

Carla Milani Damião*

***Rolling Thunder Revue:
In Search of Authenticity*****

For Neil and our 25 years on the road

Abstract

This article deals with the theme of a road tour in the context of American counterculture and the environment of the music created by Bob Dylan, sometimes characterized as politicized folk music, sometimes as rock & roll. The primary reference is the film *Rolling Thunder Revue* (2019), directed by Martin Scorsese, resulting from a tour in the 1970s. The reference to the novel *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac is notable, and the presence of poet Allen Ginsberg in the troupe reinforces the context of a generation and an era. The article aims to reflect on the relationship between the original tour, the editing of the new film by Scorsese, and the construction of heroism that oscillates between truth and falsehood. In this construction, we consider, on the one hand, the playful and provocative game between fiction, reality, and authenticity; on the other, the political emphasis that raises ethnic and racial issues as the main components of critical and cultural reminiscence in the tour footage as recomposed in the film.

Keywords

Travel, Authenticity, Irony, Counterculture, Bob Dylan

* Federal University of Goiás (UFG), Brazil
Email: cmdw16@gmail.com

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Our songs are alive in the land of the living. But songs are unlike literature. They're meant to be sung, not read. The words in Shakespeare's plays were meant to be acted on the stage. Just as lyrics in songs are meant to be sung, not read on a page. And I hope some of you get the chance to listen to these lyrics the way they were intended to be heard: in concert or on record or however people are listening to songs these days. I return once again to Homer, who says, "Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story" (Dylan 2017).

The pseudo-documentary *Rolling Thunder Revue*, directed by Scorsese, about the troupe led by Bob Dylan in the 1970s, can be seen as a minor afterthought of a more considerable discussion concerning fiction and reality in different literary or cinematic genres. This article explores the type of narrative presented in the film and the construction of a unique singer—sometimes considered a hero, sometimes a genius—deployed in his role of revealing the possibility of critically expressing his break with the pasteurized dream of being the “voice of the people” in a soothing song of collective suffering and mass industry, while still hanging on to the dream of a nation.

The epigraph to this article is a quote from Bob Dylan's acceptance speech to the Swedish Academy after being awarded the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature,¹ an award that raised extensive discussions and reflections concerning the border between literature and music, as well as the unusual attitude of the awardee. Dylan observes the meeting between poetry and music in the quotation by evoking the ancient poet Homer and the muses that guided his singing. The Stockholm committee considered the poetry in Dylan's compositions and the transformation of traditional American music in providing him with the coveted award.

Guided by this epigraph and by the question of authenticity, we propose to reflect on how, in the negative image of a nation, these poet-musicians or dancer-poets who sing, like Ginsberg—troubadours for some—managed to tell some collective truths over past decades that still reverberate in the present. In the understanding we seek to address, authenticity can help us consider the heroic aspect of Dylan's performance in the *Rolling Thunder Revue* tour.

On the Road is a metaphor that Dylan, in both a serious and laconic way, explains in *Rolling Thunder Revue* as the “road of life.” An ontological sense that mixes history and individual, professional and social existence. We are

¹ Although Dylan was not present to receive the award, (Patty Smith doing so), these words are from an address recorded in June 2017. For details of the award's polemic, see the following document: “The Nobel Prize vs. Bob Dylan: Bob Dylan's controversial behaviour and its potential impact on the Nobel Prize”, 2018. 31–2018.

familiar with the theme in some films, designated as a film genre, *Road-movies* such as the iconic *Easy Rider*, directed by Denis Hopper in 1969; and the adaptation of Kerouac's novel, *On the road*, by the Brazilian filmmaker Walter Salles, from 2011, among so many others. There are a few examples, films drawn from a genre that infinitely refers to travels, journeys, and above all, to the idea of *Bildung* and self-knowledge through otherness that constitutes the game between losing and finding oneself; between the familiar (*Heimlich*) and the unfamiliar or strange (*Unheimlich*).

In a broad sense, the *Odyssey* can be taken as a Western culture model of a collective adventure cohesively constituted in the figure of the hero, passing through the idea of a formative novel, among the pillars of a narrative genre that has gained prominence and new forms in cinema, for example, in Goethe's *The Years of Learning of Wilhelm Meister*, to the beatnik novel *On the Road* by Kerouac, as mentioned earlier.

In the documentary *Rolling Thunder Revue*, Dylan distinguishes between his tour—at once burlesque and politicized—and traditional tours. He focuses on authenticity by discarding the quest for self-knowledge when he says, "Life is not about finding oneself, life is about creating oneself and creating things" (*R.T.R.* 2:15:45). Therefore, *On the Road* presupposes a kind of life that has music and performance as the main impulse, and for which "creativity" and/or "genius" are required. These concepts, which also echo a long tradition in the philosophy and history of aesthetics, will be used in a secondary sense, as we believe that the concept of authenticity brings together creative ambitions and the use of criticism that Dylan proposes. As documented in many bolder interviews, Dylan is irked when asked about the "message" in his lyrics or when people, conditioned by traditional folk music, demand an "explicit protest" in his songs. We are aware of the controversy and confrontations, particularly as depicted in *No Direction Home*,² also directed by Martin Scorsese. Dylan's attitude, however, was not consistent with the assimilation to "folk music" owing to his use of electric instruments. On the other hand, he was critical of the industrialization of popular and/or folk music as he said in an interview: no matter the kind of music, there is "a constitutional replay of mass production" ("San Francisco Conference Press," 1965, 30:57).

² A particular experience on the UK tour, viz Scorsese's "No Direction Home". This film shows the protest from Dylan's fans, who wanted him to play acoustic music, rejecting his shift to electric instruments and to rock-n-roll. Dylan is booed as "Judas" in a concert on 17/5/1966 at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester.

Putting aside the idea of “self-seeking” or moral education (*Bildung*) of those who launch themselves on the “road of life,” we will focus on the idea of “authenticity,” a concept of that time, discussed by Lionel Trilling, an intellectual of the period, who was also Kerouac and Ginsberg’s guide. This concept can overturn the structures of the search for crystalline truths because irony—this critical tool of romantic negativity and ancient rhetoric—is one of its engines. By this means, we believe it is possible to review heroism in a new interpretive key. It is not the hero of ancient times nor the weakened modern hero in a context in which equality undoes the prominent place of the one who stood out when representing a social whole.

We must consider other possible aspects that are affirmative in relation to the truth that is sought in the use of the road metaphor, of the “no-looking-back” and a possible return that attests to a non-place: when “the color is black and the number is none” (Dylan 1962). Before we point out a redemptive aspect of the tour and the two heroic figures in the film, namely, the poet Allen Ginsberg and the composer-troubadour Bob Dylan, we will address the polemic surrounding the film edition.

The real and the fictional in *Rolling Thunder Revue*

This article is not intended to analyze the documentary but only to indicate passages and connections with other documents to point out aspects of Scorsese’s edition of real and fictional scenes from different times. It is important to note that Scorsese has previously directed some documentaries with Dylan’s direct or indirect presence: *The Last Waltz*, about the band that accompanied Dylan, in 1978; *No Direction Home*, 2005; and *Rolling Thunder Revue* in 2019—the latter produced by Netflix—containing recent retrospective interviews using fictional and non-fictional material from the 1975 tour of the same name. Part of the material pertains to the film *Renaldo and Clara*, released in early 1978 and spanning four hours. This film was a notorious failure with critics and audiences alike, winning the *Stinker Award for Worst Picture* of 1978. Dylan starred in the character role of Renaldo, with Joan Baez playing Clara. Dylan and Sam Shepard wrote the screenplay; the final format consisted of interviews, filming of concerts, and dramatized dialogue, directed by Dylan.

The pseudo-documentary *Rolling Thunder Revue* is a collection of documents by well-known artists, including Joan Baez, Sam Shepard, Ronee Blakley, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, Roger McGuinn, Ronnie Hawkins, Larry Sloman, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, Arlo Guthrie, Joni Mitchell, Mick Ronson,

Arlen Roth, Harry Dean Stanton, accompanying violinist Dylan, Scarlet Rivera, and poet Allen Ginsberg. An artifice created in the documentary belies truth by including a central character, the Dutch filmmaker Stefan van Dorp, who would be responsible for the material filmed on tour, but who was a fictional character, played by actor Martin von Haselberg. In addition to this fictional director and cameraman—who was depicted as having invested his savings in order to follow Dylan’s troupe—other pseudo-documental or fictional elements show; for example, the actress Sharon Stone had “witnessed” her inclusion on tour as a teenager pushed by her mother to meet her idol, Dylan, and an unfolding story of a song supposedly dedicated to her (“Just like a woman”).

None of this ever happened. Similarly fictitious was the appearance of Jack Tanner, an onscreen politician from “Tanner 88”, a TV political miniseries written by Gary Trudeau and directed by Robert Altman, with Michael Murphy reprising his role in this “mockumentary.”³ Only those familiar with the series could have seen through this. The genre itself and the inclusion of this fictional character in the film is possibly the revealing anecdote of Scorsese’s own “documentary.” But, as said, this only applies to audiences familiar with the miniseries. In Larry Fitzmaurice’s (2019, 1) comment, we see the game as played with the viewers: *Rolling Thunder Revue* “blends truth and falsehood seamlessly, to the point where many people watching, I’d wager, won’t be able to tell the difference between what’s real and what’s staged.”

Other Dylan documentaries should be mentioned, such as the first one, *Don’t Look Back* (1967), directed by DA Pennebaker, which characterizes Dylan as a representative of the rebirth of folk and protest music, casting a defining image for his future projection and its relationship with the press, as well as *The Other Side of the Mirror* (2007), directed by Murray Lerner, which combines performances by Dylan from 1963 to 1965, in addition to the aforementioned *No Direction Home* (2005) directed by Scorsese.

Rolling Thunder Revue, therefore, applies some false testimony, including Dylan’s testimony, to unfold an objective fact: a tour performed by Dylan with no explicit commercial goal. The reconstruction of this fact uses the narrative of Dylan and artists who participated in the tour and other fake

³ “Mockumentary”, a word combining “mock” and “documentary” is a pseudo-documentary that makes parodies and/or satires of famous events. These are films that try to make us believe that what is depicted really happened; it is presented as a documentary, although it is mainly untruthful. Mockumentary filmmakers use parody, satire and humour to tell “stories”.

characters, the main one being the Dutch “filmmaker” van Dorp, a character who seems to spring from narratives in well-known Scorsese films, such as *Goodfellas* from 1990. Although van Dorp does not belong to the gangster world, he readily assumes the character of one always looking for disputes. He was supposedly a director of Dutch erotic-psychedelic cinema whose success had come about through his video of the Dutch band *Shocking Blue*, performing their hit, “Venus,” in 1969.

The combination of fact and fiction demands the kind of viewer who can, from time to time, be duped into unquestioning reception, in contrast to the critical viewer who recognizes the cited references—be it the material that precedes the composition of the film, such as the four-hour feature *Renaldo and Clara*, or the surreal, non-explicit insertions of the intrigues and disputes between Dylan and van Dorp. Therefore, belief, criticism, and imagination are crucial to the reception of films, supposedly of the documentary genre, produced and released on this contemporary exhibition platform, which depends on overcoming the restrictions of a conventional movie release in movie theaters with a fixed time for its exhibition. It is a film that recomposes a musical era full of political meaning, protest, and the demand for creativity that we prefer to treat here as authenticity.

The Assumption of Authenticity and its Recognition

Between 1969 and 1970, Lionel Trilling presented a series of lectures at Harvard University, which will be the publication of a book entitled *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Trilling was a distinguished professor of English language and literature. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were among his students and directly or indirectly part of the film. Trilling mixed philosophy and literature in his classes to explore the relationship between ethics and knowledge or (re)cognition of oneself. Going back to the Enlightenment period and Shakespeare’s pre-modern work, the author came across the term sincerity, understanding it as a moral ideal. There is then a specific reconfiguration of sincerity as authenticity to change the definition of sincerity from the requirement of “transparency” to “remaining true to oneself.” The presentation of his lectures and subsequently of their transcription is essayistic, punctuated by countless literary references, from Shakespeare to lesser-known authors. The book’s chapter titles guide the transformation of sincerity into authenticity: 1. Sincerity: its Origin and Rise; 2. The Honest Soul and the Disintegrated Consciousness; 3. The Sentiment of Being and the Sentiments of Art; 4. The Heroic, the Beautiful, the Authentic; 5. Society and Authenticity; 6. The Authentic Unconscious.

Considering that the word sincerity and the concern to be sincere did not always exist in all cultures, Trilling remembers that the Latin word *sincerus*, the meaning of which is related to the pure wax that would show its transparency, was only adopted into the English language at the end of the 16th century, after its use in French (dating back to the 13th century), initially pertaining not to people, but objects and materials such as "sincere wine." We assume that the author intends to show how sincerity has become a fundamental characteristic of Western people over centuries, marked by the need to assert themselves as loyal and worthy. On the other hand, the decline or anachronism of the term is also remarkable, making it practically impossible not to provoke an ironic reaction to the manifestation of sincerity in contemporaneity. The weakening is explicit in language use and literature.

From the origin to the decline of sincerity, the author's thesis is not precisely to discard sincerity but to show that if there was a devaluation of the word, it was because it did not represent someone's truth in itself but served as a means to present someone as sincere. Therefore, about subjectivity, sincerity was not an end in itself but constituted mainly as a means of social recognition. Morality and reputation in the social environment seem, in this sense, to withdraw from the subject the truth about themselves, making them hostage to the staging of the sincere social being. The weight given to the social context in terms of sincerity as an affirmation of subjectivity is contrasted with the use of the word authenticity in the period of publication of Trilling's work, which, when defining authenticity, leads us to perceive a greater degree of demand for truth and commitment to the subject's truth, based on a non-acceptance of the social perspective that would govern sincerity.

The word 'authenticity' comes so readily to the tongue these days and in so many connections that it may very well resist such efforts of definition as I shall later make, but I think for the present I can rely on its suggesting a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity' does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life (Trilling 1972, 11).

Therefore before speaking of authenticity, Trilling claims that sincerity had mastered people's imaginations to impose on them what they should be. Their role in society and beliefs condition an individual's sincerity. It is also related to confession and the desire to be authentic always. Despite recognizing this source, to which we could relate to Rousseau, the author sees the assertion of authenticity in usurping the place of sincerity only in the mid-

19th century when the modern notion of identity is, he says, better defined. Not by chance, in the chapter “The Honest Soul and the Disintegrated Conscience,” Trilling will quote Hegel’s interpretation of Diderot’s posthumously published work entitled *Rameau’s Nephew* (*Le Neveu de Rameau*).

In contrast between the characters of the moralist and the immoralist, the reversal of roles is recognized. The immoralist, the “old” nephew of the great musician Rameau, should be the stepping stone for the moralist’s speech to express the sincerity of his “ought to be.” However, it seems to the reader that the nephew, at various times, proves to be more truthful than the moral philosopher.

The mask theme presented in the philosophy and literature of the period, and also in Dylan’s tour,⁴ proves to be the best reading filter for Diderot’s dialogue, as a representation of the impersonal and non-sincere; a necessarily apparent game, joined to the world of theater, social conventions, props, and power games, evoking the condition of alienation, disintegration or laceration of consciousness. For Hegel, this is positive since the unfolded consciousness becomes more capable of referring to itself than the self-absorbed self. The circus-style of Dylan’s tour seems to carry over in this game of appearances, supported by narratives invented by Scorsese and maintained by Dylan.

In the following chapters, Trilling relates the arts to authenticity, for example, by showing how the spectator perceives their inauthenticity in the face of an authentic work of art. In this direction, the artist becomes the model of authenticity. We can say that, in general, the difference Trilling marks between sincerity and authenticity lies in distinguishing, respectively, the presentation of oneself to others and the expression of the true self in judging the relationship with others. Performance, otherness, and expression closely reflect what, in our view, Dylan characterizes as creativity, a grouping that comes closer to Dylan’s touring experience and his mask play.

Don’t Look Back: Action, History, and Heroism

The “foot on the road,” performance and expression as indications of authenticity are more related to becoming oneself than some isolated psychological essence. Agency, in this sense, precedes narration, and when narration is

⁴ At one point in the film, Dylan says that when someone wears a mask, they tell the truth; when not, it is unlikely. In the film there is use of masks or face paint. There is a reference to the band *Kiss* and their face paintings, but nothing proves that it was actually an inspiration, as the band *Kiss* was not formed until 1973.

summoned as testimony, it eventually distances itself from historical truth. This distancing is one of the film's purposes, with Dylan in a mocking mood from the outset, e.g., claiming that the tour had taken place so long ago that he was not even born. It is, therefore, a game that does not put much to the test but does not discard a truth in which it is possible to find heroic aspects.

In "The Unforgiven" (1992), directed by Clint Eastwood, the figure of the narrator of legends of the old West appears. The W.W. Beauchamp character (Saul Rubinek) initially appears as a biographer in tow of, and in thrall to, bounty hunter English Bob (Richard Harris). The latter is violently demoralized in his attempt to live up to his fearless reputation by the sadistic sheriff, Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman). The writer, fearful and gullible, is a model of bad journalism, hyperbolizing the legend of supposed heroes in the mythical land that configured itself in the narratives of the "West."

It is possible to observe that in *Rolling Thunder Revue*, amongst other footage and films, Scorsese and Dylan, at certain times, create their legend by borrowing Beauchamp's pen. The imposed "director" (van Dorp), who neither directs nor even exists, takes the place of the actual director and becomes the author of his legend. Scorsese, the actual director, becomes editor of the decade-old footage, reassembling it. Deliberate inaccuracies introduce an element of fiction and invented characters, alongside reliable facts and depictions, prominent among these being the stance taken in support of Rubin Carter ("The Hurricane") and native peoples.

The case of the boxer Rubin Carter, known as "The Hurricane," who was unjustly convicted and imprisoned on 17 June 1966, is a fact, not fiction. Dylan read Carter's autobiography, written in the context of a political movement—the African-American Civil Rights Movement—and denounced the racial aspect of his conviction by a jury. Dylan became a spokesperson for a lost cause following a prison visit to the one who "could-a been/the champion of the world." His song and the way he performs it are, at the same time, aggressive and critical. He gives an account of Carter's wrongful arrest in a lyric with eleven stanzas and the refrain: "Here's the story of the Hurricane/The man the authorities came to blame/For somethin' that he never done/Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a been/The champion of the world" (Dylan 1976).

The song "Hurricane" can be understood as a heroic agency supporting racial vulnerability. Indigenous people are present when the film's title hits the screen. The name Chief Rolling Thunder is given as a possibility for the film's title. We become aware of Chief Rolling Thunder during the visit that the tour makes to the Tuscarora Reservation, near Niagara Falls in the state

of New York. There Dylan sings a song very similar in lyrics and tune to Woody Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd," telling the story of Ira Heyes, an Indian who became a United States Marine during World War II and who was one of the soldiers who "planted" the flag on the island of Iwo Jima, Japan. Another protest song from the film, following a dialogue with Joan Baez, is "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" (1963), the story of a black serving-woman allegedly killed by one William Zanziger. It is said that Hattie, 51 years old, and mother of ten, died from other causes, but Dylan himself blames Zanziger for her death. Though found guilty, the accused served only six months in prison. Ethnic, race, and gender issues are themes of long songs and narratives of violence suffered by those in vulnerable conditions.

Conclusion

"Where black is the color, where none is the number" (Dylan 1962), a place devoid of meaning, a stronghold of painful observation, a turning point of a generation in the face of a historic promise that did not come true; on the contrary, it failed, and it cast a scene of deep skepticism. In its historical reconstruction, the film mixes fiction and deception with facts, which in some cases mark a period, such as the commemoration of the bicentennial of the United States that opens the film, together with the image of the Statue of Liberty.

The film, in a way, is a pre-failed epic narrative with two singing poets. Allen Ginsberg writes poems, sings, dances, and "spiritualizes" by opening, mediating, and concluding the film with the assumption of communitarianism. Dylan composes, sings, and plays different instruments; dance is not the central part of his performance. For him, Ginsberg composed one of the maxims of his generation. This phrase works as lyrics because it is in everyone's memory: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked..." (Ginsberg 1956, l.1). A poem dedicated to Carl Salomon who spent periods in psychiatric hospitals. For Chow (2019), "it is an important context (1975-76), as hippie optimism had given way to cynicism in a rapidly deteriorating economy."

Scorsese's hand is certainly in the film's opening scene, George Méliès' 1896 short, *The Vanishing Lady*, when the famous illusionist and character Hugo makes his assistant Jehanne d'Alcy disappear before the eyes of viewers. In this sense, the magic and illusionist tone of the film is triggered in the opening.

Rolling Thunder Revue has a subtitle: "A Bob Dylan Story by Martin Scorsese." Scorsese's task, in addition to contemporary testimonies of his making, was to select and edit the material filmed by various cameramen at the time the tour took place, in the mid-1970s.

A game between fiction and reality gives authenticity to the film in a historical moment of profound disillusion with the political promises that constituted "America." Authenticity is revealed in the meeting between action, art, and politics. The action retains the possibility of the heroic, freeing the form of conventional epic narrative. Lionel Trilling's theory echoes this context; we can see the revision of the meaning of sincerity composed with irony and playfulness. Even the word authenticity does not discard the ethical appeal that shows in its social insertion of the political function based on the recognition of alterity and the recognition of the vulnerability that suppresses blacks, women, indigenous people, and the young.

As one of the testimonies of the tour observes, there remains, amidst skepticism, irony, and incredulity, a desire for the redemption of "America." A wish expressed by Dylan when he said that if the United States does not return to what it was, let the promise of freedom be the dream of yesteryear. This desire for redemption comes up in Ginsberg's quasi-religious words at the end, followed by the equally redeeming: "Knocking on Heaven's Door."

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