JIM JARMUSCH AND THE AMERICAN NATIONAL CINEMA

by

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Abstract

Jim Jarmusch is an American independent film-maker whose work, despite its relative popularity and droll veneer, is consistently contra-Hollywood, thematically, aesthetically, and ideologically. In this thesis, I demonstrate through my close analysis of Jarmusch's four major works to date -- Stranger Than Paradise (1984), Down By Law (1986), Mystery Train (1989), and Night on Earth (1991) -- that Jarmusch's work should best be regarded beside representative examples of other contra-Hollywood national cinemas, rather than held up against the Hollywood cinema. Ultimately, this thesis argues that Jarmusch's oeuvre is a superlative instance of the American national cinema -- an entity not commonly held to exist. I define the American national cinema as one constituent part (like the French national cinema) of the meta-set of the international art cinema practice, and as this entity is distinguishable from Hollywood, and from other nations' commercial cinemas.

In Chapter One, I lay the foundation for the above argument with appeals to various expert sources, especially those concerning concepts of ideology, auteurism, national cinema, and the art cinema as a classifiable mode of film practice.
The following four chapters consist of close analyses of Jarmusch's four major works. Chapter Two considers how Jarmusch inverts the stereotypes of dreary communist East and sunny capitalist West in *Stranger Than Paradise*. The emphasis in Chapter Three is on the "things-are-not-as-they-seem" nature of every American cultural phenomenon raised in *Down By Law*, and how these reversals illuminate Jarmusch's take on his culture. Chapter Four considers the centrality of the relationship of race to American popular culture which *Mystery Train* posits. Chapter Five shows how *Night on Earth*, as a natural outward extension of Jarmusch's thematic and stylistic preoccupations, is designed explicitly as an American art film, as I am using the term here. In chapter six, I briefly recapitulate some of the theoretical and industrial suggestions that I proposed at the outset, weigh them against the evidence presented in the four close analyses, and conclude that a contra-Hollywood American national cinema surely exists, and that Jim Jarmusch's work is its exemplary illustration.
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Chapter One

Introduction: Jim Jarmusch's Sad and Beautiful World

When Roberto (played by Roberto Benigni) strolls out of the grimy night in Down By Law (1986) and announces, unprovoked, that "ees a sad and beautiful world," Zack (Tom Waits), not knowing what to make of this foreign stranger, mutters, "hunh. Yeah, it's a sad and beautiful world alright." This one short scene is largely (but certainly not completely) emblematic of Jim Jarmusch's entire oeuvre. It features the chance encounter of two somewhat charming deadbeats, one of whom is new to America, and both of whom share (with each other, and with Jarmusch) a hipster's conviction that the filth, decay and degeneration surrounding them is actually strangely beautiful, often-times amusing.

The intention of this paper is neither to simply analyze Jarmusch's films nor to critically examine moments such as the one recounted above. Rather, I begin with this brief scene synopsis to acknowledge straight-away that much of what follows is inflected by unabashed auteurism. I will attempt to show deliberate consistencies (and/or inconsistencies) in what Jarmusch does, critically examine these consistencies (or inconsistencies, as the case may be)
as they reflect Jarmusch's dominant aesthetic and thematic concerns, and attribute them to Jarmusch's expression as an auteur, an artist.

But this auteurist examination of Jarmusch's films is neither the sole, nor even central, purpose of the following work. Instead, I intend to use Jarmusch's oeuvre as an illustrative example, and a particularly stylish one, of a "national" cinema, much in the way that, say, Atom Egoyan might be discussed in terms relative to the Canadian cinema. Puzzling as this may seem at first to be, my claim is simple: there exists a great many alternative independent American film-makers whose work ought properly be considered to be economically, politically, thematically, and aesthetically as much contra-Hollywood as are many of the productions of any other national cinema. It is my contention that Jim Jarmusch's work, as an exemplary model of this American "national" cinema, can and should be fruitfully examined in this light.

Of course, one implication of my argument is that Hollywood films are somehow not representative of an American "national" cinema. If films can be seen as representative of the society and/or culture which produced them -- a safe enough presupposition, I suggest -- then how is it that I claim that some alternative independent American films, and Jarmusch's specifically, are more or
better representative of American society than are Hollywood films? The short answer is that I cannot completely. However, as my argument proceeds, what I hope will emerge is a critical methodology, an alternative approach to examining Jarmusch's work, one which considers Jarmusch's films in the same light as that in which productions from other nations might be considered -- contra-Hollywood. It might appear that what I am proposing is simply to lump Jarmusch and other non-Hollywood American film-makers in with every other non-Hollywood film-maker, be she Angolan or Zimbabwean. Or, perhaps, it might appear that I am proposing nothing more than that Jarmusch's films should be considered in the terms suggested by David Bordwell's article "Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" (1979) (or, for that matter, by any definition of "art cinema"). However, this introduction's important task will be to define and trace the phenomenon, and stunning recent ascendency, of the alternative independent American "national" cinema, relative to other national cinemas, to the comparatively mainstream American "auteur cinema" (Allen, Scorsese, et al.), and to Hollywood. This chore is crucial since I intend critical, theoretical, and historical concerns to converge in the course of this paper. And even more importantly, this introduction shall face the above noted theoretical problems of "national" cinema head-on.
Furthermore, this introduction shall attempt also to redeem the following chapters from the theoretical problems of auteurist film study. By this I do not presume that I might "solve" these theoretical problems, but I shall -- because I believe it an absolutely necessary job in light of the current state of film studies -- address these misgivings about the validity of auteurism directly, hoping to at least reassure the reader that this work has not been written in a critical vacuum.

Jarmusch as an American "National" Film-maker:

In his important contribution to the "Cinema We Need" debate among critics and enthusiasts of Canadian film (which, provoked by Bruce Elder's polemic "The Cinema We Need," raged in 1985), Robin Wood's article "Whose Cinema?" suggested that there was no discernible Canadian cinema to talk about at all since the films produced in Canada were virtually indistinguishable and invisible versions of Hollywood's production. Canadian cinema, according to Wood, merely reflected its minor role as part of the capitalist, patriarchal, ideological apparatus. No matter how much one disagrees with Wood's conclusions about the
Canadian cinema (as I do), his suggestion has ramifications for every nation's cinema. Wood's argument does not result in the dismissal of every western nation's cinema, however, because he claims that Canada's can be ignored not only because it is indistinguishable ideologically from Hollywood, but also because it is, unlike the French cinema for example, virtually unseen as well. Nevertheless, one foundational principle of his argument -- that popular cinemas, regardless of their nationality, reflect the dominant ideology of their society -- is sound and is what initially led me to consider the American alternative independent cinema, and Jarmusch's films specifically, in "national" terms.

Another article which has greatly influenced my thinking on these issues is Andrew Higson's "The Concept of National Cinema," in which he notes that every film-making nation has a "quality art cinema," in addition to embracing films, nationally or externally produced, which might be called this nation's "popular cinema" (Higson 37). Higson also observes that we commonly differentiate discussions of "art cinema" from ones of "national cinema" because although David Bordwell and others have convincingly shown that "art cinema" should be seen as a mode of film practice, we can and do distinguish each nation's "art cinema" from other
nations'. This is to say that it is only because of the multiplicity of national cinemas that we can distinguish, say, the British cinema from the French one. In addition, the films associated with national art cinemas also frequently, but not always, address nationally specific issues -- relationships to shared national histories, aesthetic and cultural traditions, etc. Furthermore, Higson -- following Thomas Elsaesser's lead -- observes that Hollywood cannot really be considered completely "other" in any film culture because of its profound impact on all national cinemas (Higson 39).

The conclusions that I draw from these points are:
1. Since every nation has a "quality art cinema," it should follow that America has as well. By using the term "art cinema" to describe this set of films, I recognize that I am labouring under the strain of the unfortunate baggage which this term carries. That is, Bordwell's explanation of "art cinema" sounds as if it might -- although it does not -- deny the status of "art" to certain Hollywood films.
2. Since we differentiate between national art cinemas because of their multiplicity, we should be able to identify an American one too.
3. Since every nation's cinema is affected by Hollywood's massive influence, and since, as Wood notes, every western nation produces some (or many) films which reveal their
existence as merely part of the capitalist/patriarchal ideological apparatus, it stands to reason that Hollywood's existence in America should not negate the existence of an American national cinema in the same terms that a Belgian cinema, for instance, exists.

Thus, I conclude that every nation, at least every western nation, has both a national cinema and a Hollywood-like cinema (insofar as these Hollywood-like cinemas reflect each western nation's role in the machinery of capitalist/patriarchal ideology), while in America, their Hollywood-like cinema is the eponymous, archetypical example for every other western nation's Hollywood-like cinema. And furthermore, the American national cinema (as I have delineated it) is best seen as compared to the non-American examples of contra-Hollywood aesthetics and ideology located in other national cinemas. The underlying presupposition here is that Hollywood films (and their counterparts - the popular, Hollywood-like, films produced in other western nations) do reflect their production and consumption under capitalist-patriarchal ideology. I acknowledge that this is a broad-ranging claim, but am satisfied of its general applicability.

As an example of one important difference between "art" films and "popular" films, the films of the counter-Hollywood (or un-Hollywood-like) national cinemas are
typically intended to be (and usually are) received by "... a cosmopolitan, non-chauvinist spectator who can empathize with characters from many nations" (Lev 5). I would add that the national art cinema audience is also more likely to at least consider themselves (accurately or not) to be more politically aware in some vague sense than the consumer of exclusively Hollywood-like films, believing the films they choose to watch to be somehow less tainted by the dominant ideology colouring Hollywood-like films. There are American precedents for the national art cinema: Robert Altman has made several films which are explicitly designed as such; *Images* (1972), and *Three Women* (1977) are good examples.

But why am I bothering to, in what is ostensibly an examination of Jim Jarmusch's oeuvre, jump through these hoops and go through these contortions to "prove" the existence of a counter-Hollywood American "national" cinema? First because there seems no good reason to consider his films next to Hollywood ones when they so much more resemble the quality art cinema predominately (but not exclusively) produced in other countries. And, secondly, because one feature that Jarmusch's films share is a thematic address of the concept of nationality, national citizenship, and the "nature" of America and Americans as compared to non-
Americans. In the scene which contributes the next chapter's title (I'm as American as You Are: Stranger Than Paradise), Eddie tells Willy that he had no idea that, "you was born in Hungary, or Budapest, or any of those places. I thought you were an American." But Willy is an American. Or at least he is, as his answer indicates, as American as Eddie is.

**Jarmusch as Artist/Author/Auteur:**

It is a commonplace in contemporary discussions of auteurism and auteurs to pay at least lip-service to the ubiquity of auteurist film study in spite of whatever theoretical problems may surround the issue. David Bordwell, Helene Keyssar, and Robert Self, for instance, all begin their address of the questions surrounding the legitimacy of auteurism by remarking on how university courses, film societies and festivals, and the popular and academic press, all insist on talking about films and/or collections of films in terms that betray their auteurist bent by writing about directors as authors (Narration 211; Self 4; Keyssar 7).

The case of Jim Jarmusch might not have much space in the controversy over auteurism (except in the headiest of
theoretical objections) since Jarmusch is as much the sole, or at least dominant, creator of the art of his films as is virtually any film-maker. Jarmusch writes his own scripts (for specific actors), directs, and according to Melody London (his editor) wields great authority even in that process of the films' creation (Bugbee 52-3). In fact, Jarmusch also personally negotiates most of the deals surrounding his films' financing, distribution and exhibition: selection of a producer, sales to videotape, subtitling, and foreign and domestic advertising, etc. Jarmusch demands such concessions from those willing to finance his productions. He is in charge of the creation of his films' "meaning" through every stage of their development. Or is he?

In "Robert Altman and the Theory of Authorship," Robert Self documents two of the dominant theoretical doubts about auteurism's legitimacy. First, quoting Stephen Crofts, (auteurism) perpetuates the divorce between artistic product and any social determination, both at the level of production (the syndrome of the creative author) and at the level of reading (the reader who [re]produces ideology while pronouncing 'objective' critical judgment) (Crofts, qtd. in Self, 3).

Second, Self quotes Rosiland Coward and John Ellis:

instead of showing the richness of the text in its openness, its readability in the meanings that can be produced from it, [auteurism] aims at a particular sort of closure (3).
Despite these two (above noted) questions about auteurism's tenability, Self, and it seems many, many critics who broach the subject, concludes that despite auteurism's limitations in accounting for a film's "meaning(s)," there is a great convenience in naming a set of films Robert Altman or Jim Jarmusch because the "author's" name serves a useful and particular purpose: according to Michel Foucault, "(the name of the author) characterizes a particular manner of discourse" (Foucault 284). And not only should this "particular manner of discourse" bear the name Jim Jarmusch, it should, admittedly, be further distinguished as Peter Urquhart's Jim Jarmusch, since at the level of my reading, and despite my best efforts to avoid the "problem" of ideology, all manner of ideological (re)production should be assumed.

Interestingly, the issue of ideological (re)production has cropped up in this very brief glance at auteurism, while this same issue is central to my case for the existence of the American "national" cinema. Indeed, the concepts of authorship and national cinema converge in other important ways too. The so-called quality art cinema (internationally) that forms the meta-set of national cinemas (as I am using the term) consists of -- virtually by definition, Bordwell's definition at least -- a pantheon of auteurs. These are auteurs who are necessary for the
existence of these national art cinemas, not just for their simple presumed utility as artist-creators, but also because the existence of their "voice" in these films embodies one of this "mode of film practice's" defining characteristics ("Art" 59-60). Confounding this tidy contention, Peter Lev claims that Bordwell's "formalist" definition of art cinema, "does not provide an adequate basis for a social-historical, rather than a strictly aesthetic account..." (4). Perhaps it doesn't, but exactly as Self, Andrew, Keyssar, and Naremore's discussions of auteurism proceed, Bordwell's definition of art cinema, opens a space in a film's meaning (at the levels of creation and of reception) for the influence of the artist/creator. The overall weight that ought properly be ceded to intentional creation by an individual artist is impossible to say, but that it should be granted some weight seems impossible to reasonably deny.

**The American National Cinema:**

Hollywood never functions as simply one term within a system of equally weighted differences. Hollywood is not only the most internationally powerful cinema -- it has also, of course, for many years been an integral and naturalized part of the national culture, or the popular imagination, of most countries in which cinema is an established entertainment form. In other words, Hollywood has become one of those cultural
traditions which feed into the so-called national cinemas of, for instance, the western European nations (Higson 39).

One interesting feature of Higson’s point here is that it lends itself unproblematically to inverse application. While the films associated with national art cinemas have never held anything like the world-wide commercial sway that Hollywood’s have, their critical influence has been profound, notably upon the generations of (often film-school educated) American cineastes arriving since the 1960s. Just as Hollywood must always be considered as an important part of every national film culture, so too national art cinemas should be considered highly influential upon both the Hollywood, and the American national, cinema. In fact, it is commonly noted that the rise of the so-called New American Cinema (in the 1960s and ’70s), which produced such films as Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969), The Graduate (Mike Nichols, 1967), Midnight Cowboy (John Schlesinger, 1969), and Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn, 1967) was the direct result of the influence of international art cinemas on Hollywood and American film production and consumption. What one finds evolving in this period in the American cinema is something of a Hollywood/art cinema hybrid, one which is perhaps best exemplified by directors such as Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola - directors who
made small, personal, often independent films, interspersed with big-budget, star-driven Hollywood productions. Interestingly, "independence" from the major Hollywood studios has never been a very useful criteria for categorizing American films, except in strictly industrial terms. Jim Hillier notes the long tradition of independently produced American films: "by the late 1950s, two-thirds of features were being made by independents..." but Hillier goes on to point out that the vast majority of these received full studio financing and distribution (9). The current state of American film production is little different. Hillier describes the more successful of the newly formed independent film production companies (Castle Rock, for instance) as possessing "limited independence," because of their reliance, like those independent productions of the 1950s, on financing and distribution through the major studios (9).

In addition to its influence (however relatively minor in practice) on Hollywood, the international art cinema also exerted acute influence on the American national art cinema. John Cassavetes, Paul Morrisey, and Andy Warhol all made independent art films which owed as much to the international art cinema as they did to the strong tradition of the American avant-garde (Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakage,
Maya Deren, etc.). Cassavetes, Morrisey, and Warhol, perhaps even more so than the Hollywood auteurs mentioned above, can be seen as direct precursors of the contemporary wave of American national film-makers, which includes (among many, many others) John Sayles, Gus Van Sant, Richard Linklater, and Jim Jarmusch.

To get around the problem of the relative uselessness of the term "independent" in discussions of American cinema, in the introduction to their book Off Hollywood: The Making and Marketing of Independent Films, David Rosen and Peter Hamilton define the parameters of their study under the term "specialty films." The American films falling under this rubric, like international art films, "share a common humanism, and are neither racist, sexist, nor exploitative... (which is) the key difference between specialty films and independently-produced, low-budget genre films" (xvii-xviii). They might have added that specialty films should be distinguished as well from independently-produced blockbusters such as Terminator 2: Judgement Day (James Cameron, 1992). Rosen and Hamilton have suggested, however, a reasonably useful definition for what I am attempting to explicitly argue for -- a recognition of the existence of a set of American films which are not only typically financed (and often distributed) independent of Hollywood’s machinery, but are also to varying degrees
independent of, or outside of, prevailing Hollywood film practice aesthetically, thematically, and politically.

In another recent study of the American national cinema, Donald Lyons begins by remarking that "it is much easier to agree that this is a rich and productive moment for American independent filmmaking than it is to demarcate the boundaries of that field (xi)." This situation is analogous to the recent condition of the business of popular music. Nirvana's multi-platinum album Nevermind (1992) was the first punk rock recording to make massive profits (tens of millions of dollars), provoking a hitherto unheard-of tidal wave of punk/alternative bands being signed to major record labels, the public (i.e. popular) acceptance of formerly "specialty" musical genres now assured. It is commonly argued that the record's giant success played a large role in opening space in radio and pop video programming for all manner of non-mainstream, or "alternative" music which would otherwise have remained profoundly marginalized (see, for instance, CMJ, and/or Hill). In the movie business there is no single film that can be seen as the commercial breakthrough that Nevermind was, but Jim Jarmusch's Stranger Than Paradise (1985) was something of a watershed film in the history of the American national cinema, a movement which has much in common with the making and marketing of so-called "alternative" music.
As J. Hoberman opines:

*Stranger Than Paradise* was one of the more felicitous popularizations of avant-garde techniques. Jarmusch not only evoked a certain mood of New York posthip hipsterism, he synthesized a number of poststructural strategies... *(Modernism* 143).

The relative popularity enjoyed by the film despite its avant-garde tendencies, opened popular doors for American art films in the same way that *Nevermind* made punk rock more immediately available and allowable in commercial contexts. One evident result of the popularization of the American national cinema is that an unprecedented number of these films have won important prizes at the international film festivals -- *Sex, Lies and Videotape* won the Palme d’or at Cannes in 1989; *Before Sunrise* won the Best Director prize (for Richard Linklater) in Berlin in 1995; and *Stranger Than Paradise* captured the Camera d’or at Cannes in 1984 -- and their box office performance have been in parallel ascendency.
Notes to Chapter One

1. Robert Self wrote in "Robert Altman and the Theory of Authorship:" "To address any body of films bearing the name of one director, as I have done for some time with the films of Robert Altman, without confronting these perspectives (the theoretical objections to auteurism) is to analyze those films in a critical vacuum." Cinema Journal 25:1 (Fall 1985): 3-4.

2. Geoff Pevere argues in "Radical Marginalia: Subversive signs from the Hinterland" (CineAction! 6 (Summer/Fall 1986): 50-56) that while Wood’s analysis of the role of ideology in Canadian cinema may be in many cases accurate, there also exists in the Canadian cinema a radical, oppositional counter-current of regional, low-budget films. I suggest that Pevere is quite correct in his contention, and his view has influenced my assertion that the American national cinema is similarly oppositional. In short, Pevere and I agree heartily with Wood’s argument that much Canadian cinema does simply reflect its role in the capitalist/patriarchal machinery, but we respond by pointing to the existence of a body of work which Wood is either unaware of, or unconcerned with -- radical and regional Canadian films.

3. Higson’s conception of national cinema differs from mine, however. He claims that it is only through examining the entire film culture of a nation - examinations of film criticism, industrial concerns, and, crucially, through the study of spectatorship and reception theory that a national cinema can be identified. This may be so, and where our opinions differ may be simply a matter of terminology. I’d like to call each nation’s art cinema (an entity Higson does not dispute the existence of) its "national" cinema because this terminology greatly facilitates discussions of the sort which I have undertaken here.

4. I have no documentation to support this claim. However, it seems a reasonable enough assumption that the art cinema audience arrives with at least some different expectations than does, say, Wayne’s World’s audience.

5. For useful accounts of Jarmusch’s total "control" of his films, see Victoria Bugbee and/or Richard Gold.
6. My qualification exists because, as J. Hoberman points out:

George Lucas and Steven Spielberg are the most successful film-makers who ever lived, with the six top-grossing movies in American History. Millionaires many times over, they can do whatever they want. Lucas even insists that what he would really like to do are experimental, non-narrative films. But who's kidding who? What these guys want, apparently, is *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Modernism 195).
Chapter Two

I'm as American as You Are: Stranger Than Paradise

This is a film that goes beyond nostalgia toward some Platonic sense of Americanness (Modernism 202).

The aesthetic boundaries in the '80s have been blurred by numerous crossovers. That The Atomic Café and Sherman's March could enjoy commercial runs, that the National Society of Film Critics would name as best films Stranger Than Paradise and Blue Velvet (rather than Ghandi and Hannah and Her Sisters) indicate the popular acceptance of at least some a-g work (Modernism 177).

These two quotations pithily delineate this chapter's two major concerns. First, in this chapter I shall go to some lengths to show that Hoberman's quip about Stranger Than Paradise's "Platonic sense of Americanness" is not only entirely tenable, but also that it suggests a fruitful and illuminating approach to a film (and an oeuvre) which I am attempting to paint as quintessentially of the American national cinema. Secondly, Stranger Than Paradise's position as an important "cross-over" breakthrough for the American national cinema shall receive substantial attention here, paving the way as the film does for numerous ensuing independent American art films, as well as anticipating to a great degree Jarmusch's own subsequent work. Finally, this chapter will also discuss the film in terms suggested by a
synthesis of these two principal points: since a great deal of the films of the American national cinema exhibit this sort of avant-garde/popular hybridization, it will be argued here that films such as Warhol's Empire (1966), Cassavetes' Shadows (1959), and especially James Benning's American midwest "postcard" movies anticipate Stranger Than Paradise as much as European or Japanese art films do, and further, that Stranger Than Paradise was an important part of a cultural shift which has resulted in the incorporation of all kinds of formerly "alternative" and even avant-garde popular cultural tendencies into the mainstream of today's American culture. ¹

But first, it should be noted that Stranger Than Paradise was not Jim Jarmusch's first feature film. In 1980, as part of his M.F.A. degree at New York University, he wrote, produced, directed, and edited Permanent Vacation, an eighty-minute black and white film which saw a very limited release.² This film was something of a cult success in Europe, where it won prizes at the Mannheim and Figueira da Foz festivals, and even made a modest profit (Sante 146). In America, however, Permanent Vacation was virtually unseen, but was for a time in the 1980s available on videotape. It would appear that Permanent Vacation expressly anticipates some of the recurring tropes and motifs prevalent in Jarmusch's subsequent mature works. For
instance, *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby maintained that *Permanent Vacation* "is not an unrecognized masterpiece, but it is clearly the forerunner of the eccentric comedies to come," and also that the film consists of, "a quantity of raw material that would later be refined into three of the funniest, wisest comedies of the last decade ("Vacation" C17)."

Two years after the completion of *Permanent Vacation*, Jarmusch made the first third of *Stranger Than Paradise*, "The New World" -- which stood as an autonomous thirty-minute short film -- from forty minutes of raw 35-mm. film stock donated by Wim Wenders. In 1984, Jarmusch completed the remaining two-thirds of *Stranger Than Paradise*, and the final version went on to win the Camera d'or at Cannes, among many other festival prizes, as well as becoming a significant popular success in America and around the world.

But what is it about *Stranger Than Paradise* that makes the film feel so characteristically American? What about the film provoked Hoberman's remark about the film's "platonic sense of Americanness?" I have several suggestions: first, and most significantly, the film's tacit comparison -- through the reversal of the stereotype -- of the eastern and western cold war blocks (i.e., that New York, Cleveland, and Florida are as grim or grimmer places than Budapest is) is an arguably more accurate portrait of
American society than are the typical Hollywood representations of ambitious Americans under benign capitalism. Ambition, which is central to capitalism and to Hollywood representations of American society, is completely absent from the film's characters, and this absence is necessarily reflected in the film's treatment of American culture. Secondly, the film's systematic evocations of, and references to, American junk culture (football and cartoons on television, Budweiser beer, Chesterfield cigarettes, hot dogs, and Screamin' Jay Hawkins, etc.) are tendered in the midst of the film's post-industrial landscape, draining these artifacts of their affirmative connotations, and revealing the vacuity of faith in the innovation and progress associated with prototypically American consumer products such as T.V. dinners. Finally, as part of the film's core, the personal relationships to America and American citizenship which the European immigrants (Willie/Béla, Eva, and Aunt Lotte) develop, and the degree to which these characters are assimilated into America and its culture, also necessarily reflect starkly upon American culture.

Part-way into their drive from New York City to Cleveland, Eddie asks, "did you ever notice, Willie, wherever we go, it all looks the same," and elsewhere, still more pointedly, "does Cleveland look a little like
"Budapest?" The desolation of all of the film's locations are clearly meant to rouse an American's conceptions of the stereotypes of any of the Warsaw pact cities: Leningrad, Krakow, East Berlin, or Budapest. And in addition to the cheerless mise-en-scène, the film's use of black-and-white, high-contrast film stock further underscores its strategy on this front. This reversal of the stereotype is at once part of the film's amusing modus operandi, and a subtle political statement as well, since the representations of the eastern block which Americans were typically exposed to (circa 1984) consisted of images of relentless, mindless, and humourless toil for the sake of the State, and tiny, grimy, unheated State housing, bad food, and so on. That exactly the same could be said about a significant part of America is, like the entire film, at once funny and depressing.

The film's settings are only part of its cunning mise-en-scène, however. In an ingenious inversion of the stereotypical representation of citizens under communism, Jarmusch costumes his Americans in utterly antediluvian fashions: Eddie's argyle sweater, Willie's 1940s shirts and baggy zoot-suit trousers (naturally supported by suspenders), and their ubiquitous fedora hats. All of their clothes are consciously out of style, which is what all citizens of Budapest (or Leningrad, etc.) are perceived by Americans -- at least by Americans conditioned by typical
Hollywood representations -- to be. In fact, Eddie and Willie seem to be coded as outsiders or foreigners even in their own country. Another world, an "ordinary" America, does seem to exist outside of their drab existences, however, as evidenced by their occasional (but very few) interactions with other Americans (i.e., everybody but Eva and Aunt Lotte). These few scenes of interaction are telling because since so much of the film focuses on Willie and Eddie, we tend to start taking their weird world as natural, until Jarmusch juxtaposes our heroes with "everyday" Americans.

Before the first such encounter, though, we see the poker game in which Willie and Eddie are almost caught cheating. Strangely, the card-players closely resemble Willie and Eddie in their manner and dress, one even wears a bow-tie. These hipster deadbeat characters exist to contrast with the next character to cross Willie and Eddie's path. Shortly after the card game encounter, we see Eddie and Willie driving out of New York, having already decided to visit Eva in Cleveland. Willie instructs Eddie to pull the car over to the side of the road so he can play a little joke on the man standing at a bus-stop. But after asking the man "do you know which way is Cleveland?," the man angrily responds with, "hey gimme a break, I'm just going to work." When Willie asks where the man works, we find out
that he is a factory-worker. Driving away, Willie and Eddie can scarcely hide their disbelief: "Poor guy! God! You shouldn't have given him such a hard time. Can you imagine working in a factory?!!" Eddie exclaims. Eddie and Willie are somehow removed from their culture -- obviously of their own volition it should be noted -- that the very thought of toiling in a factory is shocking and upsetting to them. Not only do Willie and Eddie lack conventional ambitions and capitalist work-ethic, even their petty hustling and gambling is apparently slothfully unmotivated.

The only other person that Eddie and Willie meet is Eva's almost-boyfriend, Billy, who, while never overtly ridiculed or mistreated by the film's other characters, is neither accorded much dignity by the film. Billy doesn't have much to do in the film, but one thing he does is suggest that he and Eva go to see a "foreign flick" on a date. Eva, perhaps misunderstanding that Billy means an art film, suggests a kung-fu movie instead.

Willie's grimy apartment, Aunt Lotte's house, and even the Florida motel room are also part of the film's Budapestization-of-America game. Eva asks of Willie's T.V. dinner, "what does that meat come from? It doesn't even look like meat." This scene is hilariously indicative of the film's strategy: something classically American, the T.V. dinner, is turned into something straight from the
clichéd-Hungarian kitchen, meat so deleterious, that its very origin is questionable. And yet, as Willie patiently explains to his unenlightened Hungarian cousin, "this is the way we eat in America. See, I got my meat, I got my potatoes, I got my vegetables, I got my dessert, and I don't even have to wash the dishes after." Interestingly, later in the film, when Eva works at a hot dog stand in Cleveland, Willie, Eddie, and Eva all share their distaste for hotdogs, perhaps the ultimate American food, closely associated as they are with baseball, the national pastime.

In addition to the eastern European-inflected mise-en-scène, Stranger Than Paradise's narrative also specifically evokes the empty toil of the comrade under communism posited by virtually all American cultural production. It is interesting to note here that this is an extremely specific example of the ideological effect of cultural production which I addressed very briefly in the last chapter. That is, Hollywood films have created for Americans (and to a degree, the world) an image of the eastern European city and citizen, images which are necessarily in black and white, covered in soot, ugly, shiftless, and grim. Of course, these words also perfectly describe Eddie and Willie's world. Eddie and Willie's shiftlessness are responsible for an amazing shiftless narrative. Or what would be an amazingly shiftless narrative, if it were not for Eva's
arrival in "The New World," as the film's first section is titled.

Eva is responsible for virtually everything that happens in the film, a fact which implies that if Eva did not arrive in New York, nothing would ever happen to Eddie and Willie. All action, except for card-playing and racetrack-going -- which are apparently Eddie and Willie's only activities -- is attributable to the force of Eva's presence. The axis upon which fish-out-of-water stories (which this is, of a kind) turn, is that they present a film-maker the possibility to view the humdrum and the banal with a fresh new perspective through the eyes of a newcomer, an outsider. This is a tactic which Jarmusch repeatedly returns to throughout his career, and in Stranger Than Paradise, as it does elsewhere, the effect is achieved as designed: a "Platonic sense of Americanness" is achieved by seeing the American landscape, history, culture, and traditions through the fresh young eyes of a eighteen year-old girl from Budapest. Interestingly, Eva does arrive in America with plenty of pre-conceived notions of what the country and the culture is going to be like, and of what is considered hip. She smokes only Chesterfields because she knows them to be hip -- presumably from some archaic American cultural products (probably Hollywood films), from the last time that they were actually hip. She listens only
to her "main man," Screamin Jay Hawkins, who represents to
Eva the ultimate American music, while some might consider
other American innovations, composers, or performers to be
customarily cited as archetypically American -- the
Gershwins, Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis, and Charlie Parker,
or even Elvis Presley, for instance. And her fondness for
dated American slang ("my main man," "bug off") also situate
her in a weird time warp somewhere just after scrubbed
Yankee G.I.s handed out chewing gum to shell-shocked,
European children.

When, near the end of "The New World," the film's first
section, Eva is leaving Willie's apartment for Cleveland,
Willie asks her to leave behind some of the cigarettes which
she has shoplifted. At first, Eva is reluctant to comply
because she is afraid that these New York City
Chesterfields, which look and taste so good to her, will be
unavailable in Cleveland. It's only when Willie assures Eva
that a carton of Chesterfields bought anywhere in the United
States will look and taste exactly the same, does Eva agree
to leave some behind for her cousin. The importance of this
scene, beyond its surface utility as part of the film's
fish-out-of-water comedy, is that it demonstrates the
contradictory status of American junk culture as having both
homogenizing and heterogenizing qualities, depending on who
is regarding a given artifact. For Eva, Chesterfield
cigarettes are a sign of American cool in the same way that Screamin' Jay Hawkins' music is, as is the expression "bug off." To Willie, though, Chesterfield cigarettes don't "mean" anything nearly so profound. Brand name and franchise homogeneity are such a significant part of the American cultural landscape, that Jarmusch uses the Chesterfield's brand name as a way of looking back on the days when certain brand names had a different caché than they did in 1984. This is why the character's wardrobes (like the passé Chesterfields brand name) also contribute to the so-out-of-style-its-in ambience of the film and its characters. One can assume that it was this feature of the film prompted Hoberman's observation (quoted in the last chapter) of Stranger Than Paradise's "post-hip hipsterism."

By flagrantly inverting the stereotypical representations of communist, oppressed, eastern Europe and of capitalist, free, America, Jarmusch illuminates the American culture by comparing and contrasting it to what Americans have perceived to be its opposite - the "enemy's" culture. Analogously, Stranger Than Paradise reverses the roles and degrees of influence of the European art cinema and Hollywood. The result of this reversal is plain enough -- an American art film, one which is distinctively (through direct contrast to Europe) American in flavour, tone, style, etc., is born. Stranger Than Paradise
is a superlative example of the sort of cross-cultural fertilization that is one of the art cinema’s (i.e. the meta-set’s) defining characteristics. This is to say, as Andrew Higson notes, that Hollywood has a significant affect on the film culture in every nation; so, too, the art film, especially the European one, affects every nation’s film culture as well. One can almost sense the delight and complete awareness of the phenomenon of American, European, and even Asian, cultural cross-fertilization in Jarmusch’s own description of Stranger Than Paradise: "It’s a neo-realist black comedy in the style of an imaginary East European director obsessed with Ozu and The Honeymooners" (qtd. in Modernism 201). "Tokyo Story," after Ozu’s film, is the name of the horse they decide to bet on early in the film (from a selection which also includes horses named after Ozu’s Late Spring and Passing Fancy).

In the scene where Willie tells Eddie that he is as "American" as Eddie is, Stranger Than Paradise prompts its spectator to question the nature of personal nationality. In the most prosaic sense, surely Willie is, like Eddie, an American citizen; they both probably have American passports, voting rights, and all of the other relatively mundane rights and responsibilities of American national citizenship (as they are specified in the American constitution and relevant immigration and naturalization
legislation). But these banalities are not what Willie is talking about. Rather, he means that his nature, his temperament, his essence are, despite his country of birth, as American as Eddie's.

Interestingly, because (as the film very gradually reveals), Eva seems to share so much in common with Eddie and Willie insofar as their world views and self-conceptions (not to mention their notions of "cool") are in harmony, Eva is as American as the film's two deadbeats from the very moment she arrives in New York City. But as Barbara Kruger notes:

Stranger Than Paradise is really about cool, in that cool is about gesture....Cool is always seen and never heard.... Cool knows its limitations and is cool enough to keep them a sweet secret (62).

Kruger's observation applies to the film's characters as well as to the film's relationship to the American cinema. Addressing the connections between culture, hegemony, and style, Dick Hebdige suggests that counter-hegemonic inclinations are often expressed obliquely through style. Stranger Than Paradise's characters are not themselves aware of their role in this process, but Jarmusch clearly is, as evidenced by his film's handling of film style, fashion, and mise-en-scène. And since the three principle hipsters' only real "antagonist" is Aunt Lotte (and only when the three decide to split for Florida), it would appear the film sets
up a generational conflict, rather than a truly cultural one. Aunt Lotte has been in America for years but speaks very little English, and as demonstrated by her automatic production of steaming goulash upon Willie and Eddie's arrival in Cleveland, she solidly retains her Hungarian heritage. Of course, Willie has been attempting to shed his Hungarian ancestry like a disease since his arrival in "the new world." But Eva, as opposed to Aunt Lotte and Willie's extreme reactions to their new environment, blends cultures, maintains her ties to the old, while robustly embracing the new as well. And the existence of this generational conflict as one of the film's scarce sources of drama, especially when coupled with the film's plot -- "as uneventful as ordinary life itself" (Bordwell 1988, on Ozu, 1) -- is certainly further evidence of Stranger Than Paradise's conscious homage to Ozu.

Jarmusch told Janet Maslin of the New York Times that he "still thinks of the film as an underground film that somehow crossed over" ("Director" C8), and producer Sara Driver has remarked,

I think the success of Stranger and other independent films is establishing a path and opening things up for everybody. Everything's changing. You can feel it" (Seidenberg 17).

The plethora of popular and critical praise which greeted the arrival of Jarmusch's second feature film was
astonishing given the film's avant-garde complexion and almost complete absence of the ingredients typically found, and often considered requisite, in popular films. But as J. Hoberman notes (at the start of this chapter), Stranger Than Paradise's extremely positive reception was part of a larger tendency in the consumption of, and reaction to, films in America in the 1980s -- the growing acceptance of aberrant, formerly unpopular, modes of film practice. In a 1986 article, Tim Holmes reflected on Stranger Than Paradise's influence upon the American cinema:

The commercial success of the film took everybody by surprise. Here was a movie with no sex, no violence, no car chases, no special effects; the minimal dialogue was laconic and deadpan; each scene consisted of a long, single shot from a solitary camera angle. But Stranger had its own rhythm, centering on the almost imperceptibly varying intervals between its punctuating blackout frames, and the impeccably droll delivery of its principle characters. The film announced the arrival of a new comic sensibility that acknowledged pulp while dispensing with camp. Stranger's success revealed the artistic and commercial potential of independent cinema... (38).

Stranger Than Paradise is an avant-garde film which reached a large popular audience. Notable among the attention which the film received in industry circles, the characteristically enthusiastic Variety article, "'Paradise' Passes $1,000,000..." which, while describing the film's distribution strategy, enthused:
projecting its first runs to be completed by the end of the year, (the distributor) pegs ultimate U.S. rentals from the film at $2,500,000..." (24)

Of the avant-garde work which the film most resembles, Hoberman has observed the film's affinity to James Benning's *8 1/2 X 11* (1974), and *11 X 14* (1976). I would suggest that Benning's *Him and Me* (1982) also anticipates the film to a large degree, and resembles *Stranger Than Paradise* even more closely than Benning's earlier films do. Benning's work, which is much more rigorously formalist than Jarmusch's, often relies upon the super-long take, framing images with strict attention to all three axes (but especially the Z axis) and lingering on this image for what can only be considered astonishingly long periods of time. *Him and Me* has shots, for instance, of more than 11 minutes of static camera with no human intervention.

Vincent Canby wrote in his review of *Permanent Vacation* that, "in later films Mr. Jarmusch demonstrates a singular gift for the kind of narrative that, without the audiences' awareness, builds to an inevitable payoff" (C17). Accurate as this observation is with regard to Jarmusch's major films, Canby's remarks are also perfectly applicable to James Benning's *Him and Me*, where the narrative exists in only the most nebulous of forms, until the final sequence makes sense of almost every one of the film's many details
which upon their initial presentation provoked nothing but puzzlement. The build-up to the payoff is, as Canby writes, unknown to the audience, so upon its arrival the satisfaction is all the greater. This strategy, of withholding a film’s "trick" (which in the case of Jarmusch’s films is always situated in the way the story is told), is common practice in experimental or avant-garde film-making. In addition to the pertinent example of Benning’s œuvre, one could cite as examples of this phenomenon many canonical experimental films, such as Michael Snow’s _Wavelength_ (1969). In the case of _Stranger Than Paradise_, the narrative’s final trick -- sending Willie, alone, back to Budapest, and leaving Eva, newly-wealthy, in Florida -- is perfectly appropriate to the film’s overall illumination of the nature of America through comparison and contrast to communist eastern Europe. Jarmusch’s dalliance with narrative subterfuge in his ensuing films shall be prominent among the following chapters’ concerns.
Notes to Chapter Two

1. In Hoberman’s Village Voice review of the film (which is reprinted in Vulgar Modernism (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991)), he catalogues a whole host of art film and avant-garde influences:

With its dislocated travelogue, Stranger Than Paradise suggests Wim Wenders’ Kings of the Road; the transcendentally shabby moonscapes evoke Chantel Ackerman’s News from Home and the absence of reverse angles her Jeanne Dielman; while the shaggy-dog narrative and vignette structure are anticipated by Jim Benning’s 8 1/2 X 11 and 11 X 14.

Hoberman goes on to add, though, that:

Jarmusch displays free-floating affinities to filmmakers as disparate as Ron Rice and Carl Dreyer as well, but Stranger Than Paradise is far more than the sum of influences (202).

I have called 8 1/2 X 11, 11 X 14, and Him and Me Benning’s "post-card movies" because they are largely comprised of extremely long, uncut, shots from a fixed camera position of strangely beautiful and carefully composed inert images of Americana.

2. One frequently cited fact about Jarmusch’s time at N.Y.U. is that he was Nicholas Ray’s teaching assistant. In almost every article about Jarmusch and Stranger Than Paradise written in 1984 or 1985, this fact was raised.

3. The reader will note from my list of works cited that Canby reviewed Permanent Vacation in 1990, years after its initial release, on the occasion of the public screening of the Anthology Film Archive’s 35-mm. blow-up of the 16-mm original.

4. Apparently because he was impressed by Permanent Vacation, and sought to encourage Jarmusch’s unrealized potential, Wenders gave Jarmusch the film-stock after Jarmusch worked on the Wenders/ Nicholas Ray collaboration Lightning Over Water (1982) (Sante 146).
5. The film does not reveal Eva's age. While many commentators agree in observing that she is younger than Willie and Eddie -- a point made fairly explicitly by the film -- her age varies in reviews and articles on the film from sixteen to twenty-one. Eighteen is just my guess.
Chapter Three
Down By Law: "Stuck in Jail" or "In Control?"

The United States are destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of time.
-- Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas." (318)

Down By Law's (1986) opening tracking shots of obliquely-framed New Orleans streets and highways (which appear to have been shot through the window of a moving car) manifest the degree to which the film which follows will share its title's ambiguous and/or contradictory character. Jarmusch may agree with Walt Whitman that "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem," but Jarmusch's reasons for thinking so are the opposite, or something like the opposite, of Whitman's reasons. This line from Whitman's preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass is among the most famous observations in all American literature. It is the contention of this thesis that Whitman's remark is an observation which Jarmusch's oeuvre takes as one of its starting points: the United States themselves are also essentially the greatest film. Jarmusch's perspective toward the state and potential of his nation is more cynical, less celebratory, but no less commemorative than Whitman's, however. Bob tellingly
prefaces his prison-break plan with, "I think a film I have seen will help. An American film. Lots of action. Very good film." And just after scaling the prison’s walls, Bob exclaims, "We have escaped! Like in American movies!"

Bobbie, Jack’s prostitute/girlfriend clarifies Jarmusch’s contradictory take on Whitman’s celebratory optimism about the American democracy: "My momma used to say that America is a big melting pot, because you bring it to a boil and all the scum rises to the top. So maybe there’s hope for you yet, Jack." "You always makin’ big plans fo’ tomorrow, because you always fuckin’ up today."

Although it sounds as though it should mean something like "stuck in jail" or a related concept, the street slang phrase "down by law" loosely translates, according to Jarmusch himself, as "in control" (Holmes 38). In other contexts, as Spike Lee explained to Brenda Bollag, "down by law" can also refer to,

someone you can really count on, using "down" in a sense reminiscent of "he’s really down" = "he’s a good person" (especially one who’s ready to participate in anything) (Bollag 11).

That the film’s title actually means something like the opposite of what one might expect it to mean illustrates the subversive position the film assumes, a position which reverberates throughout, in many interconnected ways. For instance, of the film’s three central characters, who is
actually "down by law" (or, in Jarmusch's words, "in control")? And who of the three believes him or herself to be "down by law"? In one pivotal scene, *Down By Law* reveals the reach of its rhetorical strategy on this front: Bob, afflicted with a stubborn case of hiccups, asks Jack for a cigarette. Surly as ever, Jack rebuts, "cigarettes don't work for hiccups, not in this country, anyway." More ridiculous words have scarcely been spoken on screen, and every spectator, after laughing at Jack's preposterous assumption of authority, cannot help but be distracted by the realization that even dim Jack senses that something is wrong about his assumption of authority on this subject. The spectator is further dismayed once she recognizes Jack's fleeting conception that perhaps, in some countries, cigarettes do alleviate hiccups.

Correspondingly, Jack greets Bob's announcement of his discovery of an escape route with the astonishingly ridiculous remark, "Bob, if there was a way to get out of here, we would know about it." Just as in the cigarette/hiccups case, one senses that even Jack himself recognizes that his laughable presumption of authority on the issue is undermined by the very compelling evidence to the contrary. Jack believes himself to be "down by law" in the phrase's actual sense, while the only way in which he is "down by law" is in the sense which the phrase conveys to
the uninitiated.

Jack's complete lack of knowledge, and of control, of matters both within, and beyond, his own sphere (he's even an inferior pimp) reveals the inaccuracy of his pathetic assumption of authority. Likewise Zack; he knows that there is something wrong with his life, but he does not know what that something is; he does not know what to do about it and, furthermore, does not even recognize that nearly everything he does is misguided, imprudent, and completely ill-considered. In fact, some of the very first narrative information that Down By Law supplies is that Jack and Zack (even their names obviously connect them) are complete shmucks in very similar ways. Both of them are set up in the same way, by people they should never have trusted, in situations which clearly reveal their witlessness and their credulity. Not only are the set-ups similar, and the deception unnecessary and avoidable (as far as Jack and Zack are concerned), but both set-ups are predicated upon the perpetrator's knowledge, and skilful manipulation, of the victim's vain and false misconception of his position of power and authority. This is to say that the men who take advantage of both Jack and Zack play on their victims' self delusions. Gig says to Jack, "I admit, it's no secret where you're headed...(i.e. to a more powerful underworld position)," because he knows that by stroking Jack's
ridiculous ego he will be able to lure him into the vice-squad’s trap. "You gonna remember me for the rest of your life for this," Gig says, ominously, as if taunting Jack. Similarly, Preston, the hood who sets up Zack, knows that he must pretend to cede to Zack’s self-assumed position of power in order to convince him to drive the infected Jaguar across town. Both Jack and Zack believe themselves to be "down by law," while both could not be more wrong. After catching a sustained invective, during which his girlfriend is throwing his meagre possessions into the street, the only response Zack can muster is, "I guess it’s over between us Laurette?"

Conversely, Roberto (who magnanimously urges everyone he meets to call him "Bob" because, "ees the same"), while nearly completely lacking in the basic communication skills probably necessary for achievement in America, is truly "down by law," in both Jarmusch’s and Lee’s sense of this strange term. And like the expression itself implies, Bob seems out of control. One critic called Bob, "an Italian whose dazed hummingbird look belies his ability to get things done" ("Festival" 52). Bob discovers and shares his escape route from the Orleans Parish Prison; Bob catches and cooks the rabbit when the three fugitives haven’t eaten for days; and Bob discovers, in the most spectacular—yet instance of the film’s magic realism, Luigi’s Tintop, the
Italian restaurant in which his and his friends salvation lies. In fact, everything Bob does, while often initially annoying to Jack and Zack, is beneficial to the trio. He has luck and skill, though. It is through his unbridled optimism, enthusiasm, and positivism, which are completely at odds with what we find in Jack and Zack's sour demeanours, that the film could be seen to suggest -- Whitmanesquely -- that a positive attitude is vitally necessary for success in this life. Bob "gets the girl" (a Hollywood ending staple), and he not only escapes (which is all Jack and Zack could hope for), but he's actually much better off than they are, since he falls in love, has a job, attaining, thereby, everything he could possibly want.

It should be noted, however, that Bob does have some bad luck, and does not always succeed at first. He was, for example, caught cheating at poker, an incident that provoked the chase which resulted in him being charged with murder. But it is the good humour with which Bob faces these situations that at first sets him apart from his grumpy cell-mates. As Vincent Canby wrote, Bob faces the murder charge "as if inconvenienced by bad weather at an airport" ("Up the River" C21). His eternal optimism, and the subsequent good fortune which follows this attitude, is directly tied to Bob's passion for American poets. "Do you like Walt Weetman?" Bob asks neither Jack nor Zack
specifically, out of the blue in their cell. "Leaves of Grass...," Bob continues, vaguely, to no one in particular, "I love Walt Weetman." What would it tell us if Bob admired Stevens or Elliot or Pound, or some other American poet? Given Bob's unremitting enthusiasm and hopefulness, Whitman is clearly the best poet for Jarmusch to associate with his Italian character, excited as Whitman was for the prospects of the emerging American democracy in the 19th century.

Almost as amply as the film evokes Whitman, Robert Frost is another ghostly presence in Down By Law. While arguably less important to the narrative connotatively, Frost's most famous work (which Bob hilariously recites the first few lines of -- in Italian) does supply the film with part of its big finish, its "trick" ending. That Frost's "The Road Not Taken" (1916) has really very little to do with the choice of roads facing Jack and Zack at the film's conclusion, is not a fact which diminishes the poem's relevance to the film.

This matter of the film's ending broaches the business of how we got there. Down By Law ends with Bob and Nicoletta, in a state of pop-eyed, love-at-first-sight bliss, remaining together at Luigi's Tintop, and Jack and Zack head off, each On the Road, until it converges in what we assume to be a yellow wood. There is no Road Not Taken for our travellers though, so they cheerfully agree to take
whichever road the other does not. Here, as in the case of his twist on Whitman's sensibility, Jarmusch exploits the concept of the phrase "down by law" in relation to another of America's best known poems, by one of America's best known, and most characteristically American, poets -- Robert Frost. The ambiguity of Frost's famous "The Road Not Taken" is valuably explicated by Mordecai Marcus: "The poem's popularity seems to be based on the mistaken notion that it celebrates the triumph of independent choices - most likely Frost's choices as artist and man." Marcus continues, even more revealingly when considered in the context of its use in  *Down By Law*, "...the poem's seemingly genial celebration of a fortunate choice remains seductive, even to those who perceive a satirical intention" (64). Bob is evidently aware of what Marcus calls Frost's subtler message (Bob calls "Bob" Frost a very cynical man), yet he remains seduced by the poem's genial surface message.

Aloysious, *Permanent Vacation's* protagonist, says: "What's a story anyway except one of those connect-the-dots drawings that in the end forms a picture of something? I go from this place or person to that place or person and, you know, it really doesn't make that much difference." And Brenda Bollag remarks:

The point of departure for the construction of
Down By Law would seem to have been the questions, Where does a story come from? How does a film-maker isolate the elements of a narrative from the vast and heterogeneous assemblage of material to which the camera gives him access? (11).

Bollag also observes that each of the premises which introduce the characters could very well be Hollywood films in their own right (small-time pimp gets set-up, itinerant disc-jockey framed for murder, etc.) and yet each of these premises is systematically abandoned by Jarmusch as the film proceeds. These premises are abandoned because of Jarmusch's desire to show us something other than what we expect to see. As he says, "I'd rather make a movie about a guy walking his dog than about the emperor of China" (Sante 148).

Harlan Jacobson suggests that Down By Law is a story about "lost purpose" in America, in the same way that Alex Cox's Sid and Nancy, the Frears/Kureishi films, or Michael Apted's 7 to 35 Up films are in some way about Britain's national decay ("Festival" 52). This is where the film's evocation of Whitman seems most relevant, especially in light of the reversal of meaning implied by the film's title. "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem:" Bob's Whitmanesque, unbridled optimism (that which allows him to believe Whitman was right) play against the film's revelation of American detritus, of "lost purpose." This sentiment may seem rather trite, especially
in this age of "contracts with America" in the U.S. Congress, and "common sense revolutions" in Ontario, but it is expressed with enough good-natured incongruity, as to render it, like Jarmusch's entire oeuvre, simultaneously amusing and vaguely melancholy. Or, as Jacobson writes:

Jarmusch has fashioned a funny parable that looks at America and satirizes why the country doesn't work anymore -- unless you're an immigrant too ignorant to know what the rules are and that they've choked off the natives' air supply ("Festival" 51).

Relatedly, several of the articles written at the time of the film's release describe Bob as a tourist, but in fact, nowhere does the film give any indication what Bob is doing in America. All we learn about his past is that (and this isn't really that far "past") he got caught cheating at cards, threw an eight-ball at one of his pursuers, and killed him. But we do know what Nicoletta is doing in America. Her Uncle Luigi, who won the Tintop in a poker game, died on the very same day -- her birthday -- that her boyfriend left her, so she decided to move to Louisiana, and take over the "business." Thus, she's been minding the place, basically just waiting for Bob to turn up, ever since. Is this an American Dream story? A variation on Horatio Alger? There are no exceptionally meritorious folks in this film - no hard work, no drive, no ambition; "good" people do get ahead, but they do not pull themselves up by
their bootstraps, as Congressman Gingrich might have them.

After *Stranger Than Paradise*'s enormous success, *Down By Law* was much anticipated by critics and by Jarmusch's by-then-growing legion of fans. At first glance, the two films' similarities are striking: both are black-and-white, slow-moving movies about three characters, one of whom is European and in possession of far more grace and goodness than either of his or her American foils. As well, both films are especially interested in seeing aspects of American culture through the eyes of its European new-comer.

Also at first glance, it might appear that Roberto Benigni's Bob merely replaces *Stranger*'s Eva as the enigmatic wide-eyed foreigner in America, Tom Waits' mumbling Zack/Lee Baby Simms replaces mumbling Eddie, and John Lurie's inordinately irascible Jack replaces John Lurie's inordinately irascible Willie, in an otherwise corresponding narrative.

But one important difference between *Down By Law* and *Stranger Than Paradise* is each film's treatment of personal relationships between characters, and especially the treatment of love and romance. In his moderately unfavourable review of the film, David Eldenstei astutely observed:

...however successful he (Jarmusch) is in
capturing his sense of human desolation on screen, he's not using his art to work through that desolation, and come out somewhere else (64).

This is to a large degree accurate in the cases of Stranger Than Paradise and Down By Law (and remains somewhat true for Mystery Train, but less so for Night on Earth), but I raise Eldensteins's point here because part of Down By Law's strength lies in its ability to render even human desolation in at least mildly amusing situations. After Jack and Zack have shared their prison cell for a time, there is a period of a few days during which Zack refuses to speak. When he finally does, and reveals that he is Lee Baby Simms, unemployed disc-jockey, Jack cannot believe it. "Man, what is wrong with you? It's like pullin' teeth tryin' to get you to talk, and you're a fuckin' deejay." Jack fails to realize, of course, that there is no good reason why it should be easier for a deejay to talk than for anybody else. But this exchange does permit a tiny degree of contact between the two men (who have staunchly refused to become prison escape movie "buddies"), because Lee Baby Simms does give a fictional traffic report, much to Jack's delight.

The other reason I raised Eldenstein's complaint about Jarmusch's treatment of human desolation is because it is interesting to note how Jarmusch blocks and frames his characters. One might expect, in films with such massive
distance between people, that they would be kept literally separate by the camera. But Jarmusch never shoots a conversation in the standard shot/reverse shot manner, and typically forces all three of his characters to share the same frame. Throughout the post-jail-break portion of the film, we are almost always in the company of the three characters, who almost always share the frame in medium to medium-long shot. While a variation of this strategy leads in *Stranger Than Paradise* to increasing, but always severely muted and unfulfilled, sexual tension between Eva and Eddie (and perhaps between Eva and Willie as well), the apparent absence of such tension in *Down By Law* is exploded by Bob and Nicoletta’s tender early morning dance near the end of the film. The dance’s poignance is amplified by our recollections of Zack’s, but especially Jack’s relationships with women, and perhaps even more so by the lovers’ effusive presence in the front of the frame, with Jack and Zack -- still there -- but relegated to a space deep in the Z axis. This shot is only one example (albeit a striking one) of one the film’s novel formal properties, which is, as described by Jarmusch: "...whenever you see something or someone (that a character sees), you see them seeing it" (Reynaud 5). The spectator might not explicitly recognize the film’s adherence to these sorts of principles (*Stranger’s* meticulous dependence upon sequence shots is another
prominent example), but the effect of these devices, even when they remain unnoticed, is to render the experience of the film strange, if not exotic. As we shall see in the proceeding chapters, notwithstanding the appearance of increasingly conventional complexions to his films, Jarmusch continues to adopt unconventional tactics in order to produce utterly original works.
Notes to Chapter Three

1. Bollag asked Lee about the phrase at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival (where Down By Law also premiered) because in Lee's She's Gotta Have It, Lee's character, Mars Blackman, when reminded that May 19 is Malcolm X's birthday, replies with, "Yeah, he was down by law."

2. The term "magic realism" may not be quite right, but in Down By Law the plot turns on a few miracles which occur completely off-screen - notably, the prison escape and the successful rabbit-hunt. And the appearance of Nicoletta and Luigi's Tintop ("is this a mirage?" Zack asks) is a remarkable event which the film glosses over, as it does the escape and rabbit-hunt, with its blasé, but essentially realistic, tone.

3. In fact, not only does Jarmusch resist shooting conversations in the conventional manner, but in this film, which looks much less formally abstinent than Stranger Than Paradise does, there is not one reverse shot to be found.
Chapter Four

Mystery Train: Elvis was a Hero to Most...

Elvis was a hero to most, but he never meant shit to me, you see;
Straight up racist, that sucka was,
Simple and plain...
...most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps
-- From the song "Fight the Power" by Public Enemy

In twenty years, when Spike (Lee) is the Minister of Culture, I'll be making whitesploitation movies.
-- Jim Jarmusch (qtd. in Sante 146)

It is interesting that Brenda Bollag's report from the 1986 Cannes Film Festival in Film Quarterly (which I cited in the last chapter) should have focused on the correspondences between Jarmusch's entry, Down By Law, and Spike Lee's, She's Gotta Have it. Bollag's decision to focus on the connections between the two film-makers' predilections seems retrospectively prophetic because Lee and Jarmusch's next films have even more in common than their 1986 accomplishments, at least insofar as these films take the relationship of racial tension to culture (in the anthropological sense) and to pop culture (as both of these entities are distinguished from "high culture") as their primary thematic preoccupation.²

Considered as a whole, Jim Jarmusch's entire oeuvre
reveals the implausible, enigmatic story of Elvis Presley's career (and especially his posthumous cultural invocations), with its labyrinthine cultural meanings, as a perfectly apt metaphor for Jarmusch's own expressions of the state of American culture and society. Rooted in racial ambiguity, commodification, and appropriation, the trajectory of Elvis Presley's career is the story of American culture -- of, at the very least, a significant part of American popular culture -- since the 1950s, and in Mystery Train, Jarmusch fashions from his usual bag of tricks an incredibly economical allegory of his culture and his society.

Seething with hostility and resentment, Public Enemy's song "Fight the Power" both opens and closes Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing. I have cited the song's most notorious lines above because they bear directly on what any cultural evocation of Elvis Presley must necessarily address -- race, racism, and American popular culture. These issues are among Mystery Train's central concerns, and as issues at the centre of American culture, it is not surprising that Jarmusch should tackle them head-on. As well, I included the line about heroes and stamps (which comes in the song a few lines after the bulk of my quotation) because this line clearly links the song's passionate resentment of racist institutions to Do the Right Thing's riot-provoking question, "why aren't there any black folks on Sal's "Wall
of Fame," a question which Johnny/Elvis (Joe Strummer) echoes in Mystery Train. Why, Johnny wonders, would a black hotel, with (as he says) black dudes working on the desk, have a portrait of Elvis Presley on the wall instead of one of Otis Redding or Martin Luther King? In this chapter, I shall attempt to map out some of the multitudinous devices Jarmusch conscripts to flesh out this story of the relationship of race to contemporary American popular culture.

First, Mystery Train's Memphis conjures at least two dead kings: Elvis Presley, king of rock and roll, and Memphis's most famous citizen, and Martin Luther King Jr., who was murdered in Memphis. The assassinated civil rights leader exhibits only a ghostly presence in the film, though. The only explicit reference to King in the film (other than the one noted above), occurs when we notice his portrait hung on the back of the door at Shades bar, the "black" bar where Johnny, drunk to hell, commiserates with his black former co-workers. But there might even be a third king in Mystery Train. Joe Strummer seems an inspired casting choice for the role of Johnny/Elvis because of the myriad cultural associations he carries. As the leader of the Clash, who along with the Sex Pistols were the most notorious, influential, and famous bands of the first wave of British punk rock, Strummer is an extremely significant
cultural figure, as well as a kind of king for many of the post-Presley, punk generation of pop and rock music fans. That Strummer appears in the film as a gruff Englishman who seems to prefer the company of African-Americans is interesting because of the Clash’s close association with London’s West Indian community, most clearly evident via their incorporation of reggae music into their otherwise conventional punk sound. The cover of one of their very early singles -- significantly titled "White Riot" -- was adorned by a photograph of the racial disturbances at the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival in London. One chronicler of the early incarnations of English punk has succinctly linked the Clash to the influence of black culture on punk:

Most conspicuously amongst punk groups, the Clash were heavily influenced not only by the music, but also the visual iconography of Black Jamaican street style (Hebdige 29).

"Race music," we learn from the Sun Studio’s fast-talking tour-guide, is what Col. Tom Parker hoped to record at his Memphis studio. The tour-guide explains that Parker, an astute businessman, hoped to capitalize on the popular sound of the various black forms coming out of the area (all blues based) by tempering their wild raunchiness in order to broaden their appeal. The evolution of rock and roll music, and the evolution of punk music some twenty or so years later had much in common. As Dick Hebdige notes, there can
be little understanding of the "punk" phenomenon (and therefore, I would submit, all subsequent rock and pop music) without an appreciation of punk's reliance, musically, on reggae music, and on its cultural appropriations of both West Indian culture and the milieux of black working-class Britons, many of whom, naturally, were of West Indian descent. In short, Strummer's associations with the close tie between rock and roll music and race are as significant as almost any popular entertainer of the past forty years, with the conspicuous exception of Elvis Presley himself.

Of course, one possible ramification of this analogy is that it could very easily be taken as criticism of Strummer's function as a cultural icon, and of the Clash's appropriation of black (again, mostly West Indian) culture. That is, despite the Clash's best efforts, and undeniably altruistic motives for championing blackness in late-seventies England, the fact remains that Elvis Presley and punk rock in its entire cultural reach were regarded by a vast majority of working-class blacks as utterly irrelevant at best, and reprehensible at worst.³

While it would be unreasonable to attempt a wholesale analogy between the advent of rock and roll and that of punk, it will be useful here for me to at least state some of the indisputable (and, in some cases, perhaps obvious)
connections for the purposes of shoring up my argument that Jarmusch uses the similarities between these two cultural phenomena to illuminate his view of the muddied waters of race and American popular culture. First, both early rock and roll and punk were felt by the mainstream of their societies to be scandalous, rude, anti-social, and, in short, a bad influence on the teenagers who were typically drawn to these forms. Second, as I have already noted, both forms owed a great debt to black culture and music: blues in one case, reggae in the other. And finally, the irresistible commercial value of both rock and roll and punk were quickly recognized and exploited. Thus the rapid emergence in the 1950s of completely non-threatening, broadly commercial rock and roll music, a profitable and exploitable teenage market, and, in the contemporary case, the ridiculous incongruity of popular commercial radio stations broadcasting Nirvana's blistering, screeching "Smells Like Teen Spirit" immediately before or after any Elton John or Whitney Houston rock ballad one would care to name.

These transformations of cultural phenomena — from nasty annoyance, to mainstream culture — are an important part of Mystery Train's thrust. And as we have seen, in both the case of rock and roll in the early 1950s, and that of punk in the 1970s, the initial rise was the result of theft
from black culture. This transformative quality in the reception of cultural artifacts is manifest in many forms — consider the evolving impressions of cinematic "realism" — but for the purposes of this discussion, a few specific matters merit attention. First, mainstream recuperation is inevitable and ongoing. Second, the meanings and values assigned to cultural artifacts are completely fluid, as the case of Presley so clearly indicates. I refer the reader to Marcus' *Dead Elvis: Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession* for astonishing examples of this phenomenon. As Marcus summarizes:

> The enormity of (Elvis') impact on culture, on millions of people, was never really clear when he was alive; it was mostly hidden. When he died, the event was a kind of explosion that went off silently....No one, I think, could have predicted the ubiquity, the playfulness, the perversity, the terror, and the fun of this, of Elvis Presley's second life... (xiii).

But the example of punk, and even more specifically, Joe Strummer's personal cultural meaning, is inspiring, or at the very least interesting to a moderate segment of the white population, but of no interest whatever to the vast majority of African Americans, especially southern, working-class blacks.

bell hooks, the black American feminist culture critic remarks on the existence of the genuine admiration of black culture and subsequent celebration of it by some "hip" white
folks despite the widespread commodification and appropriation which she sees (accurately) as run-of-the-mill white supremicism and imperialism. In fact, in her esteemed book length study of race and representation in American culture (in which she refers continually to film because, "more than any other media experience, (film) determines how blackness and black people are seen, and how other groups will respond to us based on their relation to these constructed and consumed images" (6)), hooks cites only two "white" films which do not resort to the contentious commodification and appropriation of representations of blackness -- John Waters' satire Hairspray (1988), and Jarmusch's Mystery Train (36).

Mystery Train is bracketed by images of a train arriving in (then leaving) Memphis, and by two different versions of the eponymous theme song, the first sung by Elvis Presley, and the second, recorded two years earlier (in 1953), sung by Junior Parker, a black rhythm and blues artist. Jarmusch's inclusion of the original version of the song that Elvis "made into" a hit is but one, and perhaps the most obvious, example of his fun with music in the film, both white rock and roll, and black rhythm and blues. The diegetic inclusion of the legendary R. and B. man Rufus Thomas's "Memphis Train" (Johnny's first jukebox selection in Shades bar) is just as clever. Thomas himself appears as
the gracious cigar-smoker in the Memphis train station (he thanks Jun and Mitsuko for the light -- in Japanese!), and the first verse of his song glaringly exposes Jarmusch's inspiration for the film's tripartite narrative form:
"Train number one, is gone down the line; Train number two, is gone down the line; Train number three, is gone down the line."

Once again, it appears that one of Jarmusch's central concerns in Mystery Train (as it was in the two films thusfar examined) is to examine the American wasteland (which is all he ever shows us of the American landscape) through the eyes of newcomers to the country. As J. Hoberman helpfully observes, though, Jun and Mitsuko, central characters of the film's first section "Far from Yokohama" are not, as Eva and Bob were (and Luisa and Johnny are), recent immigrants to America, but rather they are tourists, with far less stake in the strange culture they encounter than they would be if they had to negotiate this culture in the way that recent immigrants typically must ("Individualists" 59).

Johnny is another Jarmuschian foreigner with a twist. Apparently acclimatized to Memphis, Johnny has become chummy with several of his black co-workers, who tease him by calling him Elvis, presumably because of his Presley-
inflected greaser hair-style. Johnny hates his nickname though (motivation enough for his friends to persist in using it), and once snarls, "Don’t call me that! Why don’t you try Carl Perkins Jr. or something?" It is strange that Johnny should suggest the name of Perkins, since he was one of the whiter, more country-inflected artists of the first wave of rock and roll, and since Johnny has already displayed his affinity for things black. But Perkins does have his partisans (Jun, for instance, clearly prefers Perkins to Presley), and there was a time in the 1950s that Perkins, not Presley, claimed the title "king of rock and roll." Johnny’s black friends are also much more philosophical than he is about their recent job loss, having experienced lay-offs before, no doubt. "You lucky you had a job in the first place," Johnny’s former co-worker says, echoing Jack’s admonishment to Bob upon Bob’s loss of his notebook containing every English idiom he ever encountered: "Man, you lucky to even be alive." These are not especially hopeful or optimistic world-views, and they are in both cases essentially true. Johnny also acts the most like an stereotypical American in some ways (at least as far as his gun play is concerned).

Elvis has many incarnations in this film, but three essential ones. The Japanese teenagers believe that the most important distinguishing feature of American culture,
the difference that most clearly marks the separation between Japan and America, is the existence of Elvis Presley. "We didn't have Elvis in Japan. This is nothing like Japan," Mitsuko dreamily remarks whilst gazing up Memphis's large bronze statue commemorating the king of rock and roll. For these two kids, Elvis represents something intangibly cool, hip, and essentially good about American culture, much in the way that Screamin' Jay Hawkins (her main man) acts as Eva's touchstone of Americana, and like Whitman and Frost operate for Bob.

In the second story, "A Ghost," as Ava Preacher Collins points out, the Elvis of the story takes on the colouring of commodification (in the strictly material sense), the hucksterism, and the duped masses which Elvis has also come to represent in some senses. It is only in "Lost in Space," the film's final section, that the racial questions surrounding Elvis's cultural meaning are fully foregrounded. We can see in the film a progression from symbol of the totalizing good of American culture, to commodity, to ambiguous racial icon (and arguably racist one: cf. "Fight the Power"). Preacher Collins concludes:

...the image of Elvis is, like the characters, in transit, foreign, an Other until appropriated, taken in and rearticulated by the characters according to the variable criteria that each employs, and those rearticulations function variably for the characters as well (101).
Interestingly, the ghost which appears to Luisa in the Arcade hotel is, with the utmost Presleyan politeness, as confused by his appearance in her company as she is. Luisa and Presley's exchange is a model of miscommunication and misunderstanding:

Presley (startled): Oh. Where am I?
Luisa (equally startled): You! What are you doing here?
P: Well...I don' rightly know m'self.
L (to Deedee): Excuse me...
P: Excuse me, ma'am.
L: No, I was saying to her...
P: No really, excuse me, ma'am. Uh...I musta got the wrong address or somethin'. I better be goin'. I gotta go.

*Mystery Train*'s three-parts-plus-an-epilogue structure is another feature it shares with *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Down By Law*. In fact, *Mystery Train* even returns to *Stranger*'s practice of further separating the films' sections by means of individual titles for each section. But *Mystery Train*'s thirds occur simultaneously, a fact which the film only gradually reveals. One of the "clues" Jarmusch plants in each of *Mystery Train*'s three sections, to twig the audience to the simultaneity of events, is the report of the gun when Johnny accidentally shoots Charlie. The reactions of the various characters to this gunshot are telling and amusing. When Mitsuko asks Jun "was that a gun?" as they pack, he reacts with a characteristically nonplussed: "probably, this is America." In the film's
second section, "A Ghost," when Deedee asks Luisa the same question that Mitsuko asked Jun, she ventures, thoughtfully, "maybe a .38?"

The gun, of course, is fired by Johnny/Elvis, who, as several commentators have noted, shares more than just his hairstyle with the king of rock and roll; he also shares Presley's legendary recklessness with firearms. Strangely, while Johnny is coded throughout the film as distinctly acclimatized to Memphis and his adopted culture, Jarmusch does choose to reveal some of the gaps in Johnny's Americanization. Johnny has (not surprisingly) never heard of the television series Lost in Space, a program which has caused Will Robinson considerable annoyance over the years because he shares one of its characters' names. Will's smouldering aggravation at being reminded of the old t.v. show reveals that he has endured a lifetime of such jeering. Imagine growing up black and poor and being constantly bugged by your peers about your association with such a vacuous television program, a program which has so very little to do with your own experiences.

Finally, the desk staff at the Arcade Hotel demand some attention here. First, seen beside the ingenious strategic casting of punk rock idol Joe Strummer, and in light of the personal relationship Jarmusch shares with Spike Lee (not to mention the aforementioned similarities between Mystery
Train and Do the Right Thing), that he filled his bellhop vacancy with Spike Lee's brother Cinqué was a clearly purposeful directorial decision. But even more crucial to the tenor of the film is the restrained gentility of Screamin' Jay Hawkins' performance as the desk clerk. The scenes over the course of the plot's one night which occur (and seem at first to recur) at the front desk are among the important ingredients Jarmusch uses to both efface, then gradually reveal the simultaneity of the film's three sections. And these scenes also reveal that as far as these two men on the graveyard shift -- the only two in the film who are aware of the events' simultaneity -- are concerned, the simultaneity of the three story's events is a meaningless coincidence.

Like the previous films, all of Mystery Train's locations are wasteland images, with piles of rubbish adorning every grubby parking lot, back-lane and alleyway. One notable exception to this is the splendid green forest which the train cuts through just outside of Memphis on its way into, and on its journey out of, town. Part of the joke of Stranger Than Paradise is that even Florida looks grimy -- so imagine what Cleveland looks like! -- so the fact that Jarmusch chose to include just outside of town, the first pastoral, pleasant American image just outside of Memphis is telling. Despite the presence of this pastoral greenspace,
and despite the fact that *Mystery Train* is Jarmusch's first film shot in colour, it can be seen as his bleakest work to date. In *Mystery Train* Jarmusch prods the wasteland of his culture even more menacingly than he does in the two films already discussed. Like Lee in *Do the Right Thing*, Jarmusch uncovers an atmosphere charged with racial tension, exposes what may be good, valuable, bad, and indifferent about this milieu, and also as Lee does, Jarmusch offers no suggestions, concrete or subtle, about how best to resolve the tensions at the root of his society.
1. It should be noted about this epigram that like all of Public Enemy's music, these words, naked on the page, with their dearth of subtlety and apparently clumsy rhyme scheme, can never approach the intensity, potency, and venom which they admirably communicate through the song itself.

2. By "Lee and Jarmusch's next films" I mean Jarmusch's Mystery Train (1989), and Lee's Do the Right Thing (1989). Between Down By Law and Mystery Train, Jarmusch did, however, complete a six-minute short, Coffee and Cigarettes (1986) with Roberto Benigni. The film was apparently exhibited in London, as it was reviewed in the British Film Institute's Monthly Film Bulletin. See Jenkins for a synopsis and short review.

3. First, it must be noted that while the Clash did appropriate aspects of reggae music for their own punk project (just as the early white rock and rollers stole from the blues), they were also vocal and ardent supporters of black reggae musicians. As well, like Presley and his early colleagues covering R. and B. tunes, the Clash also recorded their own versions of obscure reggae songs (Junior Mervin's "Police and Thieves" (1977) for instance), but only in an effort to get their own predominantly white audience turned on to reggae music, and because of their genuine love of the source music. (see endnote number 4 for a further remark on this practice.)

   Naturally, my observation about the disregard of and/or dismayed initial reaction to Elvis and punk is equally applicable across racial lines. My point, however, is that neither Presley nor punk rock have ever gained much support from black folks.

4. See Greil Marcus' books Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock and Roll Music (New York: Dutton, 1975) and/or Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of Cultural Obsession (New York: Doubleday, 1991) for invaluable explications of the relationships between early rock and roll music and the black music from which it was derived (stolen?). As Marcus notes, one result of the literally segregated popular music
markets in the early 1950s was that dozens of songs recorded by black artists -- often with a degree of success -- were later re-recorded for white audiences by white artists, thus forming the canon of early rock and roll. For the purist (and the self-aware hipster) like Johnny, and no doubt like Jarmusch himself, the earlier, black, versions of the these familiar songs are vastly superior to the white cover versions.

5. Marcus, perhaps unkindly, notes that Perkins adopted this moniker as if in kamikaze denial of the compelling evidence to the contrary (1975, 167).

6. See "The Declaration of Independents," a conversation between Jarmusch and Lee, during which their friendship is manifest, and in the course of which Lee includes ("no, I'm completely serious," he says) Stranger Than Paradise with The Wizard of Oz among his list of favourite films (Jarmusch 26). See also the unsigned Premiere piece (also titled "The Declaration of Independents") in which Jarmusch and Lee recount anecdotes about their time as classmates at N.Y.U.
Chapter Five

All the World's a Stage: Night on Earth

Why movies? Why don't we just go outside and watch real life instead?
— Jim Jarmusch (qtd. in Schoemer C1).

While somewhat less narratively elaborate than Mystery Train, Night on Earth is Jarmusch's most intricate film yet. Comprising five completely distinct stories set in five different cities around the world, the film's scope is simultaneously vast, and, confirming Jarmusch's deserved reputation as something of a minimalist (or even, as J. Hoberman has described him, "a miniaturist"), it can also be seen as another modestly contained work. Night on Earth shares many features with Jarmusch's previous films, and expands outward from some of the concepts, techniques and themes he had already advanced in these earlier works.

To facilitate this chapter's discussion, I shall begin with the following very brief summary of the five episodes, which a bank of clocks, indicating the location's five different time-zones, reveal as occurring simultaneously. At 7:07 p.m. in Los Angeles, Corky (Winona Ryder) a very young taxi driver picks up Victoria Snelling (Gena Rowlands), a Hollywood casting agent, at the airport. En Route to Snelling's home in Beverly Hills, while dusk quickly falls into night, she decides that Corky would be
perfect for the major role which she is casting, but Corky, citing her desire and ability to become a mechanic, refuses the offer. In New York, at 10:07 p.m., Yo-Yo (Giancarlo Esposito), trying to get home to Brooklyn, hails a cab in Manhattan. After quickly discerning that his driver, German former circus clown Helmut Grokenberger (Armin Mueller-Stahl), cannot drive, Yo-Yo takes over, whereupon he picks up his sister-in-law Angela (Rosie Perez), against her will, takes her home, arguing all the way, and surrenders the driver's seat to Helmut, who drives off into the night. At 4:07 a.m. in Paris, after kicking some patronizing west African diplomats out of his cab, a driver, himself from the Ivory Coast (Issach De Bankolé), picks up a blind woman (Béatrice Dalle), whom he annoys with ignorant questions about her condition. After she decabs, we hear the taxi smash into an another car, off-screen. In Rome, at 4:07 a.m., Gino, a gregarious taxi driver (Roberto Benigni) picks up an ailing priest and proceeds to, against the priest's wishes, confess some of his sinful sexual encounters. The priest dies in the taxi, and Gino abandons him on a bench. At 5:07 a.m. in Helsinki, Mika (Matti Pellonpää), a taxi driver picks up three very drunk men. On the way to their houses, they tell Mika of the tragedies that have befallen Aki, their passed out friend, whereupon Mika tells them his own tale of woe. Arriving home, the men abandon Aki, who
sits in the snow in front of his house as the dawn rises into morning.

The principal issues to be examined in this chapter are issues central to the thesis as a whole: with a global scope, and with only two of the film's five episodes occurring in American cities, Night on Earth is a film in the model of the art film, and in typically Jarmuschian fashion, one that necessarily illuminates aspect of American culture. Fully three-fifths of Night on Earth is not in English, and is requisitely sub-titled. While Jarmusch does go to great length to distinguish nuance between each story's taxicab, characters, and cityscapes, are the episodes stylistically different? On the surface, the answer is no; they are not. The great advantage of the episodic/simultaneous form is that it allows all of Jarmusch's tendencies (cf. this chapter's epigram for what I would suggest is a guiding principle in his life's work) to play out, unencumbered by the conventions of Hollywood filmmaking. In fact, as some critics have noted, in Night on Earth, Jarmusch may even be seen as deliberately situating his work in the international art cinema.

Well known for beginning the creative process with actors in mind, Jarmusch's casting in Night on Earth is once again evidently intricately planned for the associations each actor arrives with. J. Hoberman quipped that "there
hasn't been a film since Godard's *King Lear* in which the performers' mere presence carried so much cross-referential baggage ("Roadside" 6). As my emphasis in the previous chapter on actors' associative meanings in *Mystery Train* indicates, I might disagree with Hoberman's example, but not with his point, which is irrefutably sound. While in the case of *Night on Earth*, the associative "meanings" which the actors contribute to the film are as clearly significant as they are in *Mystery Train*, they are even closer to this project's central thesis, evoking as these performers do the international art cinemas of Cassavetes (Rowlands), Lee (Esposito and Perez), Fassbinder (Mueller-Stahl), Benieux (Dalle), (Denis) De Bankolé, Jarmusch (Benigni), and Kaurismäki (Pellonpää). As for the Kaurismäki connection, one critic has concisely observed that, "(Kaurismäki) is viewed -- along with Jim Jarmusch -- as a proletarian metaphysician in deep artistic hock to Wim Wenders" (Fisher 254). And since Pellonpää is to Kaurismäki's films rather as De Niro is to Scorsese's, Jarmusch's casting here is once again irrefutably portentous. As well, the associative connections of cinematographer Frederic Elmes (who has also shot famous films for David Lynch and John Cassavetes) are as nearly consequential as the actual images which Elmes creates and captures in this film.

Moreover, the presence of Winona Ryder (a Hollywood
star) in Night on Earth, especially when seen in the light of Jarmusch’s persistent resistance to the mainstream commercial film industry, is at least as significant (and perhaps simple-mindedly so, especially in light of the fact that Corky -- Ryder’s character -- turns down the chance to become a Hollywood star!) as is the presence of Aki Kaurismäki regular Pellonpää, or Esposito and Perez, whom J. Hoberman calls "denizens of planet Spike Lee" ("Individualists 59). Different ideas of ambition, not to mention the lack of it, seem once again to come into play here. In the course of turning down the casting agent’s offer of instant movie stardom, Corky delivers the following speech: "look lady, I like the movies and all, an’ I see you’re being serious, but that’s not a real life for me, y’know? And I know there’s tons of girls who want to be in the movies an’ all..." She acknowledges that she is different from the "tons of girls" who would kill to be movie stars, with this admission clearly attributable to Jarmusch’s own stance vis-a-vis Hollywood.3

In addition to the evident winks of the art house eye which accompanies Jarmusch’s casting, the trajectory of his career as an art film director has brought him by Night on Earth to a position where he may (and his audience takes delight that he does) allude to his own previous work. Two arresting examples of this device in action are found in
otherwise extraneous narrative or visual material. In the
New York story, it is certainly essential that the driver’s
given name be Helmut, but by giving the gentle and amiable
driver the surname Grokenberger, Jarmusch alludes to Otto
Grokenberger, the young German aspiring producer who saved
Stranger Than Paradise from oblivion with his last-minute
investment. In even more elliptical fashion, Jarmusch
throws in a fast insert of Gino’s (Benigni) Fiat gear-shift-
knob (it’s an eight-ball), for no other possible reason but
to allude to the missile which Benigni’s character Bob used
as a murder weapon in Down By Law.

The film’s structure and organizing principle (that is, the five separate stories, five sets of characters, five
different locations, with no connection whatever save the purely formal one) is extraordinarily well suited to
Jarmusch’s cinematic preoccupations. The formal mechanism of basing an entire film on the necessarily random-seeming
counters between taxi-drivers and their customers (a pair who are naturally unacquainted with each other) is
supremely Jarmushian. In fact, the Roman taxi driver makes this case explicitly when he explains to the priest
(significantly, in order to convince the priest to hear his confession) that he has been driving a taxi in Rome for fifteen years, and has never picked up the same person twice. Jarmusch wants his audience to know this (surprising
but certainly plausible) fact not only because it might expedite the driver’s hilarious confession, but also because it starkly illuminates the uncommon relationship between a taxi driver and his or her customer. This relationship, which forms the core of the film, does reveal in typically Jarmuschian fashion the distance between people in each of the five episodes. Conversely, each episode’s driver/customer relationship also exudes (to extremely varying degrees) a warmth, and degree of sensitive understanding, which has been hitherto absent from the oeuvre, with the striking exception of Nicoletta and Bob’s magical convergence in Down By Law. Even Mystery Train’s young Japanese lovers are, because of Jun’s oppressively cool demeanour, rendered with less tenderness between them than are Yo-Yo, Helmut, and Angela in their fleeting, coincidental, and never to be repeated, encounter in a New York City taxicab.

Jarmusch has claimed that Mystery Train marked the end of a kind of trilogy in his career, with Night on Earth as the beginning of a new phase of his creative endeavour. The latter film seems to me, however, to actually be the pinnacle of this sort of film-making, marking the end of progress through all four films to this end point. Furthermore, the fact of Night on Earth’s juxtaposition of the two American segments with the three European ones,
automatically provokes a degree of explicit comparison of American society (at least inasmuch as taxi rides can expose this) to various nuances of western European society. Previously, we have seen Jarmusch show his audience an America they might not have seen before, by looking at the culture through the eyes of foreigners. In Night on Earth, all of the characters are more or less naturalised (if not native) citizens of their episode's location, and yet the existence of the five different places allows the film to have a revelatory affect on all sorts of spectators, through the modest trick of simple comparison.

The simultaneity of the five episodes is used differently in Night on Earth than it is in linking Mystery Train's three parts. The first important difference is that the fact that the events are occurring simultaneously is somewhat effaced in Mystery Train, only to be gradually revealed, while the Night on Earth's simultaneity, short of splitting the frame into fifths and projecting the stories simultaneously, is made as plain as it reasonably could be. The net effect of these two tricks on audiences is palpably different. Interestingly, it is only through retroactive speculation that Mystery Train's audience fully apprehend the implications for what it has witnessed of the gradually revealed simultaneity, while Night on Earth's unmistakable simultaneity provides only occasional spectatorial awareness.
of the events' points of comparison and contrast across the
time-zones.

One common feature of representative works of the
international art cinema (which, in this thesis' terms, is
comprised of, to reiterate, all the national cinemas) is its
international scope. Thus the frequency of international
co-production and what Peter Lev has identified as the
"Euro-American cinema," that is, films such as Paris, Texas
(Wenders, 1984) and the nearly archetypical example,
Godard's Contempt (1963) among, of course, many, many
others. One reason for the presumption of greater
"sophistication" (or self-assumed sophistication) of the art
house crowd, naturally, is the more literally worldly nature
of the art film, even if the film in question never strays
outside of the tiniest of locations. Night on Earth's
conception, that is, the very idea to make a film whereby
simultaneous taxi journies around the world provoke
questions about time, culture, the human condition, is to
undertake an art film. Unlike Down By Law which could
conceivably be re-made into a Hollywood action picture,
Night on Earth is an art film, a priori.

The bank of clocks and the spinning globes which
Jarmusch begins each of the film's five sections with are
ostentatiously strange because of the extreme rarity of
extra-diegetic visual material within a film. That is, with
extra-diegetic music utterly conventional, in the fiction feature film, whether it is the spawn of Hollywood, the art cinema, or something else, images which have no bearing on the characters of the diegesis are extremely rare. Indeed, such images are virtually entirely absent from the commercial cinema, occurring only slightly more frequently in art films and/or the fully avant-garde cinema. These clocks are the tool by which the five stories simultaneity is revealed.

While the clocks inform us about the literal simultaneity of the events, the film also connects the episodes in many, much subtler ways, a device which lends a universal quality to the film as a whole, over and above whatever universality might be expressed by the film's literal universality. Some of the deft and fleeting links between the episodes link the disparate places (a shot of the Roman Colosseum reminding us of the Great Western Forum which we passed en route to Beverly Hills), while others link some of the characters across the time zones (the disconsolate Helsinki stories of marital disintegration and pregnant teens recalling Corky and her desire to find "just exactly the right guy"), while still others link all the characters, across one night on earth (smoking and the etiquette surrounding it, the ultimate thoughtfulness of each episode's tip for the driver), and finally the touches
that bond the episodes to other significant films (the wafts of ominous smoke rising from a sewer as the New York story opens -- a comical visual homage to Scorsese's Taxi Driver (1976), while Béatrice Dalle's blindness harkens back to her performance of self-eye-poking in Beiniex's Betty Blue (1986).

This film allows the spectator (be they Parisian, Los Angelino, or neither) to travel, and to see the everyday and the banal (nothing more than slice-of-life taxi encounters) of five very different places in much the same way that Jarmusch has previously exposed American culture through the eyes of foreigners. In the New York story, we find the following revealing exchange: "Check it out, Helmut, man, this is Brooklyn! What you think?" When Helmut replies, wistfully, "it's crazy," and Angela rebuts, "it's a dump!" Yo-Yo comes back with, "don't be sayin' that Angela, man, it's our neighbourhood." Yo-Yo's observation draws our attention to the fact that whatever we might make of a place, there is certainly going to be someone who sees the same place in a completely different light. Every story's location in this film is familiar to the characters (with only few small exceptions), a fact which allows Jarmusch to treat his audience as tourists, to invite us to see the foreign through our own eyes, in exactly the same way that he has shown Americans their own culture through the eyes of
foreigners, be they tourists or immigrants. This kind of
tourism, the pleasures it supplies, and the cultural
insights it offers may be one good answer to Jarmusch’s (not
so unreasonable) question which begins this chapter.
Jarmusch may be interested in showing his audience the
beauty, comedy, tragedy, the art of the mundane, but also
that the tedious and the uneventful are no less so because
they occur in foreign places. Helsinki only looks as
foreign to a non-Finnish spectator, just as Angela’s
Brooklyn can be "a dump" to her, defensible, and even
bragged about by Yo-Yo, and beautiful and crazy to an aging
German former circus clown.

Jarmusch has commented that,

> taking a taxi is something insignificant in your
daily life; in a film when someone takes a taxi,
you see them get in, then there’s a cut, then you
see them get out. So in a way the content of this
film is made up of the things that would usually
be taken out (Keough 9)

This content, comprised of exactly what would be
removed from more conventional films, is exactly what
Jarmusch’s films have foregrounded since the beginning --
remember Aloysious’ remarks on stories (which I recounted
in the Down By Law chapter) from 1980’s Permanent Vacation?
Stylistically minimal but international in reach,
narratively spare, both amusing and melancholy, Night on
Earth epitomises Jarmusch’s work to date.
Notes to Chapter Five

1. As I write, Jarmusch's latest film, Dead Man, starring Johnny Depp, is poised for an autumn release following its so-so reception at the 1995 Cannes Film Festival. I know little else about the film at present other than it, like Mystery Train and Night on Earth, was produced with capital from Japanese investors, that in addition to Depp it also features Gabriel Byrne, John Hurt, and Alfred Molina, that it is a western, and that its score was composed by oddball rock star Neil Young. I gleaned these facts from "Cannes '95: Official Web Site of the International Festival" U.R.L.: http://www.mhm.fr/cannes/eng/index.html

2. Jarmusch has claimed in several interviews that the idea for his films always begins with him imagining characters for specific actors. Typical among these claims is the following: "I don't write a story first. I start with actors that are people that I know who I'd like to work with. So I start and I collect little details about a character that I would like to create with the actor in my head..." (qtd. in Clark 31).

3. By now, the basis of my claim should be perfectly clear, but in case it is not, I would direct the reader to Sante or Seidenberg, which are just two of the many interviews in which Jarmusch has claimed that he is (or at least was at one time) regularly deluged with extremely fat offers to direct other writers' scripts for Hollywood studios. For example, he complained to Seidenberg in 1985 that "I've been offered some real garbage scripts for a lot of money, but I don't have any desire to do that" (24).

4. According to a front-page feature on Jarmusch's unconventional business practices, "Headstrong Helmer See Art in the Deal," Variety reports that Jarmusch, initially sceptical of Grokenberger's offer of half-ownership of the negative and complete artistic control, "trusted Grokenberger intuitively" upon their first meeting (47).

5. This suggestion is not based solely on the knowledge that Jarmusch's next film is a western with a still-larger budget and a full-fledged movie star, although this knowledge certainly confirms my belief.
6. My suggestions of the potential origins of spectators are arbitrary, but it should perhaps be noted that Paris is one city where Jarmusch's films have been exceptionally well-received, so that he might anticipate a substantial Parisian audience for *Night on Earth* is less strange than it might be for, say, Hal Hartley, another American independent of approximately Jarmusch's international stature. *Down By Law* sold more first-run admissions in Paris alone than in the entire United States (Travers 35)
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 that by making films about displaced or marginal characters and the seemingly inconsequential little things they do.

-- Jim Jarmusch (qtd. in Sante 207)

In the preceding chapters I have attempted, through my analysis of Jarmusch’s four major works to date, to emphasize the thematic and stylistic features of these films which led me to attempt to find the category American National Cinema in which his films properly belong. In the quotation above, while divulging his deep antipathy toward what he believes has been the result of American capitalism, Jarmusch also exposes, perhaps naively, his faith in the resplendence of the everyday, of the banal.

Returning repeatedly to contemplations of American culture as filtered through the fresh, as-yet unjaded, eyes of foreign new-comers, Jarmusch’s desire to expose that which has been long invisible to the natives should be seen as wholly unlike -- indeed antithetical to -- the enterprise of Hollywood (and other national commercial cinemas). These
constant returns to the foreigners-eye-view of America are certainly shrewd inasmuch as his non-American characters see things that Americans do not see, typically speak English poorly or not at all, and hold beliefs, preconceptions, and world-views which Americans, at least those represented by the Hollywood cinema, typically do not.

Art film protagonists, Bordwell informs us, almost always lack the well-defined goals and ever-present deadlines that drive the characters, and form the entire raison d'être, of classical film narration (Narration 207). Jarmusch's films take this principle as a starting point and stretch from goal-less characters in the narrative sense, to characters who are literally goal bereft. Minor exceptions naturally occur, but by and large, Jarmusch's protagonists do not seem to know, much less care, where they are going.

Jarmusch is at present a minor artist, and perhaps shall remain one. The recognition of his accomplishments in academe is, however, such that he does warrant mention in an extremely widely-used introductory film studies text, A Short History of the Movies (5th ed.), where Bruce Kawin does usefully impart to neophyte film students that among practising American film-makers, Jarmusch is the anti-Spielberg:
If (Jarmusch's) films have, via their rock idols, a touch of the mythic, no one could mistake them for "return to myths" material; the lavish, conservative fantasies turned out by Hollywood in the late 1970s and 1980s are Jarmusch's polar opposites. In this period, the narrative filmmakers most unlike each other are Jarmusch and Spielberg, who might be considered a maximalist (527).

Paralleling Kawin's sentiments, J. Hoberman wrote in the pages of the Village Voice:

While Spielberg and company produce hyperbolic simulations of Hollywood B-movies, Jarmusch reinvented the Bs' no-frills aesthetic. His minimalist vaudevilles (complete with dialect humor) are irreducibly, confidently American. ("Noh Exit" 87)

In light of these two prominent views, there does not seem much reason for attempting to apprehend Jarmusch's films as anything other than among the best American examples of the art film; as exemplary models, very near the pinnacle, of the American national cinema. Obviously of a different kind than the Hollywood mainstream, which Spielberg's work best exemplifies, and steadfastly concerned with questions of national identity and the nature of American society and culture, Jarmusch's films are more "national" in character than Hollywood films are, in the same way that Bordwell suggests that the device of intentional ambiguity renders the art film more "realistic" than the classical Hollywood film ("Art" 60).

Passionate about the American national cinema, Jarmusch
has remarked, "some people see making a successful independent film as their ticket to Hollywood, and...there's nothing wrong with that...," but at the same time has voiced his stance on the existence of the American national cinema, and the need for some American film-makers to resist the temptations of the mainstream:

there is not a single language to filmmaking. There has to be place for serious films, serious comedies, in the American cinema. Otherwise we can all pack it in and give our legacy away (Jarmusch qtd. in Klady 47).
Works Cited


Bordwell, David. "Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice." Film Criticism 4.1 (Fall 1979): 56-64.


