

## **“ROUTE 66” – THE POP-CULTURAL TRIP TO THE WEST**

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**Abstract:** This paper will examine the touristic travels along the most famous nonfunctional highway in the United States – the Route 66. This “iconic route” is represented as the “road to the heart of America”, “the American odyssey”, as a place which comprises the “good old American values” and builds its attractiveness as a tourist destination on the narratives about the road formerly developed in literature (the “road genre”), film (the “road movie”), and music. Route 66 meant different things for the travelers in different historical periods: in times of the Great Depression it was the road of hope and better life in the West; in the postwar period, the attractions along the road were the favorite resort of Americans; in the 70’s and 80’s it only represented a demolished artifact of the past; and from the 90’s on, it became the object of nostalgia and economic revival of the small towns surrounding it. Analyzing the content of the Internet forum, blogs and web pages where tourists and fans of the Road 66 meet, we will try to show to which extent, if any, the representations of this road, perpetuated in the popular culture, correspond to the experiences of the tourist voyages, and their motivation to take this road.

**Keywords:** Route 66, pop-cultural tourism, self-drive tourism, mythology of the road, nostalgia

### **Introduction**

Taking the Route 66 for vacation is not a new thing. Route 66, with its “attractions along the road” and California as a tourist heaven of the West (and the last federal state it goes through), was the choice of local American tourists even in the postwar period – a little before being gradually replaced by the new system of the interstate highways. What represents a novelty nowadays is that foreign tourists also come to “visit” it – just to drive down the road, or what is left of it, that is.

Route 66 tourism is interesting as a phenomenon in cultural studies, as well as tourism studies, for several reasons: it shows the neglected causal link between the popular culture and tourism, it provides insight into processes which lead to the creation of tourist destinations and the significance that not just the industry

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of cultural heritage and tourism industry have, but also the importance of tourists exchanging previous travel experiences via Internet technology.

Route 66 is the subject of numerous books<sup>2</sup>, songs, movies, TV shows and commercials. Popular culture made the highway immortal – especially the novel *The Grapes of Wrath* from 1939, by the American Nobel prize winner John Steinbeck (a book about moving to West of a family from Oklahoma in times of the Great Depression), John Ford's movie based on the same novel, the song *Get your kicks on Route 66* (composed in 1946 by Bobby Troup and first performed by the Nat King Cole Trio<sup>3</sup>) – the track which the geographer Arthur Krim (Krim, 1988) named the musical map of the postwar migration towards California, and the TV show *Route 66*, which was broadcasted from 1960 to 1964. We can see its black and white logo worldwide, on various objects and in the most diverse contexts<sup>4</sup>. In the popular imagination Route 66 is much more than a road. It represents the icon of pop culture, certain product of the American history of memory and heritage, and a means to invoke “the visions of freedom, the adventures of the open road and the times when life was simpler” (Carden, 2005, p. 130). Different nicknames also speak in favor of the popularity of this highway – Route 66 is “The Mother Road”, “The Main Street of America”, “Will Roger's Highway”, and “The Symbolic River of America”.<sup>5</sup> It is the only highway in the world that has associations and fan clubs (<http://www.historic66.com/internet/assoc/>), specialized magazines and newspapers, as well as its own museums (<http://www.route66.org/index2.html>; <http://www.theroadwanderer.net/66Oklahoma/elkcity.htm>). Hundred thousands of domestic and foreign tourists come to visit throughout the year, attracted by the descriptions on the tourist web pages which claim that the Route 66 is “a ride through the American history”, “a journey to the heart of America” and “nostalgic and puzzling part of the American folklore” (<http://www.worldreviewer.com/travel-guides/road-trip/route-66-chicago-to-california/11307/>). Historian Peter Dedek (Dedek, 2007) believes that Route 66 holds a unique place in American popular culture, not just because of the distinctive and widespread identity, but also because it is connected to the

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<sup>2</sup> The search engine on the largest Internet bookstore Amazon.com enlists over 400 publications dedicated to this highway.

<sup>3</sup> The song was covered countless times, and many bands and artists such as The Rolling Stones, The Replacements, The Cramps, Yo La Tengo, Depeche Mode and many others included it on their albums.

<sup>4</sup> For example, logo of the road is on the vintage posters in bookshops, on the T-shirts sold on the market stalls, on the boxes of mints sold at the gift shops next to the Vienna museum quarter, on the web site advertising the self-study program - “66 things to help you study”, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Route 66 is neither the longest nor the first highway going through the USA. The first highway that went through the United States, from New York to San Francisco is the “Lincoln Highway”.

popular ideas about Indians and cowboys of the southwest, “Okies”<sup>6</sup> of the Great Depression, and before all, with the idea of the open road. In this respect, Dedek states that Route 66 has two histories: material – as the main American transport corridor from 1926 to 1970 and symbolical – as one of the pillars of the American twenty centuries long automobile culture and tourism (Dedek, 2007, p. 2). In this paper, we will put emphasis exactly on this symbolical history of the road which contributed to Route 66 becoming a very popular tourist destination. Route 66 became a symbol of the life on the road (Eyerman & Löfgren, 1995, p. 59), materialization of the idea that “nothing is more ‘American’ than being on the road” (Patton, 1986 as cited in Ireland, 2003, p. 475). The construction of “the road culture” found its reflection and role model, according to Eyerman and Löfgren, in the touristic transformation of the Route 66 in the last few decades – “old gas stations and motel signs modified from kitsch into antiquities, village shops into museums, and traveling by car became a saga of an almost magical quality (Eyerman & Löfgren, 1995, p. 59).

Despite its status of being a global cultural icon, without which the story about the mythology of the road in popular culture would be almost unimaginable, Route 66 was not often the topic of academic research and it was usually discussed from the perspective of those subdisciplines which have a prefix “cultural” in their name (cultural history, cultural geography).<sup>7</sup> Only in the last few years did the touristic aspect of Route 66 become the subject of academic interest, and these papers were based on examining the historical Route 66 in the context of cultural heritage, i.e. cultural tourism, while the motivation of tourist journeys was mostly interpreted within the so called theory of nostalgia (Kibby, 2000; Caton & Santos, 2007). Tourism based on cultural heritage (and vice versa) does represent one of the oldest, most important and most widespread types of tourism (Timothy & Boyd, 2006, p. 1). Heritage, in regard to whether it was tangible or intangible, was defined in various ways (Yahaya, 2006), but most authors agree that the core of what is called heritage is “the present usage of the past”, with the emphasis on the need of – its preservation and protection. Tourism of cultural heritage implies the different ways of traveling (from visits to the historical/archeological localities to taking part in the folklorized festivals)

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<sup>6</sup> The workers who moved out of Oklahoma during the period of Great Depression; someone who is born in Oklahoma.

<sup>7</sup> Historian Peter B. Dedek defended the first PhD about this road named “Journeys on the Mother Road: Interpreting the Cultural Significance of U.S. Route 66”, also master thesis’ in geography were wrote on this matter – R. Puzo, *Route 66: A Ghost Road Geography*, Master’s Thesis, California State University, Fullerton, USA, 1988., A. Brady, *Route 66 Redux: National Recognition for America’s Mother Road*, Master Thesis, California State University, Fullerton, USA, 1998.; a geographer Arthur Krim published the book *Route 66: Iconography of the American Highway*, Santa Fe, NM: Center for American Places, 2005.

where key value is found in the old, traditional and authentic. To what extent, if any, the widespread views, when tourism of cultural heritage is concerned – tourism of cultural heritage represents the revivification of the past for touristic purposes, a sort of nostalgia for the traditional and lost social values or one of the ways to “consolidate” patriotic feelings, correspond to the interpretations and attitudes of the tourists themselves, who traveled or intended to travel across the historical Route 66, will be one of the questions that this paper will try to answer.

This essay, among other, aims to point out to the crossings of the popular culture and tourism, as well as the ways in which pop-cultural tourism via Internet and other media enables and influences the creation of virtual communities consisting of the fans of this road. The phenomenon of cultural tourism, even though it represents the cultural niche in rise, hasn't received enough attention in literature so far, and texts about tourist trips influenced by popular culture can be found only in two academic journals – in *Annals of Tourism Research* and in *Tourism Management* (see Buchmann et al., 2009; Riley et al., 1998; Fawcett & Cormack, 2001; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Squire, 1994; Connell, 2005; Connell & Meyer, 2009).

We decided to use a compound “pop-cultural tourism” further on. Literature in the tourism studies so far didn't use this term, and trips connected with popular culture were labeled either as film tourism or a literary tourism. The entry pop-cultural tourism will be treated as the umbrella term to include tourist trips connected to film, literature and music, and which, in case of the Route 66, comprises all the above mentioned and represents a sort of cultural tourism, that is, it builds its offer on the historical, as well as on the popular cultural heritage. In other terms, Route 66 is the perfect example how the cultural mythology interwoven around one dysfunctional road becomes a tourist destination (see Kibby, 2000; Caton & Santos, 2007).

Route 66 became the cultural icon thanks to the central place that the cars and highways hold in the American popular culture. In the first part of this paper we will show the significance and cultural starting point of the “road genre” as a typical American road narrative. Later on, after describing the short history of this highway, we will discuss the “Route 66 self-drive tour”, offered by the tourist agencies in the USA and in the world, and then, we will go on to analyze the content of the Internet forums, blogs and web sites where tourists and fans of Route 66 gather. The paper will attempt to show to what extent, if any, the ideas about this road perpetuated in popular culture correspond to the experiences of tourists and their motivation to take it. The goal of this essay is to point out that

the narratives about the road, formerly developed in literature, film and music, along with the narratives about the tourist experience on the Route 66 (“road trip stories”) influenced the growth and popularity of the Route 66 tourism.

### **Narratives about the road in the American popular culture**

*“Automobile is in the same time the center of the American spirit, the symbol of the country, the foundation of the national character, and the form that the American soul assumes”*  
(Genis, 1999, 17)

The influence that car and highway have in the American popular culture and folklore is indisputable. America is, after all, the cradle of the car industry (whose basic elements are automobiles, roads, trips and traffic rules and regulations), which has its own mythology and rituals (see Kovačević, 2001, p. 196-211). In his study *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, Roland Primeau (Primeau, 1997) states that Americans treat their roads as a holy space, because highways and cars are for them “much more than a sheer transport, places that encourage movement, speed and loneliness...going on the road represents a chance for a new start, a time during which they come to understand themselves and their country, driving through the open landscapes“ (Primeau, 1997, p. 1). The American love of roads and cars (whether on the line of generalization or not) found its cultural manifestation in the media such as literature, film and music. Numerous authors hold that the narratives about the road comprise a specific “genre inside the genre” the so called “road genre”, which is typically American (Eyerman & Löfgren, 1995; Ireland, 2003; Primeau, 1997; Laderman, 1996). Like all other genres of popular culture, “road genre” is highly formulaic (see Cawelti, 2006) and the audience knows in advance what to expect of the literary or film work – a protagonist who is usually male, goes on the road to look for adventure, run away, find someone or seek new possibilities. According to Primeau, four basic themes of the American highway literature are social protests, quest for national identity, journey for self-discovery and runaway (Primeau, 1997). The topic of social protest is one of the first associations that come to mind when this genre is mentioned, thanks to the famous novel by Jack Kerouac *On the road* from 1957. This novel defined the foundations of the genre, and, as pointed out by Eyermann and Löfgren, created an important precondition for future attraction to the road movie – ambiguity of the road, “road is always open regardless of the route, north-south, east-west, but in the same time filled with risk and hope“ (Eyermann & Löfgren, 1995, p. 58). Primeau notes that, in a way, all trips on the road are a protest. People go on the trip to change their surroundings, to avoid limitations imposed by the customs,

tradition and other circumstances at home, or at least for a short time, to live an alternative way of life. Time spent on the road, according to Primeau, offers a possibility to question the present social order, and examine the values contrary to what is dominant in our culture (Primeau, 1997, p. 33). Narratives about the quest for national identity, mostly build the story around the motive of loss – abandoned cities, highways, regions and lost values, and narrators who try to bring back the old way of life and revive the lost (Primeau, 1997, p. 51). The trip thereby becomes a quest for the soul of nation, a certain “essence” of America, America of the past times. Primeau concludes that “the primary force which motivates the American quest on the road is the lust for the return to the time when the river was deeper, when the local customs and regional culture were alive, a time before landscapes became covered in billboards and interstate network replaced the old highways” (Primeau, 1997, p. 65). The quest for America is also, according to the Ireland’s interpretation of the genre, its basic building block: “the basic element of road genre is the quest for America, the America as promised in the American dream, which is traditionally placed in the West, behind the Border” (Ireland, 2003, p. 482). The third main theme of the road genre, as noted by Primeau, is the journey for self-discovery. According to him, every highway hero in this or that way wants to escape from the daily distractions and drive to the time and place where one can find his inner I (Primeau, 1997, p. 69). Primeau explains the aforementioned by the fact that the road often represents the place free from deadlines, obligations, and membership, so that the journeys, at least for a short time, postpones the positioning of the individual based on the origin, profession or geography (Primeau, 1997, p. 69). The last theme of the genre, referring to the escape, experimentation and parody, represents a contemporary, postmodern shift from the conventions of the genre, and it is a reflection of the changes in taste, demands and values of the audience nowadays. These narratives about the road are highly anxious, solitary, and characterized by the loss of hope, which is present in other themes (Primeau, 1997, p. 69).

Is the road genre typically American genre? If it is, what is it that makes it American, beside the country of production? Don’t the other cultures have their own cinematography or their own version of popular literature about the road, articulating desires, fears and values of the given culture? Moreover, if it is American, what does it change to transpose this genre into different social and cultural contexts? Movie about the road of American, i.e. Hollywood production is undoubtedly very popular among European public. Eyerman and Löfgren believe that the reason of its popularity and its “americanness” lays in the ideas of freedom and mobility, which has been tightly connected to the idea of the American dream in the US. “The road as a way of life is not the American

invention, but the Americanization of this type of narrative is the consequence of the way in which specific concepts concerning freedom and function of the road are constructed in the US – freedom to move up on the social ladder is one of the central and lasting notions that America has of itself, and that Europe has of America. American movies about the road build their foundation on the ways in which freedom and social mobility associated with physical mobility as a theme in the American culture (Eyermann & Löfgren, 1995, p. 55).

Ireland refers to the road genre as the “microcosm of the very America”, and finds the reason of the American fascination with the road in some presumed “restless, wondering spirit and nervous energy of the Americans” (Ireland, 2003, p. 474). Ireland attempts to justify the reasons for that claim with the historical experience of settlement in the USA (overlooking its mythologizing) and examples of exploitation of the symbol of the Wild West in these movies, adopting the controversial Turner’s thesis according to which the “existence of the Border created this, unsettling, nervous energy inherent to the American character”. Ireland uses this to ascribe the popular mythological traits – on one hand, to the proponents, and on the other, to the contemporary consumers of these films. According to this author, the direction from East to West is the fundamental direction of the trip in the genre – travelers are following the traditional route of the pioneers and the Manifest Destiny (Ireland, 2003, p. 475). In the end, the author explains that the reason why the road genre didn’t occur in some other culture is because they lack experience of the Border, that is, the western expansion toward the border (Ireland, 2003, p. 484).

Besides literature and film, the highway as a symbol of mobility and freedom is “celebrated” in numerous songs of the so called traditional music genres like American folk and country. Mentioning the road, speed, gasoline, and waitress from the restaurant by the road in the songs is almost the imperative of the country genre.

Moreover, numerous and diverse folklore items developed in connection with cars – the “key symbols of modern America”, as the American folklorist Richard Dorson called them (Dorson, 1977). The automobile, as the subject of the contemporary folklore, appears in different forms of folk tradition as a part of the landscape of modern life, in two ways, as the English folklorist Stewart Sanderson (Sanderson, 1969) contends: “as a familiar artifact according to which, with bigger or smaller modifications, many older beliefs and customs are passed on”, and also “which generates new types of folklore, like a technological innovation in the light of the automobile civilization” (Sanderson, 1969, p. 241). In favor of the significance of the cars for the everyday life and contemporary

folklore of the Americans also speak urban legends in which the automobiles often take on the central place –as object around which the plot of the story is built or as a spot where the legend takes place (see Kovačević, 2009).

### **U.S. Route 66 – creation of the cultural icon**

*"If you ever plan to motor west  
Travel my way, take the highway that's the best,  
Get your kicks on Route 66!"* (Bobby Troup, 1946)

Route 66 was established in 1926 thanks to the adoption of the "Good roads movement" and passing the "Federal Highway Act".<sup>8</sup> The goal to connect small and undeveloped cities of the Middle West, bypassed by the formerly established highways (Lincoln and Dixie Highway, for example), with the developed East of the USA. Route 66, connecting Chicago and Los Angeles, was 2488 miles long (3940km) and went through eight federal states: Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Soon after the official opening, the association for the promotion of the new road "U.S. 66 Highway Association" was established, and its delegates came from all the states the highway went through. It is this organization which nominated Route 66 "the main street of America" for the purpose of tourist advertising. To attract tourists traveling from East to the West the association published guides, maps and postcards, and in cooperation with Route 66 "business" (restaurants, motels, gas stations along the road) organized many manifestations such as the local fairs and expositions, rodeos, "Indian shows", etc. (Dedek, 2007, p. 35).

In regard to its usage from its establishment up to today, Route 66 went through several different historical phases. From 1927 to 1934, it represented a newly opened tourist route and was the primary highway used for truck transportation, with many bumps and sharp turns. From 1934 to 1940, Route 66 symbolized "the getaway road" for hundred thousands of economic refugees from Oklahoma and its neighboring states, who headed towards California in search for employment and better life. During the Second World War, from 1940 to 1945, its role changed again – because of its geographical isolation it served as a place for a military base and soldier training. After 1945, Route 66 became "the favorite tourist route" again, and primary transport corridor between Chicago and Los Angeles. From 1956 up to the late 70's the "interstate highways" gradually replaced parts of the Route 66 (Dedek, 2007, p. 34).

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<sup>8</sup> Mass production and car popularity called for better highways, so the Congress passed the "Federal Highway Act" in 1921, which enabled financing the building of the national network of two-lane highways.



Ann Carden (Carden, 2006) analyzed these five historical phases based on the research of popular and historical literature, advertising material, and interviews with the travelers of that time in the context of tourist motivation and ways in which travelers contributed to its branding. Carden holds that the road went through the following phases: 1. Opening – symbol of the novelty, 2. Great depression – symbol of hope, 3. Tourism – destination sign, 4. The fall – symbol of old times, and 5. Rebirth – the sign of nostalgia. In the first phase, in the 1920's, Carden singles out the escape from the constraints of the traditional society, social status (because traveling implied having time, money, and before all, the means of travel) and cultural curiosity as factors which motivated the Americans to take the newly opened highway (Carden, 2006, p. 54). In the period of Great Depression, the travelers of Route 66 were also motivated by the escape, but this time, the escape from poverty and hard life, and by the hope of regaining the lost social status in California, the American heaven on the West (Carden, 2006, p. 55). After the end of the Second World War, Route 66 experienced the tourist boom – new restaurants, motels and amusement parks were opening along the road, illuminated with neon lights, and also buildings in the shape of huge oranges, sombreros or animals, as well as big statues of different folk heroes (see Marling, 1984), and that is why Carden believes that in this very period Route 66 became the cultural icon (Carden, 2006, p. 56). When the new network of interstate highways with four lanes was established (1956), Route 66 became the symbol of old times, and finally in 1984 all traces of the old highway were erased from traffic signs and maps (Carden, 2006, p. 56). The last phase Carden stated, and which lasts from the 1990's onwards, is the “rebirth of the road”, when Route 66 represented the symbol of nostalgia, and when the first mass visits of foreign tourists traveling Route 66 to experience the authentic, ‘simple’ America of the past times were noted (Carden, 2006, p. 56-57).

In the late 1980's, the Route 66 organizations were founded in each of the eight countries. The joint commitment of these organizations for preserving the old dysfunctional road brought about the birth of some sort of a cultural movement, which would surpass the local boundaries (“Grassroots Route 66 preservation movement”). Congress passed the legal act “Public Law 101-400 the Route 66 Study Act of 1990”(The integral text of this law is available at <http://www.nps.gov/rt66/PublicLaw106-45.pdf>), presenting the Route 66 as a symbol of the American heritage and the culture of traveling. Federal Agency for the protection of national parks and monuments (“National Park Service”) was in charge of evaluating Route 66 as a resource for potential conservation, i.e. to determine its importance in the American history, the ways to preserve the road and its further usage (The study is available at [www.nps.gov/history/](http://www.nps.gov/history/)

rt66/SpecialResourceStudy.pdf). In 1999, Route 66 was pronounced as the "National Historic Corridor" and the ten year long program of protection called "the National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program" was established. For the program of protection and restoration of Route 66 (including restaurants, motels, gas stations and neon signs along the road) a fund of ten million dollars was provided, in order to stimulate the economic growth of small towns through which the road went. The revitalization program was renewed in 2009 and delayed in the next ten years.

### **Content of the Route 66 self-drive tour**

Touristic trips along Route 66 nowadays can be described as "themed touring routes", that is, "self-drive tours".<sup>9</sup> The authors who examined this phenomenon offered pretty obvious and too wide definitions: "self-drive tourism is tourism based on car travel (one's own or rented) from the starting point towards the final destination that includes taking part in tourist activities along the road" (Prideaux & Carson, 2003, p. 308) or "self-drive tourism represents car travel as a primary way of transport which implies going away from home at least for a night" (Olsen, 2002 as cited in Prideaux & Carson, 2003, p. 308). Research about the self-drive tourism phenomenon was so far focused on the economic aspects of these travels and explored its role in the regional development (Taylor & Prideaux, 2008; Sivijs, 2003) emphasizing the "highlighted individuality" of self-drive tourists who, by taking this kind of holiday, are "trying to catch the sense of freedom and independence" (Hardy, 2003 as cited in Prideaux & Carson, 2003, p. 309) and get away from the city life" (Taylor & Prideaux, 2008, p. 78). Popularity of the self-drive themed tours in the last couple of years calls for questioning the relationship between the tourist travel and tourist destination. In fact, according to some authors, issues about the importance of mobility and the very travel as a tourist experience were almost totally ignored in the studies of tourism, and the travel was considered merely as a "necessary evil for reaching desired destination" (Larsen, 2001, p. 81). Getting to the destination – tourist attraction, is the only thing deserving attention, while the trip represents mere transport from point A to point B. In the case of Route 66 tours tourists spend most of the time traveling and very driving becomes a destination.

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<sup>9</sup> This term doesn't exist in Serbian language, probably partly because this kind of tourism isn't developed institutionally in Serbia and in this region in general, but is limited to huge landscapes – USA and Australia. Still, "partial" self-drive tours are being conducted in Great Britain and Scandinavian countries; according to some researches, it is he British and the Norwegians who make up the greatest number of international tourists visiting the American road 66.

Numerous American and European tourist agencies specialized for the so called “road trip” offer the travel along Route 66. The Agency offer usually consists of taking the flight to Chicago, renting a car or a motorcycle, and lodging in hotels or motels, depending on tourist budget. The tour usually lasts from fourteen to sixteen days, and the travel program follows the route of the old highway whose big part is impassable today, that is, isn’t “drivable”. In each city through which one passes, a one-day stay is provided, and cultural, historical and natural sites, specific to a given place, are listed in the tour description. The visit around Chicago takes place on the first two days, and on the third day the tour arrives to St Louis, on the fourth day to Springfield, on the fifth to Oklahoma City, on the sixth day tourists visit Amarilo, seventh, eighth and ninth day they spend in the cities Tukumkari, Albuquerque and Santa Fe (depending on the offer of the tourist agency organizing the tour), then on the tenth and eleventh day the tour stays in Holbrook, on the twelfth day they reach Las Vegas, and on the thirteenth and fourteenth day they stay in Los Angeles or Santa Monica, which was also the end of the old highway.

### **The Internet and Route 66**

The Internet has an important role in promoting the historic Route 66 as a tourist destination. Marjorie Kibby (Kibby, 2000) divided the web pages dedicated to this road on the official sites of the Route 66 association, offering primarily general information (history, maps, guides), on sites held by the Route 66 “entrepreneurs” (restaurant owners, hotels, gift shops, and other attractions along the road), on personal web pages of tourists who, after traveling Route 66 posted their diaries on the Internet, and on forums, i.e. mailing lists where past and future tourists discuss everything in connection to this highway (Kibby, 2000, p. 144-147). Social networks, via which tourists report in real time about their “life on the road”, such as Facebook and Twitter should also be added to this list of the internet locations about Route 66 (for example <http://twitter.com/#!/tlton66>; <http://twitter.com/#!/TheMotherRoad>).

Internet blogs (For example <http://routesixty-six.blogspot.com/>; <http://bethfenwick.com/route66>; <http://oldmanonrt66.blogspot.com/>; <http://belgianroute66roadie.blogspot.com/>) about Route 66 are a very good illustration of the specificity of Road 66 tourism. This uniqueness doesn’t just come from the fact that some tourist made a web site dedicated to his or her travel – there are probably similar examples of this kind of tourist diaries about, for example, Niagara Falls or Goa Island. Route 66 blogs are in the same time the road testimonies, a way to share a traveling experience, attempts to prolong the trip atmosphere, and a means of asserting the belonging to a global community of

fans. Most of the blogs have the same narrating structure – preparation for the trip, going on the trip, traveling, and the return from the trip. Blogs are usually illustrated with photographs of/by the highway – traffic and neon signs, architecture, local inhabitants, most of which are the ones where the focus is on the “open” and “empty” road. The experience of traveling the Route 66 means different things to bloggers – to some, traveling represents a quest for romanticized images in the works of popular culture, while to the others, taking the road 66 is just one way of connecting with their “roots”.

An American tourist, who made her first journey on this route, wrote the following:

*“I also couldn't help but think about the parallels of this journey and the journey that my mother and father made in 1963. My dad came to California for work and they packed up the kids, left Illinois and came to a new life here on the coast. What a pleasure it has been to go back to Illinois, see the old house I was born in, the small town my mom grew up in, and meet people that actually knew my family... Route 66 is an intoxicating drug. There is an allure to it that is unmistakable. You drive it and you look back over your shoulder and, in almost every instance, you want to drive it again”*(<http://bethfenwick.com/route66>).

One German tourist began her blog about traveling the Route 66 with the following statement:

*“What I have learned on my trip is that all the Route 66 people are into the Walt Disney animation “CARS”. You should see the movie before starting your trip as you will come across with it probably a few times. The little story behind is that the animators from Pixar travelled the Route 66 in order to collect info on the people and their lifestyle and stories as well as the locations...”*([http://www.alex-aroundtheworld.com/html/route\\_66\\_chicago-la.html](http://www.alex-aroundtheworld.com/html/route_66_chicago-la.html)).

Two Internet “locations” represent the reference point for data collection about Route 66, and a place where “members” of the virtual Route 66 community meet on daily basis<sup>10</sup> - mailing list “The Route 66 eGroup” and the web page “The

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<sup>10</sup> Virtual communities are those social groups that appear when people gather in “cyber space” – these cultural entities are created when “enough people meet often enough in cyber space” (Rheingold 1992 as cited in Antonijević 1999). Due to the nature of computer-mediated communication which goes beyond time and space, virtual community – a group of people which gathers at a particular discussion forum, in chat rooms or mailing lists, can consist of people from all over the world, brought together by common interests, whether in regard to hobbies, profession or something else.

Historic Route 66”. This mailing list (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/route66/>) exists since 1999 and has over 2000 members. From its establishment until today, over 73 000 messages have been written here. Approximately 15 to 20 messages of different content are posted on the list daily (announcements about the happenings on Route 66, advices and tips to plan the route, travel experience, that is, road trip stories...). Web page “The Historic Route 66” (<http://www.historic66.com>) represents probably the most comprehensive guide for traveling down the Route 66 – maps of the road are depicted and explained in detail for every country and small town that one passes by, there is a special part of the web site for the announcements of various happenings on Route 66 (festivals, expositions, races, informal gatherings) photo gallery, links to similar pages, online quiz about the Route 66 facts, and a discussion forum with 3042 members. Site was founded by a Belgian tourist Swa Frantzen in 1994, after the unsuccessful attempts to find any information about taking this road on the Internet. Unfortunately, the forum is no longer in function, so the material for the analysis of tourist discussions about Route 66 will be taken from another, equally popular forum.

Discussions about Route 66 tourism are observed on the forum of the Lonely Planet firm (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/>). Forum Thorn Tree, whose purpose is to exchange the advice and information about traveling, was primarily chosen because of its world-wide popularity – Lonely Planet is considered the biggest and most influential publisher of tourist guides in the world. Topics about tourist trips on the Route 66 are present within the sub-forum of the USA. These are mostly topics posted by international tourists from Europe and Australia, who want to get information and “first-hand” advice about the Route 66. We examined seventeen topics for the purpose of this essay. There are much more topic about Route 66 on the forum, but we chose only those who provoked further discussion<sup>11</sup> among the following participants: future tourists (who are usually the ones posting the topic), ex tourists, and the Americans writing on the forum.

Questions which future tourists are asking concern the general information, already available on many guides about Route 66 on the Internet free of charge – the most convenient season for taking the trip, the most accessible rent-a-car agencies, recommended motels and restaurants and so on. Unlike the organized Route 66 tours lasting 16 days tops, these “self-drive” tourists are planning to spend at least three weeks on the road. In the introductory post international

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<sup>11</sup> Themes whose purpose is to advertise the road, that is, those which were posted by the Route 66 “entrepreneurs” (hotel, motel, restaurant or gas station owners) were not taken into consideration.

tourists often explain the reasons why they decided to take Route 66. They believe the trip down this road will introduce them to the American culture and history, and before all, that they will have a lot of fun – which are the expectations characteristic of any tourist visit to some region.

*"I have 3 weeks, and want to experience great landscapes and a big variety in culture and history"* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=2064478>).

*"A little background: we are 3 europeans living in boston for the last 2 years and the objective of the trip is to party, see new places, mix culture with fun, include las vegas a national park"* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=2026451>).

*"We're not the sort of people who need sight-after-sight-after-sight. Our version of travelling (and there has been MUCH of it in our lives) is just going along to somewhere, doesn't matter if it's not very exciting, looking around, noticing the little details of what's different and what's the same as where we live, going with the flow...I'm also very keen on travelling without a fixed plan. We've got broad interests including history and culture and, most importantly, people"* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=2031772>)

In one part of the responses, the influence of popular culture on the tourist decision to take this road is obvious. These are the romanticized ideas about road adventures presented in numerous American movies or, for example, following the geographic trace of the famous song "get your kicks on Route 66":

*"I have a romantic vision of my wife and me taking the open road in a top down convertible"* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=2064478>).

*"...I'd also like to travel a bit of the old Route 66 and visit some of the towns mentioned in the song"* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1812245>).

Route 66 tourist travels are usually motivated by the quest for antiquity and history (old restaurants, abandoned cities, and generally America of the "past times") – and with that inevitably comes the negotiating of authenticity of the landscapes or objects with other participants in the forum discussions. It seems that Route 66 tourists, (un)aware of the tourist commodification of history and culture, according to the old dichotomy tourist vs. traveler, do not consider themselves tourists, or at least refuse to be so. The reason also probably lies in

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the very nature of traveling – without the guide, partially without the formerly planned route and limitations imposed by the tours organized by tourist agencies, and therefore in their own or rented vehicle, which is free to “divert from the road” whenever they feel like it.

*“Heard a lot of stories beginning in Chicago and ending in LA, I think that would be the best route to travel. We love old diners, see some real things about the area, not only the touristic stuff”* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1769056>).

*“We really wanted to get a taste of 'old america' although we do not necessarily need that to last the entire duration! Along the way we would like to experience a ghost town (a real one not one that's been turned into a tourist attraction). Aside from that we like to see areas of outstanding beauty, we like a drink and good nightlife and we love amusement parks”* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1959980>).

Driving the “open road” through the landscapes typical for the West of USA is also a frequent motive:

*“many people at home are fascinated by the idea of taking a long road trip as we do not have this wide open spaces like in the US - but I often get the impression that people think the Route 66 offers not only wide open spaces (what it does) but also outstanding scenery (what is not so much the case - that 's why I wrote other routes offer better scenery - I guess most Germans would get pretty quickly bored driving thru Kansas or Missouri)”* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1612750>).

*“I am an Aussie (Australian) that loves the open road and driving route 66 from LA to Chicago (flying SF - LA and Chi - NY) has always been a dream of mine”* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1452486>)

This trip represents a dream come true for many tourists, something they always wanted to do, and which is a “once in a life time” opportunity:

*“I am one of those Europeans dreaming about Route 66 for a long time (whether it exists or not) and I'm planning to drive it this summer. I have to confirm most of the doubts here – yes, it is because of the sense of freedom, Americana, road varieties, the need to see as much as I can during the short period of time, and because of the fame of Route 66”* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1612750&start=15>).

*"I'm a classic car builder, always wanting to take the time to cruise Route 66. Didn't do it, up to this point in time. Due to illness, I have to do it now, before I can't do it at all"* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1924330>).

Ex tourists, who take part in the discussion, are mostly domestic, American tourists or tourist from Australia. Their replies affirmatively describe the experience of traveling the Route 66. The emphasis is on the cultural-historical significance of the road, and stress is on the "hospitality" of local residents, and on the "America which doesn't exist in the cities any longer".

*"Driving down what's left of 66 is a bit like visiting Roman ruins. You don't do it for the views (which are often lacking), aesthetics (mixed bag) or for their contemporary relevance (obviously now obsolete), but for their historic value. Imagine driving it in an old car with crap brakes and no air conditioning, and you might get a sense of the early 20th century American experience, which obviously wasn't great for everyone"* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1612750>).

*"My friend and I drove route 66 and a bit of the Lincoln Hwy from Philadelphia to Chicago 18 months ago. If you want to see a bit of the real America you can't go past route 66. Sure you will see lots of pea's n corn, and stay in a lot of places named Springfield, but you will also get to see Americans at its best. At the end of it you will have seen a bit of the US that many people Americans included will never see in a life time"* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1959980>).

*"Last summer we did route 66 from Chicago to Albuquerque -- it was a grand trip. There's still lots to see and wonderful people to meet. But, we found we had to drive parts on the interstates and then hop off to see the segments of Route 66 that appealed to us. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It is pure Americana"* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1647157>).

The third group of participants in forum discussions consists of "random visitors" who are interested to take part in conversation. These are the American debaters whose answers aim to deconstruct the myth about Route 66, and which express a critical view of the tourist usage of the national cultural heritage.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Since tourists and their motivations and attitudes represent the subject of this paper, the arguments of these critics are not considered here.



Based on different contents about Route 66, put on the Internet by the past, present, and future tourists, it is possible to single out a few motives. Examining tourist motivation and answer to the question of why people travel represents one of the key questions in the studies of tourism. Still, despite many attempts to define tourist motivations, there is no general consent or a single accepted definition of tourist motivations. The question whether motivation represents psychological or sociological concept is equally contemporary today as it was three decades ago (see Dann, 1981; Iso Ahola, 1982; Dunn Ross & Iso Ahola, 1991; Mansfeld, 1992; Fodness, 1994). According to Burns (Burns, 1999), tourist motives are often too complex and to research motivation as a purpose of traveling demands thorough and “deep” face-to-face conversations (Burns, 1999, p. 35). Therefore, the perceived motives influencing tourists to make a decision to take Route 66 are definitely not final, nor do they apply to all Route 66 tourists, but represent an illustration of tourist motives based on a selection out of available Internet narratives about traveling that road, and a potential starting point for future ethnographic researches of Route 66 tourism and tourists.

Foreign tourists decided to travel the Rout 66 for fun and an opportunity to get to know a different culture and history, local inhabitants, and the incentive of that “general motive” is usually inspired by the representations generated in the works of popular culture – animated movie *Cars* with the message that the true values are preserved by the people (that is the cars) inhabiting small deserted towns by the road, movie scenes showing the car ride through the vastness of the American West, music tracks with refrains about the road “adventures”, etc. In other words, popular mythology of the road has largely shaped the ways in which foreign tourists feel about the tourist experience of Route 66.<sup>13</sup>

Motivations of domestic tourists are in the same time personal (family history) and collective (history of the nation). Their leading idea is predominately the idealized memory of the past, nostalgia about past times. The subject of that nostalgic notion is often not a personally experienced past (Davis, 1977, p. 416) but the past transmitted and constructed through the mass media – contemporary Route 66 tourists “remember” the Great Depression period and Route 66 as a road of hope through Steinbeck’s novel, and the “feeling” of the 50’s through Kerouac’s writing.

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<sup>13</sup> One Greek tourist once asked a question on the forum Historic66 (which is inactive today) if he and his friends could travel the road in the “opposite” direction from West to East. Members of the forum reacted very negatively because that direction was labeled as “historically incorrect” – pioneers and Okies went from the West to the East. <http://www.historic66.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=3447>

## Conclusion

The example of tourism on Route 66 points to the significance that the very tourists sharing, exchanging and transmitting tourist experiences have in the latter forming of the given destination. Their motivation for traveling is inspired by the popular narratives about the road, and then, tourist experience is also being transmitted further as a narrative.

Route 66 represents the authentic American tradition, as well as the giant statue of "fakelore" hero Paul Bunyan located beside this road in Arizona. Term authenticity is maybe one of the most frequent words we will come across in the works dealing with the phenomena in the tourism studies. Still, however "fake" one and the other seem to be, proving their "fakeness" doesn't lead to a deeper understanding of the tourists who visit them or the phenomenon as such.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> As German ethnologist Herman Bausinger once said, "the function of the 'real' and the falsified casket is the same" (Bausinger, 2002, p. 176).

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Although Historic Route 66 is no longer the "Main Street of America," this long stretch between Los Angeles and Chicago is still an iconic American road trip destination. This corridor is like a journey through American history, where you can see flickering neon signs, abandoned gas stations, quirky museums, breathtaking natural formations, old-fashioned diners and motels, and some of the nation's most-famous landmarks. Don't rush your Route 66 road trip; the journey is the destination here. While some of the landmarks have shut their doors, there are still plenty of great stops along