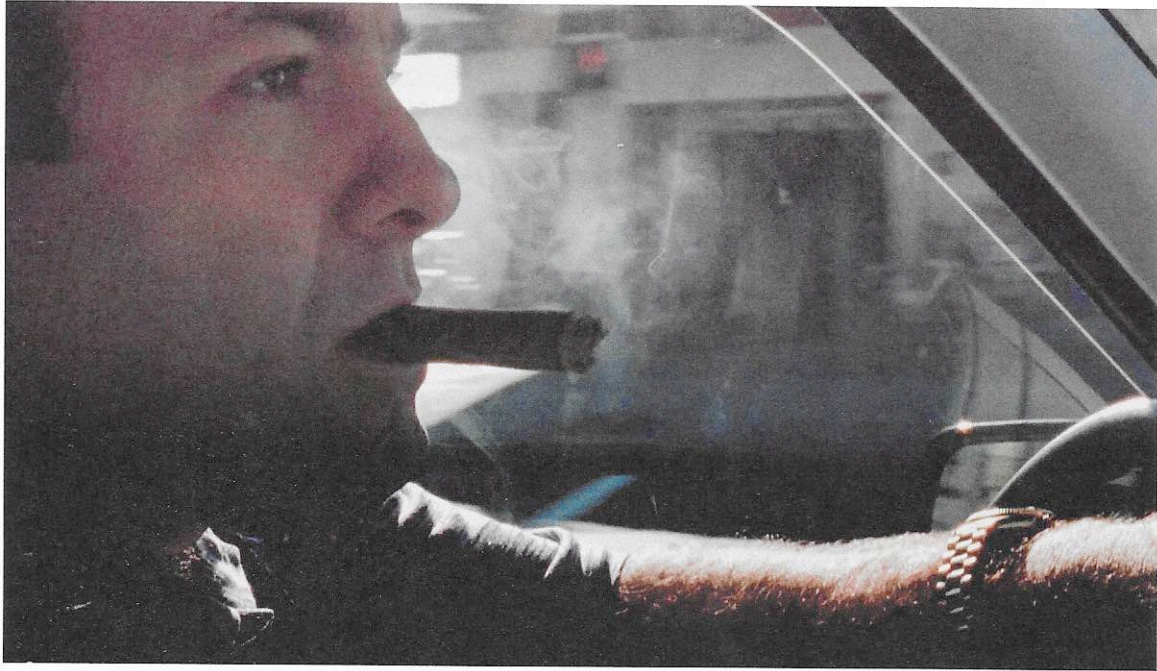


lore
of the
turnpike

Looking at America
through the lens of this
pop culture icon

Text by
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The Sopranos, 1997-2007, film still. Written, produced, and directed by David Chase.

You have to drive through us at some point.

— Jason Jones, “Garden Statement,”
The Daily Show with Jon Stewart

True, but if you're on the New Jersey Turnpike, you have to stop at tolls. You'll gas up at a rest area and find yourself choosing between bad and worse options in a food court. And unless you're comatose, you'll look out the window of whatever you're riding in.

Only a highway engineer (or a comedian) could think of the Turnpike just as a way to get from point A to B, or as 148 miles of asphalt untainted by anything around it. The comedian's joke works because of what we're driving past. The engineer is

only concerned with what we're driving on. (Apparently, the people who work at the Turnpike Authority see it as completely separate from its surroundings.)

As myopic as it seems, the engineer's isolationism grows out of a larger cultural zeitgeist: utopian modernism, an aesthetic liberated from stories. Painting was color on canvas; sculpture was bent metal. This was an article of faith among artists like the sculptor Tony Smith. Flashback to the early 1950s when Smith took his first ride on the still unfinished Turnpike:

It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the

landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights. This drive ... did something for me that art had never done.

—“Talking with Tony Smith,” *Artforum*, Dec. 1966

The euphoric Smith believes the Turnpike has no cultural precedent, no other points of reference. Yet, he can't help calling out the “stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights.”

The culture of the road was destined to be overtaken by the culture of the roadside. Not roadside attractions, but banal agglomerations of exit ramps, frontage roads, rest stops, refineries, swamps, and shipping containers. Turnpike-specific and Turnpike-adjacent, they populate the

lore of movies, television shows, poems, songs, and, yes, jokes, about New Jersey's infamous artery. Some are set even a mile or more away from the Turnpike proper. But since they share the same psycho-geography, I count them too.

Ask around and you'll be told that the Turnpike was the location of the scene from the *Godfather* (1972) where Clemenza says “Leave the gun, take the cannoli.” (It was in Liberty State Park.) For my part, I was sure that Woody Allen and Mia Farrow's fight in *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984) was shot off the Turnpike. (That was Morris Pesin Drive in Jersey City.) In both cases, and surely countless more, the common denominator is the Meadowlands. In fact, the Turnpike does cut through its swamps, ferrying the imagination to the underworld's buried bodies.

Being John Malkovich, 1999, film still. Directed by Spike Jonze; written by Charlie Kaufman.



The Turnpike's criminal bona fides would be cemented in 1999 by *The Sopranos*. It opens with New Jersey capo Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) driving out of the Lincoln Tunnel, getting on the Turnpike, paying his toll, and heading back to his fractious family, his therapist, and his fiefdom of strip joints, butcher shops, restaurants, and, no surprise, waste haulage. After watching those credits for eight searing seasons, I doubt the Turnpike, any more than the mob, can ever go legit. I will always see it through Tony's windshield.

Crime becomes punishment in *Being John Malkovich*. Released the same year as *The Sopranos'* debut, the film plays with trope of the Turnpike-as-dumping ground—not for gangsters, but for office workers who buy tickets to spend 15 minutes inside of real-life actor John Malkovich. Tellingly, each journey begins in a tunnel and ends with ticket holders spit out in front of the Turnpike's toxic gas works, wannabes banished to purgatory.

Of course, a crucial piece of New Jersey's identity is that it's *not* New York. For Bruce Springsteen, the opera's on the Turnpike and the ballet's a fight in an alley. Although, he's hardly the only bard to throw a gauntlet down to Gotham. That most of us know the Boss but not poet James Baker Hall makes "The Poet Finds an Ephemeral Home in a Truck Stop on the New Jersey Turnpike, ca. 1970" that much more poignant.

*Just look out there in the lot, dozens
of trailer trucks, each of them—
covered with road dirt; monumental
cartes blanches is what they are!
I see myself out there zapped up
like a billboard painter writing poems
on the dirty sides of the those trailers
...*

*Just think of all the people who'll read
that!*

*Abstract expressionism in the Chase
Manhattan,*

*and now poetry, poetry! On M&M
trucks—*

...

Words on a page can't compete with Abstract Expressionist canvases in Manhattan. Except in this revenge fantasy, they do: the Turnpike's trucks are going to publish the poet on an epic scale, and far more democratically. Better yet, the mobility underwritten by the Turnpike would secure his status as the people's poet, read by folks all across America. If only.

America. Looking for it on the New Jersey Turnpike in 1968. You'll find it in Simon and Garfunkel's sweetly mournful song about two teenagers on a Greyhound bus looking for the dubious promise of an America, whose ideals were being eroded by racism, poverty, and war. Even now, it makes me want to weep. Yet, they "all come to look for America." They still do. In this version of its story, the Turnpike is an equal-opportunity conveyor belt for dreamers, most of them on their way to somewhere else.

But what about those who stayed—and who come to stay? The Turnpike goes through stretches of New Jersey that are home to multiple generations who remained close to their port of entry—my grandparents among them. Their dreams may have been circumscribed by the demands of just getting on with things, but they were no less ambitious in their search for America. It's just that they bequeathed the luxury of ruminating on those ambitions to their children. Such is the pragmatism and poetry that continues to shape the New Jersey Turnpike, where for the price of a toll we can "all go to look at America." }