

The long and grinding road



Sam Riley, Kristen Stewart and Garrett Hedlund in the Walter Salles-directed adaptation

As the first cinema adaptation of *On the Road* is released, Rob Garratt looks at the other chequered attempts to bring Jack Kerouac's classic beat tome to the screen

There's a good reason it's taken 55 years for Jack Kerouac's generation-defining escapist travelogue *On the Road* to be adapted for the screen.

Well, there are two reasons: the first is Marlon Brando. In 1957, the year of the book's release, Kerouac wrote to Brando asking him to play the lead role of Dean Moriarty in a cinema adaptation, with the author himself to play his far-from-fictional alter-ego Sal Paradise. 'What we should do is talk about this because I prophesy that it's going to be the beginning of something real great,' Kerouac wrote to Brando in the letter (which went unpublished until 2005, when many of Brando's possessions were auctioned off). 'I'm bored nowadays and I'm looking for something to do in the void – writing novels is getting too easy.' Brando never replied.

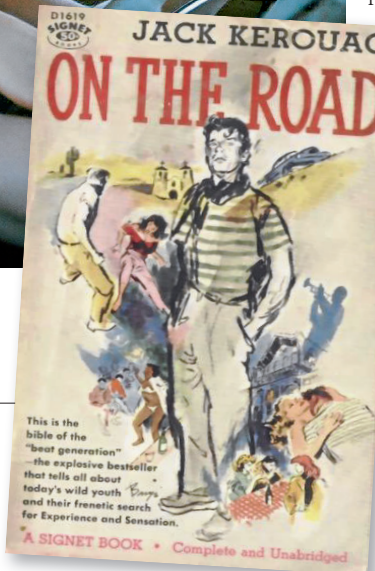
The other, far larger reason there's never been a cinema adaptation of *On the Road* since then, or since the author's death in 1969, is simple: the novel is virtually un-filmable. Kerouac, in his letter to Brando, envisioned the movie as 'one vast trip' filmed 'with the camera on the front seat... as Sal and Dean yak',

something no intelligent studio would ever agree to. But that's more or less the content of the novel.

Written in a frenzied three-week splurge in April 1951, *On the Road* is said to be an entirely autobiographical depiction of the marathon zig-zagging road trips Kerouac took between 1947 and 1950, many of them alongside, or in search of, friend Neal Cassidy ('Dean Moriarty' in the book). Along the way Sal encounters the fellow writers who, along with Kerouac, would come to define the 'beat

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generation', notably Allen Ginsberg ('Carlo Marx') and William Burroughs ('Old Bull Lee'). Between hitchhiking and cruising highways they gather, party, prophesize and philander. Drink, drive, dance and devour – and talk. A lot. While the cities, jobs and women change from page to page, nothing resembling a conventional plot ever develops; it may be a road



book but it's not so much where they are, but what they're saying. Hardly the building blocks of cinematic success, as so many filmmakers have discovered – one especially.

As the director of all-time classics *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*,

Later both Brad Pitt and Colin Farrell were both lined up for the role of Dean Moriarty, while directors Joel Schumacher (*The Lost Boys*) and Gus Van Sant (*Good Will Hunting*) have been linked with the project.

Taking the back seat of executive producer, the man Coppola finally called on is Brazilian director Walter Salles, after seeing his tasteful adaptation of another icon's road trip memoir; Che Guevara in *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004). That movie was a triumph of tone, careful not to get bogged down in the revolutionary Argentine's myth, it showed the young Che bathed in a coming-of-age adventure, while the cinematography perfectly captured both the diversity and dislocation of life on the road.

But *On the Road* is a very different beast to tame. Che's trip was about where he went and what he learned, his actions, not his words. There's nothing noble in Kerouac's actions, he is simply on a quest for 'kicks', and the only real message to shine through the novel is the power of the written word. Kerouac's writing sparks with life, wit, honesty, dirt and humility. 'The only people for me are the mad ones,' rages Kerouac in *On the Road*'s oft-quoted opening page. '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.'

The relentless energy of the prose reads like one long conversation, a manic monologue from a weary traveller sitting by the fire. Everything that makes Kerouac's novel so unique, inspiring, influential and infuriating – its utter immediacy, embarrassing confessionality, and grand non-conformity – is precisely why so many filmmakers have steered clear of this project for so long. And however many voiceovers Salles uses to quote the source material, when it's transferred to screen we can only be left with a few of the twists and turns Kerouac encountered. Unless, that is, he somehow surprises us all and manages the unmanageable... *On the Road is in UAE cinemas from Thursday December 20. Read our review on the opposite page.*

▶ **NEXT WEEK:** *Cirque du Soleil: Worlds Away* director Andrew Adamson shares his fantastical vision