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**REDEFINING *THE AMERICAN DREAM*: FROM JOHN DE CRÉVECOEUR TO JIM JARMUSCH<sup>1</sup>**

The discovery of the new world brought about the idea of a dream, the dream of freedom, wealth and other traditional American values and ideals such as: justice, liberty, fairness, democracy, and equality. Foreign settlers wishing to run away from hunger and poverty or religious persecution dreamed of a fresh start in the New World. Some were motivated by the prospect of profitable business, and many were adventurers. But all were ready to cross the Ocean in order to make their dreams come true. Their decision to leave Europe was the direct result of an idyllic vision of the unknown continent, based on the reports of numerous travellers. *The American Dream* attracted tens of millions of people from all nations to the American shores. They dreamed not only of material affluence, but also of being able to grow to their fullest potential.<sup>2</sup>

Iconic for *the American Dream* is the Statue of Liberty. In 1903 Emma Lazarus' poem "The New Colossus" (1883) was engraved on the base: *Give me your tired, your poor;/ your huddled masses yearning to breathe free./ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore./ Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me./ I lift my lamp beside the golden door!* (David 1991:31).

It was a symbolic welcome for immigrants leaving their mother countries. Just as Lazarus' poem gave new meaning to the statue, the statue took on and transmitted a new ideal for the United States. Liberty did not only mean freedom from the aristocracy of Britain that led the American colonists to the Revolutionary War. Liberty also meant the freedom to travel to the United States

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a modified and extended version of *The Disintegration of the American Dream as seen in the films of Jim Jarmusch*, published in G.A. Kleparski and A. Uberman (eds) (2008).

<sup>2</sup> For 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century American literature concerning *the American Dream* see chapter one of *An Early American Reader* ed. by Lemay (2000). Examples of travel literature, and anecdotal accounts of exploration and discovery aimed at attracting people to America can be found there.

and create a new life without religious and ethnic persecution.<sup>3</sup> As a direct result of Larazus' poem, the Statue of Liberty gained a new name: She would now become *the Mother of Exiles*, torch in hand to lead her new children to American success and happiness.

St. John de Crèvecoeur emigrated to America in 1755 and, after four years spent in New France, moved to the State of New York. As the author of *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), he is generally regarded as the first writer to have explored the concept of *the American Dream*, defining America as a dream land - *the asylum of freedom, ... the cradle of future nations, and the refuge of future Europeans* (Crèvecoeur 1997:7). He saw the New World as a land of plenty, an idyllic place comparable to paradise on earth. When new immigrants arrived, they were simply unable to believe their eyes: *It is to them a dream*, wrote Crèvecoeur (Lemay 2000:128).

Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America* described New England as *a land given over to the fantasy of dreamers, where innovators should be allowed to try out experiments in freedom* (Tocqueville 1988:39). Tocqueville never used the exact phrase (the American Dream), but he was at times very close to it with expressions like *the lure of success anticipated* (Tocqueville 1988:483).

*The American Dream* as the literary expression of “America: the land of opportunity” has been expressed by many authors ranging from Walt Whitman and Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Franklin. The great American poet, Walt Whitman, author of *Leaves of Grass*, sometimes used the word “dream” in a most compact way: *I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers* (Whitman “The Sleepers” 1973:426). But he never mentioned the concept with that particular wording – *the American Dream*. The closest he gets to such an allusion is in “Passage to India” and his famous evocation of Christopher Columbus: *Ah Genoese thy dream! Thy dream !/ Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave,/ The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream* (Whitman “Passage to India” 1973:414).

American is a nation of immigrants. These immigrants have journeyed to the USA from various continents seeking economic opportunity, religious freedom and social or political justice. Immigrants in particular have seen America as a promised land, with the dream as an integral part of this vision. They had to face reality at the Ellis Island - the chief entry station where the newcomers were registered and sometimes denied entry.<sup>4</sup> During the 19th century, the transcontinental railroads that opened the West to trade and settlement, the

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<sup>3</sup> The meaning of “freedom” and other values dominant in contemporary American culture are discussed in *Rediscovering America's Values* by Lappe (1989).

<sup>4</sup> Problems connected with the growing number of newcomers forced the legislature of the New York State designate the southern part of Manhattan – **Castle Garden** – as the centre for receiving immigrants (Tindall and Shi 1996:440).

development of mass production through industrialization, and the discovery that oil was abundant and could be used as the basic energy source for manufacturing, were factors which greatly increased economic opportunities for workers and businesspeople, as well as raising the American standard of living. In the 19th century, “rags to riches” stories of business tycoons like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller contributed to the belief that talent and hard work could lead to riches.

During the Jazz Age, the 1920's, *the American Dream* was formed by the upper class society. It was a dream of money, wealth, prosperity, the need to get rich quick, and the happiness that should come as a result of a booming economy. *The American Dream* was based purely upon materialistic things. It was about taking advantage of the opportunities in life and managing to rise through hard work and determination to a higher standard of living. The novel *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, illustrates one man's aspiration to fulfill *the American Dream*, the limitations America set on his dreams, and the disappointment of losing his dream. Jay Gatsby was a man who fought hard to earn his place in the world. He dreamt of converting himself from a poor farm boy into a wealthy man of high esteem. He became so focused on money that any way of making it was thought to be acceptable, even if it was unethical, like the bootlegging of liquor. *The Great Gatsby* shows the misconception of *the American Dream* as being a life of prosperity, parties, happiness, and an all-together idealistic world. He bought himself the finest automobiles, homes, furniture, clothing, and jewellery but was unable to buy happiness. Just as *The Great Gatsby* was full of dreamers, so was America during Prohibition. *The Great Gatsby* portrays a corrupted version of the *American Dream* as representing money, wealth, prosperity, and happiness.

The term *the American Dream* was historically popularized and brought into general use by James Truslow Adams. In his book entitled *The Epic of America*, which was written in 1931, the phrase appears for the first time in the Preface, when Adams refers to the *American Dream of a better, richer, and happier life [for all]*, adding that *that dream or hope has been present from the start* (Adams 1931:viii). In the *Epilogue* Adams goes into more detail and broadens the scope of the notion of *the American Dream*, explaining that it is

*[...] that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position* (Adams 1931:404).

Everyone's goal in life is to have the "perfect family" and a house with a little white fence in the front yard. It is commonly accepted that it will always be a part of *the American Dream*. However, a more important factor is to have the freedom of choice, which is the ability to choose that which is best instead of being limited to one particular thing. Not many countries offer to its citizens as much freedom as the United States: the freedom to attend college, marry anyone they want, the freedom of speech,<sup>5</sup> and so on. *Although there have always been and always will be variations on the American dream, the key component is freedom* (Billingsley 1995:7).

Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous speech "I Have a Dream" and Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence," incorporate *the American Dream* in the meaning of political and religious freedom, equal access to education and equal opportunity in the workplace. King's speech contains the words: *It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. ... I have a dream that ... one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.*<sup>6</sup> The political freedom is expressed in the American "Declaration of Independence" with the following words: *full power to levy war, conclude peace, contract alliances, establish commerce, and to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do.*<sup>7</sup>

The phrase – *the American Dream* - was first coined in 1931 when the United States was in the grip of the Great Depression. One consequence of that economic and social crisis was that America lost something essential that was fundamentally implicit within the term. Thomas Jefferson's nineteenth-century vision of the average American as a free and independent farmer was no longer valid in the twentieth century. People no longer believed that America was a land of infinite possibilities, nor that hard work and determination was sufficient to procure a successful life. The fundamental discrepancy between *the American Dream* and the American reality was marked by the level of

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<sup>5</sup> The freedom of speech is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution which says: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances* (*The Constitution of the United States of America* 1992:36).

<sup>6</sup> The speech entitled "I have a Dream" was delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 23, 1963. The excerpts from the speech are taken from two publications. The first one is ed. by Malkoc, Smolinski and Kral, *Celebrate! Holidays in the U.S.A.* (1997:18). The second one is *Black History Month* [in:] *ZOOM in on America*, Vol. I, Issue 1 (February 2004:2).

<sup>7</sup> "The Declaration of Independence" can be found in many publications. For students of American culture I would recommend Jurczyński's (1995:346–348) *Dictionary of the United States*.

poverty. The concept of *the American Dream* had been replaced by an idea of a nightmare.<sup>8</sup>

*The American Dream* can either materialise or evolve into a nightmare depending upon the cultural prejudices of the local community and the possibility of obtaining freedom. The phrase generally refers to the idea that one's prosperity depends upon one's own abilities and hard work, not on a rigid class structure. Some see *the American Dream* as an unfulfillable vision, especially those whose race, ethnicity or gender the mainstream uses as an excuse for excluding them from dreaming. Factors such as the exploitation of immigrants, indifference to the poor, hostility towards workers' organizations, the subordination of women, discrimination and unequal opportunities all provide barriers to one's chance of attaining *the American Dream*. Individuals who are united through some common bond, which may be religion, ethnicity or social status, create a group or class of people. When individuals are subject to racial prejudices this often makes upward mobility impossible. Without equal opportunities to move upwards within society, *the American Dream* is unattainable.

The antiquated ideology that determination and hard work help achieve *the American Dream* has been replaced by the catchy idea "Get Rich! Quick!" Americans are trying to get rich by winning millions from game shows, lotteries, and frivolous lawsuits. Being wealthy, having lots of money, writing checks, owning expensive and fast cars, multiple houses and estates, and dining at the most beautiful 5 star restaurants in the city has become an obsession. Yet, sometimes a new *American Dream* is looked at with less focus on financial gain and more emphasis on living a simple, fulfilling life. In today's society *the American Dream* also means a myth that only leads to self-destruction. Having a lot of money, a good job and expensive possessions are no way to guarantee happiness.

The concept of *the American Dream* seems to have dwindled from its position in the past few generations. It has veered away from success, freedom, having lots of money and the nicest possessions. It is no longer just about money. Better pay, a nice house, and a rising standard of living will always be attractive. But another factor is emerging: The new *American Dream* is to maintain a reasonable living standard while doing work that people enjoy. Nowadays *the American Dream* could simply be labelled as „personal goal” or even a „life time achievement”. Besides, it is no longer *the American Dream* but your own dream and your own thoughts based on your standard of living.

The idea of *the American Dream* or *the Promised Land* has been widely explored in films. Jim Jarmusch belongs to the group of independent directors who have remained beyond the peripheries of North American mainstream

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<sup>8</sup> The change of meaning is discussed by Reuben, "PAL: Appendix S: The American Dream".

culture.<sup>9</sup> This *avant-garde* director seeks to explore his country from the point of view of an immigrant.<sup>10</sup>

*Permanent Vacation* (1980) is an intimate study in the search for the meaning in life. Suffering a bout of insomnia, sixteen year old drifter, Aloysius (Chris Parker), wanders through downtown Manhattan in search of some kind of cure for his loneliness. Allie rejects traditional social values, like materialism, ambition and family. However, as the film unfolds, we see that Allie is interested in the world around him but, rather than engaging with it via conventional modes, he maintains an observational regard. Conventionally speaking, not much happens in *Permanent Vacation*. Narrative events are accidental and random, essentially forming a series of set pieces that trace a day in Allie's life. The act of walking through a strange and unfamiliar place is to be replayed constantly throughout Jarmusch's films. The simple action of walking establishes a distinction between the individual and the world which surrounds them.

Almost every character Allie meets is "crazy" and every landscape he enters strangely deserted, in ruins. The places which were supposed to be symbolic of *the American Dream* look like the deserted villages of Eastern Europe. *You know it's funny. You come to some place new and everything looks just the same* – says Eddie (Mazierska 1992:17). In this way Jarmusch wants to say that America is not an exceptional place in the world, so the journey of migrants is senseless. Jarmusch criticises America, its reigning ideologies and institutions by portraying its landscape as a wasteland. However, it is precisely within these deserted and run-down landscapes that he finds his alternative, bohemian subjects – his glimpses of paradise.

Jarmusch's *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) is an underground, antimainstream film which is the first installment of a trilogy continuing with *Down by Law* (1987) and *Mystery Train* (1989) that explores extensively the themes of foreign perspectives of America, and the relationships that exist between people and places. The first film plays with the dominant myths of America as *a promised land* and reverses the stereotype of Eastern Europe as a bleak land of misery and factory workers. Notably, it is a foreign character who begins the narrative of exploring America and makes it also possible for the culturally isolated immigrants in New York City. The characters lack any sort of real ambition. Instead, the mundane and the everyday is emphasised and explored, with often interesting results.

Jarmusch successfully documents the life and attitudes of a pair of bohemian characters Willy (John Lurie) and Eddie (Richard Edson), the entrance of a new element into their world, a younger woman from Hungary (Eva played by Ezster

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<sup>9</sup> More information concerning independent cinema in America is presented by Gołębiowski (2004:428–429).

<sup>10</sup> A detailed description of Jarmusch's films is presented by Więcek (2001).

Balint), and finally their journey across the American landscape. This theme is present in the rundown locale of New York and the monotonal quality of the American landscape in general. The film includes three sections, each filmed in a different part of the USA: *The New World* (filmed in New York), *One Year Later* (in Cleveland) and *Paradise* (in Florida).

The movie opens with the arrival of Eva in New York City. She has come from Budapest to live with her Aunt Lotte in Cleveland. She is supposed to stop off at Willie's apartment in New York for ten days while the aunt has surgery. As Eva walks along the streets on her way to Willie's apartment, she plays a tape of *Screamin' Jay Hawkins'* "I've Got a Spell On You." This dangerous sounding song from the 1950's probably conveys the sense of adventure Eva is hoping to find in the United States. After finding Willie's apartment Eva is stuck there for the next ten days with nothing to do. Shot in black and white, with a stationary camera, the scenes in the apartment look bleak and dismal. Willie and Eva spend most of their days just watching television and smoking. Eva is bored, Willie is content. She feels as if she is imprisoned. This is almost certainly not what Eva expected when she decided to come to America.

The second section of the film titled *One Year Later* takes place in Cleveland. It soon becomes apparent that Willie does not know how to have a good time. The whole week he and Eddie spend in Cleveland is passed by playing cards with Aunt Lotte and watching television. On the last day of their visit they decide to visit Lake Erie. There Eddie expresses the fact that being in Cleveland does not seem that different from being in New York and decides to go to Florida. Willie holds a subconscious desire to change in his life, but does not know how to go about doing this. Somehow he thinks that just by changing his location he can bring about the change in his life. He does not realize that change has to come from within.

The third section of the film is titled *Paradise* and the action takes place in Florida. There the characters buy sunglasses to celebrate; another insignificant and superficial change. Eva probably thinks that she is finally going to have some fun but instead of going to the beach, Eddie and Willie go to the dog track. Willie forbids Eva to go along and she is stuck in the motel room all day, feeling once again bored and neglected. Jarmusch's use of black and white photography manages to make even Florida appear drab and dreary.

*Down by Law* (1986) continues Jarmusch's fascination with people who live on the margins of society. It shows further cluttered landscapes: shabby New Orleans and mud-filled Louisiana. As a symbolic allegory, this film deals with *Death, Hell, and Redemption*. The opening shot is of a hearse and cemetery. The camera pans past the cemetery's memorials and mausoleums, and then past rows of small shacks and houses that look similar to those structures that house the dead in the previous shot. The setting is New Orleans, where people bury their

dead above the ground, and where two of the movie's characters seem to be involved in the process of burying themselves in their squalid lives.

Two Americans, Zac (Tom Waits) and Jack (John Lurie), and an Italian, Bob (Roberto Benigni), find themselves together in an enclosed space. Although the space changes empirically - from prison cell to outdoor swamp - it essentially remains the same. The film's question is thus abstract: what happens when two Americans and a foreigner are locked in a confined space? Jack talks about his dreams of being a wealthy pimp on the outside, with beautiful women, limousines, drugs, and the luxurious trappings of success. Zack and Jack are each, separately, entrapped and arrested due to their own greed and vanity. Symbolically, the men who entrap them are manifestations of the devil, using flattery and sweet words to seduce them into foolishly giving up their freedom. For Zack and Jack, their arrests and imprisonment effectively equates to their *Death* and descent into *Hell*. While not guilty of the crimes they were arrested for, their lives were already condemned to a slow death. This film is more intent on examining people who do not fit in and who are not interested in pursuing *the American Dream*. They are foreigners, in a sense, in their own country.

Jarmusch continued his view of America through the eyes of outsiders with the structurally ambitious *Mystery Train* (1989). The three stories that comprise the film are all based on foreign characters moving through roughly the same space; temporarily finding themselves in Memphis. Taking its title from one of Elvis' own tunes, *Mystery Train* exemplifies director Jim Jarmusch's obsession with American popular culture and music. Two young Japanese tourists in a faded Amtrak coach are listening to their Walkmans. The girl is an Elvis fan. Her boyfriend believes Carl Perkins<sup>11</sup> was the true father of rock 'n' roll. They have come to visit the shrines of Memphis – including the Sun recording studios, where rock 'n' roll was born.

It is not until the final episode (*Lost in Space*) that Jarmusch explores the perspective of black America. The hidden imperialism of the mythical South and the way it wrote black musicians out of its history is implied in the scene where Joe questions his black friend, Will Robinson (Rick Aviles), about why the Arcade motel is filled with pictures of Elvis Presley but not Martin Luther King or Carl Perkins, especially because it is located in a black neighbourhood and run by black men. Will responds sardonically: *It's because white people own the motel*.

The picture of the city presented in the film is rather a sad one: we see a waste disposal site, a motorway exit, all in all a quite depressing cityscape. The movie does not show much of the architecture of Memphis, the audience only sees one or two roads, an old hotel, a barber-shop, a pub called *The Shades* and various pictures of the King. The titles of the three episodes also indicate a kind

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<sup>11</sup> Carl Perkins – an American pioneer of rockabilly music, a mix of rhythm, blues and country music, recorded most notably at Sun Records in Memphis.



of absence - the central topic of the film: *Far from Yokohama* implies that Memphis is not seen as a city in its own right, but as not being Yokohama. During the episode *A Ghost* the centre of attention literally shifts to the King's ghost, rather than the reality of Elvis. *Lost in Space* is about the character's alienation. The pattern connecting the episodes also functions as a sequential structure of the night: namely the noise of the passing night-train, a voice on the radio introducing *Blue Moon* by Elvis, and the sound of a shot in the morning. Further links that work as points of reference between the episodes are everybody's complaining because of the absence of a TV-set, and the ever-present portraits of Elvis, taking over the function of a hotel bible. The soundtrack is taken from a local radio station, and Presley's version of *Blue Moon* is heard at one time or another during all three of these stories, providing a common link. The ghost of Elvis, who seems to haunt the movie with his voice and his legend, acts in a similar vein. But this is not the Elvis of the supermarket tabloids, just as *Mystery Train* is not about dusty Amtrak coaches. The movie is about legends, and people who believe in them.

As illustrated in numerous movies, the idea of *the American Dream* is becoming a myth, a thing from the past, once pursued but no longer attainable. The realities show that there are enormous differences in the economic status of American citizens. Some of them have set their expectations so high that it has become too difficult to achieve, which causes many to give up on *the American Dream*. Depending on what your definition of *the American Dream* is, it is up to you to reach the goals you set. Although there is a widening gap between the rich and the poor, there is still a chance to bridge that gap. Efforts to extend rights to previously excluded groups have been accompanied by a continuing expansion of educational opportunities. Today, numerous earlier generations of immigrants have achieved levels of success that often surpass those of native-born Americans. If children once living in slums can become lawyers or doctors, if an immigrant can become California's governor, if ordinary people can become extraordinary people, then *the American Dream* remains quite possible.

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## **REVIEWS**

