradition is Steven Spielberg’s *Duel* (1971). The third involves films in which the freedom of movement associated with the highways facilitates the relentlessly mobile serial killer, as in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986). My focus here is on the fourth subcategory of Highway Horror film: that in which hapless travellers are stalked not by human malice, but by the spectre of the fatal car crash. The key film here, as we shall see, is Herk Harvey’s cult classic *Carnival of Souls*, which was, coincidentally, also released in 1962.

The construction of the Interstate Highway System (the IHS), ‘the largest engineered structure in the world’, was, along with mass suburbanisation, one of the most dramatic innovations of post-war American society (Katz and Puentes 259). As one scholar notes, ‘It is hardly necessary to keep compiling evidence of the extent to which American society has been permeated and influenced by motorized highway transportation. We have it thoroughly impressed upon us in our day-to-day living’ (Rae 152). The new network of well-maintained and well-constructed roads built in the years between 1956 and 1990 provided Americans with an ability to freely move around the *entire* nation that had previously been denied them. During this period the car assumed the vitally important practical and symbolic function it continues to hold to this day (as Mikita Brottman has noted, ‘[...] it has become as iconic to U.S. culture as the gun’ [xxvi]).

However, the increasing practical and symbolic significance of the car came at a high cost. Since 1889, car crashes have killed 3.4 million Americans (Lutz and Fernandez Lutz 151). As long ago as 1951, the nation recorded its millionth death in a road traffic accident (Whitlock 6). 2016 was recently cited as ‘the deadliest year on American roads in a decade’ with 40,000 fatalities (Korosec, ‘U.S. Traffic Deaths’). Noting that in 2007, 112 Americans a day died on the roads, Lutz and Fernandez Lutz observe that this is ‘the equivalent of a nearly fully loaded passenger plane going down in flames every single day of the year’ (181). ‘It’s a war out there’ they continue, pointing out that since 1889, car crashes have claimed many more victims than all US wars combined, and that 5 times as many Americans died on

the roads in 2007 than died in Iraq (182). This trauma is intensified by the fact that death in a car crash is, by its nature, violent: ‘Car crashes produce deaths that are horrible, or ‘horror-able’ as one woman who lost a good friend this year described it. They are not deaths that can be assimilated because they approach slowly, as with illness, or like deaths that allow for some dignity and grace. They are instead sudden, unexpected, violent and gory [...]’ (186).

Many of the case-studies featured in safety campaigner Ralph Nader’s crusading polemic *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed in Dangers of the American Automobile* (1965) read like real-life horror stories. We are told of a housewife whose defective Corvair suddenly overturns, leaving her with a ‘torrent of blood gushing forth from the stub of her arm’ (Nader 2), a garage mechanic whose leg is crushed by a Buick with defective brakes (36); and a female shopper whose car crashes into a couple sunning themselves nearby (48). Nader’s exposé brought public and political attention to the fact that, ‘Many of those beautiful, extravagant automobiles built in the 1940s and 1950s had huge windshields that broke easily and could sever jugular veins, upright metal steering columns ready to penetrate thoraxes, enormous steering wheels that could crush chests, protruding radio knobs that could crush skulls, and crazy suicide doors that could spring open, spilling helpless bodies on to the pavement’ (Brottman xxi).

Car crash deaths also serve as a reminder of the fragility of life and the perpetual closeness of death. As Brottman further notes, ‘the accident is a necessary property of any given system – of progress, movement, technology and speed’. Yet, ‘at the same time, the accident is outside of any form of human control, a fact that compels us to shroud it in superstition and taboo’ (xxvi). Lutz and Fernandez Lutz even suggest that the violence and suddenness of car accidents so violates our sense of order that they constitute an assault on our ‘basic trust’ in the world:

One grief counsellor who had helped many people through such calamitous events said: ‘When someone you love very much has died doing something that we all pretty much just do everyday – just get in a car and go somewhere, sort of accepting the quality of that car – I think there’s a real shaking of the foundations of what is to be relied upon [...].Nothing is reliable’. In comparison with those who deal with the loss of a loved one as a result of illness, people who lose someone in a crash are more likely to have nightmares and question the fundamentals. (192)

This ‘questioning of the fundamentals’ is emphasised in *Carnival of Souls* and other horror films I will mention here, in which those who have been killed on the roads are so stunned by the violence and rapidity of their demise that they are unable to accept their fate. As a result, the American highway is transformed from an everyday landscape into a terrifying liminal space in which the boundaries between life and death, natural and supernatural become increasingly difficult to distinguish from one another.

Of course, in a wider sense, the horror story in which all manner of surreal and unlikely events is ultimately explained away with the climactic revelation that the protagonist(s) has been dead all has long been a wearily common trope. Aviva Briefel persuasively categorises this as the sub-genre of

'spectral incognizance', which 'reassuringly represents death as an event that can be overlooked. The protagonists of this genre, with whom the viewer is meant to identify for the entirety of the film, finds out in the final moments that he or she has died or been involved in a prolonged dying process' (95). Briefel also highlights the frequency with which the 'image of driving as a metaphor for a life that has exceeded its limits' emerges as a trope in these films' (99). As we shall see, however, in addition to representing a key addition to the long-standing tradition identified by Briefel, *Carnival of Souls* also resembles in several crucial respects the 1960s and 1970s Highway Safety Films which warned young Americans in particular that careless driving habits could result in gruesome, sudden, and pointless death.

The basic premise of Harvey's film has been frequently imitated. Protagonist Mary Henry (Candace Hilligoss) appears to narrowly survive a car accident which takes in the opening moments of the film, but becomes disturbingly detached from the people and the places that surround her, and is subject to terrifying visions of a spectral ghoul. Ultimately, it is revealed that Mary had in fact been dead all along, but was unable or unwilling to accept the reality of her demise. *Carnival of Souls* is fascinating for many reasons, but my interest in it here is due to the fact that it so effectively and atmospherically emphasises the connection between automobility and death which represents one of the Highway Horror film's most notable characteristics. This connection is also very much present in the Highway Safety films of the era. These were devised in response to increasing public and police concern at the rising death toll on American roads.

Indeed, even the opening moments of *Carnival of Souls* directly mirror the premise of the early Highway Safety film *Last Date* (1950).<sup>2</sup> *Last Date*'s cautionary tale begins as the teenaged protagonist, Jeanne, writes a melancholy letter. 'They finally released me from the hospital, and now I'm home again. But in a way, I almost wish I *had* died in there. It would have been easier if I had'. The film then flashes back to the events of a few weeks ago, when Jeanne found herself torn between two young men with very different personalities and driving styles: steady, sensible Larry, and hot-rod driving dare-devil Nick. Jeanne agrees to 'go for a ride' with Nick, quashing her misgivings about his carelessness on the road. He succeeds in killing himself, and the people in the car he smashes in it, whilst poor Jeanne's (never seen) face has been horribly mutilated: a terrible punishment indeed for choosing the devil-may-care dangerous driver over the sensible good guy.

*Carnival of Souls* begins in *medias res* with a close-up of Mary, a twenty-something who, like Jeanne, has made the mistake of accepting a ride in the wrong car.<sup>3</sup> When challenged to a drag race, the driver readily agrees, much to Mary's evident dismay. The stilted dialogue and awkward acting apparent throughout the film reinforces the scene's 'educational' feel, as does the predictability of the tragedy that follows. The car crashes through the guard rail of a bridge and plunges into the river. As it sinks, there is a close-up of the black, swirling water, and the title suddenly materialises, accompanied by the funereal organ music that recurs throughout (Mary is a church organist). The camera stays focused on

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<sup>2</sup> *Last Date* can be found online here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkMd4LNHp44>> Accessed April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017.

<sup>3</sup> *Carnival of Souls*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bUePiQJCI> Accessed April 2017<sup>th</sup> 2017.

the river throughout the credits, as if to confirm that no one could possibly emerge alive. ‘They may never find that car’, an onlooker predicts. But suddenly, Mary clammers out of the water and on to a sand bank, shaken, but apparently alive – and with no memory of how she managed to escape (indeed, the recently deceased usually suffer from a necessary degree of amnesia in these films).

The solemn head-shaking undertaken by the policemen and accident investigators at the scene of Mary’s crash was also a stock feature of the era’s Highway Safety films. Stagy, black and white, and obviously fictional cautionary tales such as *We Drivers* (1936) – the first driver safety film – and *Last Date* were replaced in the late 1950s and after by a new wave of ‘mental hygiene’ films that showcased uncompromisingly graphic footage of *actual* accident scenes.<sup>4</sup> The first so-called ‘educational gore film’ was the aptly titled *Safety or Slaughter* (1958) (Smith 78).<sup>5</sup> As Ken Smith suggests, the cultural prominence of these films between the late 1950s and the early 1970s can be understood by appreciating just how deadly American roads were at the time:

Traffic engineering had remained dormant since the 1920s, when cars were slow and scarce. Poles, rocks, trees and ditches lay just off the shoulder, if there was a shoulder. Passing lanes were rare, curves sharp, and guard rails had blunt ends that skewered anyone unfortunate enough to hit the head on. If you hit something, you would possibly die, for there were no air bags, shoulder belts, and very, very few seat belts in cars. There were no roll bars, headrests, antilock brakes, child safety seats, or ‘crumple zones’. Steering wheels were rigid steel and would crush your chest on impact if you weren’t impaled on the steering column. Many people were killed simply by being thrown through the windshield or out of doors that easily sprang open. [...] In this uneven world, where minor auto accidents were often fatal and the driver shouldered all the responsibility, highway safety films flourished. (74-5)

The most famous films of this type were those produced by the so-called ‘Highway Safety Foundation’, which was established in Mansfield, Ohio, by advertising executive and amateur photographer Dick Wayman. Wayman regularly photographed accident scenes on behalf of the Ohio Highway patrol, and, together with another photographer, Phyllis Vaughan, began touring schools and fairs with a slideshow of graphic images intended to shock viewers (particularly teenagers) into taking more care on the roads. When the highway patrol suggested that they begin to use a movie camera instead, the impetus for the creation of the most famous Highway Safety film of all time, the 1959 release *Signal 30* (named after the code that Ohio troopers used to refer to a traffic fatality) was provided.<sup>6</sup>

The viewer is left in no doubt as to the authenticity of the scenes which follow by the film’s opening crawl: ‘These are actual scenes taken immediately after the accident occurred. Also unlike Hollywood our actors are paid nothing. Most of the actors in the movie are bad actors and received top billing only on a tombstone. They paid a terrible price to be in the movies, they paid with their lives’. As

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<sup>4</sup> Background information cited here comes from the excellent documentary *Hell’s Highway: The True Story of Highway Safety Films* (Dir: Bret Wood, 2003). This DVD release also features many of the films mentioned in this article, as well as valuable commentary by those involved in their creation.

<sup>5</sup> *Safety or Slaughter*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfAG\\_W5KW-Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfAG_W5KW-Y) Accessed April 27<sup>th</sup> 2017.

<sup>6</sup> *Signal 30*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKOoengbOk&t=8s> Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017.

the film progresses, the viewer is repeatedly asked to ‘Put yourself and your family in these untouched, un-staged scenes’.

This emphasis on authenticity, as Brottman notes, ‘detracts attention from the fact that the film is, in effect, carefully shot and edited to create a deliberate and specific effect. Camera movements are sometimes lose and jerky, in the best traditions of *cinéma vérité*, and sometimes they are much smoother, particularly when the camera glides easily over plies of twisted metal, panning for mangled body parts’ (234). We see the aftermath of an incident in which a cattle truck has driver right over car which ignored a stop sign; the ‘raging, furious’ result of a collision between two trucks (which includes close-ups of the charred bodies); a pickup which became ‘a funeral pyre for an aging, hard-of-hearing farmer’, and the body of a high-school football star whose ‘love of speed cost him his life’. The film stresses that ‘Every accident has at its base the violation of a traffic law’.

*Signal 30’s* follow-up, *Mechanized Death* (1961) also emphasises the responsibility that the individual driver holds for his or her own destruction.<sup>7</sup> It begins with a montage of gory accident scenes, and then depicts stock footage of the highways being built, along with a voice over: ‘Our story starts at the logical beginning – the beginning of the finest roads and highways that eminent engineers have ever devised. When the contractors perform their work, they are executing the plans of highly skilled specialists. But when *you* come into the picture, too often that word ‘execution’ has a totally different meaning’. We are left with the idea that death himself is stalking the highways, waiting to seize his chance when the inattentive, reckless, or intoxicated driver a fatal mistake. Furthermore, in contrast to his fictional Hollywood counterpart, ‘Mechanized Death never takes a holiday’.

In the staged inserts between real accident scenes in *The Third Killer* (1966), Death is even personified as a sinister travelling salesman who calls himself ‘Rellik’ (the subtle clue to his true identity comes when one reads his business card backwards), and likes to hang out in diners encouraging tired businessmen to drive another 200 miles without sleep. *Wheels of Tragedy* (1963) also used actors, in this instance to portray accident victims in the last moments of their lives, although genuine crash scene footage was also utilised (Smith 226).<sup>8</sup> *Highways of Agony* (1969) marked a return to the signature highway safety foundation style: a series of gory accident scenes preceded by a stilted introduction from a solemn highway patrol officer.<sup>9</sup> The film however ends with a striking scene in which the camera slowly pans over a lengthy line of Mansfield citizens laid out end-to-end on the asphalt, bluntly but effectively evoking the human cost of careless driving. *Options to Live* (1979) was essentially a ‘greatest hits’ compilation intended to restate the organisation’s core message for a new generation of young drivers.<sup>10</sup> Yet again, hard-to-stomach accident footage was interspersed with a hectoring voiceover.

The primary aim of the films made by the Highway Safety Foundation was, of course, educational, and they were a regular feature of the high-school curriculum for many decades. However, they also showed violent scenes of a kind that would be unthinkable in mainstream media and popular

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<sup>7</sup> *Mechanised Death*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y93URRKGtGto> Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017.

<sup>8</sup> *Wheels of Tragedy* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ijVHYigvM8> Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017.

<sup>9</sup> *Highways of Agony* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksCaZT8YgRg> (last accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017).

<sup>10</sup> *Options to Live* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05vXxzsZSLY> Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> April 2017.

entertainment for many years and therefore had a shock value that attracted some viewers for decidedly non-educational reasons. Brottman notes that titles such as *Signal 30* experienced considerable popularity on the 'home video mail order market', and characterises this phenomenon as 'an interesting symptom of our obsession with traumatic encounter and violent death [...]'(21). The Highway Safety film were then for some, a jolting 'real life' slice of horror entertainment and socially acceptable means of viewing material that would otherwise have been inaccessible to the average citizen. Indeed, in recognition of the fact that they brought previously taboo authentic '[d]eath scenes into the American classroom', the editors of the seminal history of death on film, *Killing for Culture* (2016) discuss them within the context of other notorious (and much-circulated amongst gorehounds) instances of 'Death in the Media' (370-373).<sup>11</sup>

With their focus on the bloody and traumatic aftermath of the moment of impact, their continual emphasis on driver culpability, and their judgemental tone, Highway Safety films are, by their very nature, repetitive. Although *Carnival of Souls*, like subsequent 'death on the highway' horror films discussed obviously did not have an explicitly didactic purpose, it does have this sense of eternal return to the scene of the crash. Like *Carnival of Souls*, the post-2000 films *Sole Survivors* (2001), *Dead End* (2003), *Reeker* (2005), *Wind Chill* (2007), and *Southbound* (2015) all begin with what seems like a lucky 'near miss'. In the aftermath, the protagonists of *Dead End*, *Reeker*, *Wind Chill* and *Southbound* all mysteriously find themselves unable to leave the highway on which the incident happened. As in Harvey's film, the true significance of the original trauma is deferred until the final moments, which always feature ambulance crews and the police grimly viewing the scene of the horrific accident with which the film began.

In between the initial supposed 'near miss' and the climatic, 'Surprise - you've been dead all along!' revelation, life for these protagonists invariably involves a succession of uncanny episodes which create the increasingly urgent sense that something has gone very wrong indeed with 'reality'. Again, this is a trope drawn from *Carnival of Souls*. Because we know practically nothing about Mary Henry's life before the accident, it is difficult to tell whether her obvious emotional detachment is a new development, but Harvey does emphasise the sense that the crash has knocked everything subtly (and, later on, not so subtly) off-kilter. Mary leaves town to head for a new job in another state without even bothering to say goodbye to her parents. As she leaves, she pauses for a moment on the bridge, and looks down for a moment, as though unsuccessfully trying to remember, before continuing on. The next shot is a characteristically ominous one shot from the perspective of the car windshield, as though Mary were travelling down a tunnel – in fact, this technique is used for much of her journey. As is the case during the long highway scenes in which Marion Crane travels to her fatal date with destiny in *Psycho*, we join our doomed heroine in the driving seat.

Shortly after Mary passes a 'Welcome to Utah – Please Drive Carefully' sign a funereal looking man in black appears reflected in the driver's window, and then again on the road. When Mary, in panic, runs off the highway, we see a shot of the stalled car surrounded by darkness, the headlamps the only

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<sup>11</sup> In her chapter on the 'pre-history' of 'Found Footage' in *Found Footage Horror Films* (2014), Alexandra Heller-Nicholas notes of the Highway Safety films that 'their relationship to horror is unmistakable' (42).



light in the frame (an image that recurs in *Dead End*). The ghoul is again spotted in the boarding house where she stays. She also finds herself increasingly fascinated by a run-down old pavilion on the beach which holds mysterious significance. Upon being driven there by her new boss, an elderly minister, she observes of the barriers that surround the building, 'It would be easy to step around it' – another reminder that she too has 'stepped around' a barrier of a very different sort already.

Mary's reluctance (or inability) to 'fit in' confuses and angers those around her. To her, the church in which she is the new organist is 'just another place of business', whilst the smug advances of her fellow lodger, John Linden, are received with a combination of fear and indifference. One of the film's most memorable moments occurs when Mary goes shopping, and finds herself locked in the changing room (the onset of uncanny moments like these is here, as throughout the film, foreshadowed by a subtle visual 'rippling' effect that evokes the current of the river seen at the beginning and end of the film). Mary exits to discover that no one else can see her – it is as if she doesn't exist (even the sound is muted, save for the title organ music). Though the patronising psychiatrist from whom she seeks guidance assures her that, 'Our imaginations can play tricks on us', he believes that the ghostly figure she keeps seeing may be some kind of 'guilt feeling' manifesting itself. Soon, Mary's 'coldness' has alienated her aggressive suitor, who is angry that she has rebuffed his violent advances: her 'lack of soul' and unintended departure from the hymn book gets her fired from the church and she experiences a bout of ghoul-inspired hysteria at the boarding house. Though Mary packs her bags and tries to leave, she again experiences 'car trouble', and in a scene which plays out the film's core idea of being trapped between two worlds in a memorably meta fashion, her vehicle becomes stuck on the mechanic's pneumatic ramp. She then experiences another terrifying episode of invisibility.

In the final moments of the film, Mary is drawn back to the old pavilion, and to her inevitable date with death. Harvey's eerily staged climax, in which a soberly clad mob of proto-zombies chase her onto the beach, still effectively evokes genuine unease, and, as many critics have pointed out, anticipates the visual imagery of George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) by several years. The next day, Mary's psychiatrist and former boss gaze somberly at her abbreviated footsteps in the sand – it is as if she has suddenly been spirited away. Events come full circle when the action then returns to the crash scene with which the film began – and we see that Mary is still in the passenger seat, as dead as everyone else in the car.

As has been pointed out elsewhere, *Carnival of Souls*, like any resonant creative endeavour, can be read in any number of ways – in this instance, as a narrative about the paranoid fantasies of a repressed young woman unable to fit into the world around her; as a representation of hell as a kind of bespoke ordeal tailored for each individual sinner; or as a subtle indictment of the conformity and conservatism of the Eisenhower era.<sup>12</sup> What interests me here, however, is the obvious way in which Mary's tragic fate resonates with powerful anxieties related to the very-mounting road accident death toll. Mary's death on the road may be one amongst the 38,000 (real-life) others which took place in

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<sup>12</sup> See the excellent piece on *Carnival of Souls* by blogger/film critic 'Arbogast on Film' for more on these alternate interpretative avenues: 'Lost Souls in the Sunset': <http://arbogastonfilm.blogspot.ie/2009/01/lost-souls-in-sunset.html> Accessed 27 April 2017.

1962, but the film leaves us in no doubt as to the horror of an individual life suddenly, shockingly extinguished before it has reached its true potential.<sup>13</sup>

An entire generation would pass before the next significant entries in the ‘You died in the car crash’ cycle emerged (Highway Horror in the 1970s and 80s was dominated by serial killer movies and ‘Highway Nemesis’ narratives instead), but the core premise in these much more recent films remained very much the same. In *Sole Survivors* (2001), college student Cassie (Melissa Sagemiller), like Mary, experiences a prolonged death-dream in the aftermath of a car accident (her crash also submerges the car in water), and is also, again like Mary, plagued by hallucinations in which she is pursued by spectral figures. It eventually transpires that although she and another passenger survived, the ghosts of those who perished have been trying to prevent her from returning to the world of the living.

The horror comedy *Dead End* (an overlooked gem of a film) takes the idea of the afterlife as a ‘highway to nowhere’ and makes it literal, in that for almost the entire running time of the film, our protagonists, the bickering Harrington family, are trapped on a seemingly endless night-time road trip punctuated by episodes of an increasingly horrific (and absurd) nature. The enforced intimacy imposed by the confines of the car is frequently a source of unease in the Highway Horror: *Dead End* takes this tendency to the fullest as the journey increasingly becomes an forum for the airing of long-suppressed resentments and dark family secrets. In addition, as in *The Third Killer*, death is personified as an active force in the world. The same is true in *Reeker*. The protagonists here are college students on their way to a rave when they have their ‘near miss’: yet again, the rest of the film takes place in a purgatorial afterlife. The terrible stench that envelopes the characters as they are picked off one-by-one marks their dying moment in the real world. Another ghostly force which preys upon highway travellers trapped between life and death manifests itself in *Wind Chill* (suggestive tag line: ‘A Road Many Have Travelled and Few Have Escaped’), an atmospheric and chilly two-hander. Early on, a pair of college students named in the credits as the ‘Guy’ (Ashton Holmes) and the ‘Girl’ (Emily Blunt) become stranded on their way home for Christmas. In an early scene that hearkens back to Mary’s plight in *Carnival of Souls*, just before their accident, the Girl briefly finds herself trapped in the ladies room, crying, ‘How can you not hear me?’ as fellow travellers dine uncomprehendingly just outside the door. The difference here is that the Girl, unlike Mary, is still alive (and also she survives the film, unlike her needy travelling companion). Nevertheless, the moment alerts us to the fact that this is yet another Harvey-influenced variation upon the standard highway-set ‘spectral incognizance’ plot. More recently, the atmospheric and effectively gruesome anthology film *Southbound* features five stories concerning seemingly unconnected travellers who find themselves unable to leave the same never-ending stretch of desert highway due to all manner of horrific and uncanny events. Yet again, the American highway is depicted as a purgatorial space that is literally stalked by death (this time in the form of eerily floating skeletal wraiths).

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<sup>13</sup>These statistics have been taken from:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_motor\\_vehicle\\_deaths\\_in\\_U.S.\\_by\\_year](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_motor_vehicle_deaths_in_U.S._by_year) Accessed 27th April 2017.

Ultimately, what *Carnival of Souls*, the Highway Safety films of the 1960s and 70s, and the more recent horror films mentioned here all suggest is that the ability to freely travel across the continent created by both the Interstate Highways System and the American culture of mass automobility has brought with it chaos, destruction, and death. In their own genre-specific ways, they highlight the monumental overall mortality rate and the individual suffering and loss associated with accidental death on the roads, thereby making graphically 'visible' a deeply troubling yet inconvenient truth that only became more and more significant in the decades following the Second World War. After all, to do so would undermine the culture of car dependence so often romanticised as a means of perpetuating values and freedoms said to lie at the very heart of the American sense of self. As is so often the case in the Highway Horror narratives more generally then, in these films, the sophisticated new road system built for ordinary citizens by the representatives of a supposedly benign federal authority leads not to happiness, prosperity, and contentment, but disorientation, torment, and death. What's more, in the films just cited in particular, the unspoken societal taboo against dwelling on the sights, sounds, and consequences of the fatal car crash is vividly and gruesomely violated in a manner that underlines the often horrific price of mass automobility.

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