Abstract:

Vincent Gallo’s film, *The Brown Bunny* (2003), examines the transcontinental landscape through a bug-splattered windshield. The protagonist’s journey begins after a motorcycle race in New Hampshire and concludes at a California motel. Gallo uses the road trip to parallel his character’s unstable mind. The repetition of rest stops, fast-food signs, motels, and gas station logos amplifies the protagonist’s mental state. The film ends in a Los Angeles motel room – over-lit, standardized, and redundant. Vincent Gallo has only released two of the four films he has directed. Both find resolve in an anonymous motel room and both are studies in Americana, car-culture, and the architecture of familiar environments. Interviews with the filmmaker further support his interest in this anonymous roadside architecture and its relation to the contemporary landscape. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour conceptualized this anonymous architecture in *Learning From Las Vegas*. In this study, the architects catalogue pluralism, historical motifs, and vernacular elements of roadside architecture. In *The Brown Bunny*, this boring, ordinary, and anonymous roadside has morphed into the American Landscape. This article also examines *The Brown Bunny* within the context of Venturi and Scott Brown’s theories to illustrate how architectural catalogue is at the heart of Vincent Gallo’s cinematic aesthetic.

I like boring things…

– Andy Warhol –

I looked and photographed. I documented the “view from the road” on foot and by car, and shot The Strip from a raised eye level through the front window of the early morning bus that took workers to the casinos.

– Denise Scott Brown –

Vincent Gallo’s, *The Brown Bunny*, premièred at the 2003 Cannes Film Festival. It was an immediate sensation for two reasons. The first was its graphic, unsimulated oral sex scene performed on writer/director/actor Vincent Gallo by Oscar nominated actress Chloë Sevigny. The second reason was that Roger Ebert deemed *The Brown Bunny* “the worst film in the history of the festival” (“Gallo’s”). Ebert’s May 22, 2003 *Chicago Sun-Times* review reads:

Imagine 90 tedious minutes of a man driving across America in a van. Imagine long shots through a windshield as it collects bug splats. Imagine not one but two scenes in which he stops for gas. Imagine a long shot on the Bonneville Salt Flats where he races his motorcycle until it disappears as a speck in the distance, followed by another shot in which a speck in the distance becomes his motorcycle. Imagine a film so unendurably boring that at
one point, when he gets out of his van to change his shirt, there is applause. (“Gallo’s”)

Other critics and reviewers deemed Gallo’s film tiresome, boring, and utterly banal and pointless. Indiewire called The Brown Bunny one of the most profoundly egomaniacal and obnoxious films in the history of American independent cinema while The Hollywood Reporter judged it a film of “crude technique and thundering banality” (O’Brien). A small number of other reviews proclaimed The Brown Bunny a success. “The Brown Bunny is, in its Bruno Dumont-meets-Matthew Barney sort of way, a cry from the wilderness of a time when independent cinema wasn’t a studio’s boutique indulgence, when independent films weren’t just mainstream plots...or, most importantly, when independent films were art instead of try-outs for Hollywood blockbuster assignments” (Chaw, “FFC”). “Gallo’s second feature turns out to be a gentle, lyrical road movie – the sort of picture American indie cinema was supposed to nurture and support” (Taylor).

Roger Ebert would review the re-edited version, twenty-six minutes shorter, of The Brown Bunny over a year later, and claim that the editing was the movie’s salvation, and that the new edit is an entirely different film, specifically citing an improved Bonneville Salt Flats scene. Ebert’s review of the infamous pornographic ending is that it is many things, but erotic is not one of them. He ends his second review with, “Make no mistake: The Cannes version was a bad film, but now Gallo’s editing has set free the good film inside. I will always be grateful I saw the movie at Cannes; you can’t understand where Gallo has arrived unless you know where he started” (“Brown”).

The Brown Bunny is a simple story. After losing a race, professional motorcycle racer, Bud Clay, must drive from New Hampshire to California to meet his girlfriend, Daisy. On his cross-country drive, Bud attempts to connect with three different women, Violet, Lilly, and Rose, but fails. Like Jay Gatsby, Daisy is always in his mind. Gallo leads us to Los Angeles, only for the viewer to discover that Daisy is dead.

The aim of this article is not to defend The Brown Bunny and its maker, Vincent Gallo, nor is it to criticize Roger Ebert’s and other critics’ reviews of the film. This article analyzes Vincent Gallo’s use of American roadside architecture and car-oriented cinematography as The Brown Bunny’s visual design and narrative device.

By analyzing and reframing the film’s criticism through postmodern architectural theory and design, specifically that of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, new meanings and possibilities within the film emerge. Understanding the filmmaker’s decision to construct the mise-en-scène through the windshield of the character’s van for the entirety of the film offers the audience a cinematic perspective rarely seen. This article aims to analyze Vincent Gallo’s production design as an outgrowth of urban design. In a 2014 interview, Denise Scott Brown stated: “Traveling from our house to our office I like to watch a sequence of views no architect could have designed. None could achieve that variegated vitality
and to try would force it. But many won’t look at it because they’re sure it’s ugly” (Salomon and Kroeter). The Brown Bunny is designed around a similar “sequence of views.” Perhaps it was the audience’s overfamiliarity with highway gas stations and rest stop vending machines that made The Brown Bunny appear tiresome, boring, and banal upon its release (Fig. 1).

In their seminal 1972 work, Learning From Las Vegas, authors Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour open with “learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary…to question how we look at things…Las Vegas is analyzed here only as a phenomenon of architectural communication” (5-6). The book was intended as a criticism of late Modern architecture – that of the 1960s rather than of early Modern architecture prior to World War II. In their comparison of their Guild House and Paul Rudolph’s Crawford Manor, both early ’60s apartment complexes, the authors explain that

We shall emphasize image – image over process or form – in asserting that architecture depends in its perception and creation on past experience and emotional association and that these symbolic and representational elements may often be contradictory to the form, structure, and program with which they combine in the same building (87).

It is important to analyze The Brown Bunny from Venturi, Brown, and Izenour’s theoretical context. The film, like its maker, is a contradiction; a filmmaker not influenced by the medium of film, but rather by painting, architecture, and 1970s fashion photography (Chaw, “FFC”); a filmmaker in constant search for new breakthroughs in his work (Pride), and a filmmaker with an appreciation for the significance of parking lots identical to that of Venturi, Brown, and Izenour.

The Brown Bunny is not a scene-by-scene narrative, yet we recognize a story. The film lacks a traditional structure and plot, yet it has an inherent pacing and visual repetition that grounds the viewer in the environment and the protagonist’s pathos. And, like

Fig. 2: Billy Brown and Layla pull into Denny’s in Buffalo ’86.
Gallo’s first film, *Buffalo ’66* (1998), *The Brown Bunny* is a car-culture, car-oriented film that finds resolution in a motel room – unassuming, anonymous architecture visible during the day and lit up at night.

In both his released films, Gallo uses the familiar environment (Fig. 2) – bowling alleys, *Denny’s*, rest stops, gas stations, bus stations, and motels. This is not kitsch; this is not irony. It is ugly and ordinary and all around; it is vernacular. It is perception and creation on past experience and emotional association.

Vincent Gallo is not Werner Herzog, the dreamer and explorer travelling to unknown, unseen lands in search of something new. Vincent Gallo is not Wes Anderson, a filmmaker devising magical, whimsical, overly-saturated worlds, probing the complexities of adolescence. Vincent Gallo’s “Best Western Motel” is not Wes Anderson’s “Grand Budapest Hotel.”

Vincent Gallo’s characters must return to the familiarity of their homes and hometowns in order to communicate their loneliness and isolation. Gallo must use hardcore, pornographic imagery to visualize guilt, anger, and self-loathing. In both films, characters attempt to return home, only there is no home. Parents reject their only son in *Buffalo ’66* and previously occupied homes are now empty in *The Brown Bunny*. The motel becomes home. Gallo employs the unheroic to generate progressive work.

It is an aesthetic shared by Venturi and Brown: “Modernism did not adapt to the existing and changing landscape…it became ‘irresponsible’ in that it did not communicate with how society lived and perceived the world. Modernism became an expressive architecture where its expression was the symbol. The heroic modernism was progressive and anti-traditional, while the ordinary and conventional was evolutionary, using historical precedent” (Venturi et al. 102). Venturi and Brown were generating architecture and an architectural discourse for a changing process:

The heroism implied in this approach is generally false: in this context conscious heroes are pathetic weaklings. Ironically you are more likely to turn out heroic in your role as anti-hero. To be truly visionary is to be truly humble…focus on the realities of now and the potentials in the realities…with perception (273-274).

Gallo, discussing his collaboration with Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas on his Los-Angeles condominium, states:

I wanted to do something extremely progressive, conceptual, and very thought out. Modernism is not things that look like sleek designs from the ‘50s and ‘60s. Something truly modern and progressive is far away from the thinking and lifestyle of the ‘50s and ‘60s. The work of the real architects from the ‘50s and ‘60s does not relate to contemporary life or the real state of things. My understanding of a home of today, the way that I would interact with that home, sleep, entertain, have sex and perform my work functions in that home, are all quite contrary to what even the most modern architects were thinking in the past. I have owned three houses by John Lautner, one of the better residential architects of the 20th century. When the houses were for sale, I could not resist purchasing them as I was so drawn to the

…Gallo’s characters must return to the familiarity of their homes and home towns in order to communicate their loneliness and isolation.
aesthetics and sensibility of those homes. However, soon after moving in, I would feel that the lifestyle and mood required to live in those homes was far from my own and stuck in the past. Even with all of Lautner’s creativity, intelligence, and problem solving abilities, he was still creating architecture for an old way of living. (Gallo)

Like Billy Brown in Buffalo ’66 (Fig. 3), The Brown Bunny’s Bud Clay finds resolution in a motel room where he must operate within fantasy and reality, between past and present, and anger and guilt. Gallo’s characters challenge love and honesty in rented spaces. That Gallo chooses the motel as final destination for his characters is telling. What can be made of this aesthetic and narrative choice? Is it mere coincidence or does Gallo possess a fascination with the psychology, history, and design of the American motel and car-culture?

“Motel” is simply the shortened form of motor-hotel. After the Second World War when America became a car-oriented culture, American motels grew in popularity. Large, luxurious hotels with endless amenities were largely found near railroad stations in the centres of towns; the car-oriented motels with few to no guest amenities were found close to highways and featured parking lots. The growth of the motel reflected America’s interest in tailfin cars and “the new shape of motion” (Hine 87), a moment in time when “America found a way of turning out fantasy on an assembly line” (5), a fantasy consumed by new modes of consumption and futuristic gadgets. Like the bunny for sale in the film, simply changing its diet and taste will not prolong the bunny’s life; the fantasy was short-lived.

Similarly, the unique American roadside motel (like those along Route 66) did not last. Chain motels began sprouting up and the individually-owned and operated places began their decay. The overall design of the singular motel gave way to the chain-motel where signage and electronic iconography trumped architecture in order to attract the passing driver. No longer a glamorous roadside stop for the American family on its westward travel, the motel, in reality and in cinema, is a dingy, dirty place where criminals hide out, or the down-and-out loners go to waste away and die. This altering of the Route 66 landscape was captured by artist Ed Ruscha with his first photographic book in 1963, Twenty-six Gasoline Stations. “Seen together, the gas stations offer a range of American utilitarian architecture” (Wolf 112). Ruscha only made one exposure for each gas station
and the images appear as if taken from a moving car (120).

Bud Clay is always going to the Best Western in Los Angeles.4 Bud’s life, and mind, are car and motion-oriented. He is a motorcycle racer by profession. When he finishes his race, he packs his motorcycle in his van and drives to the next race in the next town. He possesses motion trapped in motion. Bud’s mind, like his motorcycle and van, is never at rest. Bud meditates on his past and views the world passing by through the windshield of his moving van.

How does the motel room affect the communication of cinematic language and symbol? Watching the infamous final scene of The Brown Bunny, the viewer is overpowered by specific elements: the whiteness of the motel room and the graphic oral sex. The room is completely antiseptic and resembles an institution more than an anonymous space. The reunion of Bud and Daisy is pornographic. It does not climax with Bud’s ejaculation, but rather with his emotional and mental breakdown.

To Bud, the motel room is home and therapist office; for Gallo the filmmaker, the motel room is design and “decorated shed.” It is not a symbolic setting, but rather a setting that symbolizes and represents unity, balance, and predictability – it is two lamps on each side of the bed. It is a plastic-wrapped plastic cup on the dresser and a phone on the nightstand. It is two white pillows and four white walls, all photographed from a distance. It is transient and car-oriented. It is anonymous. It is a pre-fabricated movie set that perfectly suits Gallo’s aesthetic. The transient room does not symbolize alienation, fear, horror, or suspense as it does in Last in Translation (2003), The Shining (1980), or Psycho (1960). The ordinary motel room epitomizes the contradictions of Bud’s mental state and Gallo’s aesthetic taste. He states:

In the middle of the desert, heading homeward towards LA, I’ll often sacrifice the experience of a National Park to instead pass by a nuclear power plant or a factory. Anonymous architecture… Egoless, yes, which is most important. Ego leads to self-gloration, which leads to compromised function. It prevents the work from being better than the people who make it (Gallo).

This cry for the egoless offers an interesting counterpoint in that The Brown Bunny is anything but an egoless cinematic product. The opening titles clearly state: “A Vincent Gallo Production. Written, Directed, Edited and Produced by Vincent Gallo.” This is not anonymous filmmaking. Yet, it parallels Robert Venturi, who is not speaking of anonymous architecture when he demands a break from the heroic modern. Gallo and Venturi construct their work from contradictory and pluralistic elements (high and low, beautiful and ugly, ordinary and extraordinary, innocent and pornographic), while being endless self-promoters. Both view the mainstream products and the marginalized mainstream products of their fields with the same attitude – the products are irrelevant and irresponsible because the films and buildings are using the same tired language (Venturi et al. 101). Gallo answers the riddle best: “If you allow people who are coming from ego to put something in an empty space, they can’t help themselves to do so without self-gloration. If you ask the
same group of egomaniacs to pull things out of a cluttered space, it’s much more difficult for that gesture to be part of self-glorification.”

Gallo’s Best Western has no architect; it has no architecture. This is why Gallo never reveals hallways, Bud’s entry into the room, or any close-ups of room details. These details are irrelevant. It is the bold Best Western icon read from the road as Bud drives by that is important. The icon through the windshield is the detail. The sign is more hotel than the building. The Best Western reflects industrial, Fordist design—fast and efficient—and the American chain-store industry where one store is indiscernible from the next. Destinations are only recognizable by their roadside sign/symbol—that which is visible during the day and lights up at night. The Best Western reflects minimalism—the walls are completely blank, sans any cheap, mass-produced store-bought print often found in motel rooms (Fig. 4). Daisy is the motel room’s only applied ornament.

Gallo’s use of the glaring white motel room at the end of The Brown Bunny incorporates Venturi and Brown’s famous “duck” and “decorated shed” theories of structure and symbol. The “duck” building is “where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form.” The “decorated shed” is “where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of the program…The duck is the special building that is a symbol; the decorated shed is the conventional shelter that applies symbols” (Venturi et al. 87).

Venturi and Brown’s theories are bound by “automobile-oriented commercial architecture” (87-88). Architecture as viewed and comprehended at high speeds (Vinegar 24) where the unity of the whole is insignificant. The decorated shed has applied ornament to the front and a plain back, while the duck is consistent on all sides. Just as Bud drives throughout the film, internalizing road signs, skylines, and national monuments, Daisy’s presence in the motel room is a symbol of his car-oriented vision and his deepest emotion. Daisy is an applied symbolic ornament to a plain white motel room. In Bud’s narrow field of vision, Daisy is a passing vision and decorated shed (dressed in brown) just as the motel is a “decorated shed.” Both Daisy and motel are meaning, not expression; both are contradictions (dead and present, home and rented space), not consistent and unified. Both are evocative, not innovative (Venturi et al. 102). Both are at the service of Gallo’s filmmaking vision and Bud’s roadside-vision. The viewer understands Bud’s vision of the world through seeing all that passes by his “bug-splattered” windshield. Bud’s vision remains the same in the stillness of the motel room. Daisy is another splattered bug, and the motel is the only space in which Bud appears to function.

Bud has been driving to this destination the entire film. He has attempted and failed interactions with three women, each systematically appearing like McDonald’s and Gulf’s iconography. Each woman reads big and bold: Bud’s Impotence. Bud has stayed in one previous motel room (an innocuous beige space with striped wallpaper and a mass-produced print on the wall) and left a note for Daisy at their vacant house in Los Angeles.
The motel room is bright, yet the mood is dark. The room is not only clean; it is beaming white as if it has been bleached through and through. Bud’s motel room has been bleached to mask others’ past transgressions because that is the nature of the space, and Bud is not the only guilty individual in this familiar environment. Bud’s mind is racing round and round, unable to comprehend time, place, and space. He is a victim of the road and the glowing lights of chain retail store signs. Bud sees Mobil, Sunoco, Wendy’s, and McDonald’s over and over again. They are chain-linked and systematically proportioned electronic icons placed in a naturally diverse environment. These signs keep him awake; they disorient him and make his unstable mind more unstable. They are the only objects communicating with him, compelling him to continue to the motel in California.

Gallo challenges the audience with his shot compositions and lighting throughout the entire film. The filmmaker pushes his Super-16mm film stock and lenses to their limits. Scenes shot inside the van in the dead of night are so grainy and the focus so soft that the viewer is forced to recognize the shape of Bud’s facial features outlined by the road signs outside the window. Bud’s face finds form in front of McDonald’s golden arches. Close-ups on Bud in profile trim and cut the front half of his nose from the frame. The motel room offers a similar visual challenge: medium-shots of Bud with half his body outside the frame. These are not rare, over-aestheticized split-body medium-shots shots like those found in Danny Boyle’s Steve Jobs (2015). Bud and Daisy are characters obscured by car window frames: visual information perceived from a moving vehicle.

Like the road signs on the highway, Daisy appears in the motel room. She does not walk into the room but silently appears as shown in Fig. 5. Bud’s deepest emotions, his guilt, sorrow, and hate, surface. Daisy stands as if caught in the headlights of Bud’s van. The first shot of Daisy in the motel room is of her standing against the door with a bright light striking her, casting a large, and by traditional Hollywood cinematography standards, “ugly” shadow. Such a shadow would never be visible in a Coen
Brothers or Alexander Payne film. Gallo is destroying cinematic rules and practice to adhere to his system – a system derived from perception and not vision. In Gallo’s system, Daisy is no more than a shadow, no more than a ghost, while Bud’s view of the world is no more than that which ghostly appears on the highway and racetrack. Here Gallo keeps with the car-oriented motif of the film. He brings the car into the motel room (not the camera) – motion within motion – motorcycle within van. The car is the visual and narrative design of the film and Bud’s real and fantastic vision of the world. Where the viewer was placed in Bud’s black van for the majority of the film, the viewer is now placed in the whiteness of Bud’s motor-hotel room for the conclusion.

Bud and Daisy sit on the bed. The back of Bud’s head is out of focus, as is Daisy’s face. The focus is pushed to the background of the image – the ugly mirror on the wall and the two identical lights on each side of the mirror. Gallo focuses on the mirror and lights that resemble the front of a car approaching – windshield and headlights. The room is blown out white, washed out, not only to the viewer, but to the film’s characters. Daisy asks, “It’s so bright in here. I feel so shy…Can I turn off the lights? Please?” Bud does not turn out the lights; he undresses her. This leads to the controversial fellatio scene.

Viewing this scene through the windshield of the van is simple enough. Again, Gallo blasts light into the lens of the camera so that the image is soaked with lens flare – much like the blinding glare of headlights on a highway at night. Much like the road sign icons of gasoline stations and fast food eateries. And, like his hands on the steering wheel, Bud keeps one hand on the base of his penis and the other on Daisy’s head – controlling, manipulating, and driving (Fig. 6). Bud has not left the driver’s seat.

The graphic nature of the fellatio scene makes it extraordinary, and pushed Gallo’s film to an X-rating. But reviews have overlooked the ordinary nature of the scene, and the fact that the scene is an illusion. “Criticism of Gallo’s film has so far failed to address
this combination of pornography and narrative cin-
ema” (Léger 89). The infamous fellatio scene is in
actuality Bud’s self-abusive, tortured masturbation
viewed through the windshield of the van.

In an interview, Gallo remarked: “If you dereg-
ulate pornography, take away the rules, you’ll have
anal, double anal, triple anal, bukkake, American
bukkake, bukkake with 10 year olds, bukkake with
newborns. Eventually porn would be two people
hugging…I describe it as an evolution or part of the
process.” The fellatio scene does not climax with
Bud’s ejaculation, but with Bud weeping on the bed
(Fig. 7). This scene is about the result. The Brown
Bunny goes from hardcore pornography to pathos:
two people hugging on the bed. Gallo is attempting
to film that evolution as Bud and Daisy lie hugging
on the bed. While the fellatio scene is long and
graphic, it is immediately undercut. Gallo does not
give the viewer time to process the pornography be-
cause the scene immediately devolves into Bud’s tre-
mendous breakdown where his speaking through
tears is as inaudible as Daisy speaking with Bud’s pe-
nis in her mouth. Both choke on guilt. The viewer
has been driving with Bud the entire film waiting to
hear his confession, not to witness his ejaculation.
Gallo’s fellatio scene is a road sign informing the au-
dience that the destination is only “x” miles away.

The viewer discovers afterward that Daisy is
dead. One must analyze either the necrophiliac na-
ture of the scene or the fantasy – that Bud is either
being fellated by a dead woman or is masturbating in
the middle of the room while talking to his dead girl-
friend – berating her. Most criticism has only dis-
cussed exactly what is depicted, the literal image and
therefore has failed to recognize Gallo’s pluralistic
and contradictory nature and the trompe l’oeil
effect of the imagery. Sex in movies is simulated for the cam-
era and for the audience and presented to both as
“real” in order to serve the narrative. This fake sex is
a narrative act, not a thematic act. In the case of rare
films like Last Tango in Paris (1972), 9 Songs (2004),
and Intimacy (2001), the sex is unsimulated on cam-
era, in order to appear even more real and authentic
to the audience. None, however, uses pornographic
imagery and action, both in content and aesthetic, as
thematic representation.

Fig. 7: Bud’s breakdown.
If Gallo had simply filmed the reality of the sex as it is with Daisy in the scene and not as Bud’s fantasy, the scene would have been extraordinary and not ordinary.

But the scene is ordinary, because, albeit graphic, it is an ordinary act that occurs between two lovers, and often in motel rooms between lovers and paying customers, an ordinary act elevated to extraordinary cinema not because of its graphic nature, but because of its visual depiction – as through the windshield of the van – keeping with Gallo’s program and aesthetic system. It is like reading “St. Louis” while viewing the Gateway Arch earlier in the film, reading “Chicago” and seeing the city’s skyline, reading “Bonneville Salt Flats” and seeing the salt flats, reading “Blowjob” in big electric letters and seeing a blowjob. It is the balance and difference between word as object and image as language. Is the oral sex really happening? Yes and no. Is it ordinary? Yes and no. Is it communicating the same message as “Welcome to Ohio?” Yes and no. “Stripped of its meaning the word becomes a typographical shell that has been driven from its linguistic context into a silent landscape” (Wilmes).

It is internal and external. It is representation and perception. Could Bud’s breakdown have come without the graphic depiction of oral sex? No. The scene depicts Gallo’s evolutionary process, not anti-traditional cinema. Physically, Bud gives nothing back to Daisy. He does not offer Daisy sexual pleasure in return because the scene is not about sexual pleasure and eroticism. The scene is about Bud’s pain, loneliness and guilt at having not saved Daisy that plays as pornographic, sexual fantasy. Like one of the many road signs, the sexual act passes, and Bud, Daisy, and the viewer immediately move on to the next moment. The characters do not discuss the sexual act; it is never mentioned. They discuss Bud’s guilt and Daisy’s death. Bud must confess his guilt at having not saved her, and for having misread Daisy’s rape as an ordinary sexual act with other men. In back-to-back scenes, Vincent Gallo frames the shell of a sexual act – first the oral sex for the viewer, then the flashbacks of Daisy’s rape for Bud. Both acts are stripped of their meanings – pleasure and eroticism – and re-contextualized through Gallo’s mise-en-scène as Bud’s guilt and loneliness.

Vincent Gallo does not use the existing landscape as background – instead he foregrounds the dead Populuxe-era fantasy landscape through the windshield, just as he foregrounds the white walls of the Best Western when he is on the bed with Daisy. The viewer witnesses one of the most original presentations of the American landscape in film history. “It’s all so familiar it feels as if the images have been plucked from your brain, and yet I can’t recall any movie that has gotten the look of America that this one has. When Bud drives down the Vegas strip (Fig. 8), instead of the usual overhead montage of gaudy neon movies usually give us to denote Vegas, Gallo shoots the scene in broad daylight from a driver’s perspective” (Taylor).

The viewer internalizes every road sign with Bud. Throughout the entirely silent cross-country drive (Bud neither listens to the radio nor flips stations), the road sign text becomes cinematic dialogue for the viewer: Dialogue and Object. Gallo forces and screens a pluralistic nature of text throughout the film that is inherent to the existing landscape, but constructed by him for specific communicative functions in the film. We have the systematized
placement of U.S. road signs with Gallo’s systematic film editing. “For artist Ed Ruscha, the landscape is a distinctly American one: drive anywhere in the United States, and the signs and billboards are as much a part of the scenery as the deserts, mountains, plains… These signs do much more than locate us in our external world, we internalize them; they become part of who we are” (Weston). From the opening image of the film, Bud has internalized the American road and its iconography.

Gallo’s thoughtful cinematography conveys Bud’s internalizing every passing sign, structure, and landscape. “Words become objects: and as objects, there is little doubt that they are lifted from that environment in which all words compete for maximum impact, which is that of the driver looking at road-signs… What is glimpsed through the windshield is quickly forgotten, only to reappear, perhaps in a predictable way, elsewhere” (Berggruen and Weston ii). Throughout the cross country drive, Gallo chooses to focus the camera on the background of the image rather than on Bud’s face. Gallo does not want the viewer to see Bud. Studying Bud’s face does not provide the viewer any visual information or psychology. By focusing the camera on the background of the image through the film - mountain ranges, gas stations, fast food restaurants – the viewer is forced into Bud’s perspective. Gallo’s cinematographic selections become psychology. The repetition of Bud’s drive never appears to get him any closer to his destination. The road signs, acting as dialogue, only communicate to Bud and the viewer just how far away the Best Western is. As Ebert stated, “you can’t understand where Gallo has arrived unless you know where he started” (“Brown”).

The Brown Bunny is a “gentle, lyrical road movie” and a complex architecture of cinema based on existing forms and new cinematic vocabulary. Describing how the film was shot cannot be easily communicated. The camera, while static, is not presenting Bud as the main character. Bud is not the visual epicentre of the film. Bud is part of a system that combines actor, story, theory, postmodern architecture, pornography, and, most importantly, a car-oriented visual motif. Like Populuxe-era products, transportation was the chief formal influence (Hine 76). Bud driving the van is a cinematic device used to present the grand design of the landscape. If Gallo views Bud as he does himself driving across the landscape, then the viewer would understand Bud differently from the reviews:

Around Four Corners…I started noticing shapes and forms that I’d seen a hundred times. I’ve done the trip a hundred times. The energy and the lifespan of those objects, of those forms, of those things are so much bigger and broader than my understanding of them. Bigger than my interpretation, judgment, response, and emotions. So much more. And I suddenly remembered my insignificance… The perception of the same thing can change. So in fact, perception is what’s changing most (Gallo).

It is the use of existing forms that Gallo employs: road signs, motels, and pornography. Bud does not impact those forms; they impact him because they continually change while remaining the same. Viewing Daisy as a form, an apparition, not a human, but a ghost, impacts Bud. Daisy affects Bud...
more in her death than she does in life. In the flash-back scenes during Bud’s post-ejaculate breakdown, Gallo shows Daisy being gang-raped at a party while Bud watches. Bud does not know she is being raped. Bud believes she is cheating on him with other men. Bud turns and walks away. By doing so, Bud lets Daisy die. He does not save her. Does Bud cry while Daisy is being raped? No. Does he break down like he does in the motel room? No, because Bud only communicates with passing signs from the inside of a vehicle: transient and temporary spaces and symbols with electronic icons and signs that speak boldly and simply, with images that possess an immediate future and immediate past – never a present, signs recognized at 70mph that when read together over the course of the drive read like “a single long dada phrase or as small, interlinked sections of an epic poem” (Codrescu 5). Signs overpower the architecture to the point where the buildings are made smaller and the signs larger in order to communicate with the traveller. It is a moving encounter between driver and environment. Venturi and Scott Brown wrote “on the highway the landscape becomes a series of events, more or less insistent, which swim into the driver’s ken and rapidly out again to be succeeded by the next” (Venturi and Brown 12). Those series of events are the system of The Brown Bunny on the highway and in the motel room. For Bud, they are fantasies which “swim into the driver’s ken” which explains why he returns to impotent encounters with three women and why he jumps so quickly from oral sex to mental breakdown, because there are more oral sex fantasies and mental breakdowns in the future. “There is a system, with alterations within an otherwise ordered field, that produces steady yet rhythmic repetition and syncopated alternation of identical forms, enabling the coexistent and contradictory effects of distraction and attention” (Vinegar 113).

The Brown Bunny frames a narrative through the bug-splattered windshield of a fantastical, yet boring, cross-country journey. For Gallo, the motel provides the perfect transient space where the cinematic process of resolution can begin. But Gallo views cinematic resolution as part and the start of a process, and not a definite end. As a result, the final freeze frame of The Brown Bunny (Fig. 9) evidences that Bud has found no closure, that Bud will see Daisy again and again in motels in Los Angeles. Gallo’s film ends, but has no conclusion.

Notes
1. This article analyzes the theatrical and DVD release. The Cannes version was never released.
2. While this article references Learning From Las Vegas 1972, it actually quotes the 1977 Revised Edition which was created by the authors as a cheaper and more portable version with fewer pictures. The 1972 First Edition is used to emphasize the impact of the text at the time of publication.
3. Gallo has directed two other feature films, Promises Written in Water (2010) and April (2013). Neither has been released.
4. It must be noted that the Best Western in Los Angeles is actually a hotel not a motel. However, that particular hotel evidences design and characteristics appropriate to the “motor-hotel.” Also, The Brown Bunny DVD case refers to it as a motel.
Works Cited


