

# Outsiders in America

The Films of Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmusch

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The following are extracts from a Masters of Art assignment

“The original title of Kafka’s *Amerika* was *The Lost One*.”

- Wim Wenders

## Introduction

Jim Jarmusch and Wim Wenders use the debate that an outsider's sensibility brings forward a more provocative, therefore truer, form of American cinema. Specific cross-examinations of their respective works *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Paris, Texas* (both released in 1984) show similarities in narrative structures, character concepts and general authorial imprints that epitomize specific forms of otherness within an American landscape. Each film deals with dislocation (often perceived as a nomadic search for one's family or roots) antagonism (when both the traditional European outsider is amalgamated with the postmodern) and the search for true cultural identity (seemingly problematic within an environment steeped in a desire for conformity). This paper will attempt to investigate these ideas and their pertinence to the cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, and his philosophies throughout the 1980's.

"The country is without hope. Even its garbage is clean, its trade lubricated, its traffic pacified. The latent, the lacteal, the lethal – life is so liquid, the signs and messages are so liquid, the bodies and the cars so fluid, the hair so blond and the soft technologies so luxuriant, that a European dreams of death and murder, of suicide motels, of orgies and cannibalism to counteract the perfection of the ocean, of the light, of that insane ease of life, to counteract the hyperreality of everything here."

- Jean Baudrillard

One

Wenders and Jarmusch:

European Outsider and Outsider from Within

excerpts

### 3. Strangers in a Strange Land: Entering the Fiction of America

“In reality, you do not, as I had hoped, get any distance on Europe from here (America). You do not acquire a fresh angle on it. When you turn around, it has quite simply disappeared. The point is that there is really no need to adopt a critical stance on Europe from here. That is something you can do in Europe. And what is there to criticize, which has not been criticized a thousand times before? What you have to do is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction. It is, indeed, on this fictive basis that it dominates the world. Even if every detail of America were insignificant, America is something that is beyond us all ...”

- Jean Baudrillard

As Baudrillard enters this “fiction of America” so do the central protagonists in *Paris, Texas* and *Stranger Than Paradise* (each character a celluloid version of Wenders and Jarmusch themselves). Eva in *Stranger* is a Hungarian immigrant while Travis in *Paris* is a mute loner returning from a four-year trek across the Mexican wilderness. As a result, each leading character is aiming to transcend from fact into fiction, from past *actuality* into a cinematic *reality*. It is also valuable to note how Wenders and Jarmusch allow both individuals to be introduced by a fellow European, reaffirming the status or rank of the Old World within “insignificant” America. In *Paris*, the German born actor Bernard Wichi (Doctor Ulmer) constitutes the linkage between the European bourgeois consciousness and the less restrained AMERIKA receptivity. Doctor Ulmer is ostensibly one final signifier from Wenders’ previous oeuvre; he is a pseudo-American at

once belonging yet removed, not only introducing Travis to a Baudrillardian view, but also escorting Wenders on his most ambitious (to date, in 1984) archaeological wanderings. Therefore, in one respect, Wenders discards his German awareness within the opening minutes of *Paris, Texas*, throwing himself into the universe of Americana and its alluring alienation.

The Travis character is presented to the New World as an anomaly, in much the same way as Jarmusch presents Eva as an anachronism. Firstly, the news of each protagonist's arrival is sent via modern telecommunication, metaphorically signifying the transference from past into future; in *Paris, Texas*, Walt (Travis' brother, played by Dean Stockwell) receives a call on his cellular that his mute sibling has been found, while Eva's cousin Willie answers a call informing him of his relative's inopportune arrival. These devices reiterate the future society as being efficiently superior to the outsiders' modes of communication (Travis cannot speak, while Eva knows very little English), magnifying their incapability and reliance upon more established European Americans (Doctor Ulmer is German, Aunt Lotte is Hungarian) to initiate them into this new order.

Wenders has stated:

"The FUTURE. It can't help being frightening. Science fiction novels and films play off man's fear of the future and his wild curiosity to know what will happen. When I arrive in America I soon learn what will happen, how much easier and quicker and meaningless 'communication with others' will be; how what is strange will become familiar and how what is still familiar will become strange; how much more abandoned and tougher children will be; how much quicker you'll be judged; how much more anonymous you'll soon be, and how much freer, therefore, to do what you want, and how much less free to do it differently from everyone else. How much more lonely!"



Both Travis and Eva are subjected to such “FUTURE(S)” and therefore suffer the cost of losing their previous identities. This impression of America as time travel appears to be one of Wenders’ many resurfacing motifs. During the 1970’s, he perceived his own cross Atlantic journeys as travelling through present to future, seeing America as a primitive society yet paradoxically obsessed with more imminent life interests (social trends such as recreational activities and self-improvement programmes). Wenders confrontation with the possibilities of what could happen in Europe eventually form the base foundation for many of his later moral/technological inspired concerns, evident in *Until the End of the World* (1991) and *The End of Violence* (1997).

Subsequently, this journey of transference forces both Travis and Eva to be subjected to reconstructions, where not only psychological individualism is rebuked or at least sanitized, but superficialities are emphatically encouraged. “You should dress the way people dress here” is one such Willie-ism in *Stranger*. When Eva’s own choice of an androgynous look is perceived as unsuitable, she is altered into an all-American girl wearing a pretty white dress. She agrees in deference, but only temporarily, eventually reverting to her truest self once out of Willie’s gaze. In *Paris*, the somnambulist Travis is also liable to Walt’s impositions, agreeing to wear a checkered lumberjack shirt and to shave off his beard. He too then rebels, ultimately trading his new cowboy boots for his brother Walt’s battered pair (the Old World claiming power over the New). The epitome of such a reform is then eventually played out as Travis searches a magazine to find an example of the ‘true father’ from which to emulate. In this scene, a Mexican housekeeper takes on the role of authority figure (or director) explaining how a “rich father” acts, to aid Travis in formulating a new sense of self. By wearing a white hat and three-piece-suit, Travis believes that he has successfully transmogrified into a character of considerable worth. Most notable is how the housekeeper’s didacticism stems from her own belief in such cultural symbolism where image is everything. The white cowboy hat and suit are emblems of prosperity, success, Republicanism

(possibly Reaganism?), in other words, a Hollywood cliché as lifestyle blueprint, an escape from a more prosaic existence.

Such ideas of renewal and following rejection are also tried in *Stranger*, as to personify Europeaness is frowned upon and viewed as an inferior state of being. When Willie is casually asked by Eddie “I thought you were American?” Willie’s defensive retort is “Hey, I’m as American as you are!” Willie’s polemic response illustrates his awkwardness within what he believes constitutes as the American majority (Celtic/Anglo Saxon/Protestant) and is ashamed of his lineage. The fact that the character had Americanized his name to ‘Willie’ instead of retaining the Hungarian ‘Bela’ only adds further weight to this need to disregard the past identity.

As the eternal cynic, Jarmusch portrays the outsider as a being incapable of disguising itself to fit the average standard, as it must stay true to its own inimitability. Wenders plays a similar game with Travis, who remains a Euro/American mix, someone who is unable to be successfully amalgamated into the acceptable mainstream. Hence, *Paris, Texas* provides an ongoing theme interweaving cultural combinations. Both Travis and Walt’s French wife Anne (played by actress Aurore Clement) embody such dualities. For Wenders, Anne is a remnant, the voice of reason and a throwback to the homeland and its compassion. Her calming presence and gentle nurturing of Travis (the lost stranger) realigns his psychological state, which in turn eases him into the social comfort of her and Walt’s lower middle class life. It could therefore be said that Travis was first brought into the world by the American father (Walt) who gave back Travis his skills of communication (the power of language), yet he was fostered by the French mother, thereby gaining the ability to express emotion and independence. This appears more pertinent when taking into account Travis’ statement that his father had always wanted a French wife, continuing the metaphorical relevance of the films geographically disconnected title. Even though Travis is portrayed as being of Spanish descent (his mother’s maiden name was Sequine), his father’s

dissatisfaction of having a Spanish spouse resulted in him attempting to reinvent her as being of French extraction (French appearing more sophisticated than the more common Spanish ancestry to the aspirational American male). This emphasis on the importance of Europe as a higher state is further illustrated around twenty minutes into the film, in a well-delivered scene where Travis recalls how his father would joke with friends, describing how he met his wife “in Paris ... but leaving a pause before he said the word ... Texas.” Travis patronizes the memory of his father by saying “he’d always laugh real hard” indicating Travis’ sophisticated advancement from his father’s middlebrow humour.

Adding to this group of multicultural signifiers is also the character of Jane (played by German actress Natasha Kinski) who is chosen to play a Texan. This exemplifies Wenders’ continual forays into personalizing or re-Americanizing his texts, allowing Europeanism(s) to form an integral part of his cinescapes, no matter how subliminal. One specific scene fully exemplifies the quintessential Wenders cultural fusion: a spray-painted mural showing The Statue Of Liberty with African American physiognomy. Here, the camera pans across the wall, noticing the words ‘RACE, BLOOD, LAND’ as the actors recite their dialogues in the foreground. The authors Robert Phillip Kolke and Peter Beicken describe this shot as including three elements of Wenders’ hybrid connections; the African American Statue Of Liberty, the Native American and the American neo-Nazi slogan; all signifiers combining as an eclectic collage of socio-political distortion. Therefore, in one respect, it could be surmised that Wenders is saying that to integrate such cultures is questionable, as their combination only serves to weaken each philosophy’s individual language. It could also be argued that Wenders uses such examples to comment on the imperialism of American culture, its globalized capitalist presence and the subsequent loss of self for the affected. The African American features on The Statue Of Liberty may be an ironic comment on the inaccessibility of the American Dream in regards to marginalized groups, but Wenders is more often than not firmly in line with Baudrillard discourse, as it is most probable that he

allows this mesh of multinational signs to be portrayed in a purely superficial context. Here, surface is far more material than political doctrine, resulting merely in a hollow collage, providing a confusion of communication, thereby forming yet another part of the simulacrum. This meaningless convergence in Wim Wenders work appears less subtle within Jim Jarmusch's narratives. His usual responses are to revel in the disorder created by interconnecting East and West, Anglo and Asian and to satirize such situations, as for Jarmusch, the ethnic immigrant is held in high esteem, mainly due to his rejection of bourgeois affinities. Consequently, the characters choose disenchantment to portray underlying severity, yet always with a hint of the absurd in their bearings. Here, it is worth noting Marcus G. Singer's opinion:

"I wonder how many of you have noticed the distinctive way in which an American handles his knife and fork when eating, and how it differs from the way in which people in Europe do. But that complicated and genteel way of handling knife and fork is a characteristically and may be a distinctively American trait; it constitutes one decisive break, in a nation of immigrants, with the traditions of the old country."

Despite adhering to cultural generalizations, this does fall in with how Jarmusch views his hinterland. Thankfully, he employs an irony that enables the erudite viewer to notice both the characters comicalities and yet empathize with their core meanings. The above statement from Singer is from his introductory essay to *The Context of American Philosophy (1985)*. In this, he also assumes that "a cultural generalization is a proposition to the effect that a certain trait, property or activity is characteristic, typical, distinctive or representative of a certain society, culture, or cultural group." This is firmly Jarmusch territory, enabling him to critique the marginalized characters with precision. A prime example is in *Stranger*, where the newcomer Eva is instilled with an old world sensitivity, thereby owning an awareness of the American repetitious, regressive and derivative. Even during the opening minutes, she coolly observes how her traditions have

become Americanized, being particularly disenchanted at Willie's ritualistic consumption of a TV dinner ("This is the way we eat in America"). This reinforces her disdain for a society that places the mass-produced item and the televised image before more respectable acts of familial or communal habits. Jarmusch continually takes his characters through such introductory realizations, adding sardonic relief to many micro rituals. In a later scene, Willie buys Eva and his friend Eddie sunglasses while in Florida, declaring; "Now we look like tourists". The protagonists are openly self-deprecating, fully aware of their own vulnerability in adopting expected roles. "To be a tourist you must act like one" and they willingly participate within such a masquerade. This act shows Eva allowing such vacuous customs to invade her previously conservative tastes, hinting at her official acceptance within the deteriorating society and possible loss of what is most valuable to her.

"People say my films are optimistic, but I have a very deep pessimism that maybe comes from being American. America is about objectifying everything and making it marketable, about greed and profit. I react against this by making films about displaced or marginal characters and the seemingly inconsequential *little* things they do"

- Jim Jarmusch

Jarmusch does depict his characters within mundane, insignificant narratives, so in this respect, it could be said that he counteracts the desire for throwing oneself into the wide-open spaces by making 'little films' about 'little people' in 'little places'. The fact that the state of Florida in *Stranger* is depicted as a non-descript motel room rather than a panoramic ideal is a valid example.

Baudrillard states:

"In this country (America) it is not the highest virtue, nor the heroic act, that achieves fame, but the common nature of the least significant destiny. There is plenty for everyone, then, since the more conformist the system as a whole becomes, the more millions of individuals there

are who set apart by some tiny peculiarity. The slightest vibration in a statistical model, the tiniest whim of a computer are enough to bathe some piece of abnormal behaviour, however banal, into a fleeting glow of fame”.

Jarmusch's beings live by such language. His world of disaffected loners surviving stylishly within a timeless realm, (more a state of mind than a place) each aspire to the American Dream, yet are paradoxically non-aspirational, incapable of a pragmatic outlook, forced to exist by their own low paid menial work and petty crimes. Rather than aiming for the 'pursuit of happiness', they prefer the reactionary 'aiming for despair'. As in Baudrillard, "A European dreams of death and murder, of suicide motels ...". Jarmusch imbues his work with awkward, quirky, often villainous immigrants, second generation Americans or foreign visitors, all incapable of personifying Anglo/American sensibilities and associative factors. And yet, however forsaken they may appear they welcome such an existence. Jarmusch, like Baudrillard, believes that these Americans should be left alone, to savour the naivety, the kitsch-ness of their lives, everything that makes America more advanced than any rival continent.

Like Jarmusch, Wenders beautifully subverts such Americanisms through his characters' similar idiosyncrasies. One such moment is worth examining with the main protagonist Travis; having bought a plot of land (through mail order), he takes a photograph of the site with his own choice of composition, which shows little to do with traditionally acceptable aesthetic standards. The picture is bleak, depicting a barren wasteland, however, the image underlies great significance to the character, as it is the area in which he believes he was conceived. Gaylyn Studlar's review of *Paris, Texas* describes this shot as "a place captured in a battered photo, which attains a higher reality in the mind" and it is wholly germane as Travis places meaning onto empty surfaces, taking a reactionary position against how Americans wish to represent themselves and their environment:

“... everywhere signs already indicate the points where you should stop and look and take a picture of the view. The camera set-ups are predetermined so that millions will take the pictures which will confirm the picture that already exists”

- Wim Wenders

In saying this, Wenders enjoys examining uniformity and its most banal manifestations. The admittance that his expectations of AMERIKA eventually led to dissatisfaction, mirror both Travis and Eva’s estrangement and eagerness to find *the behind* within the superficialities.

Both Wenders and Jarmusch relish commenting on this lack of underlying moral or ethical substance, or the idolization of nothingness. However, in their eyes, this is not only to be found in the deserts, but in a systemized society that undermines it. This lends itself more to Godardian rhetoric than to a Baudrillardian perception. Godard’s line that “Americans have a simplicity that creates depth” pre-empts the concept of an emptiness that becomes America’s reality. In line with this, Fredric Jameson defines it as a fatalistic depthlessness, providing a ‘weakening of historicity’ that ultimately offers a ‘waning effect’.

“My sense is that this is essentially a visual culture, wired for sound – but one where the linguistic element ... is slack and flabby, and not to be made without ingenuity, daring, and keen motivation.”

- Fredric Jameson

Wenders adds:

“... on the first visit to America, I came back staggered from what I had seen on my first journey ... They’d all been there, the freeways, the big signs and the motels, the gas stations and the supermarkets, but there

had been nothing else! ... I'd expected something "behind", I had looked, but found nothing ... nothing 'behind'."

The fact that Wenders had fashioned his earlier work around this 'broken promise' shows that his hoping for a personal epiphany was founded on a falsehood. He, more so than Jarmusch, is relentless in his examinations of this failure, constantly attempting to find what the nouvelle vague appeared to discover in their inflated reviews of Hollywood B movies. As in the *Easy Rider* promotional campaign from 1969, "They went looking for America and found nothing there", Wenders had to learn through experience that the land of opportunity was a myth perpetrated by a capitalist society insistent on the marketing of fabrication and illusion.



Two

Alienation in The New World

## 1. The American Road Meets The American Movie

It is reasonable to assume that all American films have various manifestations of the American Dream inherent within them. Even reactionary works projecting the antithesis of the myth, still hold it as an omnipresent spectre; in this way, the film and the dream cannot be separated. This disillusionment is the fate that befalls the principle characters in *Paris* and *Stranger*, as their romantic preconceptions of what constitutes the American Dream/Road is tinged with dissatisfaction, whether it is New York, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Texas or Miami. However, the characters unremitting willingness to seek out a more reachable nirvana are the filmmakers' acknowledgements to American positivity and idealism.

In *Stranger*, the American Dream of an immigrant's transplant from Europe to the United States, then from the east to the west coast by car, forms the main catalyst, just as *Paris, Texas* adheres to the road movie archetype (the search for reconciliation). Here, The Road is of momentous cultural significance to Travis, as the freeways of LA form the antithesis of the Roman infrastructures of Europe. In one scene, Travis' son Hunter delivers the hackneyed Californian line "No one walks, everyone drives." By this, he not only affirms his own cultural identity (one specific ideology from one particular society) but also attacks Travis' 'European' sensibility (the preference of covering land by foot). Similarly, in a later scene, Walt places his ambivalent foster child Hunter behind the wheel of the family's parked car in their garage. The dialogue plays out as follows:

WALT

Where are you going?

HUNTER

Driving.

WALT  
Where?

HUNTER  
Just driving.  
(slight pause)  
Nobody walks.

Here, the boy adopts both the biological father's role of a kinetic eagerness for freedom and self-expression, while in contrast, opposing Travis' four years wanderings by foot (a peculiar notion to a Californian child). Wenders shows that the son is the 'American', invested with a passion for speed, while his natural father remains stoical, fixed in a less technologically obsessed and anti-materialistic past. The distinction between past and future also resonates within the car journey episodes in *Stranger Than Paradise* as Jarmusch's characters' Willie and Eddie now become abnormalities positioned awkwardly within such a scenario constructed to indicate brash and colourful optimism. For Jarmusch, the car is both a literal and metaphorical vehicle, a laughable chance to allow such immovable characters to progress, or at least attempt a transference from a dull life to one dictated to them through the omnipresent advertising promoting the American Dream. Yet Jarmusch persists in using a monochrome dreariness to de-enhance the Whitmanesque spaces as portrayed in the black and white cinematography of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). They therefore remain claustrophobic, unable to completely fall for such a celluloid myth. In Jarmusch's *Night on Earth* (1992), the uninteresting car journeys (slow moving taxi rides) are actually seen as major moments, usually excluded from Hollywood narratives (where the cab is always a form of connection to move quickly from A to B). Here, Jarmusch sees it as a chance to provide insight into the often-unseen interludes, yet again emphasizing the need for 'little people' occupying 'little spaces.'

In both *Stranger* and *Paris*, the automobile is fundamental to both story and plot. In *Stranger* it propels the narrative, forcing the characters to confront new situations that would be impossible within the confines of their established routines. This is also true in Wenders case, particularly in the homage to the Hollywood car chase that makes its appearance in the second half of *Paris*. Upon Travis and Hunter realizing that his wife (and Hunter's biological mother) is driving away in a red\* car, a tailing ensues along the Houston highways. The young son is the navigator, placed in the back of the open truck, communicating via walkie-talkie to his father behind the wheel. Here, the Californian Child is *ahead* of Travis, more comfortable in the FUTURE than the adult, confident that technology is a thinking process that should be embraced for more effective results.

The car is thus the first of three signifiers indicating future disappointment. Even though mother and son are finally brought together, the family's full reconnection is left unresolved, as Travis rejects the role of husband and paternal figure. This division echoes *Stranger Than Paradise's* characters' final separation, as for Wenders and Jarmusch, companionship on the open road is often ephemeral, a momentary attempt to 'live the dream', but one always done in vain. In *Stranger*, each person takes a separate direction by the end of the film (as do the three jailbird companions in *Down by Law*) showing Jarmusch's, like Wenders', use of aloneness and internalization as a romantically tragic state of being. Here, *The Road* does not successfully forward one into the FUTURE, as the characters' miscalculations, subordinations and overall incapacity to forge connections makes this unobtainable. This is a regular keynote for Wenders and Jarmusch, demonstrating that partnerships are never cemented, and so aloneness is the only option for the American dissident. Their status will not change without mutability; therefore it is a relentless will to remain an outsider that gives these characters their unique fervor. Like their fictional people, neither Wenders nor Jarmusch attempt to lose their minoritarian positions. In other words, they will remain steadfast in not changing ones role in society to become part of the acceptable majority.

\*It is important to note here that Wenders uses red as an omen, preempting the inevitable fact that Jane has become a prostitute (she also wears a red sweater) and that Travis' indifference will disallow them to be reunited.

At the time of writing, Wim Wenders latest film *The End of Violence* (1997) addresses the writer/directors preoccupation with the infringement of technology on a society incapable of resisting its complex repercussions. This has been addressed in various ways throughout his previous seventies and eighties work, but never so sharply as the scene in *Paris* that depicts Walt, Anne, Travis and Hunter watching their younger selves on a reel of Super 8. The home movie shows typical themes such as broad smiles, overly conscious actions and the occasional naturalistic candid moment, all portraying Travis and Jane as a loving couple. In this, Wenders uses the projected image not only as signifier, (incorrectly portraying Travis' former life as a romantic effigy), but as a synthetic catalyst, as these visions actuate Travis to recapture a reality, that for him, shows his previous life as a dream (therefore cinematic) fantasy. It wields much the same power for Hunter, who later mutters to his adopted mother "that's not her (referring to his birth mother on celluloid) ... that's only her in a movie ... a long time ago ... in a galaxy far, far away." Here, the subjective Hunter is more incredulous, more informed of the void between actuality and its Second Nature conditioning. The line taken from *Star Wars* (1977) reaffirms the boy's discernment of Hollywood culture and how it forms an integral fraction within both his psyche and physical environment (as his bedroom is not only littered in *Star Wars* memorabilia, but his home city of Los Angeles has both the artistic and technological means to establish Industrial Light and Magic). As a result, Hunter is once again the child of California, and for that matter, a global child, from which all future inspirations will be taken, imbued by an innate awareness of the superculture. Baudrillard's rhetorical line "How can anyone be European?" could therefore be Hunter's most fitting dictum.

In accordance with the Super 8mm scene, Baudrillard would firmly agree with Walter Benjamin's belief that we exist within a global society in which senses are numbed by technological reproduction. "What withers in the age of simulation is lived experience and its aura." As for Baudrillard, technology has undeniably heightened our perceptions of the material world (such as landscapes evoking a déjà vu culled from the experience of having previously watched a celluloid counterfeit). The post-structuralist has stated how everything is destined to reappear as a simulation: photographs of landscapes as our True reality. This concept of regarding the reproduction as 'real' is one of Wenders' resounding thematic concerns. Jane (played by Kinski) is not only reduced to a home movie image for the first two thirds of the narrative, but is initially introduced as a photo-booth print strip (in a scene in which Walt recollects the appearance of his brother and sister-in-law). This alludes to Wenders' earlier work *Alice in the Cities* (1974) portraying the girl taking out a photo-booth print showing herself and Phillip (her new guardian) together. Her reliance on such an image reassures the girl that their relationship is 'real', or that it contains a filmic sense of actuality, as for Alice, everyday banality cannot interfere within such cinematic illusions. Therefore, she would no doubt describe it as being "Phillip and myself" rather than "a photograph of Phillip and myself". Unlike Hunter in *Paris*, she is a German child with the outsider's unknowingness, less advanced as her American relative, therefore worshipping the postmodern, oblivious to its power.

"... as super-America, California stands out as the absolute antithesis of authentic Europe ... from Hollywood to disco-pap, from ET to Star Wars ... from criminality as a form of psychoanalysis to television as an instrument of despotism, California has set itself up as the world centre of the simulacrum and the inauthentic, as the absolute synthesis of 'cool Stalinism'

- Jean Baudrillard

Therefore, Wenders and Baudrillard's perceptions may be more astutely heightened than those perceived (or unseen) by the insider, due to their previous European internments. Wenders employs this well, instilling his wide-eyed wonderment within Travis. Consequently, it could be said that Walt is Wender's 'insider' (his occupation is that of a billboard artist, epitomizing Baudrillard's America of advertising men creating an endless Second Nature). This is the America that Travis/Wenders perceives as religious edifice, "You wonder whether the whole world itself isn't just here to serve as advertising copy in some *other* world" is Baurillard's reflection on his science fictional country. These billboards are cinematic additions, wide movie vistas of desire, exalting not just a representation of the dream, but the dream itself. The 'regular guy' character of Walt (an antithesis to otherness) is less romantic towards such a miracle of obscenity, seemingly dismissive of his involvement in their creations. The journey from the desert to suburbia via a Californian highway (with Walt driving and Travis as passenger) plays out as follows:

TRAVIS

... What's your business?

WALT

I make billboard signs for advertising.

TRAVIS

Oh yeah. So you're the one who makes those. I love those. Some of 'em are beautiful.

WALT

... I'm not the only one who makes 'em, Trav'.

As a result, Travis actively recognizes the poetical within the phony, while the insider remains ignorant, even within his own environment.

It is reasonable to assume that for Wenders and Baudrillard otherness is not a state of physical or mental being but a description of America itself. In the text *America*, Baudrillard makes the entire country seem like 'the other', taking pride in his elitism. In this respect, America is the alien, made strange by its narcissism, ecstasy and vulgarity. His patronizing claim that "it had to take Europeans to tell Americans who they were" could be regarded as an indictment of the American mind through customary European condescension.

He goes further:

"We in Europe possess the art of thinking, of analyzing things and reflecting on them. No one disputes our historical subtlety and conceptual imagination. Even the great minds across the Atlantic envy us in this regard."

- Jean Baudrillard

This is a very similar negativism to Godard, albeit with underlying 'compliment':

"The Americans who are so much more stupid when it comes to analysis, instinctively bring off very complex scripts. They also have a gift for the kind of simplicity that brings depth – in a little Western like *Ride the High Country*, for instance. If one tries to do something like that in France, one looks like an intellectual."

- Jean Luc Godard

However ill conceived, additional examinations can provide weight to such derisions. As this paper's aim is to bring forward all sides of the debate, an alternative view is always worth regarding.



In more literal terms, it can be argued that the United States' power structures were systematically derived from European models, more primarily, that the existing form of American government was largely founded upon a European principle (proof of the effectual influence of European society on America's social, political, intellectual and cultural orders). This emulation appears more relevant in regard to film studies, when the fact that Hollywood was established by a small contingent of Jewish refugees. The undeniable truth that the 20<sup>th</sup> century American cinematic myth was perpetrated by a group of émigrés, not by a polemic WASPish industry, cannot be easily dismissed, reaffirming the integral involvement of Europeans as both instigators and artists. The Cahiers Du Cinema critics in the late fifties and early sixties regarded such films as an underestimated art form, with Jean Luc Godard going as far as to say that American film did not enter "the history of art" until these texts were published. Here, the French critics were evaluating how Americans were being represented, with Godard mirroring Baudrillard by also stating that film 'people' were incompetent if they weren't American, indicating how profound it was to place an American before the lens. His rationale that "Americans have a mythical element that creates their own existence" purely refers to their involvement in cinema, therefore he too remains paradoxical in his view on the American character, being that they may be exceptional on screen or behind the camera lens, yet remain parochial in other areas.

Baudrillard on the Hollywood image:

"Most films, including many of the better ones, are made up from the same everyday romance; cars, telephones, psychology, make-up. They are purely and simply illustrations of the way of life. Advertising does just the same: it canonises the way of life through images, making the whole a genuinely integrated circuit. And if everything on television is, without exception, part of a low-calorie (or even no calorie) diet, then what good is it complaining about the adverts? By their worthlessness,

they at least help to make the programmes around them seem of a higher level.”

The notion that “(advertising) canonises the way of life through images” could be attributed to Godard’s view on American cinema and also to Wenders. This interest in the hyperreal, in which boundaries between media and reality cease to exist, is depicted as a continual series of paradigms in *Paris, Texas* from which the characters can either comment upon or choose to remain unaware. In this regard, Wenders views Hollywood entertainment as not only an advertisement for The Lifestyle but as a word more suited to totalitarianism, where not only does the ever increasing progression of technology and economic systems warrant trepidation, but the advocating of violence (through seemingly passive narratives) should be openly addressed. In this thinking, it is far too easy to link Wenders’ childhood mistrust of fascist imagery (in witnessing the LIE of cinema), as many other factors are involved in formulating this belief. However, at a stretch, it could be surmised that to include the aforementioned *Star Wars* so innocently within *Paris* gives an insight into his subtle aim to indicate an undesirable ‘depth’ beneath the superficialities. In many ways, it could also be said that the child who witnesses this hidden agenda becomes a vessel that vindicates such a ‘cinema of tyranny.’ This may be a little too extreme, however a relevant Madan Sarap quotation adds substance (with particular reference to Denzin) in the following statement, as does Wenders himself in the second:

“... these films often attempt to find safe regions of escape in the fantasies and nostalgia of the past. They search for new ways to present the unrepresentable, so as to break down the barriers that keep the profane out of the everyday. However, they take conservative political stances, while they valorize and exploit the radical social margins of society. Denzin concludes that as the world political system turns ever more violent and conservative, the need for cultural texts

which sustain the key elements of conservative political economy increases.”

- Madan Sarap

Wenders:

The more impossible and unthinkable wars become,  
world-wide ones in particular,  
the more evident world-wide entertainment will appear  
as the ‘continuation of politics by other means’.

A film like *Star Wars*, truly ‘entertaining’,  
makes that perfectly clear, not only  
because it’s about war, not only  
because it supplies new images of war  
and a new mythology of war  
to a whole generation of children ‘world-wide’.

In one respect it could be said that cultural interventionism was his savior as a child, but that the current form (in a more politically latent shape) is strongly disconcerting. Maybe, for many, such products as the science fiction fantasy are blank parody, but for Wenders, the Hollywood blockbuster offers a metaphorical dictatorship, a postmodern fairytale unaware of its own rightwing implications.

## 2. The Postmodern American Icon

As Wenders takes pains to dissect the omnipresent simulacra and the great western expanses, Jarmusch chooses not to comment, preferring to chronicle the importance of specific American postmodern iconography epitomized by film and rock stars. For example, in *Mystery Train* the streets of Memphis are of little significance, whereas the hotel rooms and their shrines to Elvis Presley are given full consideration. This is Jarmusch's nod to the other America of Baudrillard, a land where media/advertising saturation constitute a code to coerce the individual into consuming the meaningless fantasy and to not only believe, but to worship the message. A statement from Timothy Leary encapsulates this concern:

“How about all these R-rated films on cable beaming into our homes? Thirteen year olds watching naked bodies writhing away! How about the X-rated cassettes! Over a hundred porn movies a month coming onto the market! Middle class families screening hardcore on their home TV! And the Calvin Klein ads and the raunchy MTV clips! Madonna and Prince prancing around half bare ass. Never before in history has an adolescent generation been exposed to such wall-to-wall sexuality. And it's all hooked up to advertising and merchandising.”

Jarmusch also mirrors Leary's fear of the hyper-sexualized icon within the Japanese tourist scenario in this first segment of *Mystery*. This portrays a teenage sightseer attempting to persuade her ambivalent boyfriend that The King (Elvis) has an unearthly presence incarnated within the images of ancient Buddhist history, together with the Statue Of Liberty (as Wenders in *Paris*) and in a black and white photograph of Madonna. The girl's inability to differentiate the cultural and religious signification of the ancient relic and the simulated eroticism of the performer(s) is where the dangers lie. Here, Jarmusch comments on a global youth generation nurtured by nonsensicality. The Japanese girl's pilgrimage proves how far she will go

(both geographically and psychologically) to experience a reality that she has only perceived by transcultural mass media communication. Hence, her relationship with her partner is put to the test due to her adoration of a sexual image infused with the Second Nature: Elvis' portrait. It could also be argued that this Japanese character has become Americanized, particularly if we apply one of Baudrillard's paradoxically critical yet praising assumptions:

“Americans are a true utopian society, in their religion of the fait accompli in the naivety of their deductions, in their ignorance of the evil genius of things. You have to be utopian to think that in a human order, of whatever nature, things can be as plain and straightforward as that. All other societies contain within them some heresy or other, some dissidence, some kind of suspicion of reality, the superstitious belief in a force of evil and the possible control of that force by magic, a belief in the power of appearances. Here, there is no dissidence, no suspicion. The emperor has no clothes; the facts are there before us. As is well known, the Americans are fascinated by the yellow-skinned peoples in whom they sense a superior form of cunning, a higher form of that absence of truth which frightens them.”

- Jean Baudrillard

The girl's willingness to participate in such ingenuous acts apparently transforms her into what one could call Hunter's Antithesis; The Naïve American Child, one who is open to believe in whatever representations are placed before her. Contrastingly, and more alarmingly, in Baudrillard's condescension she is a “yellow-skinned” person presumably more “cunning” in her discernment than her less knowing US equivalents. Whichever way she may be perceived, Jarmusch could merely be indicating just how powerful the American icon is within a global context, confirming its imperialistic sway over the rational and authentic.

It is interesting to note that Jarmusch does not judge these visitors or impostors for their worshipping of the Second Nature icon. He thoroughly understands the importance of such false imagery and so conceives dialogues where they can express such obsessions. One example appears in the character by the name of Will Robinson in *Mystery Train (1989)*, who is subjected to a pre-Tarantino discussion on his relevance to cult show *Lost In Space*. This recurring motif was established in Jarmusch's *Permanent Vacation (1980)*, as the protagonist Aloysious Parker hopes one day to name his child 'Charlie'. Therefore, Jarmusch's characters need to have their self-identities or identities of others strengthened through relationships to popular culture, giving them a greater sense of self and reaffirming their belief that reinvention and The American dream are incompatibly linked. Alternatively, it must be said that Jarmusch may also fall into a paradoxical quagmire for portraying his characters as iconic symbols rather than three-dimensional beings. This is where his major fault lies. Film historian David Thomson has said, "the value of people was tenuous" on his films, and rightly so. We do not see ourselves in these fictions, and yet we still observe, taking humour and *schadenfreude* from their onscreen antics. The main issue therefore is that they do not resemble humans as we recognize ourselves, but are portrayed as mere snap-shots of characters at their most nonchalant (or coolest) and entertainingly ridiculous. It is this emphasis on the swagger, the choice of clothes and the tone of dissent in their voices that could be criticized for lacking the depth of a Renoir or a Kazan. It is also this execution of banality that resembles Baurillard's theories, possibly unintentionally, but still apparent in each and every well composed frame.

In essence, Wenders and Jarmusch each share an equal interest and dismay of postmodernism, hoping to find cinematic remnants of gravity within the farcical. However, there are still questions that need to be raised concerning the impact of such a philosophical stance when it transfers from academic debate into more dangerous spheres of information technology, national discourse and political narratives.

Three

The FUTURE  
(Postmodernism as Stealth Ideology)

## 1. Wenders Meets Baudrillard

Like Baudrillard, Wim Wenders forces the viewer to recognize the beauty in the banal, depicting America as a continual trail of symbols which, deliberately lacking in the bourgeois element, are worthy of our attention. In this regard, he alludes to the French philosopher's stance, finding his utopia within the "astral reflections" of Hollywood, Disneyland and other grotesquely associative delusions. This seemingly innocent perception may be construed as an intellectual attack on a specific form of Americanism, and here, Wenders and Baudrillard are highly compatible. Baudrillard's bearing as a dislocated critic apparently allows him the ability to both observe and rationalize these objects that he proclaims Americans are incapable of vindicating. However, it should also be noted that as well as Baudrillard disrespecting Europe's cultural imposition, he also abhors Europe's fetish for heritage (believing that modernity in Europe is heterogeneous). In saying this, he also believes that Europe should remain receptive to US culture but Europeanness should dictate its aesthetic to America. The contradiction arises to an even greater level when he states that Europe still remains culturally elite and here, it can also be said that Wenders delineates the same message (although more passively). The filmmaker consciously shows throughout *Paris, Texas* that it takes a European to recognize the esoteric value of things that some American deem as being repugnant. So here, a nation supposedly confident in its self-awareness is being guided by a European discernment.

"Only the European cinema is capable of maintaining dignity and morality in a savage cacophony of images, and is capable of stemming the avalanche that's heading our way, in the new era of electronic images, of satellite and cable communications. The inflation of images which will in time give us the same headaches about reality and identity that already characterize American images and American TV, can only be opposed by our European images, our common art and



language, our European cinema, which we must do everything in our power to protect and defend”.

- Wim Wenders

This could possibly be Wenders admitting that his search for Truth had ultimately failed, that the theme of emptiness could be reconnoitered endlessly but merely proves insubstantial for fixation. As in the paintings of Ed Ruscha, the celebration of coolness or irony by ‘the other’ in establishing a new depth will always prove fruitless. There is no rational ground for interest where little can be found. Even if it does produce momentary debate, it finally loses out (in the long haul) to profound insight.

In *The Consumer Society/Myths and Structures*, Baudrillard uses Pop Art as an example of one Americanism that validates Truth. He states that the sixties artists merely commented on their surroundings in a simple, enjoyable fashion, taking pleasure out of representing the surface of objects, and in doing so, bringing forward the message that if these objects ‘speak American’ then it is because they have no other truth; this lack being due to the inescapable surrounding myths that envelope them. Subsequently, he states that: “the only rigorous approach is to integrate this mythological discourse and integrate oneself into it” (his view has largely been that one should not attack postmodernism, but surrender to it). His assumption therefore, is that pop artists only paint in terms of real appearances and that their ready-made/assembly-line qualities make them function mythologically. Baudrillard continues in similar thought, saying that the artist’s only truth is to be found in their creation’s advertising slogans and brand names. “If that is Americanism then Americanism is the very logic of contemporary culture and one cannot fault the pop artists for pointing this up.”

He goes on to say:

“Pop Art gleefully transposed the amazing banality of consumer goods on its canvasses. There is nothing here of the fierce parodying of the American anthem by Jimi Hendrix, merely the light of irony and neutral humour of things that have become banal.”

In Madan Sarap's article *Baudrillard and Some Cultural Practices* the theoretician believes that Baudrillard's fascination with postmodernism is, in the final analysis, negativism, leading to an amoral void. Sarup states how Fredric Jameson's general opinion possesses a far greater assurance, as, in Jameson's view, postmodernism is to be approached cautiously due to its regard for pastiche and its current dominance over originality and genius. In Christopher Norris' critique on Jameson, Norris notes that the philosopher's belief is that in terms of 'taste', one can still appreciate certain facets of postmodernism, as to be entirely anti-postmodernist would be equal to trashing the entire cultural phenomenon. Sarap's suggestion that progress should be made through social experiences (discourses on history, science, literature, storytelling) places conscious and critical endeavour over the experience of watching the Second Nature. This is a wholly inspirational alternative to Baudrillard.

“ ... only experiences confirmed and corroborated through discussion and coped with as collective experience can be said to be truly experienced.”

- Madan Sarap

The view that Marxism is now an ideological relic is obviously cherished by Baudrillard, as he wants to defend his moment in time with flagrant, enticing sound bites with the hope of it becoming The New Doctrine. However in

terms of the 'grand political picture' there is an undeniable stealth-like element to his narratives.

Jean Baudrillard's interpretation of the country as an intellectual playground shows that he is the perfect seer on which to comment on eighties America. He neglects weightier questions such as 'Are these theories of social use, owning an absolute value?' choosing a commentary which is racist, sexist, chauvinistic and deplorable. The fact that he pushes the system to its absurd limits is problematic to figures such as Jameson, Denzin and Sarap. But Baudrillard courts controversy to stay characteristically true to his own media representation. Therefore, the texts within *America* and *Cool Memories* cannot be assumed to offer a guide to reason or an introduction to lucid thought. The simple generalizations of "Americans can neither analyze nor conceptualize their own situation ... this is a necessary flaw" are only adhering to the confused forms of communication that he so relishes in dissecting.

## 2. Political Narratives

At the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, Francis Ford Coppola stated at a press conference that the making of *Apocalypse Now* (filmed from 1975 to 1978) was; "Vietnam. It's what it was really like". In contrast, Jean Baudrillard's *America* refers to the Vietnam War as a filmic reality that, even though not open to question as to its actuality, does open the debate that it may have been a misrepresentation of fact(s) via technological reproduction.

He states:

"America is back again. Left brittle by the Vietnam War, which was as unintelligible to them as the irruption of little green men in a cartoon strip – and which, incidentally, they dealt with as though it were a cartoon, a something remote from them, a television war, with no understanding of the world's condemnation of their actions and only

able to see their enemy, since they are the achieved utopia of goodness, as the achieved utopia of Evil, Communism – they have taken refuge in the tranquility of the easy life, in a triumphal illusion”.

This was a foretaste to his more arcane *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991), and yet the above assertion shows how the seeds were clearly sown. Like Foucault and Derrida, Baudrillard had created a philosophical outlook that was, if taken at face value, nothing more than an intellectual threat, a literature where falsehoods and contradictory concepts are too weak for rational thought, too illogical to warrant as sound ideology and an abomination on which to form solid foundations for growth.

However, the main issue, or problem within such theory is its very adaptability (however surreptitiously) into possible future narratives that may, through time, transcend mere thought into a myriad of social, economical, scientific and political templates. To legitimize the irrational, the illogical and banal has been wholly valid in 20<sup>th</sup> century theory and yet, as we head towards the millennium, this practice appears to be fraught with a precarious ambiguity. At the time of filming both *Stanger* and *Paris*, Reaganism was a doctrine welcomed by the visible majority (or embraced by the few, and incomprehensible to the many). It was a cultural conditioning saturating the Second Nature with previously inconceivable force. This established the era in which the loss of value through signification was either ignored or praised, where misrepresentations were slowly dissolved, slyly replaced as ‘emotional facts.’ To legitimize such unfounded, artificial hokum within the political belief system enabled it to become an AMERIKA that could not only remember its recent past, but showed signs of disregarding the reasonable and the True. This legitimization of falsities was ideal fodder for concurrent French philosophy, yet it adopted a grave similarity to the LIE of cinema that Wenders experienced within his past authoritarian society.

Therefore, the question that needs to be asked now is 'what happens once the LIE is no longer a cinematic (or televised) 'reality', but a genuine discourse that is beyond satire, beyond artistic translation and ultimately, beyond valid thought?' The threat here is that the possible impact (where the LIE is legitimized as Truth) could go beyond our reach, unable to be resolved, leading to a general collapse of understanding, the passing over of civility towards a more simplified nature of indifference.

## Conclusion

Baudrillard, Jarmusch and Wenders:  
Nomads within the Realm of Reality

## 1. Political Ends

It is too naïve to suggest that an extreme right wing polemic may rise in much the same way as it did in Wenders' warning. Nevertheless, it is not irrational to presume that the believable, seductive and aggressive could gain momentum as a microelement within banality. This is where Baudrillard and Jarmusch have shown their greatest unease, as it is no longer the beautiful image with which we should be wary, but rather the blandest of signifiers, the seemingly simple that may possess the truest negative power. But it is Wenders' premonition that addresses this so specifically. He understands how intolerant diatribes can be established through the Second Nature. These signifiers may never be as blatant as he imagines (inside the blockbuster movie or within a film industry that has always been of the Left), but could be represented by smaller, more unregulated forms of telecommunication: cable stations, localized or homegrown transmissions, together with the ever-expanding Internet. Such messages that adopt untruths within a new legitimized forum have the potential to become successors of Wenders' propagandist fears, where the aforementioned LIE becomes THE GREAT FALSEHOOD, not just for America, but also for a Europe and its effortless sliding desire to replicate the homogeneous systems of the one domineering culture.

## 2. The American Movie

Aside from their dogmatic concerns, Jarmusch and Wenders, like their forebears (Howard Hawks, John Ford, Nicholas Ray and Sam Fuller), present cinematic beings as concepts of aloneness. These are; hero, villain and victim - figures weighed down by life, heavy in their truculence, disdain or indifference. They view themselves as throwbacks to a simpler time, attempting to decipher a world that is too complex, technological and extreme in its casual ease towards conformity and violence.

Apart from the characterizations, it is also telling how the very films themselves reject more vanilla factors that would strengthen their commercial approachability. In choosing opaqueness, both filmmakers ignore the quality cinema of the classic Hollywood A movie, instead paying homage to the lower strata of B features. Yet, unlike those noirs, Jarmusch and Wenders adopt a general hipness, as theirs, like the B Movie, is a cinema of stark, economical storytelling (clever in the way it hides the laborious precision required), but more detached and knowing in its sheer effortlessness to be cinema made for and by, *The Other*.

In 1988 (five years after the *Paris, Texas* shoot) Wim Wenders made a statement declaring that he would “never become an American filmmaker”, (meaning that his sense of self had not been compromised). It could be presumed that Jim Jarmusch would say the very same about himself and his own body of work which are indivisible as seen in his cameo film appearances and interviews. They are both fitting proof of the artist able to retain their outsider identity (and individualistic right) yet still willing to address the negative aspects of their obsessions. Accordingly, it can also be said that Jarmusch’s fight against the capitalist dream factory (eighties Hollywood) is to exercise originality without concession (neither artist has looked to the pacific coast for assistance in creating their unique visions). In this respect they are true individuals, shrewdly aware of the formulaic execution of the mainstream product and its deadening results. Money can never be seen on screen in any of their works, and neither can the submission to defeat. Yet upon asking ‘who represents the truest form of Outsider Cinema?’ Wim Wenders arguably holds the strongest case. In terms of Baudrillardian principle, it is Wenders who uses the spectacle to its fullest capacity and dire implications (as he and Baudrillard possess the same foreigners’ optic nerve). They are forever scanning, ever judging; yet finally taking little from the glow of the simulacra. It is this loss, and ours, that is the true tragedy of late 20<sup>th</sup> century culture.



In contrast, Jarmusch is more concerned with adopting Baudrillardian condescension. This offers an ironic crossover, wherein a European produces work that heightens the very Americanism of America (Wenders), while an American (Jarmusch) imbues his work with a non-American gaze. It could be argued that it is the foreigner who has the true outsider constituents (as he has been on the transatlantic trip where the dream has proven delusional), whereas the born American leans more towards condemning his homeland with a sardonic edge. The European chooses not to see such humour in these signs and symbols, these non-factual facts and so his is the most solemn critique, while the American (though Europeanized) prefers to show derision and disappointment at the promise of hope.

Baudrillard stated in the opening pages of this paper that it is the adoration of the American shallow, the shining, the “clean”, the “lethal”, the “hair so blond” hyperrealism that is so potent, so “latent” in the global mind. Yet this seemingly benign presence may, through time and ignorance, become politicized power, leading to the death of reasonable thought and ultimately our common decency. The move from intellectual theory to the world of the ‘real’ is the largest step, the largest regression and one that will change our core moralities if ever taken on face value alone.

J.H.M, 1998

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