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Jeffrey L. Meikle

- 1 European ambivalence toward the United States has never run so high as in the past five years. Even so, a degree of ambivalence has long been common. Over the past twenty-five years, I have witnessed many European students and colleagues pass through the place where I live, Austin, Texas. They typically express an enthusiasm for the wide open spaces of the American West, often tempered by ironic, even cynical responses to various aspects of American politics, religion, commercialism, or popular culture. This common ambivalence can be found in European permutations of a typically American film genre, the "road movie." Such refractions, reflecting the popular American myth of the open road through European eyes, suggest a shift from a one-directional model of cultural colonization to a more complex model of transatlantic cultural hybridity.
- 2 To establish a baseline against which to contrast Euro-American road movies, let's briefly consider the American film *Easy Rider*, an instant classic after its 1969 release.¹ Although *Easy Rider* appealed to the counterculture, its story of two male buddies cruising on extravagant custom choppers embodies the traditional American mythos. The names of the main characters, Wyatt (played by Peter Fonda) and Billy (played by Dennis Hopper, who also directed), evoke the western heroes Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid. The film romanticizes simple people who live close to the earth, such as Pueblo Indians, a plainspoken Anglo rancher with a Mexican wife and large family, black tenant farmers, and even hippies trying to live off the land in a rural commune. *Easy Rider* celebrates an American landscape of vast horizons and great promise, at least until its heroes run afoul of southern rednecks with a hatred for freewheeling outsiders flaunting long-haired individualism. After innocently joining a small-town parade, the two are thrown in jail, and the film ends with them gunned down along the highway. "You know, this used to be a helluva good country," laments a fellow traveler played by Jack Nicholson. But the

message of *Easy Rider* was not so one-dimensional. Advertisements for the movie emphasized a quest for identity by proclaiming, "a man went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere."² In fact, Wyatt and Billy are heading for a life of pleasure in Florida after scoring in a cocaine deal in Los Angeles—suggesting a selfish isolation from the very people Wyatt admires along the way. In their final scene together, Billy exults, "You go for the big money, man, and then you're free ... We're rich, Wyatt." In response Wyatt delivers the film's famous line, "You know, Billy, we blew it." Although *Easy Rider* posed questions about the motives of the counterculture, its meditation on American identity within an expansive landscape was wholly traditional—and transparent. No subsequent road movie—not even the complex, ironic films of the German director Wim Wenders—could ignore *Easy Rider*.

- 3 Born into the postwar rubble of Düsseldorf and growing up with a feeling of national shame, Wenders idolized American popular culture—comic books, films, and rockabilly music from military radio stations. However, when he confronted the reality of the United States during his first visit, he realized that the "mythical ... paradise of childhood" was in fact "empty and rotten."³ This discovery of the American "nightmare" informed his film *Alice in den Städten*, from 1974, which opens with the director's alter ego, a journalist played by Rüdiger Vogler, fleeing eastward back to New York after a month-long driving trip across America. Unable to complete a feature article about his journey, he complains to a girl friend in terms that parallel Wenders's own published writings: "It was a terrible trip ... Soon as you leave New York everything looks the same ... Sometimes, on the road, I was sure I would turn back. But still I went on and listened to that sickening radio and in the evening in the motel looking just like the previous one, I watched that inhuman television." Back in Germany, entrusted with returning the young girl Alice to her grandmother, he resumes a road trip haunted by bittersweet reminders of American popular culture, from jukeboxes and Coca-Cola to a live performance by his old idol Chuck Berry.
- 4 Two years later, in 1976, Wenders completed a slow-paced three-hour road movie, *Im Lauf der Zeit*, inspired by *Easy Rider* but actually its complete antithesis. Filmed in claustrophobic black-and-white rather than ravishing color, it immerses us in the migratory life of Bruno (played by Rüdiger Vogler). With no set goal, unlike the easy riders, Bruno lives in a large truck, driving through small towns along the border with East Germany, working as a technician to maintain film projectors in small movie theaters whose audiences have mostly gone west seeking prosperity. The film opens with Bruno engaged in the domestic task of shaving as another man, Robert (played by Hanns Zischler), whose marriage has just ended, drives furiously up the road in a white Volkswagen, passing Bruno's parked truck and plunging into a river in a half-hearted suicide attempt. This is not just any river, but the Elbe where it forms the border between West and East Germany, with a fence and guard towers visible on the opposite bank. Instead of lighting out for western territory, Robert has symbolically plunged eastward into a frontier that cannot be crossed, the same frontier along which Bruno drives up and down like a yoyo. The two men travel together for several days, sharing desultory adventures and negotiating a fragile acquaintanceship, as Bruno repairs projectors along the way. At one point they borrow a motorcycle for a playfully orchestrated interlude. Wearing funny sunglasses and cruising to the beat of jangly guitar music, they offer a low-key European parallel to the heroic bikers of *Easy Rider* cruising to the rock anthem "Born to Be Wild." They are never far from American popular culture, a constant

backdrop to their postwar German lives. Bruno keeps a jukebox in the back of his truck, and a portable record player with rock-n-roll singles in the front seat. Robert quotes Bob Dylan and Bruno sings a few lines from bluesman Robert Johnson. Their most carefree moment occurs rolling down the highway, singing along with the hit song "Just Like Eddie," recorded in English by Heinz Burt, a German singer regarded in 1963, when Bruno and Robert were teenagers, as the equal of American rockers Gene Vincent and Jerry Lee Lewis. Near the end of the film, they become lost at night, reaching the East German border, the end of the line, nowhere to go. Taking shelter in an abandoned American guard hut, they examine the graffiti, most notably "rock and roll is here to stay." They slowly get drunk on Jim Beam bourbon. Before a brief scuffle that effectively ends their association, Robert declares, "The Yanks have colonized our subconscious." Next morning he departs quietly, heading west, though their paths cross briefly as his train back to civilization passes in front of Bruno's truck.

- 5 Despite a clear ambivalence regarding the United States in these films, Wenders directed a technicolor American road movie to rival *Easy Rider* in 1984. Written by Sam Shepard, the film *Paris, Texas* tells the story of Travis (played by Harry Dean Stanton), who returns from the dead, wandering out of the Mexican desert and collapsing in a West Texas ghost town. "You know which side of the border you are on?" asks the doctor who examines him. Travis, who initially refuses to speak, has crossed many borders, not just the official one at the Rio Grande. We learn he has abandoned a young wife after a horrible tragedy, that he has been wandering insane with grief in Mexico for four years, that his brother Walt and his wife have adopted Travis's son Hunter and are living in Los Angeles, and that Travis wants to right the wrong he committed against his wife.
- 6 Without reciting the plot, which winds its long way to a reunion of young Hunter with his mother Jane in a Houston hotel room, I'd like to suggest that *Paris, Texas* only looks like an American movie. The landscape, it is true, is larger than life. "Films about America," Wenders stated in 1969, "should consist entirely of panoramas."⁴ In *Paris, Texas* he glories in capturing scenes along the road, as brother Walt drives Travis to Los Angeles, and as Travis later drives Hunter to Houston in search of Jane. We see desert outposts and small Texas towns, motels and gas stations. We experience rain-slick streets, LA freeways, and the exhilaration of entering Houston after a long drive. But the West portrayed by Wenders is no longer an open road. It is spoiled, littered with junk, marred by cheap attractions of the sort his alter ego had earlier attacked. And just as American popular culture has colonized Germany, so have wandering refugee Europeans colonized America. The doctor who revives Travis (played by Bernhard Wicki) is a German who seems just as lost on the border. Walt's wife in Los Angeles (played by Aurore Clément) is a Frenchwoman who decorates her featureless suburban house with pictures of her homeland, and who fears being utterly cast adrift if she loses her adoptive son. As for Jane, Hunter's young mother who has become a sex worker in Houston, she is played by Nastassja Kinski, whose assumed Texas accent so badly disguises her German accent as to suggest the director wants to confuse viewers. The American West as represented by Wenders is a postmodern wasteland, an appropriate stage for the dissolving identities and mutating hybridities of globalization. As a madman screams at Travis on a freeway overpass in Los Angeles, "There will be no safety zone ... You will all be extradited to the land of no return."
- 7 The jaundiced vision of the United States conveyed by Wenders's Euro-American road movies of the 1970s and 1980s was further refracted in the work of the American director

Jim Jarmusch. Although born in 1953 in the rust-belt factory town of Akron, Ohio, and sensitized to the plight of society's underdogs and outcasts, he crafted an aesthetic informed by European world-weariness. Not only was Jarmusch inspired by Wenders's early films; the German director also gave him blank film stock to complete his second feature in 1984. More than any film by Wenders, Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* subverts the expectations *Easy Rider* established for road movies. In an opening pointedly entitled "The New World," Eva (played by Eszter Balint) arrives in New York from Budapest. We see her looking out over a wasteland at the airport with no explanation of how she reached this odd vantage point. A true hipster with a cassette of Screamin' Jay Hawkins in her portable tape player, Eva wanders through the wreckage of Lower Manhattan, passing incongruous graffiti reading "U.S. out of everywhere. Yankee go home." Although headed for Cleveland to live with an aunt, she must stay briefly with her self-important cousin Willie (played by jazz musician John Lurie). Eva regards his cramped apartment with clear eyes and realizes this is the same poverty she left behind in Budapest. Willie, a poor immigrant striving to become a cool American, makes his living betting on horses and cheating at poker. "Don't speak Hungarian," he tells Eva. When she disdainfully observes that a frozen TV dinner "doesn't even look like meat," he replies in a superior tone, "You know, this is the way we eat in America." Even so, Eva and Willie reach enough of a *détente* that he feels comfortable a year later taking a road trip in the dead of winter with his friend Eddie (played by Richard Edson) to visit Eva in Cleveland. Evocative camera work by the Dutch cinematographer Robby Müller, who also filmed Wenders's road movies, conveys the dead-end reality of this westward journey through post-industrial America. As they arrive, passing church after church, Eddie wonders, "Does Cleveland look a little like Budapest?" They find Eva working at a hot-dog stand. "You know it's funny," Eddie muses, "you come some place new and everything looks just the same." Staring at the frozen hell of Lake Erie, they decide on a whim to drive to Florida, where Jarmusch acknowledges Wenders by having his characters put on funny sunglasses. Otherwise everything looks the same, dull and claustrophobic.

- 8 With this deadpan reversal of the promise of the American open road, Jarmusch reached a bleak position beyond *Easy Rider*, whose optimistic energy belied its tragic conclusion. The characters in *Stranger Than Paradise* are "outsiders," Jarmusch observed in an interview. "The view we get of America," he continued, "is very much outside ... the expected one."⁵ Jarmusch has said that he personally feels like a "stranger," alienated from the "general sense of [positive] economic and political direction that people even my age have in America."⁶ His viewing of America through the eyes of displaced foreigners continued in subsequent films. In *Down by Law*, released in 1986, a naïve Italian tourist (played by Roberto Benigni), marginally functional in English, triumphs over two disdainful hipsters (played by John Lurie and singer Tom Waits) with whom he escapes from the New Orleans parish jail. Three years later, in 1989, *Mystery Train* portrayed two Elvis-worshipping Japanese tourists, an Italian woman whose husband dies during their honeymoon, and a working-class Briton down on his luck, whose stories overlap during one night in a seedy red-brick hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. Varying that formula with the film *Night on Earth* in 1991, Jarmusch created a mini-road movie, with five short pieces each set in a taxi, portraying events happening simultaneously in Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Rome, and Helsinki. The final sketch, involving a taxi driver (played by Matti Pellonpää) who picks up three drunken friends outside a Helsinki bar, offers an homage to the Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki, whom Jarmusch admires for his "simplicity," "dry sense of humour," and "bleakness."⁷

- 9 Like Wenders, Kaurismäki focuses on down-and-out drifters. Also like Wenders, Kaurismäki exhibits "a savvy appreciation for global popular culture."⁸ In his film *Ariel*, for example, from 1988, the protagonist Taisto (played by Turo Pajala) inherits a classic white Chevrolet convertible from his father, who has just committed suicide after losing his job. This oversized American car, nonfunctional in the harsh Finnish winter with its roof stuck open, remains a symbol of Taisto's aspirations until he is forced to sell it. Perhaps seeking relief from his bleak depictions of life among Helsinki's working class, Kaurismäki turned next to an absurdist fantasy about Siberian musicians seeking fame and fortune on tour in the United States, and instead discovering authentic American roots as perceived from a Finnish perspective. Entitled *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989), this outrageous mock epic turns the road movie on its head. Instead of two buddies, the band consists of eight stolid musicians, a greedy manager played by Pellonpää, and an associate discovered frozen on the tundra, whose body, kept on ice, they take along to bury in the homeland of the blues. As the Leningrad Cowboys buy a secondhand Cadillac from Jim Jarmusch, leave New York, and drive through Memphis, New Orleans, Houston, and across the Mexican border at Del Rio, the running joke is that no one regards their elongated quiffs and pointed shoes as out of the ordinary. The Cowboys shift easily from Russian folk music to rockabilly, rhythm and blues, country and western, and Mexican conjunto—and are roused from catatonic lethargy only when performing for real audiences in real bars and clubs. They even attract a straggling "second line" as they attempt a traditional New Orleans jazz funeral for their frozen colleague.
- 10 As the Leningrad Cowboys travel across the American landscape, Kaurismäki offers panoramic images similar to those evoking adventure in *Easy Rider*, heartbreak in *Paris, Texas*, and existential nausea in *Alice in den Städten*. However, despite the absolute reality of the film's found locations and the use of untrained extras in their own habitats, the Cowboys' absurdity creates a tension undercutting the authenticity Kaurismäki so obviously wishes to celebrate. The Finnish director is more open to what he finds in America than Wenders, more accepting of American self-definition than Jarmusch. Even so, despite Kaurismäki's enthusiasm for experiencing and portraying America, there is nowhere left to go, whether literally or figuratively, as the road movie under his direction becomes a mannered parody. *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* offers an absurdist reminder of the globalization of American identity and experience under unprecedented conditions of cultural appropriation and transatlantic hybridity.

NOTES

1. Background on road movies comes from Mark Williams, *Road Movies* (New York: Proteus Books, 1982); Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *The Road Movie Book* (London: Routledge, 1997), and David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002). Films were viewed as commercial DVDs or VHS tapes. Dialogue from German films is quoted from English subtitles.

2. Cohan and Hark, eds., *The Road Movie Book*, 1.

3. Kathe Geist, *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: From Paris, France to Paris, Texas* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1988), 38.
 4. Quoted in Geist, *Cinema of Wim Wenders*, 12-13.
 5. Harlan Jacobson, "Jim Jarmusch," in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, ed. Ludvig Hertzberg (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 15.
 6. Peter Belsito, "Jim Jarmusch," in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, 42.
 7. Geoff Andrew, "Jim Jarmusch Interview," in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, 195.
 8. Andrew Nestingen, "Aki Kaurismäki's Crossroads: National Cinema and the Road Movie," in Andrew Nestingen and Trevor G. Elkington, eds., *Transnational Cinema in a Global North: Nordic Cinema in Transition*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 293.
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ABSTRACTS

This article analyses a variety of ways in which the "road movie" has been reinterpreted by modern European directors (German Wim Wenders, Finn Aki Kaurismäki) or American director Jim Jarmusch with his pronounced European sensibilities. Despite the ubiquity of American popular culture in many of these movies, the films themselves are far from representing a simple "colonization" on the part of American culture. The ambivalent view of the United States adopted by these men has helped transform a typically "American" genre into a new demonstration of transatlantic cultural hybridity.

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