Film and Media Studies (MA) Theses

Dissertations and Theses

Spring 5-2024

Independent Visions of Marginal America: Reimagining a Nation Through Outsiders, Searching, and Non-Arrival

Z Evan Long
Chapman University, zlong@chapman.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/film_studies_theses

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Independent Visions of Marginal America: Reimagining a Nation Through Outsiders, Searching, and Non-Arrival

A Thesis by

Z Evan Long

Chapman University

Orange, CA

Dodge College of Film and Media Arts

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Film and Media Studies

May 2024

Committee in charge:

Nam Lee, Ph.D. (chair)

Leah Aldridge, Ph.D.

Sean Heim, Ph.D.

The thesis of Z Evan Long is approved.

_____

Nam Lee, Ph.D., Chair

Leah Aldridge, Ph.D.

Sean Heim, Ph.D.

April 2024

Independent Visions of Marginal America: Reimagining a Nation

Through Outsiders, Searching, and Non-Arrival

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Independent Visions of Marginal America: Reimagining a Nation Through Outsiders, Searching,

and Non-Arrival

by Z Evan Long

This thesis explores critical responses to American-ness, American identity, and most significantly American myth, in independent films *about America* in cultural terms, and their attempts to deconstruct the myths of nation and culture. The independent films *about America* analyzed in this thesis range from the 1960s to the 1990s, made by filmmakers across movements and cultures, but they all contain in some measure three key concepts: the "outsider," the "search," and a narrative "non-arrival." *Easy Rider* (1969) will be explored as the prototype for this paradigm, contrasted with films that reinterpret the road-movie structure away from existential angst and toward richer ambiguities: *Alambrista!* (1977), *Gummo*, *Stroszek*, *Chan is Missing*, and *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). Transnationality reflects in the content and production of many "outsider" films; therefore my study replaces the category *American films* with films *in and about America.* These films about America are threaded together by the outsider as a position relative to social acceptance and unified identity (the "inside"), and the search as a yearning, a desire for peace, happiness, meaning, etc. molded by transience and instability. The search never yields the result or object the characters intend to find, and within this *non-arrival* the denial of resolution informs us about the unsurety of life for the outsider, and the elusiveness of the nation as a mythic construct. The unsettling of myth is interpreted as a kind of hauntology, as the 'haunting' or persistence of violence and myth is analyzed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

The capacity of the image as a channel for mythology, or the act of creating a myth itself, was aptly articulated by Roland Barthes through his application to French nationalism. As the nation-construct maintains a mutually affirming relationship with myth, both obscure the unbounded flux between peoples and political borders, replacing history with a symbolic nature; "[myth] organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves."[1] The nation defines and revises its identity often through what/who it *isn't* as much as the inverse[2]; an image may function as nationalist through similar means, identifying the viewer with an object, symbol, or affect, and separating through the same devices that which is 'other-than' or outside the boundaries of identity. This process echoes through the heteroglossic category of American cinema; over a century of American film, specifically its subjects, a concept of the 'true American' has been cast against its characteristics of difference involved with race, sexuality, class, and other positions of identity and habitus. In an understanding of (American) myth and the media through which it flows and congeals, literary critic Leslie Fiedler remarked, "to be an American (unlike being English or French or whatever) is precisely to imagine a destiny rather than to inherit one; since we have always been, insofar as we are Americans at all, inhabitants of myth rather than history."[3] For those historically marginalized and denied American identity under the structures of nationalism, a different destiny is imagined, one that unsettles American myth.

---

[1] Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 2022. 58
[2] Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2017.
[3] (Quoted in) Greil Marcus. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*. E.P. Dutton, 1975. 6

In formative, influential works of independent cinema from the 1970s–1990s, the identification of America with an image is continuously deconstructed by assuming the nebulous and contingent position of the 'outsider.' By unsettling the myth, the indefinability of 'America' and 'American-ness' is revealed to be unknowable, itself an unsettled ambivalence and ambiguity. Building upon a template set by 1960s independent counterculture cinema and the "search for America" in films such as *Easy Rider* (1969), filmmakers of the following decades adopted independent production as an *outsider praxis* of resistance to hegemonic cinema and effectively re-imagined a nation as contingent.

In independent niches, American cinema post-1969 (until the indie market 'boom' of the 1990s[4]) developed and proliferated this skepticism toward America with the breakout success and cultural influence of filmmakers from various backgrounds, utilizing marginalized positions to challenge de-facto restrictions of American nationality. Films selected for discussion in this thesis—*Alambrista!* (dir. Robert M. Young 1977)*, Gummo* (dir. Harmony Korine 1997)*, Stroszek* (dir. Werner Herzog 1977)*, Chan is Missing* (dir. Wayne Wang 1982)*,* and *The Watermelon Woman* (dir. Cheryl Dunye 1996)—cross boundaries between film movements and cultures, yet all exemplify three key concepts: the "outsider," the "search," and a narrative "non-arrival." The outsider can be a reference to character or the methodology/production of the work itself; it can be taken to mean immigrants, or those marginalized in their country of birth, but the *outsider-position* assumes that of "looking at" mythologies inwardly, an impervious skepticism towards the fallaciousness of *freedom, individualism,* and the exercise of power in American myth. The search typifies the narrative element, wherein there is an object of search (however concrete, abstract, or even psychological) and an attempt to traverse territories and cross boundaries in pursuit of it, which parallels a need to satisfy something greater in the realm of

---

[4] Emanuel Levy. *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film.* New York University Press, 1999.

identity, acceptance, protection, or boundedness. The non-arrival, when the object of the search is not fulfilled by a narrative's conclusion, reaches beyond the narrative to open certain provocations in the viewer regarding a film's posited statement. Specifically, it invites reflection on what this denial of an answer reveals about the question of America itself. Filmmakers themselves are examined in this thesis as outsiders in cultural/national terms—an independent documentarian with roots in the Mexican American community (Robert M. Young), a child of Iranian immigrants, carnivals, and the avant-garde (Harmony Korine), a self-identified German (Werner Herzog), Chinese-American (Wayne Wang), queer Black woman (Cheryl Dunye)—with a particular approach of *looking-in on* America.

These films explore many critical responses to American-ness in cultural terms, deconstructing the myths of nation and culture. The contradiction between "American-ness" and the entangled subjects who inhabit the United States of America, the separation of a nation's concept from its actuality, comprises mythologies, signifying practices, dominant social structures and institutions, but also narratives and art objects that become such things—the flag, vaudeville performance, the cowboy—are reappropriated, reinterpreted, and responded to in the films selected in the thesis. They exhibit varying degrees of deviance, negotiation, and opposition[5] to the America that is supposedly inherited (only offered to some), while constructing wholly original visions of America through their accent, narrative, representations, and visual construction. Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and the idea of straddling boundaries takes hold in these films, a challenge to American monoculture and the inhabitation of myth. These expressions are especially visible because of their independent production, far less marred by the self-perpetuating habitus of capitalism and anglocentric Hollywood; their humble

---

[5] Hall, Stuart. "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." Birmingham: Univ. of Birmingham, 1973.

3

resources and often anti-corporate ideological stance pose an opposition to dominant representation and reproduction of American cultural hegemony in studio films.

As previously mentioned, the 'search' need not only be expressed through the kinetic momentum of automobiles, nor in revisitation of the western 'frontier'—the thesis' final section will examine the search within postmodern urban environments—and filmmakers have developed more abstract departures from the idioms of mythology, the "inheriting of destiny" from Fiedler, that has become quintessentially 'American' to some degree in its adoption and evolution. The selected films are significant as they signal a correction in the understanding of 'outsider,' a movement toward representations of the working class, immigrants, and ethnic/cultural minorities. The crossing, blending, and blurring of national categories that occur in such circumstances demonstrates the "hybridity" of subjects.[6] America's heterogeneity, a continuously evolving condition with roots in the colon(ies') founding, creates hybridities which inflame the boundaries of the constructed culture/national identity of 'America.' Such boundaries, according to Bhabha, render visible the limiting realm of culture that intangibly influences the appearances and mechanisms of conformity.[7]

Hauntology offers an essential framework in a broader context, one that shares applications with each of the three key concepts. Jacques Derrida's concept of the specter shares with the "outsider" a liminal presence in space, one that "insists (has causal effects) without (physically) existing"[8]; more apparent specters as they manifest in the disappeared peoples of *Chan is Missing* and *The Watermelon Woman* affect characters of the world from an ether beyond the boundedness of linear time, while the living outsiders of *Alambrista!, Stroszek, Chan,* and *Watermelon Woman* experience the ghostlike liminality of cultural separation. The "search" also

---

[6] Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Mark Fisher. "What is Hauntology?" Film Quarterly, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 16–24

leads the characters toward another haunting, that of the myth of America/American identity that stands behind their desires for security; the "non-arrival" ensures that myth can never be grasped, but is elusive by its nature. The haunting of political violence also derives from Anderson's address of violence; the kind of oppression spurred by the nation-concept creates itself more ghosts or disappearances, as the nation itself is an "imagining" of community that controls and coerces with the promise of belonging. In the films' narrative dissolution, I posit that the specter of myth continues in a form of haunting, even through the 'spiritual deaths' of characters like Bruno Stroszek and Chan Hung.

Homi Bhabha's theorizing of postcolonial frameworks (including the United States, as even the westward expansion and manifest destiny were a direct derivation of colonialism and a continuation of a capitalist colonial project) emphasizes hybridity and the contingency of boundaries such as culture and nationality. Paraphrasing his book *The Location of Culture,* I posit that the "boundaries" of culture are the location Americanism/American identity begins its presencing.[9] Directly, we become more aware of what it means to live as an American from the view of the margins. Benedict Anderson's analyses of nation-constructs and identity, as a significant divergence in radical political thinking from a Marxist reappropriation of nationality to carve new social cohesions to a destabilization of that "cultural artefact [sic]"[10] which oppresses by its very nature, likewise serves as a reference for understanding the contingency of the nation. The "American Dream" is itself a promise[11] to even the most abused and hopeless, in a mythic framing of what American identity means to most. With that consideration, what could

---

[9] Ibid.
[10] Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2017. 4
[11] Greil Marcus. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*. E.P. Dutton, 1975.

the cinematic search signify when the promise remains unfulfilled, or lacking evidence of its mere existence?

This thesis aims to answer these questions by examining a selection of independent American films from the 1970s to the 1990s. I argue that these films employ the tropes of the "outsider," the "search, and the "non-arrival" to deconstruct and challenge mythologized constructs of American identity. Additionally, the analysis of these three key concepts within a broader framework of hauntology reveals their spectral presence within the narratives of American identity and the cultural psyche. Following the introduction, "*A Man Went Looking for America…Prologues toward the Search*" provides historical context for the formation of American myth in particularly western-themed media through the example of "Buffalo" Bill Cody, and presents *Easy Rider* as the prototypical anti-mythic independent film in American culture. "*Outsider Ideations of the Frontier*" sees a more potent application of the "outsider" in *Alambrista!* in aimless journeys toward prosperity for undocumented workers. Hauntology is expounded upon in "*Haunting in American Myth*" as it relates to the construction of *Gummo* and its ghostly subjects in a decayed and impoverished anti-myth of America, as well as the deaths/disappearances of characters in the other films. In "Strangers in a Strange Land," Werner Herzog's *Stroszek* applies the view of the accented filmmaker/subject *about* America from intersecting national identities, leading a search for the American Dream to a self-destructive non-resolution. Although not American in origin, *Stroszek* resonates deeply with American independent film themes. Finally, "*Missing Persons and (un)Discoveries*" synthesizes the intellectual and aesthetic frameworks of the thesis to understand the meaning of absence and disappearance in *Chan is Missing* and *The Watermelon Woman,* and how the non-arrival can ultimately imply a radical re-interpretation of nationhood and society.

A Man Went Looking for America…Prologues toward the Search

The frontier and city were pervasive symbols which "reflected and sometimes inverted each other"[12] in a battle to preserve capitalist hegemony, embodied in a white masculine body politic. Thereby the association between individualism, hegemonic (racialized) masculinity, and the closing of the frontier synthesized as the *mythic American West*. The frontier had been colonized and westward expansion had died, yet it passed like a ghost into the fictional and aesthetic worlds of representation. Enter Buffalo Bill Cody and his tall tales, the late-19th century American realist painters, and the Hollywood western. A Hollywood form such as, or especially, the western is revisited-upon and responded-to in many of the films discussed through the *"outsider–search–non-arrival"* paradigm for this reason, that an effective unsettling of American myth may do well to begin its erosion at the source. I argue that the western form is better understood through its early pre-cinema formations, notably the legend-turned-media-spectacle of Buffalo Bill Cody.

In the proposition that America is inherently mythic, a secondary signification constructed over the violent erasure of indigenous peoples that inhabited its land thousands of years before colonization, "Buffalo" Bill Cody resembled an embodiment of American myth. A hunter, prospector, and soldier in the Civil War and 'Indian Wars,' Cody's experiences of conquest, violence, and exploitation were only realized as 'historical' through his most famous contribution, the traveling *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* show. His shrewd opportunism tethered itself on the market revolution's synthesis of political power with increasingly ubiquitous mass mediums of culture—literature, newsprint, and the traveling show—as he recreated

---

[12] Louis S. Warren. *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show.* New York: Vintage Books, 2006. 214

himself-as-persona in an immensely popular and influential nationwide spectacle. Other public figures of novelty or historical renown (Annie Oakley, Sitting Bull, etc.) joined the spectacle and thereby became myths as well. Cody's status as an American folk-hero character ignited a capacity of the "organs of popular culture"[13] to mediate America's evolving self-image in the twilight of westward expansion and manifest destiny. His dramatization of particularly the genocidal Indian Wars reasserted white patriarchy across stratifications of class; the wild-west narrative's propagation responded to the worry that the absence of violent conflict/colonization would 'soften' the American constituency and open the cultural establishment to threats of a "polyglot nation."

As the continental United States had been conquered, the borders would have to be secured, and consent manufactured for those physical and symbolic boundaries of a newly 'whole' America:

> "Frontier originals who had subdued the savage wilderness, the Wild West show's 'real' men at once reenacted their exploits and fought a defensive withdrawal before advancing artifice, civilized decadence, and the new immigration. At the very moment when psychologist G. Stanley Hall and others were beginning to suggest inoculating Anglo-Saxons against the epidemic of overcivilization by cultivating the violent tendencies of boys, Cody's show so convincingly enacted 'the drama of existence' that, in comparison, wrote one journalist, 'all the operas in the world appear like pretty playthings for emasculated children.'"[14]

The conquest of America ended[15] such that a new kind began, the maintenance of the colonizing American self and its borders of subjectivity. The physical frontier morphed into a

---

[13] Ibid. xiii
[14] Ibid. 215
[15] Although not in earnest, preceding the conquest and repopulation of Hawai'i and Alaska, as well as the US territories of the 'Commonwealth,' and the imperial projects in Japan, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

frontier of the stage, and later, the screen, through which Americans could pursue the construction of their own whiteness and effectively 'consume' American-ness to become it.

Cody's stories, through which he became Buffalo Bill, reveal something essential about the myth-making of American cinema, whose conception coincided with the final years of his life. Through a mediation of both visual spectacle and a contrived, racialized 'realism' wherein "veterans of the real West became bit-part actors in the fictionalized depiction of their own history,"[16] Buffalo Bill engaged both white and Indigenous Americans in a molding of American histor*ies* into a narrative histor*y*. Through performing his real-life social position on the stage, Buffalo Bill transformed into an immortal archetype of the *real American.* His persona provides a relevant allegory for the function of mythic American cinema, a self-affirmation through filmic identification and the medium through which national dream-vision flows.

America's nascent independent cinema developed within, if not on the margins of, pre-existing industries of art and commodity, chiefly Hollywood. Actors such as Ida Lupino and John Cassavetes divested their networks and capital from studio pictures to produce their own films in the 1950s.[17] *Easy Rider* (dir. Dennis Hopper 1969) was a similar 'insider' project by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, which nonetheless brought the influence and participation of revolutionary aesthetes (writer Terry Southern and cinematographer László Kováks) who had already contributed to low-profile studio productions. The initial concept—a western, layering the thematic pursuit of destiny, freedom, and individualism upon the leftist counterculture through the modern transgressive vessel of *the biker*—had already proven successful[18] with young American audiences in *The Wild Angels* (1966), which had also established Fonda in the

---

[16] Philip Davies. Representing and Imagining America. Keele, Staffordshire: Keele University Press, 2013. 12
[17] Emanuel Levy. *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film.* New York University Press, 1999.
[18] László Kováks had also shot a series of 'biker' exploitation films directed by Richard Rush, although more structurally and aesthetically conventional.

youth's imagination as a masculine outsider ideal, whose threatening pose carried the kind of sex appeal identified as 'radical chic.'[19] A far cry from Buffalo Bill's cowboy archetype, Fonda and Hopper's presence in *Easy Rider* pointed towards the unsettling of myth within the nation's privileged class. In fact, as Barbara Klinger observes, the film positions the mythic signifiers of America against a discursive rewriting of national identity—"the tension between nationalism as a thing evolving over time and nationalism as a thing already realized"[20]—through the ultimate visual-embodied manifestation of that myth, the post-expansion frontier.

The tagline that accompanied the 1969 release of *Easy Rider* was a paradoxical, starved trimming of faux-existentialism that nonetheless became iconic: *"A man went looking for America. And couldn't find it anywhere."* Such a portentous and complacent phrase may reveal a set of assumptions, in the film's text but also about the habitus of the filmmaker(s), through its contradictions rather than despite them. How could a pair of upper-class hippies, adorned with fringed jackets and stars-and-stripes, travel from California to Louisiana and not find America anywhere? What exactly is this vision of America that could be found, at least in their minds, but remained unfulfilled to them? The film's frustration, tenable in inebriated monologues and ironic western aesthetics, channels the cynicism of a shamed idealist, but Hopper set the stage for a tradition of the American road movie—the search not for something that is not there, but proof that it ever existed at all.

Easy Rider's protagonists set a precedent for the cinematic "search" for America, which diverged from that of *The Searchers* (1956) who recovered their abducted child from the antagonized 'other' and thereby restored a unity of national identity by the conclusion. The journey itself has no momentum but a pointedly patriarchal ideal of survival *against* nature—the

[19] Mendik & Schneider. *Underground USA: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon.* Wallflower, 2002.
[20] Barbara Klinger. "The Road to Dystopia: Landscaping the Nation in *Easy Rider*." Essay. In *The Road Movie Book*, 179–203. London: Routledge, 1997. 183

struggle of individualism paradoxically as the work which offers purpose and justification of 'the individual'—and the destination seems only to be the hedonistic allure of New Orleans' Mardi Gras festivities. Billy and Wyatt (the namesakes of western scofflaws whose lives have likewise turned to fiction[21]) wander through an American landscape like lost children, and their dejected orientation towards the nation's current state nonetheless implies a past ideal of 'America,' a kind of nationalist vitalism that insists its true state has been lost (or has yet to be realized)—as Jack Nicholson's George laments, "this used to be one helluva good country." The road movie's physical search can always be expected to stand for something else; a symbolic desire for happiness, purpose, freedom, etc. underlie the lateral exploration of physical space. *Easy Rider* engages with American myths as affectations; Wyatt's "Captain America" motorcycle is often read as ironic repudiation of the flag as signifier of national values[22] and the mechanism itself a post-industrial afterlife of the horse-riding posse's.

However, in its romanticization of the frontier's archetypal sprawl through Hopper's montages of affecting American folk-rooted music and Kováks' sun-drenched photography—recalling the western landscapes in John Ford films, and 19th century paintings which "[gave] nationalism an organic basis, to root it in the geography of the continent"[23]—the American west remains preserved in *Easy Rider,* as do the cowboy-revivalists that roam the plains. Its mystic openness, or its emptiness, remains a consequence of conquest and destruction: the erasure of indigenous nations having left a 'blank slate' upon which imagination may project a timeless nature and a past that never was. The perceived continuous body of modern America

---

[21] "Billy the Kid" and Wyatt Earp.
[22] J. Fisher Solomon. *The Signs Of Our Time*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.
[23] Angela Miller. *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics*, 1825-1875. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993. 167

is a redressed and reconstructed setting, stitched together with highways[24] that likewise integrate

themselves into the 'naturalistic' environment of *Easy Rider.* When Billy and Wyatt cruise along

the interstate to "The Weight" and "The Ballad of Easy Rider," the audience is indeed directed

towards an identification with the cowboy-frontier symbolism; although the American myth is

counteracted by various other elements, such as their positions as countercultural outsiders, other

affects of the film just as easily reproduce mythologies.

Through all their appropriations, their experimentation, their journeying, Billy and Wyatt

find no place outside their LSD-soaked fantasies that resembles *their* kind of America. At any

rate, they are murdered by hostile Southerners in the film's final scene, and the search abruptly

halts before they may reach their paradise. *Easy Rider's* conclusion therefore straddles

delineation between a dissatisfying "non-arrival" and a satisfaction of its narrative fatalism. One

may argue the counterculture generation of 1969 was not committed to reaching old age, and

their deaths symbolize a fatalist pact of 'utopia or implosion.' As the object of their search was

itself abstract, their deaths are not a failure but posed as a denial of American life's promise[25]; the

phrase "freedom" which chimes throughout the state's legal Constitution; the Declaration's "life,

liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." By relinquishing their protected status, had the outsiders

successfully challenged a society that violently defends its contingent borders of community?

The denial of resolution, framed in the apocalyptic culture of political violence[26] as the explosive

immolation of rebellious white youth (outsider), appears more as an expression of existential

angst than an attempt to work through or work past American myth.

---

[24] Barbara Klinger describes the interstate highway system developed from 1957 into the 1960s as "the enactment of a neo-frontier expansionist ethos," an post-industrial call towards the 'destiny' of American identity echoed in Kerouac's *On The Road* and 1960s Pop Art. (186-194)

[25] Greil Marcus. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music.* E.P. Dutton, 1975.

[26] Barbara Klinger. "The Road to Dystopia: Landscaping the Nation in *Easy Rider*." Essay. In *The Road Movie Book*, 179–203. London: Routledge, 1997. 197

The white countercultural angle serves as the establishment for the film's "outsider" nature by its aforementioned connection to hippie-dom and the 1960s' socially deviant biker subculture. Its opening sequences are among the most illuminating examples of the "outsider" as an affectation, more related to the aesthetics of subcultural identification than marginalized subject positions within America. As the narrative's catalyst, Billy and Wyatt smuggle cocaine across the US-Mexico border for the Mexican cartel in exchange for a hefty sum of cash, rolling their earnings into a gasoline tube while Steppenwolf's rendition of "Hoochie Coochie Man" plays. The two are thereby linked to two racially coded worlds of deviance, rebellion, and illegality. On another hand, the commune they encounter in the Southwest bears a resemblance to the region's status as "the land of displaced peoples championed by the counterculture (eg. Native Americans and Hispanics) and the site of iconography for the hippie movement, since hippie clothing and lifestyles mimicked the buckskin naturalism of the early settlers."[27]

The white outsider's construction of utopia may be read both as an attempt to rewrite the erased histories of America through their appropriation of Indigenous collectivism (see also the LSD given to Billy and Wyatt, and its vague relation to ayahuasca rituals), and as a reification of the mythic frontier as a promise of manifest destiny. Klinger identifies this as *Easy Rider's* "Janus-faced" vision of the nation, the contradiction that complicates its representation of what I argue as the "outsider–search–non-arrival" paradigm. *Easy Rider's* white male baby-boomers reject their subject position and venture on a search for the imagined identity that may replace their's: *looking for America* among its land, its people, its myths, for anything worth salvaging from their shattered formative illusions.

Although *Easy Rider* had a clear influence on the key concepts of the cinematic search for America, the concept of the "outsider" was still entrenched in a reproduction of whiteness as

---

[27] Ibid. 183

a position of mobility between exploitative (dominant) and exploited (marginalized) cultural

zones. Other films I explore further in this thesis directly engage with the representations of

racial identity in America from marginalized perspectives.

Alambrista! (1977): Outsider Ideations of the Frontier

The *search-through* and *search-for* America led many prominent independent voices

through interstate highways, the white lines that stitch the surfaces of regional identities and

overlay wounds of history on a perpetually journeyed landscape, in the wake of *Easy Rider's*

vague yearnings. Social outsiders occupy the realm of America, while their mobility is limited to

the margins of what may be considered 'the inside'; independent productions such as

Alambrista! (1977) embraced a kind of outsider praxis by engaging with the margins of social

life, geography, and economic sources behind the camera.

Through the film's movement between affectations of poetic/symbolic performance and

realism, Robert M. Young's *Alambrista!* contrasts the liminal status of undocumented

immigrants with the fixity of categorical structures of power. As a narrative of migration

between Mexico and the United States, the film's opening image of flowing water along an

irrigated ditch is at once the perpetual flow of people and cultures overlapping national borders,

and the persistence of some inexpressible life-force, as the birth of the protagonist's child is

bookended by the imagery. Roberto, the protagonist whose encounter with America is drawn

from the promise of socioeconomic mobility, leaves his home on a search which leads him to

spaces of hostility and exploitative invisibility. Sleeping under moving trains, evading

policemen, and eventually finding temporary lodging on a waitresses' kitchen floor, he similarly

finds the object of his search—financial security for his family in Mexico—elusive and

14

effectively unattainable. Roberto works without pay, initially sleeping in a chicken coop with his peers—the capitalist incentive to keep its most distant outsiders in a position to be anonymous, sub-species-being, and exploited with impunity. These are people with no record, no subscription whatsoever to the American "inside." It raises another question about the American immigrant story, especially the Mexican/Latin American story, the myth and its reconstitution of the American Dream myth. Whose dream is it meant to draw, and whose is fulfilled?

Young's vision is imbued with a kind of vitalism of human and non-human beings, against which the forces of nationalist and capitalist borders ('boundaries' which turn the beings to subjects) are faceless and lifeless. America is almost never shown through recognizable human manifest characters during Roberto's period of agricultural fieldwork—if they appear as human at all, and not the mechanized cyborg presence of *la migra* (police cars and helicopters panoptically asserted and hovering above/disrupting natural settings), they are obscured through wide shots. As he drifts through interactions with others in the city setting, including his romantic entanglement with waitress Sharon, her spirited evangelist church, and the inquisitive patrons at her place of work, his silence locks him into one-sided discourses with English-speakers and their alien practices. In a particularly tense moment at Sharon's diner, Roberto obscures his language barrier from the suspicious gaze of a police officer while a motor-mouthed resident carries their conversation as a de-facto monologue. Silence as a choice and a restriction strongly signals the character's position as an outsider, where speaking/being understood/bearing testimony are the protections of the social insider.

Although professional actor Domingo Ambriz remains the central focus, the disappeared distinctions between actors and actual migrant workers and border patrolmen on screen[28] create

---

[28] Cull, Nicholas John, and Davíd Carrasco, eds. *Alambrista and the U.S.-Mexico Border: Film, Music, and Stories of Undocumented Immigrants*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. 157

fluid positions of 'being' and 'performing,' transcending the aesthetic of realism to participate and artistically intervene in a social moment of the nation's (meta-)physical border. Realism as a contrived style, a blend of "fact and affect" which determined an American tradition through visual art and theater in the latter 19th century.[29] Although *Alambrista!* borrows from many other traditions of realism, such as Young's career in documentary (another American form with deep roots in the contrived mythologization of indigenous and subaltern peoples under the guise of ethnography[30]), its 'documentary style' identified by critics[31] conceals its reflexivity. An early scene of Roberto being taught English phrases and conventional American etiquette when ordering a meal by fellow undocumented workers becomes an intriguing study of 'acting out' a performance of American habitus through language. It is as if through imitating white Americans to the degree of formally 'passing,' they may be granted better treatment and thereby become an insider in the perceived mobility of American society. This ought to be familiar to those knowledgeable of the Hollywood industry; many (eg. Merle Oberon) changed their names, appearance, accents, etc. to appease a white gatekeeping culture of visibility and present as white, and Roberto finds upon encountering America a pressure to 'perform' such a role behaviorally if not physically. Roberto remains an outsider in his passage through the rural landscapes of Texas, up to his ultimate deportation by the law enforcement.

The cowboy and the frontier are found more as hauntings of American hegemony in *Alambrista!,* in hat-fitted patrol officers and the expansive roads/locomotives carrying the transience of an undocumented working class. Davies and McGarry address, respectively, the imagining of open frontiers and American orientations toward the spirituality of the landscape:

[29] Louis S. Warren. *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006. 217
[30] Ex. films of Robert Flaherty
[31] Cull, Nicholas John, and Davíd Carrasco, eds. *Alambrista and the U.S.-Mexico Border: Film, Music, and Stories of Undocumented Immigrants*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004.

how both call toward the suppressed and forgotten histories of America.[32] The unsettling nature

of the frontier derives from the spectrality of the country's violent past, the footprints of

migrating peoples (a permanently transient, heterogeneous population) that remain pressed as

affects upon present locations and cultural objects. It is a haunted presence key to the floating,

meandering narrative of *Alambrista!* among many others, which alludes to the hauntology that

unsettles mythic American images.

Gummo (1997): Haunting in American Myth

A relationship may be tied between the 'spiritual death' which concludes *Alambrista!* and

that of Billy and Wyatt's demise in *Easy Rider,* even moreso George Hanson's (Jack Nicholson's)

murder in the serene night beside them; ceremonial or symbolic practices which attempt to

transform the human subject into something affecting yet transparent, a specter who's only alive

in the physical sense. Social spectrality has long been drawn as a metaphor for marginalization in

America[33]; something which erases visibility and curtails mobility, limiting the ability to imprint

oneself and one's culture with permanence under institutions of power. Outside the limited scope

of one film, we may indeed invite spectrality and supernatural liminality as concepts to

understand the horror of conquest and erasure inherent in the establishment of America and its

mythic representation in the western landscape. Furthermore, how do the different hauntings of

exploitation and violence (the "no longer" and "not yet" of past and future[34]) appear to us

through mediation, symbols, myths, and art objects layered upon social situations wherein such

painful memories are suppressed?

---

[32] Molly McGarry. *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America.*
Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Mark Fisher. "What is Hauntology?" Film Quarterly, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 16–24

When the search for America seems objectless or intangible, and the non-arrival or denial of a recognized American identity…the promise of prosperity…"the American dream"…is so strong as to discourage any evidence of its prior existence, one may instead search for truth in what is not immediately visible. In response to Fukuyama's proposition of "the end of history," Jacques Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx* (1993) for a 'hauntology' that addresses the truths of experience and social realities, especially in a political system of intersecting and mythic power structures (the 'postmodern condition'; wherein the postmodernity of art only reflects the elements of a schizoid present), for which 'ontology' and its description of stable presences, *permanences*, is insufficient.[35] As the actions of the past, particularly destruction and erasure, persist upon the present as the haunting of the "no longer"; just as well, past and present violences create more hauntings of "not yet," the "lost futures" which may be temporarily or permanently lost to the material realm.[36] The concept of hauntology addresses the need to process the spectralities that arise from oppression as forces in themselves that insist without existing. Although tempting to drift these ideas into the supernatural, they prove just as relevant for the hauntings of repression in American history—peoples, cultures, lineages made invisible or marginally visible—which cast the shadows of lost futures on their descendants, on the temporal present.

Cinematic hauntology is therefore useful to aim towards understanding films that unsettle a mythic nationhood through the search for something elusive. Rather than defining what cannot and ought not be defined, we may interpret ellipses, cinematic gaps, and ultimately the non-arrival of conclusion as the haunting of a hollow structure, the unknown which is both weird

---

[35] Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International.* New York: Routledge, 2011.
[36] Mark Fisher. "What is Hauntology?" Film Quarterly, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 16–24

and "out of joint."[37] That's to say "looking for America and [not finding] it anywhere" is an insufficient denial of marginal subjects that combat national-cultural myth from the outside, and the spectral presences through which the suffering and destruction of violence inherent to myth-making can be witnessed despite its attempted effacement: the ideological replacement of history for nature[38], and the material oppression which both presupposes and reproduces that construction.

Xenia, Ohio excavates the traumatic histories of the Midwestern American pastoral, the mythic bedrock of the 'heartland,' in *Gummo* (1997) and its fragmented material and narrative form. Although not a cinematic search in the narrative sense, *Gummo's* attempt to piece together the reverberations of a devastating natural disaster in Xenia journeys toward the film's greater symbols through its blind spots, ellipses, and complex chronology. The tornado's effects are absorbed into the town's existing dilapidation (of social as well as physical structures) and thereby join the choir of spectralities that depress the subjects into destruction and self-implosion where there seems to be no cause or reprieve. Meaning can only be reassembled in pieces through bricolage: conversations with ghostlike characters channeled through deteriorated footage, obscured pasts of American cultures in Korine's intertextual references, seem to call out to the contemporary viewer through the haze and grain of the film's material vagueness, like the faint outline of a transparent phantom against the 1990s.

The veiled referentiality to vaudeville and 19th-century aesthetic representations in *Gummo,* from the dialogue to the characterizations, furthers the disturbances of aggressive hypermasculinity/sexuality, pathological abuse, and racism in the film by situating itself as the mutated offspring of an American cultural lineage. This persistence of early American mythic

---

[37]Jacques Derrida. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
[38] Roland Barthes. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 2022.

media in all its grotesque spectacle is a haunting of obscured cultural pasts, which possesses the images and flesh of identity through imitation and embodiment: see the vitriolic abuse of Bunny Boy by two prepubescent children dressed as cowboys, acting the role of hypermasculine vigilante/protector by shooting Bunny Boy with cap guns and racist/homophobic epithets.

This dissemination of images coded as profane, even violent, has a strong implication of class. In *Gummo,* poverty is a situation of unpreserved history and underdeveloped identity, an interstitial state between the common cultural consumptions of modernity (fast food, metal music) and relic values of the past.[39] The confused identities of *Gummo* are irrational, yet typical for a nation whose internal borders of race and class are deeply connected and contradictory; an act like the memorable 'chair-wrestling' is futile and irrational for the lower-class subjects, yet in the sense of an American hauntology it protests the lack of permanence inherent to social immobility. It is no coincidence that a great many ghost stories involve traumas of structural violence, such as class or race, after all; the real-life spectral presences of socio-economic hindrance denies resolution at every turn, so the irrational may well attain its own rationality. In absurd fashions, Harmony Korine critiques the capitalist hegemony that reproduces cultural myths (including that of cultural capital) through imitation and materialization.[40] The stitching of popular culture imagery—the imposition of dominant images onto subdominant people, the mythic construction of mediated identity—passes through the film's uniquely segmented structure. Popular music is imitated through singalongs (Tummler and Dot's uncanny knowledge of Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison) and identifying visual symbols (Krokus and Poison t-shirts that convey class status and cultural capital associated with 'pedestrian' white metal music). The film's visual form also cuts from celluloid to digital mediums in varying stages of decay,

---

[39] De Villiers
[40] Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture.* Routledge, 1994.

oftentimes ambiguously implying a break in chronology or flashback and disbanding narrative

conventions of temporal causality. The effect of its mixed-media textures is a schizoglossic

blending of moments past and present (the time being *out of joint*) and a displacement of

perspective—as the subjects rearrange between sequences, so does the disembodied voice-over

narration which occasionally finds no grounding in the film content but rather hovers above

(*haunts*) the visual (see the juxtaposition of a recounting of sexual molestation above a girl

playing in a puddle of mud). Many characters' resemblances to 'freak show' characters and

vaudevillian actors—recollections of the carnival and vaudeville worlds inhabited, according to

Korine, by himself and his father from an early age—are capped by Tummler, a lower-class

teenager hemorrhaging archaic jokes whose very name recalls Borscht Belt hotel workers as the

"lowest level comedians."[41] The time is out of joint for the characterization of performers in

Gummo's American entertainment, as Korine breaks loose from cinema's impression of realism

and situates the outsider's life as a perpetual spectacle of performativity.

What is gleaned from a film like *Gummo* is an interpretation of the American landscape

as both an object and an architectural structure—an object where things stick onto its surface and

render the boundaries between materialities and subjectivities unbounded and permeable; and a

structure (as with all physical space) where the past and present are layered over one another.

The elusiveness of American identity, built on tension between peoples and positions, creates

gaps and invisibilities inherent to the insistence of national myth. The uncovering of those gaps

is often a discomforting process, as it reveals absence to be rather the *presence* of specters, lost

futures of marginalization and those who straddle the borders of the present nation. *Gummo* bears

the influence of Korine's idol, Werner Herzog, not merely in its strangeness, but through

---

[41]Walczak, Antek. "Harmony Korine Interview." Index, 1997.
http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/harmony_korine.shtml.

Herzog's similarly discomforting vision of America in *Stroszek* (1977) that unsettles national myth through a representation of structural violence.

Stroszek (1977): Strangers in a Strange Land

America is a confused, confusing place with a kind of spiritual allure[42] to those drawn to its mythology; its influence uniquely reaches far beyond its physical borders. To some degree, American nationalism is a traveling contagion, whose imagined community advertises as all-encompassing (*"give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses…"*) yet exclusive and untenable. The 'immigrant story' has undergone mythologization as innate to the American dream, one that presumes a willing and smooth assimilation to a certain dominant habitus (and the affectation of middle-class capitalist/consumerist ideology) coded as American culture, an attempt to erase ethnicity to its fullest marginal extent. This perspective obviously emerges from 'inside,' an acceptance of the status quo which accepts them. The varying perspectives of those treated as outsiders in America form a radically different vision of the nation, one that carries the imagined community's necessity for homogenization and paradoxically demands the outsider to appease a drive toward hegemonic cohesion and an economic model of exploitation. *Alambrista!* portrays a community of Central American immigrants deeply rooted in the geography and culture of the Southern US despite their continued oppression, for which their migration and survival retains a kind of resilience and purpose; the filmmaker(s) also identifies, for all intents and purposes, as 'American.'

---

[42] Molly McGarry. Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

As a fascination *'about America,'* Werner Herzog's *Stroszek* (1977) explores the experiences of German exiles, an "accented cinema" in Hamid Naficy's terms[43] wherein the myth permeates the national outsider—the immigrant/expatriate/refugee—and draws them to America, and they find the myth and the country's realities (the virtual vs. the actual) colliding, even overlapping into a virtual hybrid state. As the "stranger in a strange land,"[44] the oppressive violence and dissonance this causes drives them to conclusions of absurdity and tragedy—as is the fate of Herzog's Bruno Stroszek. Something of a real-life outsider, Stroszek portrays the deviant in German society incarcerated and ostracized by his countrymen; William Beard's compelling observation connects 'Bruno S.' to Werner Herzog's greater romanticist fascination toward society's encounter with the "natural man."[45]

Upon his release from prison, Bruno S. is abused and terrorized by the criminals in his community for his kinship with a sex worker who likewise longs for an environment of safety. They repeatedly invade and ransack his home, cultivating the brutal conditions which finally drive Bruno and his companions to emigrate to America. The dynamic breach of Bruno's domicile becomes a representation of the cultural outsider's experience of rejection, the pushing force through which one ends up on the 'margins': the "home," both in sense of Bruno's house and his homeland, symbolizes the violation of psycho-social divisions between the privately developing self and the forces of control/conformity.[46] The violent invasion of dominant cultural forces marks the colonization of the subject; the outside and inside are blurred. "Home," or a homeland, is an elusive ideal denied by the social reality and the temporal present, as Naficy

[43] Hamid Naficy. An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001.
[44] Book of Exodus
[45] William Beard. "American Madness: Concepts of Culture and Sanity in The American Friend and Stroszek." Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature, vol. 40, 1992, pp. 59–74.
[46] Emily Hauze. "Keyed Fantasies: Music, the Accordion and the American Dream in Stroszek and Schultze Gets the Blues." German Life and Letters 62, no. 1 (2009): 84–95.

draws a connection between ambiguity in accented films and a frustrated human need to belong—the significance of (national-cultural) community, visibility, and recognition in our formation of self-identity.[47] The embarking upon a search for home in America, where such an environment was not found in Germany, typifies the paradoxical experiences of the exile for Naficy: a cinema filled with aporias and displacement between settings, visuals, and sound that channel a feeling of fragmented identity.

Once they arrive in America, Bruno faces a shattering collision between the America of his fantasies—the mediated mythology of a nation—and the impossibility of the American dream for an outsider of humble sincerity such as himself. After his compatriot Eva embarks on an independent but uncertain future (having returned to sex work for income), Bruno's final ventures into deviant behavior such as robbery eliminate his only remaining hope for upward mobility. The film concludes with Bruno's suicide, although the act itself functions as an ambiguous disappearance; Bruno ascends on a chairlift out of frame, and the ensuing gunshot situates his death as an unstable ellipsis (Derrida's "between life and death"[48]). As the film's loneliness and anomic transience recalls a narrative like *Five Easy Pieces*, the theory of 'spiritual death' as the non-arrival of hope and the haunting of lost future demands a return in the conclusion of *Stroszek*. Bruno's failure to find 'home,' or a stable identity, in America is the non-arrival that fully dismantles the myth of national belonging and protection. Herzog penned a narrative about "shattered hopes" he claimed was not critical of America, that could have taken place in any other country.[49] However, the mythic draw of the American dream as a 'nation of

---

[47] Hamid Naficy. An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001.
[48] Jacques Derrida. Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International. New York: Routledge, 2011.
[49] Emily Hauze. "Keyed Fantasies: Music, the Accordion and the American Dream in Stroszek and Schultze Gets the Blues." German Life and Letters 62, no. 1 (2009): 84–95.

immigrants' and the land of manifest destiny is prescient to the bitter irony of the film, as these very forces survive on the marginalization of many.

Framed as a naïve soul tossed between institutions and the exploitative wills of others, Bruno's sensitivity is a mark of self-consciousness on German and American nationalism. His self-destruction insinuates how we indeed marginalize and oppress each other, and the 'others,' between the borders of class and imagined community. *Stroszek's* ode to the 'natural man' closes as a eulogy to his mere possibility in the 20th century. Emily Hauze remarks on the film's penultimate images, "the answer to the question/ exclamation 'ls this really me!' on the back of Bruno's chairlift, I would suggest, is yes: but it is a 'me' that has been deconstructed and lies in shattered pieces."[50] Bruno is effectively destroyed by America, echoing the continued degradation of his prized musical instruments throughout the work.

Hauze's scholarship emphasizes the importance of music in *Stroszek* as indicators of cultural and personal expression. 'Keyed' instruments such as the piano, accordion, and harmonica (albeit quite abstractly) overlap and cross the spheres of coded-German and American music, and Herzog draws comparison between the instruments and the mechanisms of the body (even as extensions of corporeality, channeling breath through the accordion and harmonica). Hauze theorizes Bruno's musical objects as metaphoric vessels representing the subject's battle with interpretation under schemas of understanding, the struggle of the outsider to translate their experiences, conceptualize their identity, and meet their needs through the language of nationality. Musical instruments and pieces—from detuned pianos and accordions to country-western songs—are not only channels of expression wherein one's creative self further becomes through play, but objects of culture themselves, their own material/immaterial structures with which we negotiate. Bruno's relationship with his accordion as an instrument of

---

[50] Ibid.

travel allows him the agency to establish himself in cultural landscapes through music; German and American folk music forms (from bar chants to country-and-western) abound as inseparably tied to the land which formed (and is reflexively formed by) them. As schemas of culture that contain parameters, one can only emit sound from the existing keys/buttons, and author one's experience with the system of pitches given[51]; Bruno's attachment to his keyed instruments, and their subsequent destruction, relays the struggle of such expressions for the outsider.

Herzog's representation of America is uncanny and strange, the intentional distortion of an outside voice looking-in. It is a resculpting, a re-mediation, with cinema, music, and other art objects standing as reference points—Chet Atkins' soundtrack to the Western highway journey, the mannered working-class melodrama of John Waters' cinema coated in layers of irony.[52] In such a way, the film's orientation towards its own aesthetic, the somber/absurd trajectory to a devastating conclusion, is a departure from the American mythic imagery that inspired it. By spinning a collision of myth with tragic reality, Herzog asks: for the migrant, as for the accented filmmaker, what is America before it is encountered? A projection of a certain ego, perhaps, or the projection of a dream…

Chan is Missing (1982) and The Watermelon Woman (1996): Missing Persons and (un)Discoveries

The 20th century's shift in development from the frontier to the city intensified American urban space as a social matrix, histories densely compacted and immersed in the webs of modernity. Triumphs and violences alike were stuffed into boxes and scurried away for lack of

---

[51] Emily Hauze. "Keyed Fantasies: Music, the Accordion and the American Dream in Stroszek and Schultze Gets the Blues." German Life and Letters 62, no. 1 (2009): 84–95
[52] William Beard. "American Madness: Concepts of Culture and Sanity in The American Friend and Stroszek." Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature, vol. 40, 1992, pp. 59–74.

space, and distinct heritages lost any illusion of boundedness. With America's natural erosion of minority groups' cultural cohesion, past lives were fragmented and scattered across archival sites that suffered from lacking infrastructure and memories that evanesced over generations. These processes of assimilation and homogenization—in divisions of education, socialization, the labor market, and the gatekeepers of cultural capital—were the immaterial consequence of urban development and its exploitation along lines of race/ethnicity and class. The erosion of histories and knowledge inherent to collective identity creates gaps and shadows even in the most diverse cities, where haunting may still persist in the dense social matrix. Myths struggle to survive in urban America, yet their power—or the cultural forces which dictate them—is continuously exercised by political authorities and still-ardent nationalists. The myth may be most visible when unsettled by a haunting absence.

Peter Feng mentions, in passing, the name 'Vincent Chin' when contextualizing the year Wayne Wang gained relevance in America for his debut feature film *Chan Is Missing* (1982).[53] Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American draftsman, was bludgeoned to death following an altercation with two white automobile workers at a Michigan strip club; although the evidence and circumstance of the killing suggested a racial motivation, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz were fined little more than $3,000 for their act.[54] The criminal case ignited a national discussion concerning anti-Asian sentiment and the persecution of hate crimes, as the outsourcing of manufacturing labor in Michigan had inflamed animosities toward Asians and Asian-Americans as parasitic outsiders. Vincent Chin's story evoked a resonant experience with other Asian-Americans of the 'perpetual foreigner,' those whose status as Americans seem locked in

[53] Peter Feng. "Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American: 'Chan is Missing.'" Cinema Journal, vol. 35, no. 4, 1996, pp. 88–118
[54] Michael Moore. "The Man Who Killed Vincent Chin." *Detroit Free Press*. August 30, 1987.

invalidation due to their ethnic background.[55] The case exposed to a wide media audience the destructive extremes of social marginalization in America—who is and is not 'allowed' to be American, and therefore given social/legal protection—the outsider is neglected and shut into the cold, unidentified, even forcibly disappeared.

Wayne Wang was born six years before Chin, raised in Hong Kong until his parents sent him to the United States at 17. He describes his habitus as consistently formed by the nationalities of China and America even before emigrating; his father cultivated an enthusiasm for Hollywood films, and even his namesake, John Wayne,[56] was a mythic projection of America's hegemonic influence (the far-reaching persistence of the frontier/cowboy returns in unexpected, abstract forms). Through financing and developing his first independent film in San Francisco, Wang circumvented a national industry that perceived Asian-Americans as perpetual foreigners and their perspectives as liminal American experiences; few US feature films before *Chan Is Missing* were both produced *by* Asian-Americans and intended *for* Asian-American audiences.[57]

Addressing the concept of Asian-Americans existing in liminal cultural space, Feng deconstructs the very term (and its intentional hyphenation) as a means of understanding *Chan Is Missing.* While the broad category describes a multiplicity of nationalities and ethnicities, even further fragmentation of sub-categories beneath, *Chan* mostly centers Chinese-Americans (while also exploring, through Chan Hung's place within Taiwanese and Filipino communities, the deceptive lines of distinction between Asian nationalities that are also fluidly crossed) to demonstrate the ethnic subject as a divided one. Chan Hung's disappearance becomes more than

---

[55] US Commission on Civil Rights
[56] Emanuel Levy. Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film. New York University Press, 1999.
[57] Peter Feng. "Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American: 'Chan is Missing.'" Cinema Journal, vol. 35, no. 4, 1996, pp. 88–118

a noir-ish 'MacGuffin,' but an effect of destabilizing Chinese(-)American identity as a bundle of components and subject positions the absence of a physical presence refuses to tie into a singularity, which "only allows for, but actually contributes to, the construction of Asian American subjectivity."[58] The distinction of 'Asian American' as *political* rather than strictly *cultural* further explains Jo and Steve's frustration at the endless and fruitless search for Chan; his absence exposes a tangled network of influences acting as political agents between communities of San Francisco, the PRC/Mainland, and the ROC/Taiwan, all however joined with other Asian identities in separation from a white hegemonic American identity (another confounding political struggle).

  Chan thereby engages a postmodern critique of "living a hyphen," not only in reference to Chinese-American and Asian-American communities but to their relationship with dominant American culture as outsiders. As they resist binaries of identity and knowledge, or rather bristle against them, Jo and Steve exhibit differing orientations toward their two nations of origin. Having been formed by American life since childhood, Steve takes pride in an ability to code-switch in his streetwise vernacular, and projects onto himself a hegemonically masculine American sensibility. He fails to grasp many of the plausible reasons for Chan Hung's disappearance, interpreting it as a failure to assimilate or 'make it' in San Francisco. Jo, however, recognizes the combatting cultural tensions in Chan Hung's life as a fellow older immigrant from the Mainland.

  After all, it is through Jo that we also view the film's intertextuality, Wayne Wang's conversation and response to the discursive heritage of American cinema: the film noir's 'underbelly' of the city's web (world-weary and astute Jo acting as narrator with aptly limited omniscience) and *Charlie Chan's* caricature of the Chinese riddle and Chinese person. As the

---

[58] Ibid. 89

conventions of noir are illuminated and subverted ("if this were a TV movie, some important clue would pop up now and clarify everything"), so are the systems of knowledge that dominate American society and restrict Asian-American hybridities through misunderstanding. Differing worldviews create different worlds, and intelligibility is emphasized as social recognition: see the discrepancy detailed between Chan Hung and a white police officer concerning the semantics of traffic rules, the complex deconstruction of meaning between languages' (and cultures') concepts of "yes" and "no." The police officer's habitus and social position identifies his view as 'correct,' and Chan is reportedly sent through the legal system as an outsider forced to defend his perspective as legitimate. Understandable why this would be a fixity especially oppressive, especially 'othering,' and impossible to ignore; it may not have been the catalyst for Chan's departure, but the anecdote exhibits the burden of a 'perpetual foreigner' in America.

Characters move fluidly between distinct/overlapping concentric spheres of cultural belonging, complicating the binary of insider-outsider and overall emphasizing *becoming* over *being*, "process and movement" above any fixity or singular subjectivity.[59] Chan Hung, when not physically observed (only a concept, the object of the search), becomes an abstraction and splits into multitudes. However, if the audience retains any lasting discovery from *Chan Is Missing*, Chan Hung's fragmented identity was always an abstraction, paradoxically easier to understand when *not* engaged with directly or collapsed into a singularity between movements. The mystery of Chan Hung demonstrates this movement of bodies, its involvement with the politics of power, and the symbolic disappearance as the resistance of being converted into a subject. The ontology of the subject, evidence/proof of being in the image, is problematized with the film's penultimate and perhaps most meaningful frame: Jo's only photograph of Chan Hung, whose face is forever blurred, wrapped in mystery and shadow.

---

[59] Ibid. 106

Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996) further extends the independent artistic praxis of the outsider-filmmaker deconstructing the subjectivities of society-through-cinema, as the first feature by a black lesbian filmmaker. The truest instance in the scope of this thesis of Fiedler's maxim to "imagine a destiny," Cheryl Dunye effectively writes herself into American cinema where inheritance is restricted. As her fictionalized persona embarks on a search to rediscover the life of an old Hollywood actress billed only as "the Watermelon Woman," Dunye unearths fragments of information and moves closer towards an understanding of likely subject Fae Richards. However, due to missing information and fickle testimony, a more detailed portrait of Richards hangs forever in ambiguity by the conclusion, like the cryptic photograph of Chan Hung. *The Watermelon Woman* takes a more empathic approach than *Chan* towards the image as a locus of meaning; Dunye balances the functions of cinema as a force that flattens histories, and as a tool that forms new ones. From a narrative concerning the spectrality of Black bodies in American cinema and their (lack of) documentation, Dunye herself enacts an historical inscription. The inheritance of economic capital and cultural histories have both been limited to Black Americans by hegemonic white gatekeepers, seen in the film as institutions of knowledge, history, and preservation.

Dunye's exploration recalls Foucault's study of power/knowledge; libraries, film rental stores, interviews, etc. provide the setting of correction for the mediation and narrowing of history, the care and attention given to some stories/truths of American culture(s) above others. The filmmaker takes control of the myth-making apparatus by reflexively directing the camera's gaze, inviting the audience to participate in this action. She invites us to give care to the images of Black women historically treated as outsiders in their own place of birth, those buried in the background of our mythic cinema and rendered almost anonymous.

The Watermelon Woman, the subject of Dunye's search who may forever only exist in the hard boundaries of the film, is never fully uncovered. By collapsing into her own character, Dunye first imagines herself, then the Watermelon Woman, as destabilizers of a mythic American history (a white, male, 'straight' one) and self-aware constructions within a fiction, but unlike Dunye's persona in the temporal present, the Watermelon Woman cannot be reached. She supposes a kind of haunting, a specter of the screen who once existed and may still exist ("between living and dead") but is imprisoned by this liminality of her generation's lost future. Dunye is affected by that haunting, feels it viscerally, is compelled to release her from the space 'between histories' where people's lives/impacts are forgotten. The denial of a conclusion is a bitter injection of realism to punctuate a film equally committed to affirmation and radical queered self-love: the Watermelon Woman is still missing, and the haunting continues, as it inevitably must. The negotiation Dunye engages with is ambivalence—ambivalence towards the American episteme, and towards the cinema/the image's arrest of the Black female subject—that she nonetheless fights with her own inscription of Black life that encourages new hopes and futures.

Conclusion/Non-Arrival

The un-discovery of missing persons in the above two films, the non-arrival of ontological closure, results in a resignation on the part of the searchers to accept the ambiguity of the mystery and the uncertainty of their circumstance by extension. Taking the perspectives of the survivors and narrators, rather than those who disappear themselves (eg. Wyatt and Billy, Bruno S.) prompts the audience to read differently towards the meaning of American marginalization. Is the negotiated American identity a kind of ambivalence? What is compromised when we call ourselves American? Building American cinema on difference and subjectivities further the ultimate objective, to permanently unsettle the myths of the American nation. To illuminate ways of "reimagining" America and what we believe to be American cinema—its parameters and assumptions of itself. There are many Americas to be observed, many American cinemas, which are continually and infinitely formed and re-formed; the scope of this thesis is limited and does not purport to comprehensively describe the multiplicity of anti-mythological films from different cultures and American groups.

Non-arrival displays an open-endedness of the American nation through the spiritual death of the searcher. The outsider, search, and non-arrival of American identity are often entangled with the idea of "spiritual death" or symbolic death, which returns or persists in the form of haunting as a boundless, timeless symptom of history and trauma. The specter is not fully visible by its nature, as the haunting represents its effects, or its traces; as exemplified by *Gummo* and Xenia's symbolic tornado, the specter can be America itself in its past and present forms. *Alambrista's* Roberto and *Stroszek's* Bruno S. find themselves haunted by the nation's mythology, suffering spiritual deaths and stepping into the invisibility of society's margins.

Finally, Chan Hung and the Watermelon Woman represent the aftermath of the spiritual death, another haunting that unsettles a new generation of searchers and illuminates the unresolved.

The non-arrival is in itself a kind of discovery: a discovery of the *unsettled*, which itself is *unsettling*. To occupy American myth, or to refuse, is to dwell in the unsettled and haunting structures positioned against the great proportion of inhabitants labeled as outsiders. Dueling forces of visibility and invisibility (ambivalence) result in a challenging cinema from the independent underground, works which nonetheless strike a chord with the nation forever unsure of its past, present, and future. Ambivalence is to sit in a poised position to change Americanism…as if to suggest, *America will not change for us, so we must either re-form the nation or abandon it entirely.* While direct political and ideological action awaits, the unsettled must remain unsettled and never fully resolve, as the importance of structural evolution persists.

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2017.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022.

Beard, William. "American Madness: Concepts of Culture and Sanity in *The American Friend* and *Stroszek*." *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, vol. 40, 1992, pp. 59–74.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Cull, Nicholas John, and Davíd Carrasco, eds. *Alambrista and the U.S.-Mexico border: Film, Music, and Stories of Undocumented Immigrants*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004.

Davies, Philip. *Representing and Imagining America*. Keele, Staffordshire: Keele University Press, 2013.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 2011.

De Villiers, Jacques. "Between the Norm and a Hard Place: Representing Marginality in Harmony Korine's Gummo." Thesis., University of Cape Town, Faculty of Humanities, Centre for Film and Media Studies, 2013. http://hdl.handle.net/11427/14087

Feng, Peter. "Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American: '*Chan is Missing*.'" *Cinema Journal*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1996, pp. 88–118, https://doi.org/10.2307/1225719.

Fisher, Mark. "What is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 16–24, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16.

Goodyear, Anne Collins, et al. *This Is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today*. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2016.

Hall, Stuart. Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse. Birmingham: Univ. of Birmingham, 1973.

Hauze, Emily. "Keyed Fantasies: Music, the Accordion and the American Dream in *Stroszek* and *Schultze Gets the Blues*." *German Life and Letters* 62, no. 1 (2009): 84–95. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0483.2008.01450.x.

King, Geoff, et al. *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*. Routledge, 2013.

Klinger, Barbara. "The Road to Dystopia: Landscaping the Nation in *Easy Rider*." Essay. In *The Road Movie Book*, 179–203. London: Routledge, 1997.

Levy, Emanuel. *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*. New York University Press, 1999.

Lewis, Jon. *Road Trip to Nowhere: Hollywood Encounters the Counterculture*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022.

McGarry, Molly. *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Marcus, Greil. *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music*. E.P. Dutton, 1975.

Mendik, Xavier, and Steven Jay Schneider. *Underground USA: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*. Wallflower, 2002.

Miller, Angela. *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Moore, Michael. "The Man Who Killed Vincent Chin." *Detroit Free Press*. August 30, 1987.

Naficy, Hamid. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Solomon, J. Fisher. *The Signs Of Our Time*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

Walczak, Antek. "Harmony Korine Interview." Index, 1997. http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/harmony_korine.shtml.

Warren, Louis S. *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 2006.

Filmography

Dunye, Cheryl, director. *The Watermelon Woman.* First Run Features, 1996.

Herzog, Werner, director. *Stroszek.* Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, 1977.

Hopper, Dennis, director. *Easy Rider.* Columbia Pictures, 1969.

Korine, Harmony, director. *Gummo.* Fine Line Features, 1997.

Wang, Wayne, director. *Chan Is Missing.* New Yorker Films, 1982.

Young, Robert, director. *Alambrista!.* First Run Features, 1977.