The Other America of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits

Adriano Tedde, PhD candidate
School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences
Griffith University.

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
March 2019
ABSTRACT

This thesis employs popular culture texts (works of literature, film, and popular music) as companions to the understanding of contemporary America. It is about artworks that form a cultural resistance that enables the appreciation of social issues and cultural decline in the United States. The authors of these artworks are novelist Paul Auster, filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, and musician Tom Waits.

Born between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, in different parts of the United States, Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits have produced a series of works that share strong similarities. In their novels, films, and songs, they portray an imagined “Other America” that is in stark contrast with the idyllic vision of the American Dream. Their America does not coincide with conventional middle-class values and goals of success, money and social upward mobility. It is an open, tolerant, and egalitarian country inhabited by marginalized “other Americans” who never escape from poverty and failure. On one side, their works appear to be the backbone of a 1980s counterculture, formed against the age of consumerism and hedonism, and critical of everything American. On the other side, they constantly evoke symbols of traditional American culture like the road, the frontier, the lone anti-hero, the adventure and hope for a better future. Therefore, quintessentially American narrative symbols survive in the alternative chronicle of a problematic America.

Commonalities in the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, are closely observed in this study; for instance the essential aesthetics, the recurring themes of decay and poverty, and the urban settings. The thesis also focuses on the affinity that these works have with a traditional American progressive thought. I argue that Auster, Jarmusch and Waits are heirs of a long-established lineage of American artists and thinkers. Like Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and many others after them, they have both criticized their country and embraced its original ideals of social justice and equality.

Embedded in this tradition of American resistance, the texts examined in this thesis are ideal guides to the recent history of the United States. Although these works were not created with an overt political intention, their authors assume an accidental role of social commentators, by challenging the values of the dominant U.S. culture. Electing simplicity over wealth, and failure over success, their stories praise the universal needs and a Whitmanesque “absolute soul” that all humans share. The works of the Other America recuperate a culture of the people that defies current tendencies of isolationism, greed and selfishness that are typical of consumerism. Against the dominant culture, these artists propose a return to an ideal human brotherhood that is the main principle of a long tradition of Americans who, throughout the decades, formed a resistance against the surrounding culture. The Other America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits might be fictional, but it is a reminder of life as it is, mirroring a harsh American reality of injustice, decay and sorrow. While so doing, it never abandons a utopian impulse for life as it should be, namely the realization of a society in which love is the only law.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Adriano Tedde)
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisors Dr. Amanda Howell, Dr. Christine Feldman-Barrett, and Dr. David Baker for their guidance and support from the very first day of my candidature until the end. I am grateful for their precious advice, their continuous and prompt attention to my ideas, and for the engaging, mind-opening conversations about American politics, culture, history, film, literature, and music. It has been a joy to find responsiveness and approval for my personal perception of a faraway country like the United States. I could have not been any luckier in finding three knowledgeable, accessible, and supportive supervisors.

I would like to extend my thanks to other scholars and Ph.D. students who welcomed me and enriched my academic experience at Griffith: Associate Professor Patricia Wise, Professor Sarah Baker, Dr. Lauren Istvandity, Dr. Claire Kennedy, Golie Talaie Kamalabad, Hafsa Khan, Somayeh Khani, and James Forde. A special mention is for Stefano Barone, in whom I found a friend with extraordinary intellect and knowledge.

I would like to thank Serafino Murri and Dr. Paolo Simonetti, the first two experts of American cinema, music, and literature to whom I had the chance to describe my project, during a short stay in Rome in the months before my relocation to Brisbane. I am grateful to the staff at the American Studies Centre of Rome, where I found my first reading room for this project. It still is the most stunning building I have ever been able to study in.

Special thanks go to Sara Piazza, author of the best existing publication on Jim Jarmusch’s cinema, for her invaluable research and writing tips. Her strong passion for the works of a great filmmaker was inspiring.

My sincere thanks goes to Prof. Casey Nelson Blake, who provided me with the extraordinary opportunity to join the Columbia University Center for American Studies in New York as a Visiting Ph.D. Scholar, and for his guidance into the intellectual history of twentieth century United States. I would like to thank Ms. Angela Darling, too, for her crucial assistance in the organisation of my visit to New York.

I thank Luc Sante for his precious comments on my project upon my arrival in the United States. Receiving a validation of my ideas from the only person who has written reviews and essays on Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch, and Tom Waits meant much to the progress of my work. I thank Lyndsi Barnes and Mary Catherine Kinniburgh for their help, patience, and courteous manners during my archival research through Auster’s manuscripts at the stunning Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. I have a special gratitude for Dr. Christopher Florio at Columbia for his generous and open guidance in the history of American poverty. I am also grateful to Jim Cullen for his expert advice in the boundless domain of American culture.

I thank Manuel Santoro, Emanuele Marchisio, and Fabio Sanna for the intellectual stimulations that have kept my brain active through the years, even in dull times. Their unconditional friendship has been one of life’s greatest gifts. I cannot forget two other close friends and mentors, Simone Desmarchelier and Steven Freeland, who have always been an inspiration with their life-choices from the moment we met. You are the best of Australia!

I thank Pier Forlano, Gianludovico de Martino, Nicola Comi, Cristina Ravaglia, Luigi Tomba, Gino Moliterno, and Grazia Miccichè for their professional and emotional support in the not so easy transition that brought me from diplomacy to academia.
Thanks to my mother and my siblings, Anna, Jolanda, Luca, and Alessandra for always believing in me, never judging my choices. I dedicate this thesis to the person who infected me with the American bug at a young age, my father Vittorino.

More than anyone, I must thank Emily, my life companion without whom I would have never done this. Her encouragement and support were everything in the realisation of my study. Through her I finally discovered the life-changing power of love.

Last but not the least, I would like to mention Gloria and Maria, our daughters born respectively five months after the commencement of my candidature and five months before its end. Despite all the interruptions and unforeseen events that followed their arrival, they brought new inspiration and energy into my life. These acknowledgements were finally written when Maria kindly agreed to give me some time and fall asleep. As I am writing these words she is strapped to my chest.
INTRODUCTION

«In my childhood America was like a religion. [...] Then real-life Americans abruptly entered my life – in jeeps – and upset all my dreams.»¹
- Sergio Leone

«What really knocks me out is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it.»²
- J. D. Salinger

«The most sensitive, telling responses to complex changes in society are to be found in the work of accomplished artists and writers.»³
- Leo Marx

America caught my imagination and my fantasies like no other place when I was a child. At the age of five I had the strange idea that the entire world was encompassed within America itself. That is, when I heard the names of places I didn’t know, I immediately thought that they belonged to America. Then I went to school and discovered that there actually were different countries outside the United States and mine, but none of them sparked my interest. I was born and raised on the island of Sardinia, a peripheral region of Italy. America, filtered through media with countless entertainment products, looked so much better than the place where I lived. It appeared as an unreachable dream destination; the best place on Earth, with a grandiose nature, marvellous modern metropolises and, most of all, happy people who could achieve anything they wanted in their lives. This is a story that I share with millions of Europeans who grew up under an irresistible US cultural ascendancy throughout the second half of the twentieth century. When my father’s generation came to age after World War Two, America was perceived as a morally superior entity. This spirit was superbly caught in a

popular film, *Un Americano a Roma* (1954, dir. Steno) that described how the Italians’ obsession with America went as far as creating a true cultural identity crisis in young people. This fascination for the big western ally intensified during Eisenhower’s Cold War and continued through the years to arrive almost untouched in the 1980s when I was growing up. Even the children of families that saw America as an imperialist, evil country and supported the Italian Communist Party – the second largest national party of those days – were absorbed in American popular culture, from the way they dressed to the bikes they rode, the videogames they played, the TV shows and films they watched, and the music they listened to. While my peers also developed ties with the local reality that surrounded them and slowly dropped their attention to overseas phenomena, I remained firmly interested in American things only. Growing up, my taste shifted from *Happy Days* and other television shows to John Steinbeck’s books, from Steven Spielberg to Martin Scorsese, from Huey Lewis & The News to Bob Dylan. However, the idyllic image of America that accompanied me throughout the eighties came to an end when, in my adolescence, I discovered the films of Jim Jarmusch, the music of Tom Waits and the novels of Paul Auster. I watched Jarmusch’s *Down By Law* (1986) when I was twelve. This film’s dark and melancholic atmospheres sedimented in my imagination and resurfaced when, a few years later, I started paying attention to the difficult sounds of Waits’s records. Reading Auster’s *Moon Palace* (1989) when I was sixteen completed an evolution of my perception of American culture as both more complex and difficult than I previously imagined. This new understanding eventually brought America closer to the everyday life I saw around me. I began to realize that the problems that surrounded me (unemployment, marginalization, cultural co-optation) were not specific to my region. America may not have been a dreamland after all, but such realist representation made this faraway country even more intriguing; and its dark sides and contradictions became much more interesting to me than its glossy, mainstream face.

Auster, Jarmusch and Waits talked to me with one voice. It was a friendly voice, one that I could understand and spoke of things that were close to my own consciousness. Thanks to them, I learned that America was not the Promised Land depicted in mainstream culture. It was also a country of outcasts, impoverishment, wasteland and disillusionment. I always enjoyed finding the great affinities that their works share despite the use of different media: the themes they explore; the characters they employ; the locations where the stories are set; and the aesthetics that surround their fiction. More importantly, there is one storyline that crosses the books, movies and songs of these authors. This storyline points to one direction: a depiction of an alternative America. It is a story of Americans who, not adhering to dominant
middle-class values, escape the market place logics and appear in the eyes of the majority as failures, or losers. The present thesis focuses on this alternative American narrative.

These three authors who altered my understanding of America are alive and still active. Paul Auster (b. 1947) is a renowned writer, whose work has been translated into more than twenty languages. Jim Jarmusch (b. 1953) is a much-acclaimed filmmaker, an exponent of so-called independent cinema. Tom Waits (b. 1949) is a singer-songwriter whose popularity has grown steadily worldwide since his 1973 debut album. As generational contemporaries, all three have enjoyed cult status among audiences and critics alike since the 1980s, when their artistic personalities fully blossomed. They have produced a remarkable body of work. Thirty-one books for Auster inclusive of novels, memoirs, and screenplays; twelve feature films, two documentaries and a few short movies for Jarmusch; twenty-one studio and live albums for Waits. These works embed a voice of dissent against the opulent society that neglects to address the necessities of the poor and the weak. This voice of dissent, ill-concealed in these popular artworks, is the object of this study. A critique can be found in a recurring depiction of social alienation and abandoned landscape that makes the audiences of these three contemporaries ponder over perennial questions such as poverty, class division, and the failure of the American Dream. In other words, they hint at the unaccomplished project of a fully open, democratic, equal society in a modern state that repudiates the feudal system it escaped from. The fiction examined in this thesis exposes the incoherence and inequality of a society built upon the promise of happiness for all. In doing so, it conveys a harsh verdict on a prevailing contemporary American culture of self-indulgence, consumerism, individualism and materialism.

This study looks at the works of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits as ideal companions to the recent history of the United States. More specifically, it shows how the alternative America that emerges in the different artworks under examination understands, explains, and confronts the problems of contemporary America. These three objectives underlie the structure of this four-part work. While part one offers the framework for the purpose of the thesis, the other parts are dedicated to each specific goal: part two is about the perception of America in the texts under observation; part three looks at how the country is depicted and explained; and part four finally deals with the concept of art as resistance, exploring the confrontational nature of the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits.

Each part consists of two chapters. Chapter one defines the concept of “Other America”, the imagined country that ideally connects the œuvres of the three authors. This fictional country is not an original creation, rather the combination of ideas and ideals of an intellectual
tradition that descends from the nineteenth century fathers of American literature. Walt Whitman’s essay “Democratic Vistas” (1871) is analysed as a founding document of this tradition and adopted to explore links with literature, cinema, and music that carried on its values throughout the twentieth century. This tradition can be summarized as a permanent defiance of America’s materialistic society, backed by the ideals of equality, freedom, and social justice. American scholar Leo Marx called this “the doctrine of ‘doubleness’”, taking inspiration from a verse in “Misgivings” (1860), a poem by Herman Melville that reads: “I muse upon my country’s ills—[…] On the world’s fairest hope linked with man’s foulest crime.”

According to Marx, it is possible to criticize America as it is—greedy and plutocratic—, never losing sight of America as it ought to be—egalitarian and democratic. The chapter also looks at the crisis that such traditional thought has gone through in the last decades of the past century and anticipates how the fiction of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, promoting fundamental values of equality, freedom, and togetherness, filled a gap created by this crisis. Chapter two is devoted to the biographies of the three authors and a survey of the coinciding topics, characters, aesthetics and ethics of their works.

Chapter three begins the second part with an examination of the extensive use made in the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits of a quintessential American narrative trope: the road. A look into the road books, road movies and road songs of these authors reveals how the ideologies of the “American Dream” and the “Manifest Destiny” are at odds with their Other America. However, the revisitation of American symbols offered through the road narrative recovers notions of freedom that belonged to an old left-libertarianism and delivers a renewed version of the myth of America as the land of the “new man”. The understanding of contemporary America delivered in the fiction of the Other America continues in chapter four with the recurrence of another fundamental American narrative element: hope. Slowly eroding from the fabric of the nation, hope is nevertheless unexpectedly a central feature in stories of marginalised and dismal realities. It takes the form of human warmth, nearness and simple living, which are capable of providing even the most unfortunate characters with an impulse to believe in a better future.

Chapters five and six attend to two important recurring topics: poverty and failure. Rejected and despised as un-American, these issues are despite this omnipresent in the American experience. They co-exist with the affluent and more visible society, as integral categories of everyday life, anytime, anywhere. They are the mirror image of a materialistic

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culture that imposes wealth accumulation and social status as life’s ultimate triumphs. Poverty and failure offer a window on the bleak reality of contemporary America and raise questions about the true goals of the nation in the world’s richest economy. Chapter five, in particular, discards the idea that the poor are caught in a “culture of poverty” and offers a description of poverty as the outcome of a “culture of wealth”, which pins down the psychological traits of that part of society blindly devoted to the imperative of money-making. Chapter six, on the other hand, describing some of the unambitious losers of the Other America as democratic heroes, assumes that a culture of success generates unreasonable and superfluous expectations that inevitably lead to failure.

The fourth and last part focuses on the countercultural value of popular culture texts. Chapter seven concentrates on the references to a state of continuous crisis that have always appeared in the background of the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits. Seen as a widespread malady that afflicts humans, nature, and inanimate things, this crisis is mostly imputable to a ruling class that has transformed democracy into an oligarchy. The works of the Other America have routinely depicted the first victims of a decaying system whose numbers, through the years, have grown to include members of the middle-class. It is a picture of a “mutilated country” that has failed many of its young citizens, imposing dogmas of economic rigour and efficiency which have the effect of eroding its social safety nets. Chapter eight closes this thesis examining the Other America’s rejection of consumer culture. With the supremacy of neoliberal free-market ideologies, a rampant consumerism has turned citizens into customers, dedicated to the pursuit individual gratification more than communal living. The latter survives against the odds in the stories of characters who seek alternative ways of living. This is the core narrative of a counterculture that elects simplicity over wealth, and universal values over individualistic preferences, resuscitating utopian instincts in times when utopian thought is dismissed as unnecessary fantasy. This last consideration links Auster, Jarmusch and Waits back to the American resistance tradition begun with Whitman.

This study is based on a cross-media and interdisciplinary analysis. The starting point of the analysis is in the artworks created by the three authors of the title. It is perhaps useful to specify here that the following is not an examination of the artistic merits and accomplishments of these contemporaries. Such aspects are considered and appreciated by more appropriate scholarly works of literature theory, film studies, and socio-musicology. My reading of the texts that form the main object of this thesis draws from a classic American studies approach, as defined by the so-called “Myth and Symbol” school of Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx and Alan Trachtenberg. For these scholars, American Studies is the field of
inquiry into the intellectual and cultural history of the United States with a “predominantly literary orientation.”5 The main goal of this methodology is to make sense of a country through popular culture texts. In order to do so, my reading of both Auster and Jarmusch concentrates mostly on plots and characters, with sporadic attention to prose and mise-en-scène. For Tom Waits, the analysis concentrates evenly on lyrics and sound, giving the latter equal importance as a carrier of a socio-political message. Occasionally, Waits’s work as a film actor and a writer is taken into account as well. The analysis of the three authors’ works is conducted simultaneously in each chapter to allow these texts to speak to one another across different art forms, and draw parallels and connections when possible. For instance, a Tom Waits song can be used to accompany a passage from Paul Auster; the writer’s words can sometime serve as a verbal explanation for a still from a Jim Jarmusch’s film; or the filmmaker’s shots can work as a visual equivalent of the musician’s sound. Aside from a close reading of the primary sources, I constantly look at interviews and various statements of the authors, as well as critics’ reviews and the existing scholarship on their works, and other general studies in the fields of American literature, cinema, and popular music.

To complete the appreciation of contemporary America through the works of Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits, I look at disciplines other than literature, film and music. Sociology and history texts are employed in every chapter to examine the evolution of specific phenomena such as the general attitude towards poverty, consumer culture, the erosion of hope, and the predominance of market logics in every human activity. References to intellectual and cultural history offer an overview of the development of progressive thought and the arts; whereas the insertion of economic data confirms certain social and political trends, such as the rising inequalities after the dismantling of social programs. This study is informed in particular by the works of American scholars who have analysed the dissolution of the original republican spirit and the demise of left thought in the United States after the 1960s, most notably Richard Rorty, Todd Gitlin, and Andrew Delbanco. Their writing helped me shape the idea of Other America and the concepts that I extrapolate from the oeuvre of the three authors – especially with regard to the utopian impulses contained therein.

A comparison of the oeuvre of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits does not exist in current literature. Indeed, only one observer, writer and art critic Luc Sante, has written on all three, without connecting their works. This is the first such comparison. Moreover, this comparison insists on the strong American identities of authors who are often praised for the

deep European sensibility that distinguishes their works. The aim of this research is to participate in the study of living authors, examining their contribution to a better understanding of contemporary America and to the creation of a new critical lens and a counterculture through fiction and art. Read in the light of an American resistance tradition, the popular culture texts analysed in this thesis acquire significance as testimonials to the failings of American mainstream society and as a source for the rediscovery of the better parts of a forgotten, other America. This thesis sheds new light on works that, used as companions to America’s recent history, help to restore belief in fundamental American values of egalitarianism, democracy, and hope.

The purpose of this study does not leave room for the examination of a series of possible other objects that a comparison of these three American contemporaries may suggest. For example, the thesis does not explore the contribution that these men have received in the making of their artworks from their life partners, who are nonetheless quoted in the study. Another aspect that is left out of this thesis is that of creative industry and audience dynamics—i.e. the way these works are produced, distributed and consumed—and the dilemma posed by a criticism of the market place from artworks that are indeed commodities accessible through the market system. Last, an issue that emerged at every public presentation of this project during my PhD candidature is that of identity politics. I have been asked why I am comparing works of three white men to find an alternative America and not texts of female or non-white authors. The works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits stimulate awareness on problems that develop across the whole spectrum of a society, and the issues that emerge from the depiction of the other America that I am writing about are general problems that concern most Americans, notwithstanding their ethnicity or their gender, age, and religion. I am aware of the fact that some of the problems that these authors deal with, especially poverty and social justice, have a strong racial connotation. However, this thesis does not address the race issue in American society as this aspect is not directly addressed in the works under examination. Rather than participating in the complex and boundless question of racial disparity, these works focus on the universality of the human experience; and rather than celebrating diversity

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6 The three authors have acknowledged their European influences on many occasions. Jarmusch in 2004 said: “I feel very aligned with directors like Claire Denis in France and Aki Kaurismäki and Emir Kusturica […]. I feel close to these filmmakers, whom I consider amateurs in the most complimentary way”. See interview with Scott Tobias, 19 May 2004, http://www.avclub.com/articles/jim-jarmusch,13869/ (last accessed 15/04/2014). Auster, who speaks fluent French, for his first attempts at publishing wrote essays on Franz Kafka, Jacques Dupin, Giuseppe Ungaretti and Carl Rakosi. See Auster P. (1992), The Art of Hunger (New York: Sun & Moon Press). Tom Waits, whose music and theatrical performances have drawn inspiration from Kurt Weill and Bertold Brecht, published the album The Black Rider in 1993, based on a German traditional tale that inspired an opera of Carl Maria von Weber. All three also enjoy more success in the Old Continent than in the United States.
as such, they seem to advance the idea of equality and human fraternity first and foremost. Waits sings of women and men of all ages and races who share the same troubles. Auster creates characters from every walk of life and origin. Jarmusch offers a view on the meeting of America’s own melting pot with newcomers of all ages, ethnicities and genders. From the point of view of the reader, little does it matter if people like me, middle-class readers who fantasize about heroic alternative living, form the greater part of their audience. I am convinced that the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits stand out as artworks that anyone can engage with in his/her own terms in finding a universal as well as a personal meaning that goes beyond categories of class, gender, race, and religion and the author-reader relationship. Even someone raised in the shadow of a foreign and remote culture in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea.
Part One

THE OTHER AMERICA
CHAPTER 1

THE DEMOCRATIC DREAM. A TRADITIONAL SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN AMERICA.

«You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than the one to which you wake up every morning.»
- Richard Rorty

«As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said “No Trespassing.”
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.»
- Woody Guthrie

Tom Waits received his first music award in 1986 at a songwriter festival called “Premio Tenco”, held in Sanremo, Italy. The official prize motive read: “To Tom Waits for giving voice and form of song to a romantic America, poor and marginalized [...] alcoholic and ragged, made of wanderers and losers, poetically deluded that life, like in a Frank Capra movie, is always wonderful.” Waits’s performance at the festival was televised (late at night) with the title Tom Waits, the Other America (Tom Waits, l’altra America). An enthusiastic review of the concert appeared the day after on the national press explaining that the singer’s other America was what “the optimism of the Reagan era hides, removes, completely ignores.” Waits was greeted as the balladeer of a forgotten reality that did not belong to the mainstream image his country projected abroad.

The expression “Other America” has been used on different occasions to portray aspects of the United States of America that somehow contradict a general idea of America as a powerful, confident, and wealthy nation. In the following study this expression will describe

10 The full television broadcast is available online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijgUf3UjM0U (last accessed: 19/01/2019).
12 The term was used as the title of Michael Harrington’s best-selling sociology text on poverty of 1962, which will be discussed further in chapter 5. Other notable works bearing the expression of “Other America” are Barbara Kingsolver’s collection of political poems, Another America (New York: Seal Press, 1992); Eugene Martin’s coming of age film on homelessness in Philadelphia, Other America (2004); and Martin Luther King’s
an America that emerges not only from the songs of Tom Waits, but also from the films of Jim Jarmusch and the novels of Paul Auster. Exploring thematic connections between these artists and with American thinkers of the past, this work will investigate how texts of popular culture allow an understanding of the social and political reality of a country. Auster, Jarmusch and Waits are three renowned American artists, born between the end of the 1940s and the early 1950s, in different regions of the United States. They gained international acclaim in the 1980s, when, all living in New York, they produced a series of works that defined their artistic personalities. Auster published *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) and *The New York Trilogy* (1987), books that have left a lasting impression on his subsequent literature; Jarmusch filmed *Permanent Vacation* (1980) and *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), which contained all the central elements he would later develop within his cinema; Waits, who already was a well-established recording artist, released *Swordfishtrombones* (1983) and *Rain Dogs* (1985), the records that radically transformed his music into one of the most distinctive productions of American songwriting. Growing up in the post-war baby-boom era, these three men witnessed America at its economic and political peak in their childhood and adolescence during the 1950s and 1960s. Raised in the ease of white middle-class families, at some point in their youth they all understood that they were not going to follow a path made of certitudes and economical security through a steady job and observance of market place rules. They have instead dedicated their lives to artistic creativity, thus becoming storytellers of a marginal America, its people and its unconventional lives. Despite being produced via distinct career paths, the works of these three men have generated images of America that present striking similarities, which will be examined with the ensuing chapters. This fictional Other America of the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits finds its deep roots in a certain stream of American culture that belongs to those who express discontent and disapproval of their country while upholding the democratic ideals of social justice and equality upon which it was founded. The Other America contains an idea of America that is alternative to that of a perennial victory narrative. It looks at society from the bottom up, celebrates the common man and does not hide its failures. To provide a visual analogy, if this America were to be exemplified by a human being, it would have the face of cult anti-star and character actor public speech of 10 March 1968 “Other America”, that, like Harrington’s *Other America*, referred to the theme of poverty. In other cases this expression is used in European journalism and publications to indicate the most disparate aspects of American life that do not find a place in the dominant U.S. culture – from political ideas to alternative utopian ways of living, art currents, youth movements and so on. See Fernanda Pivano’s *L'altra America negli anni Sessanta*, (Milano: Il Formichieri, 1978-1979).
Harry Dean Stanton, the personification of the eternal struggling outsider. After a long series of small roles, Stanton came into prominence in his late fifties with the leading roles in Paris, Texas (1984, dir. Wim Wenders) and Repo Man (1984, dir. Alex Cox). His final, semi-autobiographical film Lucky (2017, dir. John Carroll Lynch) was routinely compared to Jim Jarmusch’s cinema. The character played by Stanton, a solitary stubborn old man, whose life revolves around a repeated daily routine, could easily be one of Paul Auster’s “wounded men” out of novels like Oracle Night (2003), Travels in the Scriptorium (2006) or Man In The Dark (2008). In Lucky, Stanton also performs an a-cappella rendition of a classic Mexican popular song, “Volver, Volver”, which has an immediacy and a poetic strength that reminds much of Tom Waits’s work.

The Other America imagined through different media by Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits offered a response to the dominant worldview of the Reaganite 1980s. This literary America, however, engages with a much longer tradition of American artistic production and political thought. The fundamental text to catch the spirit of the Other America is the essay Democratic Vistas (1871) written by Walt Whitman, which is a literary precursor of an alternative idea of America. The poet was hopeful that his country could form a true democracy, fulfilling the task of modern history to put into practice the “long deffer’d […] theory of development and perfection by voluntary standards, and self-reliance.”

Notwithstanding his vision for a glorious future, Whitman had no delusion that this historical task had not yet been accomplished with the first century of the Republican experience and that indeed the New World was up until that point in time “an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results.” In order to accomplish its democratic destiny, the essay insisted, America had to solve three cardinal matters: limit its greed, bring its people together, and develop an autochthonous literature. These main issues advanced by Whitman – criticism of American materialism, graduation to


14 Jim Jarmusch’s name was mentioned in many reviews of Lucky. See, for instance, the following reviews from film websites: https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/interviews/lucky-john-carroll-lynch-harry-dean-stanton (BFI, accessed 22/02/2019); https://www.avclub.com/lucky-gives-harry-dean-stanton-an-accidental-but-ideal-1818811897 (AVclub, accessed 22/02/1019); https://torontofilmcritics.com/features/getting-lucky-remembering-harry-dean-stanton-john-carroll-lynch/ (Toronto Film Critics Association, accessed 22/02/2019).


16 Ibid., p. 6.
common people, and production of ideas and culture – persist as the foundational points of the fictional country created by the three artists under examination with this study.

**American avarice.**

Against the greediness that he saw around him, Whitman developed his harshest critique of America. He detected a “hollowness at heart”, corruption and hypocrisy in American society.

In business (this all-devouring modern word, business), the sole object is, by any means, pecuniary gain. The magician’s serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and money-making is our magician’s serpent, remaining to-day sole master of the field.¹⁷

Whereas the author declared that he was not against the material success of his country and actually believed that accumulation of wealth was important for “amelioration and progress”, the appetite for money was America’s greatest soul corruption.¹⁸ A blinding desire for riches is the main obstacle to the development of a spiritual dimension; and in the worst cases, it is the source of great suffering. Only fourteen years before the publication of *Democratic Vistas*, another important intellectual of the nineteenth century, Frances Helen Watkins Harper, pronounced these words in a public address on slavery:

> Twenty thousand lives are annually sacrificed on the plantations of the South. Such a sight should send a thrill of horror through the nerves of civilization and impel the heart of humanity to lofty deeds. So it might, if men had not found out a fearful alchemy by which this blood can be transformed into gold. Instead of listening to the cry of agony, they listen to the ring of dollars and stoop down to pick up the coin.¹⁹

Accumulation of material fortunes has the power to deprive humanity of a basic respect for human life. A century later, Richard Wright, tracing the character of African-American people, reminded how the traffic and trade of humans was a perfectly accepted activity in the eighteenth century for the sole reason that it generated revenues like no other business had ever done before. Slave traders were the “captains of industry” and “tycoons of finance” of a pre-industrialized world and the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes banners on the masts of soldiers symbolised the protection of a free trade in human bodies.²⁰

A clash between the norms and goals of economic growth and the needs of spiritual and emotive spheres is present in the Other America created by the 1980s artworks of Auster,

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 11-12.
¹⁸ Ibid., p. 31.
Jarmusch and Waits. Their stories, films, and music are strikingly at odds with the “greed is good” ethic of the Reagan era, as prospects of material gain usually corrupt the characters’ inner serenity. A point in common between their works and the ideas of Whitman is that accumulation of wealth is not only the cause of a desensitized conscience in front of people’s suffering; it provides also a manipulation of personal aspirations of free individuals. If on one hand, the chase for great gains can harm humans, slavery being one extreme example of such harm, on the other, the diffuse necessity of money-making can impose social conformity to a whole nation. Unquestioned dogmas of economic growth and expansion turn masses into alienated workers who never wonder whether a life spent to accumulate money is a worthy endeavour. Auster, Jarmusch and Waits are not the first American artists to reflect on such issues. In the 1920s, Nobel laureate Sinclair Lewis immortalised this type of individual with his novel Babbitt (1922), which appeared at the same time as the establishment of consumer culture in America, offering a portrayal of the average American man. The title of the book became a neologism, as a synonym for the middle-class conformist consumerist, he who “without hesitation […] considers it God’s purpose that man should work, increase his income, and enjoy modern improvements.” This character became in turn the “square” of 1940s and 1950s jazz and Beat culture. The figure of the square is that of a man who has limited ability to appreciate the cultural variety around him. Musicologist Phil Ford, in his study of post-war cultural and intellectual history of the United States, defines the square as a man who “has absorbed the American ethic conformity, authority, and consumerism so thoroughly that he can no longer function without being told what to do, what to like, and what to believe.” Bob Dylan popularized this figure with “Mr. Jones”, the central character of “Ballad of a Thin Man” (1965), whose restricted consciousness does not allow him to understand the world around him. Possibly a worthy member of society, Mr. Jones is oblivious to the weirdness of the world outside his habits and customs, while the amused singer repeats at the end of every verse “Something is happening here but you don’t know what it is / Do you, Mr. Jones?” The dulled perceptions of the Mr. Joneses of America and the numbing of their consciousness and conscience are attributable to the materialism that bothered Whitman. Limiting this materialism, therefore, as suggested by the poet and by

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23 Ibid., p. 120.
Henry David Thoreau in the 1850s,\(^\text{25}\) is a necessary measure to avoid the weakening and dilution of a national culture into consumerism and conformity. Restraining greed is also necessary to stop the division of society between free buyers – masters of the past, and wealthy of the present – and powerless subjects – slaves of the past, and poor of the present. For Whitman, a control over materialistic impulsions was an essential step to release the democratic potential of a nation in a subject called the “People”.

**Absolute Soul.**

Only by controlling its thirst for wealth, America could direct attention to its spiritual dimension and proceed to the realisation of an anti-feudal state and society founded on the principle of egalitarianism. Walt Whitman believed in the presence of an “absolute soul” that makes all human beings equal to one another. Democracy for the author is the recognition of this fundamental equality and the practice of one great word: “Solidarity”. After all, “of all dangers to a nation, […] there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn – they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account.”\(^\text{26}\) Equality therefore, “is for Whitman the self-evident truth of democracy.”\(^\text{27}\) Thus, the purpose of the democratic rule is to bring everyone together “on one broad, primary, universal, common platform.”\(^\text{28}\) Throughout the essay Whitman goes back to the centrality of the common man: “the average man of the land at last only is important.”\(^\text{29}\) Democracy places him at the centre of society. Anticipating by half a century philosopher John Dewey’s theories on the links between democracy and education,\(^\text{30}\) Whitman believed that a truly democratic society, based on universal participation, could only exist with a solid training of all citizens, both women and men.\(^\text{31}\) Properly trained and free, the common man is capable of becoming a law that assures control and safety for the self and the multitude. For Whitman, individual and mass were contradictory terms that he wanted to reconcile with the hope that from this reconciliation a third entity would rise, a democratic nation, the People. He believed that it was possible for individualism to merge with patriotism to the point that, according to American literature scholar Francis Matthiessen, he anticipated that “the crucial


\(^{26}\) Whitman W. (1871), p. 27.


The poet embraced the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, believing that in the People resides a true patriotic spirit and love for a common project, an emblem, and a flag, an ideal country that was yet to come.  

A national-popular rhetoric of the people was reprised in the wake of the Great Depression, which left millions unemployed and undermined the country’s economy and morale. A culture of the people developed in the 1930s with the contributions of different art and intellectual works. The public sight of common people suffering inspired the production of photographic documentaries that conveyed a portrayal of a torn nation to the eyes of the national public, among which the most famous were photographer Dorothea Lange’s portraits of internal migrants. Tributes to average and “forgotten” men were paid in literature and the arts. Hollywood director Frank Capra produced some of the decade’s most successful movies focusing almost exclusively on stories about average people. He would later state: “let others make films about the grand sweeps of history, I’d make mine about the bloke that pushes the broom.”

Aaron Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man” (1942) and Earl Robinson and John La Touche’s “Ballad For Americans” (1939) were two vastly popular compositions that demonstrated music’s power to celebrate the culture of people. In a different form of musical comment, songs played by common people themselves were captured for the first time with the field recordings of musicologists John and Alan Lomax, and Charles Seeger. Travelling through rural America, they recorded the sounds of farmers, sharecroppers, prisoners, miners, and migrants, and popularized a regional music labelled as “folk” and “race” that was then unknown to mass audiences. In addition to these works of art and scholarship, intellectuals followed in the steps of Whitman’s Democratic Vistas, retracing America’s traditions and democratic aspirations in a series of studies of the national character. Among these works, it is worth mentioning William Carlos Williams’s In the American Grain (1925); Constance Rourke’s American Humor (1931), John Dewey’s Art as Experience

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34 For a study on the literature and the visual arts that paid attention to the hopeless displaced people of the Depression, see Peeler D. P. (1984), Hope Among Us Yet. Social Criticism and Social Science in Depression America, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press).
35 In the director’s rich production of the 1930s the titles that present stories about common persons and the struggles to affirm their individuality against a mass societal system are: American Madness (1932); Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (1936); You Can’t Take It With You (1938); Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939).
democratic-humanism took over the language of class struggle. At the first American Writers’ Congress of 1935 a new language of the people was adopted. Author and literary theorist Kenneth Burke invited his colleagues to replace the word “worker” with the “people” in the rhetoric of the left. Hence, the notion of the people permeated the culture of the 1930s, producing “a gallery of allegorical icons of victimization, innocence, and resilience, raging from Franklin Roosevelt’s ‘forgotten man’ to Steinbeck’s Ma Joad, from Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother to Frank Capra’s Mr. Smith.”

The egalitarian spirit of the Roosevelt administration further encouraged such culture. The President once said: “it doesn’t help much if the fortunate half is very prosperous – the best way is for everybody to be reasonably prosperous.”

Historian Michael Denning who examined the rise of a “Cultural Front” in the age of the left’s Popular Front, observes how the 1930s are often remembered as decadent, vulgar, populist, sentimental and simplistic. Yet in terms of the concerns of this study, that decade forms a point of continuity between Withman’s ideas from the past and the popular art that it created. The aesthetics of those years are generally linked to a patriotism of the left captured by the popular tune “Ballad for Americans” with its optimistic lyrics about an idealised classless and racially harmonious country. The key objections to the culture of the Popular Front have been: “its commitment to ‘the folk idiom and the documentary aesthetic’, its social realism, its sentimental populism and narrow nationalism, its masculine brotherhood, and its fundamental conservatism.”

Denning reclaims the historical importance and the cultural impact that the national-popular culture of the Depression years has had on American twentieth century culture as a whole. He believes that this culture was not a sentimental plea for “a people without race or ethnicity” or for “the ‘politics of patriotism,’ resolving all conflicts in the harmony of ‘Americanism.’” Rather, Denning continues, it was a culture that, having its roots in American folk values, made an effort to “imagine a new culture, a new way

40 Denning M. (1998), p. 117. According to Denning, during the 1950s Cold War, critics of the Popular Front often called its culture “middle-brow”, whereas in the 1960s the New Left equally criticised the thirties Left by calling it “the vanguard of commercial culture” (words of Stanley Aronowitz quoted by Denning, p. 117). In the 1980s, critics considered Ronald Reagan the ultimate heir of the Popular Front culture, a champion of mass cultural style conservatism.
of life, a revolution.” More importantly, he suggests that the crucial point in the formation of the Popular Front’s culture of the people is not the romantic praise of the people as much as the awareness of their absence. The thinkers and artists of the thirties that he thoroughly examines “meditate on the absence of the people: the martyrs, the losses, the betrayals, the disinherited.” These are likewise the central subjects for the artists whose work is explored in this project. These people form a nation that does not exclude the weak but aim to generate a community that embraces all humankind in a society that evolves “from ‘I’ to ‘we’.” Rather than projecting differences, the works of Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits tend to underline common conditions of necessity of a whole community. In this way, their work echoes popular and populist works of the 1930s. This is what John Steinbeck envisioned at the end of the 1930s with *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) with the Joad family: a utopian “universal community of all people held together with bonds of love so strong that oppression would be impossible.” Some fifty years later, in a very different political and social environment, the same need for bonds of love was felt and envisioned in the works of the Other America. Whereas Steinbeck responded to a nation torn by the Great Depression, Auster, Jarmusch and Waits came to prominence in the midst of economic growth and opulence of the “greed is good” decade, when society seemed to mind only about success stories, especially those of multi-billionaire men who, in collective imaginary, are seen as the living proof of the American Dream. Offering a meditation on the less fortunate, the “absent” people of a society, the Other America discloses the simple fact that everyday life in America is more often dominated by failure and necessity, rather than the success and avidity celebrated in mainstream narratives. The majority of people have to struggle through life, despite enunciations of basic equality and freedom for all. Their stories tell something about injustice in American history that is often overlooked by the mainstream, as author Jim Cullen reminds:

The exploitative company store of the post-Civil War South; the misleading railroad company brochures luring homesteaders onto the arid plains; the unenforced Civil Rights statutes in the wake of thousands of lynchings – this is an old story in American life, and one that is far more common than the Donald

42 *Ibid.*, p. 136. Denning attempts to answer to Antonio Gramsci’s question: “When can the conditions for awakening and developing a national-popular collective will be said to exist?” (p. 135). For Denning the conditions for such an awakening in America are to be found in what he calls the various “ballads for Americans” that were created within the culture promoted by the 1930s Popular Front: from Costance Rourke’s cultural history to Leslie Fiedler’s literary studies, Leo Marx’s American Studies, W.E.B. Du Bois’s race studies and a long list of works of art, from Steinbeck to Orson Welles, Dos Passos and Duke Ellington. See p. 136.
Trumps, Lee Iacocca, or Ronald Reagans the world would care to admit.\(^45\)

This thesis will pay attention to the way the works of the Other America rediscover this “old story” of exploitation and injustice and readapt it to the past four decades of American history. These works’ shift of narrative concern—from success stories to failure in times of prevailing materialism—is a sign of the solidarity that Walt Whitman spelt with a capital “S”, democracy’s great word. It is the recognition of the basic dignity and equality of all humans that the poet called the “absolute soul”, so to say, the core value of democracy. Singing the stories of common people means therefore spreading the values of democracy, which in Whitman’s *Vistas* is the ultimate goal of a new vibrant literature.

**The imaginative Soul.**

While Whitman considered literature as the voice of democracy in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century popular arts of music and cinema could also speak to democratic values. Whitman was sure that the country would achieve great wealth and material success. But he recognised that wealth alone is not enough to create a democracy. A spiritual dimension is necessary, too. By limiting its insatiable desire for wealth, the United States would have a chance to release the absolute soul of the people, namely, equality. The spiritual guidance to this end had to come from the nation’s “imaginative Soul” which, writes Whitman, “in these Vistas, is LITERATURE.”\(^46\) In his essay on democracy he lamented the lack of a modern national American literature that could speak to the masses. He believed that education, social standards, and literature in the United States were still in the grip of old feudalism and lacked democratic character. He wrote: “America has yet morally and artistically originated nothing.”\(^47\) Whereas material riches were a certainty, proper American ethics and aesthetics were still absent. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson did before him,\(^48\) Walt Whitman longed for a truly independent national American literature, and looked forward to a new generation of democratic writers, who could relate to the multitude of Americans, generating one “great original literature” which “is surely to become the justification and reliance […] of American

\(^{45}\) Cullen J. (2005), p. 22.
\(^{48}\) Emerson expressed his hopes for an original national literature with his address at Harvard in 1837, “The American Scholar.” The speech is considered one of the founding moments of American cultural identity. Among the students who attended the oration was Henry David Thoreau. Emerson wished for a literature that looked at the poor, the near and the common to find beauty and wonder. The address concluded with the auspices for an independent American culture: “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. […] We will walk with our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds.” See Ferguson A. R., Spiller R. E. (eds.) (1971), *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press), pp. 69-70.
The poet therefore attributed a vital role to literature in the formation of popular aesthetics that could spread democratic values. Whether Whitman would have considered the imaginative soul(s) that the United States nurtured in the twentieth century worthy of his expectations is a question that will remain unanswered. Nonetheless, many writers have contributed to the formation of democratic aesthetics; and such endeavour has also spread from literature to other fields of expression.

A democratic vitality is evident in countless major and minor film and literature currents, groups, “waves”, movements, genres and styles. Among the works that are ascribable to “democratic literature” and “democratic cinema”, those that descend from a Whitmanesque tradition recall the poet’s ability to capture and celebrate the worthiness of the unremarkable, the uneventful. Whitman was someone capable of finding “transcendental meaning in the stuff of everyday life.”

He took inspiration from both nature and the creations of men, their “ingenuities, streets, goods, houses, ships,” that were changing the outlook of the nation. He was the true American inspirational poet that Emerson was longing for: the first American who could praise inventiveness’ and labour’s visible results, namely, that artificiality that erupted in nineteenth century landscape in the form of factories, railways and other modern innovations.

Whitman’s vision of democracy in the domain of letters is reflected in works that build universal meaning out of the experience of the common man. Whereas popular Hollywood cinema seems to have absorbed and promoted an optimistic narrative of success and achievement, literature has paid greater attention to loser characters, conditions of exploitation, hunger and failure. To fulfil the goals of a democracy, literature becomes the means to give voice to unheard, downtrodden people, like the immigrant workers of Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1904), the marginalised African-Americans of Ralph Ellis’s Invisible Man (1952), or the repressed psychiatric patients of Ken Kesey’s One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1962). The social novel of the 1930s, from John Steinbeck to John Dos Passos, inserted in the larger movement of the “cultural front”, promoted a somewhat “American Naturalism”.

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50 Cullen J. (2005), p. 29.
52 In his essay “The Poet”, Emerson stated: “Readers of poetry see the factory-village and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the beehive or the spider's geometrical web.” See Emerson R. W. (1842), “The Poet”, in Atkinson B. (ed) (2000), The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, (New York, The Modern Library), p. 295.
53 See Jones G. (2014), Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History (Cambridge University Press), p. 12 in which the author attests that “American literary identity was born from an overwhelming sense of decline.” On this subject, see further, chapter 7.
for its realistic narrative and the frustration of the individual’s free will against the pressure of chance and other external elements. These are traits that characterised the French naturalism of the late nineteenth century, when writers like Émile Zola described humans as animals in a natural world: people without free will that respond only to environment or instincts. This was somehow true for the human condition in Great Depression America when workers were at the mercy of uncontrollable forces. However, American writers differed from French naturalism insofar their stories are not hopeless. Hope never abandons the troubled characters, especially the least fortunate. The social novel’s lowest classes of unemployed workers are indeed the most hopeful against a middle-class that seems to succumb under the failure of capitalism. The Beat culture that came with the following generation of writers produced literature in a context of widespread prosperity. As a consequence their works concentrated on the rejection of mainstream values and materialism, and on the search for individual freedom and a new consciousness outside middle-class certainties. The Beats saw a forefather in Walt Whitman, respected his vision of America and shared his love for nature. However, they had to cope with an America gratified by consumerism and conformity, uninterested in the great call of history for true democracy. A sense of doom for the fulfilment of the old democratic dream replaced Whitman’s high hopes and left the Beat poets with nostalgia for “the lost America of love” as Allen Ginsberg romantically called it in his “A Supermarket in California” (1955). With this poem Ginsberg imagined meeting the old bard in the aisles of a modern supermarket, the ultimate emblem of America’s twentieth century civilization, wondering what happened to the America Whitman left when he passed away. The Other America follows in this line, conscious of the lost treasure, disenamoured of a progress focused solely on wealth and material growth, but always looking for the innate humanity that animates people beyond the constraints of mainstream materialism.

Literature’s attention to marginal America is re-enacted in a popular cinema that speaks to experiences of the everyday. The conception of modern American poetry, as something tightly connected to the tangible, was first reprised in photography as a form of artistic communication with “an aptitude for discovering beauty in what everybody sees but neglects

as too ordinary.” The use of a camera to immortalize trivial sights, anonymous faces, and common objects releases a democratic energy, giving visibility to what is considered unimportant. This energy was translated from still photography into motion pictures. The trials of common people, the everyday life in a rapidly expanding industrial and capitalist society were at the centre of some of the major box-office successes of the early Hollywood industry. Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton’s slapstick comedy entertained masses, making fun of modern idiosyncrasies while directing its eyes to social problems. The sentimental cinema of the aforementioned Frank Capra played with the idea of the American Dream, openly criticizing the obstacles imposed to self-realisation by a corrupt, greedy, and unjust system. The values of American democracy became then prominent with propagandistic Hollywood productions during the years of World War II. In order to support the fight against totalitarianism, lone protagonists left the scene to “team-players” and groups of soldiers that symbolised the strength of a democratic society. Even while undemocratic practices (xenophobia, segregation, the “red scare”) resurfaced with the end of the conflict, Hollywood war propaganda movies remained popular with large audiences and “did perhaps have some influence upon those young Americans who […] became the Civil Rights activists and opponents of [the Vietnam War].” After World War II, when Hollywood studios turned to the social problem film as part of its effort to compete with television, greater opportunities for independent productions opened. A new social realism that depicted marginalized Americans – often played by unknown actors – in the films of such directors as Elia Kazan, Nicholas Ray and Sam Fuller, expressed “a set of ideas about American social life more complex than generally acknowledged.” Fuller, in particular, a director who could “hardly expect intellectuals to look to him for moral guidance” because of his rough, violent, and direct pictures, offered a brutal vision of American metropolitan life in his film noir, yet was able to find beauty even among the worst urban settings. To this day, social problems have often appeared in low budget movies (as in the case of Fuller) crafted outside the studio

60 See Lipsitz G. (1990), *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 182. The author believes that Fuller’s characters nurtured “important sources of sociability and mutual aid” giving “the city its moral capacity.” (p. 185).
system by independent artists, like Jarmusch. American independent cinema has seen in recent years an “institutionalization” that turned it into a brand desired by national and international audiences. Changes in the film industries intervened since the 1990s have increased the connections between major and independent film companies in America, with the latter becoming commercially more “dependent” on the former. New processes of distribution and marketization of “Indie” films have boosted profits and attracted “filmmakers from all kinds of backgrounds in the United States. As a result commercial cinema [has gone] to areas that had been previously uncharted and American film has come closer and closer to being ‘a democratic art.” Perhaps the form of art that the United States is most commonly associated with, American cinema has taken over the legacy of Whitman on many instances, by glorifying and visualizing the democratic potential of the country and its people amid a hostile reality.

One art form that arose from an egalitarian ethos in the United States is popular music. In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman wrote of the democratic power of music in these terms: “music, the combiner, nothing more spiritual, nothing more sensuous, a god, yet completely human, advances, prevails, holds highest place.” Music is therefore sublime and earthly at the same time. It connects God and Man; it provides a bridge between transcendence and material experience. The attention that popular music of the twentieth century has paid to the experience, tribulations, and joys of common people was boosted by the work of field musicologists in the late thirties. Their recordings allowed the diffusion of folk music with songs played by “people from isolated, scorned, forgotten, disdained communities and cultures,” offering for the first time “the complexity and richness of [folk] songs as they actually exist on the lips of folksingers.” This was a “democratic event,” as music critic

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62 Ibid., p. 246.
63 Ibid., p. 271.
Greil Marcus describes it, which sparked a search for alternative ways of living for generations to come. Records of American folk music, a music that was “both white and black, urban and rural,” became a portal to a wide social and cultural reality otherwise obscure to mainstream society. Alan Lomax wrote, “the seemingly incoherent diversity of American folksong [was] an expression of its democratic, interracial, international character.” Such incoherent diversity was best caught in the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a three-LP collection curated by Harry Smith and first published in 1952. To young middle-class listeners of the fifties, this work disclosed unknown folk, blues, country, Cajun, and gospel songs recorded in the 1920s and 1930s. Smith brought out of obscurity a number of songwriters and performers who, “cut off […] by a national narrative that had never included their kind, […] appeared now as visitors from another world.” The music of this forgotten folk served as the foundation of rock music, the most popular and evident outcome of this cultural opening to folk idioms. Emerging to public attention in the 1950s and ascended as dominant musical styles in the 1960s, rock’n’roll and rock music were a form of rebellion at a time when the “heat on the pressure-cooker of an achievement-driven and consumer-rewarded economy had been turned up too high and too fast.” They combined the different popular music traditions of America, reaching the widest possible audiences in and outside the United States. Rock music has been capable of crossing social and racial boundaries thanks to “a radically pluralistic spirit of democratic belonging that merged a kaleidoscopic sense of individuality with a polyglot ideal of togetherness.” This spirit is the soul of an ideal nation “whose citizens are not distinguishable by race. There are no masters and no slaves.” Such an idyllic vision is not far from reality if one considers the many examples of interchange and dialogue between musicians of different ethnicity, gender, and

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69 Ennis P. H. (1992), *The Seventh Stream. The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Music*. (Hanover NH, Wesleyan University Press of New England), p. 35. According to the author, this was a popular music movement that did not respond to the pre-determined dynamics of what used to be an “implacably racist” pop music industry.
72 Ennis P. H. (1992), p. 37. The author believes that the youthful rebellion that supported rock’n’roll music was not simply deviant behavior, as pictured by social inquiries of the time, but it was “as American as Apple Pie” in its quest for freedom from authoritarian norms (p. 36). For cultural historian Casey Nelson Blake, rock’n’roll might have been a field of inquiry for American intellectual history, had “the original American studies impulse to examine […] popular culture in the making of American myths” were not “dead and buried”. See Blake C. N., “Rock as Experience” in *Modern Intellectual History*, Volume 14, Issue 1, April 2017, p. 295.
age in the history of recorded music. Music’s democratic spirit comes alive in the hug that reunited musicians Mavis Staples and Levon Helm in 2011, thirty-five years after their first collaboration. Here, an African-American woman from Chicago, who took active part in the Civil Rights movement, and a white man from Arkansas, born in the small town of Elaine, theatre of one of the worst race riots in American history, became both de facto citizens of the Other America. Helm’s daughter remembers how for her deceased father “Mavis represented something essential about American music” and how the two “were of a familiar fabric as artists and people.”

This brief collection of names that contributed to the imaginative soul of the American twentieth century indicates that imagination and creativity are capable of expressing ethical values and social criticism. The democratic spirit that stimulates the arts produces a fictional image of America that reveals desires for an ideal country, while commenting on the state of the real country. Whitman’s dream to see his country shaped by the ethics and aesthetics of a democratic culture was a model that many after him reprised encountering frustrations and failure in face of repeated injustice, inequality, and greed. Nonetheless, the dream has survived through the decades of an eventful century, during which it has taken new forms and has arrived to our day in the guise of a disillusioned, flat broke Other America. The imaginative soul of the literature, cinema, and music of Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits is animated by a democratic ethos insofar it insists on giving voice to a marginal reality and on finding beauty in the ordinary, with a depiction of real problems that could find a solution through solidarity.

To love a fascist.

The present thesis will look at Paul Auster, Tom Waits and Jim Jarmusch as heirs of a

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75 I refer here to the actual music exchange and projects among musicians of different backgrounds, like the blues sessions in the 1960s between white British beat bands and exponents of the Chicago blues; or the formation of such interracial bands as Booker T. and the MGs and Sly and the Family Stone. Per contra, I am not referring to the long debated issue of black music appropriation by a predominantly white music industry. On this subject see Ennis P. H. (1992), pp. 29-32.

76 The occurrence was filmed and inserted in the documentary Mavis! (2015, dir. Jessica Edwards); the first collaboration of 1976 being filmed for The Last Waltz (1978, dir. Martin Scorsese), which witnessed the farewell to rock music scenes of The Band, of which Helm was the main drummer and singer.

77 The “Elaine Massacre” took place in 1919 and resulted in the indiscriminate killing of men, women and children from sharecropper families of the Phillips County, Arkansas. A full account of the people who died was never released, but historians believe the dead were over two hundred. See Uenuma F. “The Massacre of Black Sharecroppers That Led the Supreme Court to Curb the Racial Disparities of the Justice System,” in Smithsonian.com, 2 August 2018. www.smithsonianmag.com/history/death-hundreds-elaine-massacre-led-supreme-court-take-major-step-toward-equal-justice-african-americans-180969863/ (accessed: 04/02/2019).

traditional lineage of social critique in America that descends from classic authors who wrote
literature for democracy such as Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville. They
This lineage continued to develop through the cultural, artistic, and intellectual currents of the
twentieth century, mentioned above, that absorbed and passed on the wisdom of Democratic
Vistas. The three contemporary authors recuperate many of the elements of these thinkers and
artists, adapting them to the times they live in, without the sentimentalism and patriotism of
the past. The long century that separates the publication of Democratic Vistas and the works
that depict the Other America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, inflicted a severe blow to the
patriotic ardour and utopian ideals that animated Whitman’s writing. The nineteenth century
patriotism and utopian thinking embodied by the poet hardly survived the demise of
progressive thought in American politics (and indeed in the rest of the Western World) from
the late 1960s onwards. A decade after the end of the Cold War, philosopher Richard Rorty
reflected on the downfall of the traditional reformist left in America. With the experience of
the Vietnam War, many young Americans – the peers of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits – grew
ashamed of their American citizenship and detached themselves from the narrative of the New
World as the promise of a new civilization. The democratic dream of Whitman was an
impossible achievement to those who lost all faith in the realization of a true democracy and
saw in the United States an unredeemable “system fatally flawed by original sin.” Declining
any form of patriotism, hence their belonging to a nation, the Americans on the left side of the
political spectrum embarked on the so-called New Left project that, according to Rorty,
generated a cultural and spectatorial left, in contrast with the Old Left, the reformist
movement of the 1930s Popular Front, that was political and activist. Left thinkers turned
from participants into bystanders of the political arena. The New Left elected the achievement
of knowledge as its main goal over the cultivation of hope and the pursuit of happiness. While
recognising the merits of such cultural Left in creating a society more tolerant and accepting
of issues pertaining the private sphere of the individuals (gender, ethnicity and sexual
orientation), Rorty strongly criticizes the new course of the American left for its inability to

79 See Matthiensen F.O. (1941), p. xv, in which the author affirms that Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whitman,
and Melville “felt it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfilment to the potentialities freed by the
Revolution, to give a culture commensurate with America’s political opportunity.”
80 See Rorty R. (1997), Achieving the Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth -Century America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 4. The philosopher believes that a sense of shame resonates in most of the post-1968 literary production, from Norman Mailer to Thomas Pynchon, Richard Condon, Neal Stephenson, Leslie Marmon Silko. Rorty believes that these writers have departed from the more optimistic and active stances of such classic authors as Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser and John Steinbeck.
move beyond indignation and pessimism and to address the common needs of a nation.\textsuperscript{82} And while the outpourings of outrage were taking place on the left, the right moved undisturbed with its project to dismantle the fundamentals of the New Deal. The gap between rich and poor in an America grew bigger and new generations of wealthy people started denying the rest of the nation what previous generations enjoyed: social mobility. To reverse this situation Rorty invited intellectuals and scholars to concentrate on such pressing social issues as poverty, social cohesion, work rights, and the loss of community values and patriotism. He called for a new alliance between intellectuals and political activists to have an impact on the government’s policies. He wrote:

to form (this alliance) will require the cultural Left to forget about Baudrillard’s account of America as Disneyland – as a country of simulacra – and to start proposing changes in the laws of a real country, inhabited by real people who are enduring unnecessary suffering, much of which can be cured by governmental action.\textsuperscript{83}

This unnecessary suffering, in the world’s biggest economy, is a central feature that unfolds as the everyday reality in the fiction of the Other America.

Before the Vietnam War swept patriotism away, a patriotic left believed in civic engagement as the grassroots work on the way to reform and improvement. This engagement is based on the principle that a system might be flawed, but with the participation of willing citizens, their devotion to a common goal, and their individual sacrifice, things can change for the better. These citizens retain their criticism against the system but do not discard hope for a better future. Their patriotism entails a limitation of individual liberties in order to guarantee a true egalitarian society. To use the words of public intellectual and scholar Todd Gitlin, Americans “talk a lot about equality of opportunity, but as a nation [they] are ill prepared to amplify the principle – to enlarge it to the right to be healthy, to be cared for, to participate in government.”\textsuperscript{84} This is the social equality that the United States has not yet achieved. In less sophisticated terms, the individual liberties that must be renounced for what Gitlin defines as a “lived patriotism”\textsuperscript{85} translate into taxation in favour of a public welfare that could contrast material poverty and foster citizenship, namely participation in the democratic organisation of public life. Something that is much easier said than done, as will be discussed in the context of austerity economics and market-place ideology in chapters 7 and 8. This form of patriotism is therefore commitment to community, that particular organisation whose members one

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid. p. 99.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid. p. 139.
cannot choose. Patriotism’s sacrifice is to take active part in the life of a community, so to say of a group “consisting of people crucially unlike ourselves”, as opposed to the concept of “network, or ‘lifestyle enclave,’ made up of people like ourselves.” Another term for this kind of civic devotion is Civil Religion, namely a vision of “sovereign and democratic people that aspire to freedom and equality.” Whatever the most appropriate name for this civic devotion might be, the fact is this feeling remains a wishful thought with a passive spectatorial left that does not want to be involved in a “degenerating democracy” and associates the national flag with shame.

Gitlin’s critique of the anti-Americanism of much of the contemporary left seems to suggest nostalgia for a past left, morally and politically superior to the one emerged in the sixties. The author, who had an active role in the birth of the New Left of the sixties, is actually critical of the Old Left, too. One of the flaws of the old generation that the New Left opposed was the rigidity of its identity in a world divided between fixed categories: “us and them”, right and wrong. The intellectual recounts an episode that he witnessed first hand. In one of the many confrontations that the young exponents of the New Left had with the intellectuals of the Popular Front’s Old Left, Irving Howe, a leading personality in American socialism, asked Tom Hayden, radical activist of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), “Could you love a fascist, Tom?” Much to Howe’s dismay the young man gave an affirmative answer. This little story contains the great difference between the old and the new generation of left thinkers. Whereas the Old Left had an immovable, black and white, understanding of good and evil, the New Left had a more flexible and inclusive approach to reality, close to the colourful aesthetics of that aforementioned sixties polyglot idea of togetherness, encouraged by the sound of rock music.

This thesis contextualises its analyses of popular culture texts in terms of the above considerations. The intellectual history of the American left reflects on some of the key topics

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid. p. 140.
88 See Gorski P. (2017), American Covenant. A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present. (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press), pp. 220-222. In this study on the current state of the American covenant, the author believes that there are three different visions as to what the American nation is. One refers to Radical secularism and places individualism at the core of the American experience; the second is that of Religious nationalism, centred upon the idea that Americans are God chosen people; the third is the Civil religion mentioned in the text, which sees in America a collective project that is inclusive of all. The latter is the noblest vision of the nation, according to Gorski, who concludes his work by saying that he is not sure which of these visions will prevail above the others in America’s future.
of the artworks analysed in the following chapters: community values, equality, and social justice. The Other America of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits was imagined in the 1980s at a time marked by the absence of a strong left from the political scene that permitted the cultural dominance of competitive free-market and conservative values. Devoid of proper political representation, the Other America, originally dreamed by Whitman, during the decade of greed and selfishness found a home in the imaginative soul set free in the pages of Auster’s novels, the mise-en-scène of Jarmusch’s motion pictures and the sound and lyrics of Wait’s songs. These works, albeit purely products of creative intelligence and not political or social statements, imply a critique of the society that surrounds them and have consistently transmitted democratic values for the past four decades, filling a gap created by the lack of a strong left. A rich gallery of characters who live on the fringe of society, refusing or ignoring mainstream materialism and consumer culture, hints at the aberrations of the capitalist system that leaves too many behind, against a democracy’s noble end of assuring fair living conditions to all. A sense of frustration mixed with indignation for an unfulfilled promise links the works of the Other America to Whitman’s essay. These works, like the essay, maintain a close attention to common people, criticize America’s greediness and find a spiritual guidance in the expressions of imagination. The country they depict, this marginal America, is at the same time the recipient of anti-American-Dream stories of failure and a place of hope for the realization of a better future. It lacks a grand historical goal, like Whitman’s ideal democracy, or the Popular Front’s revolution, but it maintains those projects’ spirit of hopefulness about the possibility of human improvement. It welcomes society’s castaways and gives them a shelter to start over again in a space that accommodates everyone, where brotherhood and togetherness are more important than competition and money – in line with the values of the New Left in the sixties.

The condition of “otherness” of the country that brings the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits together stands for weirdness, and not difference or opposition to another “other”. It is the weirdness that Bob Dylan’s Mr. Jones cannot understand; of people who do not choose to live according to conformity. It is a realm discarded or simply ignored by the members of mainstream society, the “squares”. Its otherness, therefore, is neither self-imposed, nor does indicate incompatibility between two separate realities. Rather, it is generated by the mainstream’s indifference, rejection or inability to grasp its existence. The Other America is not oppositional. It does not want to attack and destroy mainstream America. It co-exists next to it, without embracing its dominant values. It is oblivious to them and, despite the difficulty of making ends meet in a society that imposes duties of economic efficiency and material
accumulation, it finds its own alternative ways of surviving. Writing about the America folksingers that were uncovered by Harry Smith’s music collection in the fifties, Greil Marcus called it “a declaration of a weird but clearly recognizable America within the America of the exercise of institutional majoritarian power.” In the same way, the America that Auster, Jarmusch and Waits have uncovered since the eighties appears weird in the light of a prevalent hedonistic conservatism, but it is part of America as much as the mainstream is. Amid a culture obsessed with ideas of wealth and individual success, the Other America seeks human warmth and company and believes in Whitman’s absolute soul that makes all humans share the same feelings, notwithstanding their differences, which society’s customs and norms tend to exacerbate, presenting them as conflicting. In this weird America, life may not always be wonderful, like the ending of a Frank Capra movie, but it is certainly worth living.

Asking the impossibly difficult question of whether one could love a fascist in this Other America, perhaps one possible answer may come from the distinction between ideas and people. If the absolute soul of humanity is one’s most important value, even when one disdains and vehemently opposes the views a fascist stands for, it is still possible to respect that fascist’s right to exist. In other words, if one keeps in mind what makes humans fundamentally equal at all times then the answer to the question might be positive. Love for human life is the glue of communal living, that undertaking made difficult by the fact that communities are groups of “unchosen” people. After all, what is humanity if not a community of people unlike us that we have to live next to since the moment of our birth?

Part of the larger society, the Other America is a mirror of the issues, problems, flaws, but also the strengths, hopes, and dreams of contemporary America. A look into this segment of American life offers a view over the tolerant humanistic backbone of a nation. Before examining how the fictional Other America understands, explains, and confronts the real country, let us first examine in detail the links and commonalities in the artistic careers and works of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits.

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CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW OF THREE AMERICAN CONTEMPORARIES: THE OEUVRE OF PAUL AUSTER, JIM JARMUSCH AND TOM WAITS.

«I always thought that songs are like movies for the ears, and, at its best, a film can be a song for the eyes.»

«When I was a teenager I was listening to songs like they were books.»

- Tom Waits

«Language can be used as a very beautiful code in poetry, the nuances and the multiple meanings of things. It has a music to it.»

«Films are structurally like music because they move before you at their own speed, their own pace, like a piece of music.»

- Jim Jarmusch

«Poetry is like taking still photographs, whereas prose is like filming with a movie camera.»

«Each book I have written has started off […] with a buzz in the head. A certain kind of music or rhythm, a tone.»

- Paul Auster

With these statements, Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits all suggest striking affinities and relationships between literature, music and film. Whilst each artist is primarily identified with only one profile – Auster the writer, Jarmusch the filmmaker and Waits the musician – the three American contemporaries have opened their artistic production to a variety of platforms. Auster has pronounced his passion for cinema on several occasions, and

95 From Tom Waits’s tribute to Merle Haggard, appeared on Rolling Stone Magazine, May 2016.
has directed films and written screenplays. Furthermore, he has published poems and lyrics for songs, allowed his art to be re-adapted into graphic novels and music, worked for the radio and appeared in film cameos. Jarmusch has pursued a parallel music path alongside his main career as a film director. He has published poems and shown extensive interest and knowledge in poetry, as well as photography and painting. He gave his voice to literary projects and appeared in several films as an actor. Tom Waits’s acting career is long-standing and acknowledged. He has worked extensively for theatre productions, both as playwright and composer, and has written and published poems and released a photographic series of oil stains.

The aptitude with which these authors engage with different art forms is only one of the traits that unite them. The common features of their artistic production are in fact many, beginning with a shared passion for storytelling and a common aesthetic sensibility that pays attention to detail and shows respect to those aspects of ordinary life mostly considered insignificant like the downtimes between events, the silences, the stillness of waiting, and small daily actions. Their arts converge also in the choice of subjects, in the narration of stories set in an anonymous urban landscape, and the use of similar heroes. All these parallels culminate in common ethics and a social critique of America that form the central subject of this study. Before exploring the shared features that lead to a fundamental political stance in their work, it is worthwhile mentioning their biographies to better understand the origins and early influences on each of these versatile men of arts and how both have made an impact on their oeuvre.

Paul Benjamin Auster was born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1947, the first of two children of Jewish parents with eastern European heritage, who provided a safe and protected upbringing, as the author himself described in some of his memoirs. While devoting his childhood to baseball – a passion that would eventually become one of the principal refrains


101 The photos were published in 2005 on the magazine Zoetrope All-Story and later printed on t-shirts for concert merchandise. Tom Waits accompanied the publication of the photos with these words: “To Whoever, These are oil stains I’ve found in parking lots in the U.S. and abroad. The horse I found on a stall door at Santa Anita Racetrack. The horse had chewed away the white paint on the door and left this incredible image of a horse sailing over a fence. After finding that I began looking for ghost images in the stains beneath cars. None of them has been retouched. They are like I found them. I took them with B+W film. I like to say I work in oils. See whatever you wish to see in them; they are the astonishing shapes and mysteries of the natural world.” See Zoetrope All-Story, Vol. 9 No 4, Winter 2005, https://www.all-story.com/issues/35/stories/286 (accessed 22/02/19).

in his work – the young Auster discovered an interest for books very early on. At the age of nine he bought the first book with his own money, a collection of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories and poems, and during his teenage years he had access to the extensive collection of his uncle, Allen Mandelbaum, an eminent scholar of classic, English and Italian literature.\(^{103}\) Among the many formative episodes of his childhood, as recalled in his autobiographical works, he mentions developing a compassion for marginalised people from an early age. When he was a six-year-old child, he saw poverty first hand while accompanying his father in the weekly visits to his tenants in the black slums of Newark and Jersey City. After developing an understanding of American history and the civil rights movement he was able to recognize the dynamics of race and class in the United States. He sympathised with the Native Americans and the Africans for the brutal destiny unleashed against them by the European colonisation.\(^{104}\) Later on, he would encounter people from all walks of life by working in a series of different trades that allowed him to witness realities otherwise alien to young well-educated white Americans.\(^{105}\) All these formative moments would later allow him to form a consciousness that is reflected in the refusal of homogenised white American values, based on free market ideologies.

At nineteen he was admitted to the comparative literature program of Columbia University and, a year later, he joined the Junior Year Abroad Program and went to Paris. There he embraced a solitary life made up of reading books and spending long hours at the Cinématèque, the movie-house of world’s largest film archive. Paris was a city that he would return to and spend over three years of his life, after graduating in 1970, in order to “get away from the noise of the United States at that time.”\(^{106}\) The Parisian stays gave the writer a chance to develop a different perspective on himself and understand if he had what it takes to become a writer. His life in the 1970s, between Paris and New York, became the subject of *Hand to Mouth*, the memoirs he published in 1997, which describe the hardships in the life of a young man whose project was to become a full time writer and avoid a double life, divided between a nine-to-five job and a secondary artistic identity.\(^{107}\) The price paid for this choice


\(^{105}\) “I gravitated toward more humble kinds of work, and that gave me a chance to spend time with people who weren’t like me”. Paul Auster in Hutcheson J.M. (ed.) (2013), p. 142-143.


was a decade of economic insecurity that, in the author’s words, created “a state of never-ending panic.”

A long list of odd jobs provided the bare minimum to first live in Paris, and then maintain a young family with fellow writer and wife Lydia Davis, whom he married in 1974, and son Daniel, born in 1977, a year before their marriage broke up.

The 1970s saw the writer struggling to find his literary path in the alternating guises of poet, translator and book reviewer. Auster has often described the several writing efforts of that formative decade as an important exercise for his future prose composition. Some of those efforts, collected in _The Art of Hunger_, edited by the author himself in 1992, show what his novels would express a decade later, revealing his admiration for authors like Kafka, Beckett, Hamsun, Ungaretti, and several contemporary French and American poets. Poetry, more than anything else, was what guided him in the pursuit of becoming a writer in times when he was not ready to accomplish his main literary ambition: to complete a novel. Today, Auster looks at some of his early verses as the best literature he has ever written and regards poetry as the practice that provided him with the necessary confidence to start writing prose. His lyrics were short and built around the idea of conveying strong emotional statements by using as few elements as possible in what Auster defined as a “lunar, stark landscape of the imagination.”

This image is an apt one to describe the prose that followed. At the end of the 1970s Auster experienced a stall in his poetry writing. Moneyless and unhappy in his marriage, he stopped composing verses and believed that economic needs had finally gotten the best of him and put an end to his literary aspirations. He spent several months contravening his initial vow and looked for a job to earn a weekly paycheck. Unable to find one, his goal to write a novel was finally accomplished and without much planning. In the summer of 1978, he occupied his time writing _Squeeze Play_ with one thing in mind: to write a commercial detective novel for “a chance to survive” as a professional author. The book, written in the canons of hard-boiled American noir fiction, sat in his closet for three years before its publication. When this occasion finally arose, Auster decided to use the pseudonym of Paul Benjamin, knowing well that this first attempt at a lengthy piece of prose was a mere stylistic exercise dictated by a state of necessity rather than the kind of novel he had been wanting to write for a long time. The book contained, nonetheless, some traits of his subsequent work, such as the characters’ existential struggles and the author’s quasi-

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111 Ibid. p. 163.
philosophical fascination with baseball.

What finally led to the rebirth of Auster-the-writer as a bestselling novelist was a sequence of unpredictable events that changed the course of his life at the turn of the decade. An invitation to a dance performance turned into an epiphany that allowed him to find his own voice as an original author. The episode is recounted in detail in another autobiographical book, Winter Journal, published in 2012. Auster describes how the beauty of the piece he attended could not be matched by the verbal explanation of the choreographer. This simple fact revealed the divide between the human experience and language, more specifically, the inadequacy of words in capturing and expressing the essence of reality. Auster portrays that as the liberating moment – a “walk through a hole in the wall in which [he] finally understood the gap between reality and language.” That prompted a new way of writing, where all “that mattered was saying the thing that needed to be said” without consideration to formal literary conventions. This new approach served in exploring the intricate nature of communication, the difficulty of finding truth and defining people’s interactions with the world around them, the inability to talk about something that is happening in front of one’s eyes. These are themes that would take centre stage in his books, starting with The New York Trilogy, the most successful and celebrated of all his books, which sparked an everlasting international fame that the author has enjoyed since 1987. A reborn man of letters, on the very night when he completed the first piece that followed the spirit of his newly found inspiration – the short prose poem White Spaces (1979) – his father died. This sudden event would resonate in his life as a writer, offering a never-ending source of reflection on the bizarre nature of coincidence. Receiving an inheritance that allowed him to concentrate on his writing, he moved back to New York after having lived in the country for some years. There he met Siri Hustvedt, whom he married in 1982. She would become an established novelist in her own right, and a close adviser with whom Auster has an intense intellectual and literary exchange. In the same year, he published the first important book under his real name, The Invention of Solitude (1982), an introspective account on fatherhood motivated by the

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115 On the intellectual relationship between husband and wife, Auster has often confirmed how Siri Hustvedt reads and comments his drafts. He recently addressed the rumors that described him as a ghostwriter for his wife as “utter nonsense”. See Auster P., Siegumfeldt I. B. (2017), A Life in Words (New York, Seven Stories Press), p. xv.
unexpected loss of his father and the birth of his first child, his son Daniel. His efforts then concentrated on the short novels that would form the New York Trilogy: City of Glass, Ghosts and The Locked Room. Thereafter, Auster kept writing books at a fast pace. His novels disclosed a world of outsiders who drop-out from the rat race to wealth and social status, looking for a meaning in life and an alternative way of being in this world. As has been described here, the writer’s biography has had a strong influence on his artistic output. The difficult days of the young aspiring writer struggling to make ends meet are echoed in almost all of his stories, and so is the relationship with his father, his years in the Upper West Side of New York and in Paris as a college student, and his life as a family man. Against the insistence of the author on the purely fictional nature of his stories, reviewers greet every new publication as a new chapter in Auster’s autobiographically-inspired novels. This was particularly marked on the occasion of his latest work, 4321 (2017), in which the main character’s life, reinvented in four parallel stories, offers many points of contact with the writer’s own life.

To date, Auster has been the prolific author of sixteen novels, three memoirs, four screenplays, several essays and short stories, one epistolary collection, one long reflection over his publications in the form of dialogue with an expert scholar, and numerous edited works, as well as the director of two films. He has tirelessly accepted interviews, presenting an open attitude toward discussing his private life and his views on the world. Many of these interviews have been given to media in Europe, where the author enjoys an enthusiastic following. Translated into more than twenty languages, today Auster is acknowledged as a major exponent of world literature whose vision of America, at odds with mainstream images of wealth and power, receives much attention outside his country.

As it is the case for Auster’s books, international audiences have received Jim Jarmusch’s films with enthusiasm, too. Their interest in the director has always considerably exceeded the attention received in the United States, to the point that his films’ overseas revenues usually amount to seventy per cent of the total earnings.116 James Robert Jarmusch was born in 1953 in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, a town that forms part of the Akron’s industrial area, renowned especially for the car-tyre industry. Arguing against accounts that portray Jarmusch as growing up in an area where children were only destined to become “rubber men”, in a letter to the Los Angeles Times, his sister Ann clarified that she and her two brothers, Jim and Tom, “grew up near, not in, Akron, Ohio, in an idyllic area that seemed eons away from the stinky,

116 See data published on http://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?view=Director&id=jimjarmusch.htm (last accessed: 05/02/2018)
grimy “Rubber Capital of the World.” Their father, a former employee of the Goodrich Corporation, worked as a small businessman in Cleveland and his “dedication and political action to help save inner-city jobs all influenced Jim”. Jarmusch’s mother, a teacher and a former film reviewer for the local newspaper, greatly influenced her children’s appreciation for the arts, especially for literature and cinema. Jarmusch grew up with all the comforts of small-town, white middle-class America in the 1960s, in an area devoid of class or racial conflicts. Yet, he recalls the uneasiness of feeling different from the other kids, mostly because he did not share the same interests and ambitions of his peers, as it would become evident later on in his early cinematic efforts. He abhorred the idea of building his life around material accumulation and the pursuit of money and, most of all, he despised the notion of having a boss and working for other people. This bothered his father’s vision of the world and caused a separation between the two for a number of years. At seventeen he left Ohio initially to study journalism in Chicago, but then he transferred to Columbia University to pursue a degree in literature. While studying and writing poetry, the young Jarmusch embraced the urban life of 1970s New York and became an enthusiastic contributor to the underground cultural fervour of the decade. He followed the punk music scene that was emerging in the East Village, becoming a regular presence at clubs like the CBGB’s and Max’s Kansas City, which in those days notoriously launched acts like the Ramones, Patti Smith, Blondie, Television, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, the Heartbreakers, Mink Deville and Talking Heads. Jarmusch would approach all of those musicians, as a follower at first and, then, as a fully-fledged young filmmaker. The punk movement had a strong impact not simply on his musical taste, but also on his approach to artistic creation. The immediacy of punk music inspired in the director a special attention toward the expressive spirit of an artistic endeavour, rather than its formal elegance and its adherence to commercial and genre canons. In 1975, like Paul Auster did in the late sixties, Jarmusch spent a year of his Columbia literary studies in Paris. And, exactly like Auster did before him, he did not attend classes but spent most of his time at the Cinématèque, the large film archive where he was exposed to an innumerable list of European and Japanese films. It was there that he


118 Ibid.


120 Auster describes how the days spent at the Cinématèque in 1968 made him want to become a director to the extent that he thought of applying for film school. See Auster P. (1997), p. 40. Whilst Auster did not attend film school, that goal would indeed be achieved by Jarmusch eight years later.
discovered directors unknown to him at that time, like Nicholas Ray, Don Siegel and Sam Fuller. These directors were American outsiders whom the European public followed eagerly, and more enthusiastically, than US audiences did. This was the first of three crucial moments that led him to devote himself to cinema. The second of these moments was the acceptance of a scholarship to enter a three-year program at New York University’s Film School in 1976. During his final year at NYU, he worked as a teaching assistant for Nicholas Ray, who was lecturing there after a call from the School’s director, Lázló Benedek. Jarmusch developed a friendship with the old filmmaker who would ask him to become his production assistant for his last film, Nick’s Movie. With Ray seriously ill, the project morphed into a documentary called Lighting Over Water (1980), made in collaboration with German director Wim Wenders. Assisting Ray in this film effort was the third crucial episode for Jarmusch’s entrance into the world of filmmaking. This was his first association with a proper movie production. Observing the working methods of a European crew, where the director is not a hired professional but the trusted leader of a consolidated team, would have a strong impact on Jarmusch’s own way of working. Such an experience, combined with Ray’s recommendation to avoid Hollywood (an advice that Jarmusch took quite literally by never physically going to Hollywood), left an indelible mark on his films, which is still recognisable today in his most recent releases.

While working on his first production, Jarmusch became an integral part of the New York art scene of the early 1980s. Playing keyboards for the band The Del Byzanteens, he found himself immersed in an atmosphere of new ideas and artistic exchange with several other young artists and aspiring filmmakers of the so-called no wave, or New Cinema, movement, like Eric Mitchell, Vivienne Dick, James Nares, Tom DiCillo, and Howard Brookner. Another no wave auteur, Amos Poe, who directed the influential The Foreigner (1978), was perceived by Jarmusch as perfectly exemplifying an emancipation from the pursuit of technical virtuosity; something that the punks already had adopted in music a few years earlier. One person who became important for Jarmusch at that time was Sara Driver, with whom he started a long-lasting relationship. The two have worked together on many projects since their collaboration on a short film directed by Driver, You Are not I (1981), and Jarmusch’s own first feature film, Permanent Vacation (1980). After the tuition money for his

122 Jim Jarmusch appeared in and was the sound recordist for Mitchell’s Underground U.S.A. (1980).
123 Jarmusch worked as sound recordist for Brookner in his 1983 documentary Burroughs: The Movie, recently restored by Pinball London Ltd, after being lost for thirty years. See http://www.burroughsmovie.com/ (last accessed 19/07/2016).
124 Jarmusch appears in You Are not I as director of photography, co-writer and producer.
last year of film studies was wrongly sent to him instead of the school, Jarmusch found himself with the necessary means to film a seventy-minute story of a wanderer in a post-industrial, dismal New York. While the decision to use his fellowship money for the film cost him his NYU degree, *Permanent Vacation* received critical appreciation after being shown in Germany at the 1980 Mannheim-Heidelberg International Film Festival. Meeting all the essential requirements of the no wave movement (roughly filmed in 16mm with a low budget and non-professional actors), the film anticipated many of the traits of Jamursch’s characteristic “observational” cinema, developed in the years to come with a consistent body of work comprised of just twelve feature films, two music documentaries and various shorts produced between 1980 and 2016. His first full-length film, *Stranger than Paradise*, would appear in 1984 to whole-hearted critical praise. Composed of three episodes, it was his first black and white film, featuring another protagonist of the New York’s art scene of the late 1970s, and his major collaborator for the first part of his career, musician and composer John Lurie. This marked the beginning of a series of fruitful collaborations with the world of music for Jarmusch. The film received the Caméra d’Or prize for best debut film at the 1984 Cannes Festival and the Special Jury Prize of the 1985 Sundance Film Festival, as well as other awards in Belgium, Italy, and Japan. Today Jarmusch is revered as one of the initiators of the American “Indie” film movement. This is a definition that, like any other label, Jarmusch tends to reject. In fact, as recently put by Sara Piazza, the adjective “independent” for Jarmusch’s cinema, unlike for other directors’, does not indicate a fashionable way of securing a low-budget entry into the mainstream arena, but is a synonym for his homemade, artisanal craft. Although the employment of more refined technics has constantly grown with every new release, his cinematique touch has remained consistent throughout the years and without trying to appease critics or gain larger audiences. “My films are made by hand”, he said in 2004. “I write the script, I'm there to get the financing, and I put together the whole crew and production. All my films are produced through my own company, then I am in the editing room every day, then I'm in the lab, then I'm out promoting the film, so that's about three years' work for each film.” That calculation equates to twelve films realised in thirty-

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Jarmusch used the term “observational” to describe his cinema, which in his own words is “a celebration of small details and variations of life”, while presenting his latest movie, *Paterson*, at the 2016 Cannes Festival. The Palme d’Or for the best movie of the 1984 Cannes Festival went to *Paris Texas*, a take on America’s desolate landscape from a European perspective directed by Wim Wenders. Coincidentally, it was the German director who presented Jarmusch with some spare film left from his previous works to shoot the first episode of *Stranger than Paradise*, “The New World”. See Piazza S. (2015), p. 16. See “*A talk on the wild side*” by Simon Hattenstone, The Guardian, 13 November 2004.
six years, from 1980 to 2016. Jarmusch has always refused invitations to direct Hollywood studio productions – invitations that started arriving soon after the success of *Stranger than Paradise*. He maintained the promise he made to himself in 1985 to own the copyright of his films and be in complete creative and executive control over his own work.\(^\text{129}\) He is the director and the screenwriter of each feature film that he has released to date and, in many cases, is also producer and editor. This approach makes him a “total” filmmaker, or a cinema *auteur* (another definition that he discards), and sets a rare authoritative example of uncompromised artistry in American cinema.

Compromise seems foreign also to the music of Tom Waits. He was born in 1949 in Pomona, in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, to schoolteacher parents. Thomas Allan Waits grew up with his two sisters in southern California. At the age of 10, Waits’s mother took the children to National City in greater San Diego, after her husband left the family. Before then, his father Frank, who later became the source of inspiration for some of his compositions, was an early influence on Waits’s musical taste. Music was present in the household in the form of 78 records and his father’s guitar playing. From a young age, the children were exposed to traditional Irish ballads, Mexican music, and the popular crooners of the 1940s and ‘50s. Weekend trips with his father to Tijuana turned out to be a formative experience, too. Ranchera and mariachi musicians were a common sight as well as the public display of poverty in the Mexican city, which impelled Waits to “develop the opinion that there was something Christ-like about beggars”.\(^\text{130}\) As a result, Waits’s musical taste was ill-timed in the sixties. Tom Waits, as a young music listener, rejected the Californian sounds of the early 1960s and preferred songs from the Great American Songbook of Hoagy Carmichael, George Gershwin, and Harold Arlen. As music writer Barney Hoskyns writes in his unauthorized biography of Waits, conforming to adult taste was a form of rebellion.\(^\text{131}\) Then came the discovery of country music on the radio and its stories of the great American landscape: George Hamilton IV, Marty Robbins, Bobby Bare had a major effect on him when most of the youngsters of his generation were swept up with *Beatlemania*. Black sounds also played an essential part in the young man’s musical up-bringing, especially music from New Orleans, classic R&B, doo-wop and soul songs played by local DJ, Wolfman Jack, and, above all other artists, Ray Charles and James Brown.\(^\text{132}\) In one of his early interviews, Waits

\(^{131}\) *Ibid.* p. 16.
\(^{132}\) Waits saw the latter in concert in 1962, when he was a teenager and in 1976, already an established artist, stated “I haven’t had fun since then”. Hoskyns B. (2009), p. 22.
confessed that he felt lost in the 1960s, a decade he slept through. Never a follower of San Francisco flower power, he visited the city only when the summer of love was a memory, searching for the City Lights Bookstore and the ghost of his favourite writer, Jack Kerouac. Disenchantsed with High School learning, at 15 he took a job as a dish-washer/cook at Napoleone’s Pizza House in National City, his employer for five years. The pizza joint and its customers were later celebrated in his songs. In those years he improved his skills on the piano and formed a trio, The System, with which he played guitar and sang standard soul and surf music. He then started writing songs, in the shadow of the biggest poetic influence of the era, Bob Dylan, whom he saw in concert in 1964. The vision of the folk singer delivering his songs alone on stage with an acoustic guitar constituted a significant illumination for the young Tom. Dylan showed young Americans a new way of interpreting music and filling songs with meaningful subject matter. Waits did not remain indifferent toward this paradigm and at the turn of the new decade he began performing his own repertoire on acoustic guitar at San Diego’s folk music club, The Heritage. In the summer of 1971, he ventured out of town to begin what would be a routine for the next couple of years: going to Los Angeles by bus one Monday every month and signing up for “hootenanny” nights where, with several other aspiring performing artists, he was allowed a time slot on stage to play three or four songs (most of the time on acoustic guitar at the beginning and, later, on the piano as his compositions grew more complex in melody and chord progression). These special music nights took place at the Troubadour club, the epicentre of Los Angeles’s singer/songwriter scene of those days. The Troubadour was Waits’s introduction to the city’s music scene, which was dominated by the new West Coast country-rock sound. He did not find much affinity with this music genre or scene, as he was a man out of his times: A beat hipster in a hippy crowd. Nevertheless, Los Angeles was the only place where his dreams to start a music career could turn into reality and the Troubadour was where he made himself known to the public and to David Geffen, then music industry’s newest talent scout, who signed him

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133 See Tom Waits’s interview with Steve Lakes for Melody Maker, 04/10/1975.
134 Tom Waits described the early morning trips to Los Angeles and the long lines to sing at the Troubador in an interview with Jeff Walker, “Thursday Afternoon, Sober as Judge” for Music World, 1 June 1973.
135 Against this view on Waits’s early years, David Smay affirms that Waits indeed “benefited from the odd boomlet of vintage pop nostalgia the music industry produced between 1972 and 1974.” The music critic believes that Waits in the early seventies was part of a company of like-minded artists who took inspiration from pre-1960s pop music like Randy Newman, Dr. John, Bette Midler, Dan Hicks and the Pointer Sisters. See Smay D. (2008), Swordfishtrombones (New York: Continuum), p. 65.
136 Waits stated that San Diego didn’t have what he wanted: “[…] musicians stay there and hope something is going to happen, but it never does. Nothing happens down there. You play in a rock band in high school and when you get out you end up playing in some swank club behind a girl singer or you stay in the rock band, play GI dances and get paid peanuts.” See “Thursday Afternoon, Sober as Judge”, Music World, 1 June 1973.
up for Asylum Records. After two years of recording demos and performing alone, Tom Waits was brought into the Sunset Sound studios to record his songs with a band of local session musicians, among whom was Bill Plummer on upright bass. He was a musician of great importance for Waits’s first record. Waits had specifically demanded that producer Jerry Yester would provide a jazz bass player. That was a rare choice for a recording artist at Asylum, the label of Eagles, Linda Ronstadt, Jackson Browne and all the other major Los Angeles-based musicians. His debut album, Closing Time (1973), made him an accidental protagonist of the West Coast singer/songwriter scene. The record contained songs filled with nostalgia and images that could suit the likes of James Taylor or Joni Mitchell. Two songs from the album, “Ol’ 55” and “Martha”, were even covered by other artists who belonged to that scene, The Eagles and Tim Buckley. However, Tom Waits’s nostalgia differed from that of his contemporaries. While the artists of Los Angeles looked back at the 1960s as their main cultural reference, Waits looked at the 1950s. He was nostalgic of the beatnik culture but dismissed the 1960s counterculture which equally looked at the beatniks as its predecessors – and which inspired many of his peers and fellow musicians of the 1970s. And while the introspective singer/songwriters of the West Coast scene used their songs as a diary to communicate their personal experiences, Waits was elusive and fictional. He created new characters and preferred storytelling to inner-self outpourings. Unlike many other aspects of his early music, storytelling was the one quality of his compositions to accompany him throughout his whole recording career. The 1970s went on with the release of five more albums that delivered Waits’s own version of jazz, Tin Pan Alley and Broadway at a time when punk and disco ruled the music charts and even Frank Sinatra was looking for a change of image. His odd, out-of-time character grew into an enigmatic public persona, introverted, vague, and impenetrable, often described as an Edward Hopper’s tableau vivant, and associated by the media with hobo, bohemian and booze clichés. The public persona and the reception of the artist would slowly change as his music went through a radical transformation with the new decade. Unlike Auster and Jarmusch, Waits enjoyed notoriety and was very active during the seventies, but just like the writer and the filmmaker, he found his own voice.

137 The Eagles were not on top of Waits’s list of favorite artists. He admitted: “[…] I don’t like the Eagles. They’re about as exciting as watching paint dry. Their albums are good for keeping the dust off your turntable and that’s about all.” See “Tom Waits: Would You Say This Man Was Attempting To Convey An Impression Of Sordid Bohemianism”, interview with Frank Dellar for New Musical Express, 5 June 1976. Years later Waits would express regret for his lack of diplomatic skills when he was young – and for similar caustic comments that he made about Neil Young and David Crosby – and told journalist and writer Barney Hoskyns that he finally was in good terms with Eagles’ Don Henley. See Hoskyns B. (2009), p. 121.

138 The “diary versus storytelling” contrast is defined by author and music writer Anthony DeCurtis in the documentary “Tom Waits 1971-1982: Under Review” (Chrome Dreams, 2006).
– or created his most original and celebrated art – in the 1980s. Once again, he went against the prevailing musical taste of the day and while jazzy atmospheres and Broadway were his answer to 1970s pop-rock music, in the decade of electronic synthesizers, new wave and dance music, his sound of choice became a gruff discordant music that had almost nothing in common with his previous recordings – from the instrumentation and the musicians he recorded with to the arrangements that he masterminded. New musical influences surfaced in his records from avant-garde rock (Captain Beefheart) to German operetta (Kurt Weill) and, most importantly, the experimental music of composer Harry Partch, whose unusual notes produced by innovative instruments would become the new trademark of Waits’s sound. The latter was a major inspiration for Waits’s puzzling combination of American popular songs and rudimental, raw, startling acoustic atmospheres. The new aesthetics of his music was somehow a better fit to the main topics of his songs, which remained unchanged from the 1970s: the world of the outcasts, the forgotten and the lowlifes. Two occurrences, above all, took Waits on his new course. In 1981, he married Kathleen Brennan, a young script reader at Zoetrope, Francis Ford Coppola’s studios in San Francisco, where he composed the score for Coppola’s musical *One From the Heart* (1982). Brennan brought a new direction in Waits’s life, both personal and artistic. She became an essential business advisor and slowly emerged as Waits’s first artistic partner, co-writing many of his songs, inspiring new sounds and collaborating with him on his theatrical works. With her, Waits relocated to New York in 1984 for an intense three-year period. The change of scenery was the other decisive element in inducing newly discovered energy into his artistic revolution. In New York he found a new entourage and new musical partners, starting with guitarist Marc Ribot, of John Lurie’s Lounge Lizards, who greatly contributed to the formation of a distinct new sound. While in New York he also met Jim Jarmusch, who would give him his first major role in a feature film with *Down By Law* (1986). It was the start of a de facto parallel career for Waits, whose number of acting roles in films remarkably amounts to twenty-eight. His new musical direction began with *Swordfishtrombones* (1983) and continued with *Rain Dogs* (1985) and *Franks Wild Years* (1987). Together these three albums form an unofficial trilogy of the new Tom Waits, who has continued to record albums up to the present day, for a total of twenty-one, including soundtracks, theatre scores and live recordings. Today, Waits leads a very private life with his wife in Northern California. Nonetheless, he has continued to produce

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music and appear in films. His more recent productions have placed him closer and closer to the core of America’s popular music, re-exploring the blues tradition, gospel, and country music, with an all-star team of collaborators such as, among others, bluesmen Charlie Musselwhite, John Hammond and Big Bill Morganfield; Los Lobos’ prodigious songwriter and multi-instrumentalist David Hidalgo, Rolling Stones’ guitarist Keith Richards and veteran 1960s keyboardist Augie Meyers. Notwithstanding his devotion and commitment to the rediscovery and rewriting of American music, the position of Waits’s albums in the music sale charts show unmistakably that his most receptive audiences largely exist outside the United States. This is certainly another affinity that his works share with Auster and Jarmusch’s oeuvres.

The biographies of these three American contemporaries reveal some significant parallels. As already mentioned, they grew up in the economically stable American white middle-class milieu of the 1950s and 60s, acquired worldwide credibility as innovative artists in the 1980s, and established fruitful artistic synergies with their life partners. Especially important to this discussion is the fact that all three developed a sense of separation from the dominant mindset of the world around them at a young age. Jarmusch openly talks about having felt as an outsider for a long time and his melancholy and loneliness are reflected in the films he makes. Waits’s love for older American music genres and his fascination with the Beat poets made him an odd teenager in the heart of the countercultural transformation of the late 1960s. Auster defines his teenage years as those of “an internal émigré, an exile in his [parents’] house,” as a result of the combination of being an adolescent living in suburbia and feeling ashamed for America’s 1950s politics and obsession with materialistic possession. “I was out before I was ever in,” he wrote in 1997, plainly describing the detachment that he developed in his youth from the conventional American way of life. Significantly, his writing developed from the idea of solitude as the optimal condition for creating literature, a state in which one is truly appreciative of his or her connection with others and understands the significance of human relations in one’s life. Literary scholar James Peacock points out how solitude for the novelist is not a synonym with loneliness, or isolation, which is an “essentially uncreative and solipsistic state of withdrawal from contact.” Solitude is the necessary condition for the creative process of writing a book, a work of art that Auster

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142 Ibid. p.13
143 Peacock J. (2010), Understanding Paul Auster (The University of South Carolina Press), p. 5
paradoxically describes as a collective venture where the writer coexists with the reader, the characters and all the voices that reside inside him. Namely, all the people he connects with in his solitude, from people met in real life to other authors met only through the books that inspire his own texts, and turn his books into “a crazy quilt of others’ writings, a palimpsest of memories, anecdotes, and quotations.” If Auster’s notion of the book as a collective work may not suit everybody’s idea of writing, working collectively is undoubtedly an essential aspect of filmmaking and music recording. Jarmusch insists that his films are the product of the work of a whole group of people that he coordinates. He sees himself as the navigator of his “ship’s” crew, not the captain. Over the years he has surrounded himself with steady teammates, like directors of photography Robby Müller and Frederick Elmes, film editor Jay Rabinowitz, sound engineer Drew Kunin and a series of musician friends, kindred souls who, in turn, have composed scores or acted for his movies like John Lurie, Screaming Jay Hawkins, Iggy Pop, Neil Young, and, as already mentioned, Tom Waits. This attention to synergy is suggested also by his democratic approach to filming and acting that offers ample scope to unscripted input and improvisation. Waits, notwithstanding his stellar career and the transformation of his music, continued to maintain close contact with essential collaborators. Aside the already mentioned Ribot, several musicians have accompanied him through the decades like bassists Greg Cohen and Larry Taylor, saxophonist Ralph Carney and percussionist Stephen Hodges. Furthermore, Waits and Jarmusch, in describing their way of composing songs and writing scripts, both seem to align with Auster’s notion of the author’s inner voices. On many occasions Jarmusch has recalled how characters sometime reveal themselves and talk to him before he can even conceive the plot or dialogues in a film. Waits describes songs as pre-existent to the writer. He reminds himself that one can write a song only when “you […] make yourself some kind of an antenna for the songs to come to you”. Songs live near and inside the songwriter and on a good day, like a quiet, patient fisherman, he can “catch the big ones”. And in the same spirit, even the words in a book

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144 Ibid. p. 7. See also Auster P. (2012), p. 317.
146 Suarez writes that Jarmusch sees “his works as collaborations, downplaying his role as absolute creator and presenting himself instead as a coordinator of a number of sensibilities.” See Suarez J. (2007), Jim Jarmusch (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), p. 20.
147 In 2014 Jarmusch said: “[…] I can't do it without everyone's equally valuable input. For me it's phases where I'm very solitary, writing, and then I'm preparing, getting the money, and then I'm with the crew and on a ship and it's amazing and exhausting and exhilarating, and then I'm alone with the editor again […] I've said it before, it's like seduction, wild sex, and then pregnancy in the editing room. That's how it feels for me.” See “Jim Jarmusch: Women are my leaders”, interview with David Ehrlich for The Guardian, 20 February 2014.
148 Silverton P., “Oh Jesus, I should have been a butcher”, Vox Magazine, October 1992.
149 Ibid.
seem to precede the writer as Auster says: “[i]t's time for me to crawl back into my hole and begin writing again. There's a new novel calling out to be written, and I can't wait to lock myself in my room and get started.”

To fully appreciate the art of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, it is therefore necessary to explore beyond the men’s biographies and discover those voices that give consistent contributions to their oeuvre, some of which are presented in the previous chapter (like Whitman and Thoreau, Ray and Fuller, Guthrie and Harry Smith’s folksingers) and others will be observed further on.

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the most relevant similarities of these three men are to be found in their work. Auster, Jarmusch and Waits have produced fiction devoted to analogous topics and themes, such as loneliness, necessity, and chance. They generated characters that are very similar in their outsider status; they share a similar sense of aesthetics, and imply correspondent sets of ethical values. Ultimately, all three have advanced an implicit yet noticeable social critique of mainstream American materialistic values. Let us now consider each one of these common aspects.

**American fringe.**

Throughout the decades, the stories of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits have moved across the American landscape and timeline while approaching a wide variety of topics. However diverse these topics have been, each author in his preferred medium always returns to a mutually shared core set of recurrent themes. The main and most evident consonance in their art is the subject of life at the margins of American society. Such a life presents many attributes of alterity from the homogenous society. It is out of pace with the affluent majority, appearing in places and at hours unfamiliar to conformist lifestyle; it does not rest on any certainty, either spiritual, or material; it strains to accept and find meaning in experience; it makes no use of the family and work values of the middle-class; and it finds beauty and comfort in the most unconventional ways.

One of the consequences of living outside the standardized existence of the mainstream society is loneliness. This is a frequent subject within the three authors’ work or, rather than a theme in itself, a kind of ghost that regularly haunts the lives that they recount. I already mentioned Auster’s attention to solitude and loneliness, two conditions that present a fundamental difference insofar as the first fuels creativity and the second leads to extreme individualism and isolation. The writer has adopted this dyad for many novels, often

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describing how the act of writing – an enterprise with which most of his characters are familiar – finds motivation from solitude, as well as the misery and instability involved in human isolation. Loneliness is also a common motif that provides the background of many stories created by Jarmusch and Waits. Aside from the loneliness that often arises from the troubled personalities of the heroes, the filmmaker and the musician create silences and vacuums that suggest suspended atmospheres of lonesomeness and emptiness. Loneliness in the work of these three contemporaries reappears in different forms, sometimes in the guise of marginalization or alienation, sometimes as a conscious lifestyle choice, a stance of rebellion or a refusal of society reminiscent of Thoreau’s *Walden*; other times as a situation inherited by class or race that some characters seem to accept passively, without any existential anxiety.

Intertwined with loneliness is the state of necessity. Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, in various ways, all return to their characters’ various demands of attention, help, support, comfort or relief. Like loneliness, necessity takes on different shapes, from the need of human company to the desire of some sort of stability. It can be found in the difficulty of communication in Jarmusch, in the appeal of the inner-journey to self-discovery in Auster, or in the wretchedness of Skid Row realities in Waits. Poverty is the representation of material necessity, which resurfaces in much of their work as an upsetting presence and a dreary reminder of injustice and inequality. Among the several illustrations of poverty in these authors’ work, *City of Glass*, Auster’s first novel in *The New York Trilogy*, offers a formidable annotation of the colossal scale of the phenomenon. The main character, Daniel Quinn, while taking lengthy walks in search of one man suddenly realizes that poverty is everywhere and it forms part of the fabric of the city. He notes down:

> Today, as never before: the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping-bag ladies, the drifters and drunks. [...] Wherever you turn, they are there, in good neighborhoods and bad. [...] beggars and performers make up only a small part of the vagabond population. They are the aristocracy, the elite of the fallen. Far more numerous are those with nothing to do, with nowhere to go. [...] they shuffle through the streets as though in chains. Asleep at the doorways, staggering insanely through traffic, collapsing on sidewalks – they seem to be everywhere the moment you look for them.151

The poor described by Quinn are likely to be found in those gloomy corners of big metropolises that Jarmusch has tirelessly filmed since his very first attempt at directing. New York in *Permanent Vacation*, Cleveland in *Stranger Than Paradise*, New Orleans in *Down By Law* (1986), Memphis in *Mystery Train* (1989), Jersey City in *Ghost Dog* (1999) and Detroit in *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) are just some of the large American cities that Jarmusch

reveals in their worst state of abandonment, void of any glossy or polished postcard type of cinematography. The effect of bewilderment given by such unconventional portrayals of world famous cities is usually amplified through the eyes of characters like strangers and visitors who wander around the streets without ever encountering a satisfactory sightseeing experience. All iconic buildings or skylines are invariably a deception. And poverty is the underlying reality in every image of the city. As an appropriate score to this type of existence, one might turn to some of Waits’s most experimental recordings. Aside from songs that contain lyrics openly dedicated to the deprived and underprivileged, Waits has developed throughout his career peculiar arrangements inspired by unique composers like Harry Partch and Kurt Weill, whose music is rarely reprised in rock and pop music. An American composer, who lived as a hobo himself during the Great Depression, Partch was able to create instruments that could defy the limitations of the Western tunings and the standard twelve tonal scale. He could reproduce so-called microtones, which are notes that are not played in Western music, for the simple reason that they do not belong to the “do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti” scale that children learn as soon as they get into music school. Waits, in approaching Partch’s complex instrumentation,\(^{152}\) has produced a number of dissonant, unmelodious and frightening songs that, without the advocacy of the words, immediately suggest dark themes of hard life, marginalisation and dispossession. His voice, husky and low, becomes an instrument that intensifies such moods especially when used for spoken word tracks like “9th & Hennepin”, “Circus”, “What’s He Building”, just to mention three out of a significant repertoire of “songs not sung”. The same emotions appear in the expressionistic music of German composer Weill, whose musical theatre compositions are heavily embedded in Waits’s own theatrical scores and songs like “Innocent When You Dream”, “Underground” or “Rain Dogs”, which take the listener into a miserable obscure world of murder and insanity, reminiscent of the settings of the plays Weill composed music for Bertold Brecht.

Another important feature of living at the margins of society is that life takes place off the beaten track of the middle-class and its own trail is not linear but bumpy. The trajectory of someone living outside the grand scheme of the American narrative of success and wealth cannot be but uneven. These three men’s stories inevitably lead to peripheral existences that do not follow the regular path of the good, conforming citizen abiding by the conventional

\(^{152}\) Francis Thumm is the person who first exposed Waits to the music of Partch. A classic pianist, Thumm played for the Harry Partch Ensemble in the 1970s and appeared as a music collaborator of Waits in the 1980s and 1990s. The two have enjoyed a long lasting friendship since when they were teenagers in San Diego. Barney Hoskyns writes: “The pair regularly sat at the piano together and played Gershwin songs, “like a couple of old men in the retirement home”, as Thumm recalled.” See Hoskyns B. (2009), p. 40.
expectations of a family-work life style. They do not follow an extraordinary climb to triumph, either, like in some rags-to-riches Hollywood stories of redemption. They very much remain confined to the marginal world that they belong to and never ascend to a new and better state. In the sequence of events that form their stories, these existences easily slip out of their original plan – if there ever was one. They face different circumstances that interfere with their course so unexpectedly and often against any desire or motivation. Chance and coincidence are therefore essential in the narration of lives that are unorthodox and irregular, if not abnormal when scrutinized with a conformist mainstream consciousness. Jarmusch’s depiction of a common day in the life of his outsiders is often tinged with passiveness, long waits, and inaction. Things finally happen by pure accident and no one seems to know why or even care about finding an explanation. This is critical in early works like *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Down By Law*, as much as it is in more recent films like *Broken Flowers* (2005) and *The Limits of Control* (2009). Without elucidations, the stories evolve thanks to an invisible and extraneous will or, better still, an inexplicable fate that brings people together or leads them to different places or situations. Random coincidences add a leading texture in several films, helping the development of the stories of characters like Allie (Chris Parker) in *Permanent Vacation* or the killer (Forest Whittaker) of *Ghost Dog* or the poet-driver (Adam Driver) of *Paterson*. Auster, in particular, has centered many of his novels on the role that abrupt chance has in everybody’s life, not only within marginalized lives, but also for the middle-class and rich. There is a feeling of general fragility and uncertainty about life that pervades most of Auster’s stories. Where the heroes are young, such uncertainty comes from not knowing who one really is and what is expected from life. Such is the emotional state of young characters in *Moon Palace* (1989), *Mr. Vertigo* (1994), *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), *Sunset Park* (2010) and the film *Smoke* (1995). Aged characters’ uncertainty, however, comes from the opposite direction. They have experienced change and lived long enough to know that life is all built upon unexpected turns, like the protagonists of *The Book of Illusions* (2002), *Oracle Night* (2003), *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005) and *Man in the Dark* (2008). The writer in 1995 published a short collection of true stories based on extraordinary incidents, *The Red Notebook*, to mark his stance that “[r]eality is a great deal more mysterious than we ever give it credit for”\(^{154}\), to the point that “truth is stranger than fiction” and “we’ve all lived

\(^{153}\) Allie wanders through New York and each person he meets leads him to his next decision or movement; the killer “Ghost Dog” commits a series of assassinations that are anticipated in violent cartoon scenes watched by his victims just moments before the deeds take place; the poet Paterson lives in the city of Paterson, New Jersey, where the movie is set.

\(^{154}\) Interview with Joseph Mallia in Auster P. (ed.) (1992), p. 278
through memorable experiences of one kind or another”; hence his goal is to “write fiction as strange as the world [we] live in.” Inexplicable and uncanny elements, therefore, contribute to the creation of an unpredictable, bizarre and irrational reality that is a trait not only of Auster’s and Jarmusch’s fiction but also of Waits’s ‘story-songs’. The musician heavily draws from the tradition of the road narrative and takes his characters on open journeys, filled with dreamy aspirations that a lack of will or substantial means will likely prevent from materializing. Frank O’Brien, the protagonist of the theatre play and ensuing concept album *Franks Wild Years* (1987) is the epitome of the American man who takes the open road to chase impossible dreams and goes through the ups and downs generated by the clash between reverie and reality. The same type of characters are portrayed in several songs with “Burma Shave” (1977), “Goin’ Out West” (1992), and “Hold On” (1999) being only some of many noteworthy examples. Waits sings of outsiders with big dreams who know what they are leaving behind, fantasize about the next destination, but do not know what is going to happen next. They live at the mercy of chance and coincidence, the only force that shapes their existences.

Marginalization, loneliness, necessity and chance are thus well-known themes for the audiences of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits alike. As a corollary of these major subjects, the three authors have investigated at different times various questions such as failure, violence, industrialization, mental sanity, incommunicability, and alienation. These are some of the matters that concern a motley assortment of characters

**Losers, drifters and boozers.**

Spanning across four decades, the prolific oeuvre of these three authors presents an abundance of characters of all ages, races, genders, and nationalities. And in at least two cases, the characters are not human: the dogs Mr. Bones and Nellie have significant roles respectively in Auster’s *Timbuktu* (1999) and Jarmusch’s *Paterson* (2016). In such a vast array of portraits, the habitual hero is a white American man of an undefined age between late twenties and mid-sixties. This is the kind of person who will lead the audience into the world of marginal existences mentioned above; either through his personal conditions or by way of casual encounters with such world. The main trait of this central character is that his story is alien from the dominant American ideology of accumulation of wealth and he does not take part in the competition to rise to the top of the social ladder.

Jarmusch has made this feature extensively evident in all his movies, as well as voicing his

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155 Ibid p. 288
own refusal of the materialism that permeates the American way of life in several interviews. His characters showcase passive temperaments, lack of ambition and very little interest in the world around them. “They are alienated, but they are not itching to improve their living conditions,” said Jarmusch of his atypical movie characters in 1984.156 This type of sentiment is still very much atypical for characters within American cinema. Two prevalent types of personalities return in all his works. One is the “centre-less” American drifter who does not have strong beliefs and lives according to coincidence day by day.157 The other one is the “stranger”, someone who does not belong to the place where the story unfolds; he is another drifter himself, who becomes an unintentional spectator to the world of the other character, the centre-less American drifter. Lost and directionless, these two kinds of characters keep each other company during their (mis)adventures; sharing misfortunes, going around in circles, never achieving betterment, and inevitably returning full circle to where their adventure began.

In Auster’s stories, his characters are predominantly losers, middle-class men who abandon their motivation and ambitions for a series of unfortunate circumstances. Auster calls them the “wounded men”. They often deal with a difficult recovery from an accident or with inner pain caused by separation, death or illness. Usually, the writer tells a story of how they become disoriented and reach the bottom, after which they go through interior struggles, discover a new purpose or meaning in life and restart their existence again. Marco Stanley Fogg, the protagonist and narrator of Moon Palace, confronts deprivation and other adversities “as obstacles that had been thrown across my path to test my faith in myself. If I learned how to overcome them, I would eventually reach a higher stage of consciousness”.158 But this is not the overused, conventional American plot of resurgence from rags to riches. Before they can find their way again, something permanent intervenes in the lives of these characters so that they mature, become disillusioned, and continue their path outside of the mainstream society and its goals.159

Tom Waits’s musical world is notoriously regarded as a romantic recollection of hobos, ramblers, and other lowlifes, a crowd of invisible people in an alcohol-fuelled world. That is

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157 At the beginning of his career, Jarmusch described his very first character, Allie of Permanent Vacation, as someone who does not have a centre in his life. “In other words: his life is a kind of rebellion, but not focused rebellion, not really politically motivated. He does not have firm convictions […]”. This description would delineate the essence of all his future characters. See Hertzberg (2001), p. 4.
true for a good measure of the musician’s large production, which counts more than three hundred and fifty songs. This stereotyped perception of his art was encouraged by the singer’s careless lifestyle in the seventies and the boozers of his early records, his tramp and drunken portrayals in movies and, indeed, his declared attention to the universe of the forgotten. But his mastery is far more complex than the sketchy classification of hobo minstrelsy that occurs in media. His long progression through different music genres and styles was accompanied by the development of a main character that inhabits his records, an American man who immerses himself in the reality of his country’s everyday life, far from the clamors of fame, privilege and power. He is the singer, the principal narrator of Waits’s work as a whole. A man who has experienced all sorts of vicissitudes over the years, in private life and in public; has shamelessly chronicled all that he went through, for good or bad; has seen and told the stories of so many other fellow travelers; and, most of all, has gained a disenchanted view of the world that he shares in ways sometimes cynical, sometimes graceful and always lyrical. This character is the originator of Waits’s troubled but resilient America, a place both of hardship and great beauty.

Mostly uncomfortable in their milieu, the principal characters that animate the novels, films and songs of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits demonstrate strong similarities. They do not accomplish great results, yet they survive outside the patterns of the materialistic society and, through them, we readers, viewers and listeners discover an alternative America. This is a place in stark contrast with the prevailing positive representation of prosperity and success that has belonged to the collective imaginary for many decades, but especially since the country’s rise as a world super power in the twentieth century. Said similarities are so intense that the characters at times seem almost interchangeable. For instance, the leading duo of Jarmusch’s Stranger Than Paradise, Will and Eddie (John Lurie and Richard Edson), with their gambling and aimless wandering, could easily stand in for Jim Nashe and Jack Pozzi, the characters of Auster’s Music of Chance (1990). Tom Waits’s characters from “Goin’ Out West” or “Frank’s Wild Years” belong to this lot, too. They all roam without a specific goal, waiting for a strike of luck. These characters are the depiction of the passive and iconoclast contemporary American man, void of ideals and dazzled by the illusion of easy success. They adhere to that latest distorted version of the American Dream that, as Delbanco suggests, has contributed to “the installation of instant gratification as the hallmark of the good life.” Other examples of the characters’ compatibility is offered by Walt and Master Yeudhi in

Auster’s *Mr. Vertigo*, a supernatural talent and his guru in America’s 1920s who form an odd couple of fellow travellers that resemble Bill Blake and Nobody (Johnny Depp and Gary Farmer) in *Dead Man* (1995), Jarmusch’s only western to date, or could fit in the heartless show-business world of Waits’s “Eyeball Kid” (1999), the story of the exploitation of a freak wonder. To mention other parallels, the aged character of Don Johnston (Bill Murray) in Jarmusch’s *Broken Flowers* might be the singer of Waits’s middle-age crisis lament of “I Don’t Wanna Grow Up” (1992), whereas Auster’s Willy G. Christmas, the protagonist of *Timbuktu*, with his weird hippie ethics and theories about life and the arts,\(^{161}\) could make an excellent contribution to Jarmusch’s collection of surrealist shorts, *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2002).

The similarities are not limited only to the topics and the characters that animate the stories of the Other America, but they also encompass the aesthetics that surround them.

**A sad and beautiful world.**

Another central element that unites the oeuvre of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits is the adoption of a raw style in each of their preferred art forms. Minimalism in these three American contemporaries is an appropriate match to the tales of marginal characters and the absence of great epics in their stories. Special attention is dedicated to the non-extraordinary moments in people’s daily lives and all the dullness and monotony that they might entail. Examples include the description of someone who learns how to walk again (Auster’s *Oracle Night*), the account of petty annoyances in a decadent urban community (Waits’s “In The Neighborhood”) or the random conversations in foreign languages that nobody is able or willing to grasp in almost every movie made by Jarmusch. By illustrating normal circumstances, these works praise the beauty and power of small things, revealed to audiences no longer accustomed to such representations in mainstream forms of entertainment.

Jarmusch was explicit in his intention to avoid grand narratives when he said, “I’d rather make a movie about a guy walking his dog than about the emperor of China”.\(^{162}\) Simplicity is a central trait in his observational films that leave no room for redundant, self-indulgent scenes that meet whatever ephemeral trend the viewers might seek in a movie at any given time. His stories develop in spaces that are commonly perceived as transient, unimportant or irrelevant in a character’s fictional story or for a person’s existence in real life. Such spaces are bus stations, taxis, hotels, parking lots, trains, bars, sidewalks, and other secondary

\(^{161}\) See Peacock J. (2010), p. 177.

locations that Renda calls “non-places.”\textsuperscript{163} They conventionally provide a mere link in between major happenings or the next scene in a movie. In Jarmusch’s films, however, they provide the main backdrop of films that are constructed as a kind of negative copy of mainstream commercial movies. They intentionally include the dead bits of those films, the leftover scenes that the director calls the “moments in between.”\textsuperscript{164} Auster’s prose, similarly, is concise, built around short, direct descriptive sentences about common actions and thoughts that confer an aura of realism to his writing. He composes his novels one paragraph at a time. Each paragraph is the object of intense writing aimed at “the right shape, the right balance, the right music – until it seems transparent and effortless, no longer written.”\textsuperscript{165} Talking about his writing, he has repeated that the style is secondary and must be sacrificed to the story. “All elegant passages, all the curious details, all the so-called beautiful writing - if they are not truly relevant to what I am trying to say, then they have to go.”\textsuperscript{166} This is a statement of form, which can be connected not only to the cinematography of Jarmusch’s films, but also to some of the arrangements of Waits. Many of his songs employ basic instrumentation of no more than two pieces for song like piano and bass (“Take It With Me”, “Georgia Lee”, “A Little Rain”), guitar and banjo (“Gun Street Girl”, “Murder in the Red Barn”, “Chocolate Jesus’), bass and guitar (“Get Behind the Mule”, “Jesus Gonna Be Here”, “Last Leaf”). An extreme example of a stripped down arrangement is his 1986 live rendition of “Walking Spanish”, where the narration of a prisoner’s last march to his execution prevails on all sound forms and musical flair thanks to the sole accompaniment of a hammer rhythmically beating on an anvil.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{163} Renda describes the “non-places” as the reflection of the transitory nature of Jarmusch’s characters and their bizarre and complex path through the world. See Renda C. (2008), Jim Jarmusch. Il fascino della malinconia (Genova: Le Mani Editore), p. 14. In the original text: “[i] “non-luoghi” […] riflettono la transitorietà dei personaggi e dei loro destini, il loro bizzarro e complicato passaggio attraverso il mondo”.

\textsuperscript{164} Talking to his friend, Finnish filmmaker Mika Kaurismäki in 1987, Jarmusch stated: “Whenever I see a new commercial American movie, and I figure out how the story is structured, I would like to see those pieces that they left out of the movie, more than those they put in. I’m more interested in the moments in between, people waiting for a cab rather than people in a cab. I’m always more interested in the small, ordinary things, and that’s why I guess I have a tendency to write the kind of scenes which would be left out in a more conventional or commercial or transparent style.” See Hertzberg (2009), p. 75.


\textsuperscript{167} See “Walking Spanish Down the Hall” live at “Premio Tenco”, Sanremo, Italy 1986: www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-O87GJjrv0 (last accessed 16/04/2016). On that particular occasion Waits accepted an award for musical excellence about which he later said: “I'm not big on awards. They're just a lot of headlights stapled to your chest, as Bob Dylan said. I've gotten only one award in my life, from a place called Club Tenco in Italy. […] Club Tenco was created as an alternative to the big San Remo Festival they have every year. It's to commemorate the death of a big singer whose name was Tenco and who shot himself in the heart because he'd lost at the San Remo Festival. For a while, it was popular in Italy for singers to shoot themselves in the heart. That's my award.” See Montandon M. (ed.) (2005), p. 158.
The aesthetic of simplicity is also a reflection of the techniques employed in the creative process by all three. Although he has introduced some innovations over the years, Jim Jarmusch has remained adamant about filming in real locations and using essential equipment, indicative of his punk beginnings. As noted above, Jarmusch’s cinema owes much of its style to the New York experimental and punk scene of the mid-seventies, where self-taught directors preferred the use of elementary equipment and improvisation over the formalism of either commercial or art cinema. For Paul Auster writing is a “physical experience” with a tactile quality, therefore he writes by hand on notebooks using a fountain-pen or a pencil before typing, first one paragraph at a time and then the final draft on a typewriter. It is a tedious process that allows the author to handle the book from a different angle, read it with his fingers, as he says, and discover parts that the eyes would not notice otherwise. The manuscript thus becomes the principal source of words, the physical place where words are coming from and reach the reader who unfolds the story contained within them. Tom Waits, meanwhile, in talking about his recording methods, refers to the beauty of the “hair in the gate” in his unfinished or unpolished productions that contain sounds normally discarded as noise or mistakes in pop music records. This is an expression borrowed from the world of movies that indicates hairs or objects that get in the way of a film projector and thus appear on screen. It is an imperfection that makes the work of art more interesting and, for a moment, that audience’s attention is taken away from the main narrative. Waits has insisted on producing sounds in the most immediate and natural forms, avoiding the use (and abuse) of the continually evolving computerized recording technologies. We already mentioned how, since the release of Swordfishtrombones, he has adopted alternative instruments, not only the experimental creations of Harry Partch, but also common abandoned objects that he uses as percussions to obtain new unusual sounds. This is a kind of Luddite reaction to aseptic high-tech innovations, as Hoskyns observes.

Most of the three artists’ stories, with some important exceptions that will be observed in

168 With regard to innovations in his cinema, Hertzberg observes that Jarmusch “seems […] to have become more flexible in his zeal for “pure” and “minimal” structures and in the skepticism about camera movement and non-diegetic music”. Hertzberg L. (2009), p. ix.
172 “I’m very crude, but I use things we hear around us all the time, built and found instruments - things that aren't normally considered instruments: dragging a chair across the floor or hitting the side of a locker real hard with a two-by-four, a freedom bell, a brake drum with a major imperfection, a police bullhorn. It's more interesting. You know, I don't like straight lines. The problem is that most instruments are square and music is always round.” From "Tom Waits 20 questions", Playboy magazine, March 1988 in Montandon M. (ed.) (2005), p. 150.
173 Hoskyns B. (2009), p. 387
Chapter 3, are set in a vast identical and largely anonymous urban American space. That is immediately evident in the films of Jarmusch where New York, Cleveland, New Orleans, Memphis and Jersey City all have the aspect of one gigantic undefined metropolis. The filmmaker pronounced his fondness for the post-industrial landscapes that outweigh any other scenery in his cinema. “There is something really sad but really beautiful about them,” he says, declaring that, to him, such images are more American than the clichéd snapshots of big city skylines or majestic forests. His interest in squalid sceneries is present even in Dead Man, a rare example of western film that portrays a mean, dark and ugly natural landscape. The monotony of landscape serves also as an admonition of the economic condition of the people who move across it. “There’s a certain continuous tone in America, especially if you don’t have a lot of money. All motels look alike within a certain price range. Although landscapes change, you’re still going to the same 7-11 store.” That is the destiny shared by the creatures of the night in Waits’s songs, especially those 1970s compositions that draw upon the crooning style of Sinatra and the Great American Song Book. While in more recent years the singer has expanded his depiction of America to rural areas thanks to his ever growing attention to the blues and gospel tradition, metropolitan life with its dimly lit streets, night dime-stores and bars, back alleys, cars and trains remains the setting of the dreams, heartbreaks, hopes and tragedies of many of his borderline characters. James Peterson, studying Waits’s aesthetics, concludes that these characters are part of an artistic output that is “invested in both sociopolitical and spiritual liberation.” Moreover, Waits’s vocal qualities become the principal means, the “primary instrument”, to channel the emotions and atmosphere where his stories take place. Guttural and gravelly, his voice has progressed from a throaty rendition of Louis Armstrong to a rough and loud growl evocative of Howlin’ Wolf’s or Captain Beefheart’s powerful roars. Even when singing sweet melodies, such voice is not the most fitted instrument to convey idyllic countryside images; it is rather a convincing medium to smoky, dark city surroundings. Urban life is at the centre of most characters’

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175 Talking about shooting on location for Dead Man, Jarmusch recalls how cinematographer Robby Müller invited him to turn around the camera every time they encountered beautiful natural landscapes and shoot insignificant and unpleasant backgrounds. See Jarmusch talking at “Permanent Vacation: The Films of Jim Jarmusch”, 2-10 April 2014, retrospective at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, New York, available online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wcUwxcbhdQ (Last accessed 13/08/2018).
176 Hertzberg L. (2009), p. 20
disquietudes in Auster, too. New York shows all its brutality, but also offers seldom glimpses of redeeming humanity in novels like *Moon Palace*, *Oracle Night*, *Sunset Park*, *The New York Trilogy*, as well as in the films *Smoke*, *Blue In The Face* (1995) and *Lulu On The Bridge* (1998). And similarly to what happens in *Dead Man*, nature appears in some Auster’s novels as a hostile carrier of woe and calamity, in particular in *Mr. Vertigo*, *Leviathan*, *Timbuktu*, and *The Music of Chance*.\(^{179}\)

One more common characteristic of the aesthetics in these three authors is the experimentation with different genres. Their works are difficult to define according to the canons of fixed categories. Hailed at first as a modern detective-story writer, Auster has then written novels in a melange of genres, from mystery to comedy, crime, noir, picaresque, absurdist and fantasy. The styles mingle into a narrative that defies the limits between invention and reality, blending fiction with factual history or autobiography, leading the reader into a maze of half-truths and half-lies, in what critics and scholars describe as postmodernist literature.\(^{180}\) Reviewed under the disliked “indie” label, Jarmusch has explored major film genres like crime, mystery, action, vampire, western, comedy, the jailbreak and the road movie. The filmmaker approaches each genre as a frame in which he develops his own ideas and style, often subverting the norms of the genre itself, like in the western *Dead Man*, or the vampire movie *Only Lovers Left Alive*, where the traditional bad characters become the good ones. This attitude applies to Waits’s renditions of almost the whole spectrum of American popular music. The musician has been able to embrace with ease the most disparate types of music and make them unmistakably sound like his own. Auster, Jarmusch and Waits are not necessarily innovators in creating such a fusion of styles and genres, this being an approach shared by many other artists of their generation. However, it is worth noting that theirs is the first generation of Americans who grew up exposed to the influence of television, the most potent catalyst of mass culture during the second half of the twentieth century. As a result to this great exposure to mass culture, one important contribution given by the artists of this generation, mostly those involved in the innovative New York scenes of the 1960s and 1970s, is the combination of high and popular culture into new hybrid artworks that made any distinction between avant-garde and mass art irrelevant.\(^{181}\) The hybridization of highbrow and lowbrow culture is marked in Jarmusch who confers equal prominence to unrelated cultural

\(^{179}\) On the subject of the dangers hidden in Auster’s American natural landscape, see Brown M. (2008), *Paul Auster* (Manchester University Press), p. 103.


references. In *Only Lovers Left Alive*, the protagonists Adam and Eve (Tom Hiddleston and Tilda Swinton) take the same pleasure in reading classics like Ariosto, Cervantes, Kafka, Beckett, and listening to soul music. Pictures hung on their walls show portraits of several famous people such as, among others, classic composers Johan Sebastian Bach, Gustav Malher alongside bluesmen Bo Diddley and Charlie Patton, and rock singer Patti Smith. Scientists Isaac Newton, Nikola Tesla are shown next to images of writers Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, William Burroughs, and William Blake. Images of comedians Harpo Marx and Buster Keaton are on display next to directors Nicholas Ray and Luis Buñuel. Jarmusch, in that movie, more so than in others, is revealing his cultural sources and expressing his horizontal approach to culture where both classic and innovative artists are equally praised as long as they dare to explore their limits and push art’s boundaries forward. The director said that even mainstream is to be included in the cultural melting pot, when it is not watered-down and contains something very strong and beautiful as in a Stephen King book, or the rock band Nirvana. In other words, whether something is old or new, has artistic or entertaining content, whether it is poetry or comic books, classical music or hip hop, Jarmusch is able to find and extract meaning and beauty in cultural expressions that affect him. This amalgamation of different sources of high art and mass culture is traceable also in Auster and Waits. The writer’s novels are rich in intertextual and metatextual references and American popular culture and history are often mentioned. Some of his characters take names from works of classic 19th century American writers so dearly cherished by Auster like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau. Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, François-René de Chateaubriand, Jules Verne, Lewis Carroll, are some of the European authors that are directly cited in his stories. Several references are devoted to the world of films, mostly classic international and American cinema, with a particular passion for silent cinema that covers a considerable part of the novel *Book of Illusions* in the form of an entire filmography invented and told in detail. His sport heroes share the same pages with these high cultural references, as well as other tributes to the popular taste of his childhood.

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182 Among the many pictures on Adam’s house walls, it is possible to recognize the musicians who appeared in Jarmusch’s previous films: Joe Strummer, Screaming Jay Hawkins, Neil Young, Iggy Pop and Tom Waits.
184 See video interview for the German magazine *Intro*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6ooNOcpfK4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6ooNOcpfK4) (minute 14:00, last accessed 27/08/2016).
185 Auster’s devotion for cinema is evident in most of his oeuvre. Classic titles are thoroughly discussed in the form of small essays in *Man In The Dark* (*La Grande Illusion* (1937), *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) *Tokyo Story* (1953) and *The World of Apu* (1958)), *Sunset Park* (*The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946)) and *Report From The Interior* (*The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), *I Was a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932)).
years, from music to *Mad* magazine and children’s literature. Baseball, in particular, is a recurrent topic that often serves as a metaphor of life, a thread that connects the isolated man to the outside world and a pastime with a strong evocative power that provides a time structure to recollect America’s recent past as well as the author’s own life.\textsuperscript{186} Waits’s cultural references are primarily musical but not exclusively.\textsuperscript{187} The eclectic richness of his music, contained in the many echoes of American and European influences mentioned above, is also expressed in his varied choice of artists that he has covered along the years, from bluesmen Lead Belly and Blind Willie Johnson, to punk band the Ramones, rhythm and blues singer Phil Phillips, composers Leonard Bernstein and Kurt Weill, and the idol of his adolescence, James Brown. Non-musical references are predominantly the Beat generation’s poets and writers, with a preference for Jack Kerouac and Charles Bukowski. Other cultural sources of inspiration include personages as distant from each other as comedian Lord Buckley, *Twilight Zone* creator and writer Rod Serling, film director Federico Fellini, and voiceover artist Ken Nordine.

The difficulty of categorization into defined genres frees their works from the constraints of fashion and static temporal positioning, making them unclassifiable and out of time. This is perhaps, as Hutchinson suggests in reading Auster,\textsuperscript{188} one of the reasons why critics in America have struggled to accept and make sense of these elusive works, which, at a first glance, may appear anti-American in their content.

**Alternative values.**

The thematic and aesthetic choices that surround the stories told in the body of works in question suggest some general shared ethical principles that animate the spirit of Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits’s art. Far from wanting to force moral precepts into their storytelling, the work of these authors comprises nonetheless an ethical stance with regard to human lives and the society they belong to.

First of all, it is possible to attempt a negative definition of these ethics as the refusal of consumer culture and materialism. In 1989 Jarmusch was vocal about the political flaws in the cinema of Hollywood and hinted at the fact that his own movies do not magnify the ideology of capitalism in which America is entrapped. Jarmusch does this by avoiding the common

\textsuperscript{186} For an analysis of baseball in Auster, see Brown M. (2008), *Paul Auster* (Manchester University Press), p.168-175

\textsuperscript{187} For a presentation of Tom Waits’s artistic influences, see documentary “Under The Influence” released by music company Chrome Dreams in 2010. [www.chromedreams.co.uk/tom-waits--under-the-influence-719-p.asp](http://www.chromedreams.co.uk/tom-waits--under-the-influence-719-p.asp)

portrayal of middle-class heroes, their values, faith in God and their aspiration for success and money. For Jarmusch, commercial cinema is responsible for a passive acceptance of petty bourgeois capitalist ideals, and he sees in that acceptance a cause of cultural decline for the country.\textsuperscript{189}

What I truly detest in cinema is films that take things for granted, films that passively lead you to believe, consciously or not, that capitalism, racism, greed, the concept of success, Christianity, the family as a consumer unit, etc. are just part of the way things are.\textsuperscript{190}

Twenty-three years later, Auster declared that the current “monolithic” nature of the arts in America is part of the cultural decline of the country and cinema, in particular, reflects such decline most accurately. According to Auster, “We’ve destroyed films now. There are no independent films anymore. [...] We’re making movies for 9-year-olds, boys, not even girls. You know, comic books. And they’re bringing in billions of dollars and it’s pretty sad.”\textsuperscript{191}

The suffocation of creativity is one consequence of the pursuit of money that Auster has criticized on many occasions. Writing about his childhood in the 1950s and his parents’ relationship with money, his portrayal of America at this time is severe: “Eisenhower was President, and the entire country had been turned into a gigantic television commercial, an incessant harangue to buy more, make more, spend more to dance around the dollar-tree until you dropped dead from the sheer frenzy of trying to keep up with everyone else.”\textsuperscript{192}

Tom Waits, whose answers to interviewers are notoriously funny, unconventional and sibylline, has probably been the least open of the three to discuss politics. However, his constant attention to outcasts leads to issues of social justice and fair treatment. His ideas on the role of America in the world have appeared in recent years in relation to the military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan\textsuperscript{193} – “The Day After Tomorrow” and “Hoist That Rag”, from \textit{Real Gone} (2004) and “Hell Broke Luce” in \textit{Bad As Me} (2011) –and the conflict in the Middle-East (“Road to Peace”, \textit{Orphans}, 2006). His lifestyle and the public persona created around the tramp folklore at the beginning of his career can be read as a statement against

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{190} See Hertzberg L. (2009), p. 97.
\item \textsuperscript{192} Auster P. (1997), p. 11-12.
\item \textsuperscript{193} In a 2004 interview, when asked what he made of the coming elections of that year his answer was: “I hope [George W. Bush] gets voted out. I pray that we will be mobilized and it will be a landslide and everybody who’s ever believed in these ideals that we’re talking about will vote the bastard out”. He also lamented the imperialistic attitude of his country towards the world: “We’re the United Sates of the World. It’s not just a country; we’re talking about world domination”. See Valania J., “It’s Last Call Somewhere in the World” in \textit{Magnet} magazine, reproduced in Montandon M. (ed.) (2005), p. 327.
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materialist society. Later, he demonstrated his rejection of capitalism’s degeneration into consumerism with a strenuous opposition taken against the use of his music by the advertising industry. After filing a law-suit in 1988 for the misappropriation of his voice in a radio commercial, his case marked an important legal precedent insofar the ruling court associated an individual’s voice with ideological values. When ruling that the musician’s demand of damages was appropriate, the court focused on the musician’s “shock, anger, and embarrassment […] because of his outspoken public stance against doing commercial endorsements [which] humiliated Waits by making him an apparent hypocrite.”

The ethics of Auster, Waits and Jarmusch, aside from the implicit refusal of consumerism and the pursuit of money, can be also traced in the treatment reserved in their works to such values as kindness, compassion, racial harmony and social justice. None of these are employed as central or explicit themes, yet they appear in every passage that depicts necessity and the injustices of our contemporary society. And what keeps the characters together is a general hopefulness, an element that is very much present in the fiction of these three authors, as it will be seen further down in Part Two. Among the ethical values that can be traced in the works of these authors, Jarmusch seems to give precedence to a democratic vision of the world. His films are prevalently shot with static cameras that portray open spaces where the characters are free to move across, in and out. The democratic approach is also suggested by those “moments in between” described above, when any action takes place according to its natural timing in a realistic fashion, hence the audience participates in every moment of a long wait or hears a conversation that is truncated or off-topic sentences like most conversation have when they take place in the real off-screen world. The above mentioned observational nature of his films lies precisely in this approach to storytelling that does not want to impose an absolute truth but, rather, stays open to as many interpretations as there are viewers. Piazza argues that the democratic approach of Jarmusch also extends to the sphere of the sound that enjoys equal importance to the image. Within this sphere, words, noise and music are, in the same way, elements of equal importance.

Righteousness and integrity are common features of Auster’s main characters. They do not

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195 On this particular filming method, Jarmusch in 1990 said: “I like the camera to stay far enough away from the characters. It gives a certain rhythm that allows the audience to choose the details they want to observe. […] If a character is static and the camera tracks on him and the music swells, the camera becomes a character. I like the camera to be invisible”. See Hertzberg L. (2009), p. 101-103.

196 Referring to this aspect of realism in his dialogues, Piazza argues that Jarmusch’s films violate the cinematographic taboo of dialogue comprehension. Piazza (2015), p. 17.

197 Ibid., p. 18.
necessarily embrace commonly accepted morals about what it means to be a model citizen as they do not avoid actions like lying, or stealing, or cheating. Such actions may be justified at times and can even lead to unexpectedly good outcomes, like the one in the short tale *Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story* (1990), where the main character lies and becomes an accidental thief while committing a good deed. Most of Auster’s wounded men abide by their own set of morals and elect to be faithful to those no matter what negative consequences this may have. It is a source of stubbornness that often leads to dire consequences. To mention a few cases, Adam Walker in *Invisible* (2009) puts his own safety at risk by telling the story of a murder he has witnessed; Daniel Quinn in *City of Glass* loses all he owns, including his mental stability, to protect someone who is weaker than him; in *Leviathan* (1992) righteousness and strong beliefs take an extreme turn and lead Benjamin Sachs to become a terrorist.

Memory plays a major part in many of Waits’s compositions, producing nostalgia, regret and dreams and giving a perspective of what really counts in a person’s life. Childhood triggers recollections of long lost friends and family ties, the memory of old loves is often romanticised and brings back the pleasant moments of the past; soldiers who are leaving town or find themselves in some faraway posting recall the good things that they leave behind, whether lovers, family and friends.

The implied ethics in the art of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits reject the prevailing venal and materialistic culture and uphold a set of values that are alternative to the core ideals of the capitalist society discussed in Part Four. Therefore, ambitions of success and money and the pressure of social competition are replaced by the simple wish to be free to find one’s place in the world and establish meaningful connections with other people. These values even seem to suggest a certain degree of nostalgia for a good past, as the many references to long gone artists and ideas would confirm. Whether this past ever existed or it is only imagined is not important, as long as it offers a set of alternative values to an evermore individualistic and money-driven America. Mild forms of rebellion and refusal thus take place in most of their stories and bring us back to the longstanding American tradition of disobedience of Henry David Thoreau and the parable of the man who seeks a morally superior existence outside society through resistance, which is also “one of the primary markers of Americanness.”

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198 “Childhood is very important to me as a writer, I think the things that happen then, the way you perceive them and remember them in later life, have a very big effect on what you do later on. [Kentucky Avenue] came over a little dramatic. A little puffed up, but when I was 10 my best friend was called Kipper, he had polio and was in a wheelchair - we used to race each other to the bus stop.” See Martin G., “Hard Rain” in *New Musical Express*, 19 October 1985.

Enduring suffering.

The climax of the affinities observed so far is a description of an alternative America and its people that is far less utopian than the one usually portrayed by mainstream culture filtered through media, institutions, politicians and the like. The work of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits contains an implicit condemnation of the American lifestyle that has failed so many Americans – people forgotten by a negligent, individualistic society that is single-mindedly absorbed in self-indulgence and consumerism.

The art of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits delivers an effort to give voice to the forgotten people and, to use philosopher Richard Rorty’s words, their “enduring unnecessary suffering.”\(^{200}\) The tales of the three authors look in different ways at the margins of American society, where people struggle to satisfy even their basic needs. From Tom Waits’s crepuscular itinerants to Jarmusch’s lost wanderers and Auster’s tragic outcasts, these are protagonists of epic failures, catastrophic falls, haunted by loneliness and indifference in a country that does not deliver the promise of happiness for all contained in the founding document of its own existence. The adversities faced by these modern-day Americans are aggravated by the absence of a social network to a point that the undoing of the welfare state makes them even more vulnerable than the derelicts of the Great Depression in John Steinbeck, Woodie Guthrie or Dorothea Lange, who eventually benefited from the social agenda of the 1930s. In a world devoid of a left that strives to solve the common problems of a nation – and indeed of many other peoples around the globe, the artist becomes the conscious witness of his peers’ tribulations and his stories address the inequities and troubles otherwise neglected by the inattentive larger society.

Their stories depict an America that is not accomplished – or “achieved” as Richard Rorty would say – where the American Dream is an undelivered promise, an illusion, or worse a lie. Crashed under the failure of the Dream, their characters still search for a way out of their misery in the most iconic American way: by encountering the road, challenging chance, or aiming at the frontier. The American man and the American myth are therefore disassembled in their stories by using the very symbols that lie at the core of the mainstream American narrative. Hardly any of these stories have a happy ending, although their characters seek reasons to go on and find answers to their pain through love, the most potent healer of human discomfort. Despite all tragedies, and their lack of direction, they retain hope for a better future, in the most quintessential American spirit. In these stories, a better future is possible

only through love, friendship and other basic human interactions that reveal glimpses of generosity, commiseration and humanity in people. This is the foundation of the Other America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, where people conduct their existence in any way they can, despite being cast-out from the great American way of life and its race to material accumulation.

The works of Auster, Waits and Jarmusch play an important role in keeping the tradition of American resistance alive during times when consumerism promotes unsustainable ideals of comfort and wealth for all. They are reminders of the fact that the original American project, the creation of the New World as a fair and just haven from the evils of the Old World, is incomplete and will remain incomplete until their characters endure unnecessary suffering. The works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits remind us that “pain and causality […] are non-linguistic truths.” In this sense, the art of these three American contemporaries belongs to that lineage of thinkers and artists, observed in the previous chapter, who paved the road to the advancement of a narrative of an “Other America” that places common people at its centre and is progressive, inclusive and protective of the weak.

The biographies of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits offer some hints to understand the origins of the many similarities that their art shares. The themes, topics, characters, aesthetics and ethics mentioned above have connections to the personal experiences and artistic flowering of these three men. However, the common social commentary that emerges from their work is what links them to the American resistance tradition seen with chapter 1. The following three parts of this thesis will concentrate on this specific aspect of their art. The critique implicit in the narrative of the Other America is the main device to examine how these works perceive, explain and confront contemporary America. The following chapters of Part Two will deal with the understanding of America through the reinterpretation of American myths and symbols given by the Other America.

Part Two

THE AMERICAN DREAM
CHAPTER 3

ROAD TO NOTHING. THE ROAD BOOK, THE ROAD MOVIE, THE ROAD SONG AND THE USE OF AMERICAN MYTHS IN AUSTER, JARMUSCH AND WAITS.

«Movement has been [America’s] dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise.»

-Frederick Jackson Turner

«I'm in love with Massachusetts
And the neon when it's cold outside
And the highway when it's late at night
Got the radio on
I'm like the roadrunner»

-Jonathan Richman

Throughout the twentieth century, the road in popular culture has become the symbol of a perpetual journey, the very “matrix of America, the restless nation,” capturing the ideas of exploration, adventure, discovery and liberty that the United States itself incarnates. The narrative of the road absorbed and perpetuated traditional myths of American life, most notably those of Freedom – from the chains of the old world –, Nature – unspoiled and majestic –, and the New Man – the inhabitant of the new world. In the final decades of the twentieth century, the symbol of the road endured in different media including the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits. However, this symbol in their Other America offers a chance to revise the myths of America. The American Studies scholar Alan Trachtenberg claims that “myths operating as symbols, or symbols embedded in images, function […] as the indispensable forms whereby and in which a society constitutes its agreed-upon collective reality.” These three authors adopt myths which shape the common narrative of a nation in order to describe an America that is alternative to the collective reality with which the majority of people agree. More specifically, Auster, Jarmusch and Waits all deconstruct the

American myth of the land of plenty by using its very core symbol, the road.

This chapter examines how Auster, Jarmusch and Waits employ this symbol, how they revise the American myths through the road narrative, and how some elements of these myths remain untouched even in the Other America. What is retained in this road narrative is the regenerative power of the journey and the promise of freedom that the road entails. What changes is the vision and perception of the landscape, which loses the democratic symbolism of the land of plenty to become a hostile environment. The central focus of the following analysis is “the road man” as he appears in the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits: a male character who has an urge to travel. His journey discloses an alternative America that implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – disapproves old notions of the frontier as a rich, hospitable Promised Land. Two foundational, deeply rooted American ideologies, the “American Dream” and “Manifest Destiny” inform the symbolic meanings of the road, linking it to discourses of democracy and the culture of the people. Consequently the revised symbology of the road in the work of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits engages with the American Dream and the Manifest Destiny, refuting their optimistic vision of equal opportunities and confronting three essential myths that descend from these ideologies: Nature, Freedom and the New Man.

When James Truslow Adams wrote his concise history of the American nation in the early 1930s his publisher convinced him that “The Epic of America” was a better title then his working heading “The American Dream”, an expression that had never been used in a book before then. Notwithstanding what was, in hindsight, an astonishing publishing blunder, The Epic of America (1931) is nowadays considered the first prominent publication that popularised the term “American Dream.”206 It is important to note how a primary myth of America originated late in the history of the country, in the days of a widespread experience of privation.207 Adams’s intention was to encourage the belief that American people, when confronted with difficult times, are capable of gathering the necessary strength to follow the nation’s call for a better life for all. He coined the expression “American Dream” to describe the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement, […] 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.\textsuperscript{208}

Adams’s American Dream presented spiritual and existential connotations. The material growth, the accumulation of wealth and power and the “contests of capital and labour”\textsuperscript{209} were not the central requirements in America’s march to progress for an author who denounced the decadence and corruption of his day. In writing his book, Adams was mostly absorbed in an idealistic vision of a democratic America with the common man at its centre. He praised Walt Whitman as the poet who captured the spirit of Americanism in an epic of the “average fellows of humanity.”\textsuperscript{210} For Adams, the contribution that his country could give to the advancement of mankind was “forging out something new and uncommon from the common man.”\textsuperscript{211} This goal was possible from the physical encounter between common migrants and the frontier, the vast open land that for Adams symbolised something nobler than simple material accumulation. For the historian the frontier offered hope for mankind, the realization of democracy in a space where all individuals could freely accomplish their merits within a society of equals.\textsuperscript{212}

Adams followed in the steps of America’s first grand theorist of the frontier, Frederick Turner for whom “America has been another name for opportunity.”\textsuperscript{213} Turner’s essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”, has had a strong impact on American thought and culture since its presentation at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, Columbian Exposition and is key to the durable myth of the road.\textsuperscript{214} His thesis placed the Westward expansion at the centre of American history and described the West as the most important geographical region in the formation of the American spirit, more so than the Eastern states with their New England’s European heritage, the Northern states for their industrialisation, and the Southern states with their agricultural power and traditions.\textsuperscript{215} The image of an unconquered free West became synonymous with America’s promise of happiness. The
doctrine of the frontier as the very source of new opportunities fuelled the idea of America as a nation in constant movement, a nation naturally inclined to take on a journey in search of its dream, like pilgrims and pioneers did in the past. Turner in his frontier thesis reinforced the idea that a new civilisation was born when colonists left the Atlantic coast and entered the American wilderness. The frontier “finds [the colonist] a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. […] It strips him of the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin.”

This is the myth of the new man who in turn would transform the wilderness and create America as we know it. According to literary scholar Leslie Fiedler, the new man is a figure in American literature born out of male companionship between “a transplanted WASP and a radically alien other.” Moving west, the European man falls out of the Europeanised way of living of the eastern colonies into an archaic America where he meets the unknown and gradually assumes new roles. The road, therefore, is a journey of transformation. He becomes a trapper, a hunter, a frontiersman, a pioneer, a cowboy and, in more recent times, a beatnik and a hippy. In other words, the European becomes the “American” when he enters the west, the mythological “territory ahead”, where his meeting with alien people will transform him irreversibly. In this uncharted territory, the new man finds his freedom away from the society he came from. In his study of the Puritan origins of the United States, Americanist Perry Miller argued that, when the children of the first settlers realised that their ties with the Old World had been severed, they wondered who they were and what they were working for. That was the moment when, “having failed to rivet the eyes of the world upon their city on the hill, they were left alone with America.” From then on, Americans became owners of their own destiny and errand, free from the will of superior forces. The freedom they gained was the possibility of building the New World in their own terms. This form of freedom was an explicitly gendered ideology later depicted in American culture through a conflict between

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217 Ibid.
218 Fiedler L. (1968), The Return of the Vanishing American, (New York: Stein and Day), p. 22. In this book, Fiedler offers a topological examination of American literature. If the “New Man” is the central character of Western literature, Northern literature produced the “Yankee”, a white man who struggles to adapt to an hostile environment; Southern literature created the “Whitey”, a white man threatened by the presence of the black population; and the Eastern literature produced the “Tourist”, the American visitor who returns to the place of origin, Europe.
219 Ibid. pp. 23-26. Fiedler believes that the most important instance of this myth in American literature is in the bond between Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking Tales (p. 112). Other notable examples of such encounter are those of Ishmael and Queequeg in Herman Melville’s Moby Dick (1851) and Huck and Jim in Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn (1884). Ibid., p. 177.
221 Ibid. p. 354.
male and female worlds, represented in a literature concerned with the western frontier in which men are the heroes seeking liberty from the domestic and Christian constraints of a society personified by women.222 According to Jane Tompkins, the man-woman conflict that traditionally animates the Western genre contributed to the secularisation of society and its materialism. Male heroes escape a suffocating domestic life to find their manhood in the open nature, which becomes the only divinity they worship, so to say, a material entity and not spiritual.223 Nature, therefore, becomes another crucial symbol in the epic journey of America. The carrier of the highest moral and spiritual values, the transcendent beauty of the American land has been used to epitomise democracy and the doctrine of the Manifest Destiny of America as the beacon of a new civilization. This has been portrayed in different media, from the lyrics of Katharine Lee Bates in the popular song “America the Beautiful” (1895) to the colour photography of National Geographic.224

The classic myth of the birth of a new man, who finds his freedom in the beauty of the land, survived in the road narrative that is found in the works of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits. A century after the presentation of Turner’s frontier theory, movement is still the dominant fact also in the Other America of these three authors, and the average fellow is still at the centre of the narrative of the American journey. This time, however, such common characters seems well aware of the fact that the journey will not fulfil the promise of Adams’s American Dream, even if the country keeps on reinventing its frontiers in order to create that wider field for the exercise of the American energy that Turner envisioned in 1893.225 The journey across the Other America discloses chaos instead of a perfect social order but, paradoxically, it leads the traveller –the restless, directionless “road man”– to some form of

222 See Fiedler L. (1968), pp. 112-119 and Tompkins J. P. (1992), West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 38-44. Both Leslie Fiedler and Jane Tompkins elaborate this thought, observing, respectively, nineteenth century literature and the Western genre. Tompkins writes that the Western as a genre was the response to “women’s invasion of the public sphere between 1880 and 1920” (p.44). It inverted the pattern of the most popular literary category of the nineteenth century, the sentimental novel or what Fiedler calls the “Northern Literature” (Fiedler, p. 15), in which a young orphan girl is the main character; actions take place in private spaces; and the plot is mostly based on the interior struggle to live up to Christian values. The Western’s pattern puts a full-grown adult male at the centre of the story; actions take place in open spaces; and the plot concerns a physical struggle that culminates in death (Tompkins, p. 42). According to Tompkins, therefore, the Western genre is an answer to the world of women.

223 See Tompkins J. P. (1992), p. 44. Tompkins believes that the Westerns had an impact not only on US society’s secularism and materialism but also on the masculinity of several generations of men who attended theatre sessions between the 1920s and the 1970s. The genre created a masculine hero who reaches the prairies to free himself from a smothering domestic life scenario. Such heroism did not produce a viable person, but someone who is unable to enjoy living with himself and other people. It produced men who are ready for a challenge and “make a killing in the stock market” but cannot interact with those closest to them, “when they go home for dinner at night” (p.128).


richer and fuller life. This outcome of the journey fulfils the promise of Adams’s dream, in the guise of new beginnings and self-reinvention, commonly associated with the American Dream. The works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, in depicting an America that does not espouse dominant economic and social values of wealth, power and success, explore the myths associated to the narrative of the road and the journey and reinterpret them in the light of a changed and changing country that emerged after the great (shattered) hopes of the 1960s for a democratic revolution. The road and its myths in the Other America are seen through the eyes of an outcast, a directionless and restless road man. This character wanders into America’s vast land without finding the grandiose setting envisioned with the old ideology that promised prosperity to the brave pioneer. Unlike Turner’s colonist dressed in hunting shirts and moccasins, he is incapable of transforming the land around himself. He nonetheless encounters an inner transformation throughout the journey, resembling the new man that both Turner and Fiedler conceptualized.

“God knows I was feeling alive”: the Road Man revisited.

In her study of Paul Auster’s poetics, Ilana Shiloh affirms that the “underlying infrastructure” of Auster’s fictional works is the quest. Although Shiloh focuses on the books that Auster wrote in the first ten years of his career as a novelist, the narrative of the quest has remained topical also in the works that were published after the time frame of her study. All the writer’s characters face, to use Shiloh’s words, “an omnipresent and thwarted journey” for which Auster employs a linear narrative with a “subject, an object and the spatial displacement of the subject in pursuit of the object.” Such a frame, which the writer fills in with several detours or “Chinese boxes” in the form of intertextual and metatextual references to American culture and history, provides some order in the anarchy and unpredictability of life, which in turn are Auster’s main metaphysical preoccupations as well as the object of most scholarship on his work. In the novels where the quest is, at least partially, conducted through a road trip – Moon Palace, Music of Chance, Leviathan, Mr. Vertigo, Timbuktu, The Book of Illusions, Brooklyn Follies – the character for a moment is in control of his/her own journey.

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or, at least, has the impression of being in control. Being on the move is purposeful in itself. Even when places are nothing but “a reason to stop before going on again,” the act of traveling brings some structure into the traveller’s life. The journey transforms the traveller into that literary figure that Film Studies scholar Ina Rae Hark calls the “Road Man”, someone who finds or rediscovers his masculinity and his place in the world when he is on the road.229

A central hero for the 1960s counterculture, the road man from the 1980s onwards faces a more hostile America230 where his desire for independence is perceived as the flaw of a “bum” or a “downscale failure.”231 In Reagan’s America, this hero finally showed the less alluring aspects of his life choices and his “inability to stay in one place, accept responsibility, or maintain a committed relationship to a wife and a family.”232 These are the problems that the road man wakes up to in mainstream America, incapable of securing a respectable social position in search of an ephemeral freedom that, in a capitalist world, only money can provide. The journey on the road, then, does not offer a quest to the material fortunes and success found behind the frontier. Rather, in the 1980s it represents an escape or a temporary relief from the conventions and impositions of a materialistic society in which the road man cannot fit.

Paul Auster’s road men are adults who turn to the road as a momentary refuge. On the road they are possessed by a will to move and they feel in control of themselves. Tom Wood in The Brooklyn Follies (2005) takes some time off his job as bookshop assistant to drive out of New York to accompany his nine-year old niece, Lucy, to Vermont. Their travel companion, Tom’s uncle Nathan, observes: “It was there on those open roads that [Tom] began to relax, to slough off the burden of his miseries and temporarily stop hating the world.”233 Marco Stanley Fogg in Moon Palace (1989), driving west for twelve straight hours, reports: “I was hypnotized by my own loneliness, unwilling to stop until my eyes wouldn’t stay open anymore, watching the white line of the highway as if it was the last thing that connected me

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231 Hark I. R. (1997), p. 214. Hark studies the figure of the Road Man in her analysis of road movies of the 1980s, a decade when the road man, overshadowed by the new oppositional figure of the yuppie, was the aged version of the hero of the previous twenty years. For the author, the ageing of the 1970s Road Man into the 1980s is best represented by the character of Travis Henderson, played by Harry Dean Stanton in Win Wenders’s Paris, Texas (1984).
232 Ibid. p. 212.
to the earth.”

Behind the wheel, these men feel at ease with themselves. In *The Music of Chance* (1990), Jim Nashe, more than any other Auster character, becomes enraptured by this sense of comfort that the act of travelling provides, and elects the road as his new home. He leaves everything he has ever had behind – a family, a job, all of his material possessions – and follows an “overpowering force” that takes him on the road for a year of “freedom and irresponsibility.”

Jim “felt like a man who had finally found the courage to put a bullet through his head – but in this case the bullet was not death, it was life, it was the explosion that triggers the birth of new worlds.”

The first part of Paul Auster’s novel sees Jim following his dream of liberty on the American highways, a man possessed by an uncontrollable desire that is satisfied only when he sits behind the steering-wheel of his red Saab. Auster describes a feeling that Tom Waits condensed in one line of the song that opened his debut album *Closing Time* (1973), “Ol’ 55”. Leaving his lover’s place early in the morning, the singer catches from his windshield the sun coming up and an emotion pervades him: “As I drove away slowly, feeling so holy/ God knows, I was feeling alive”. That sensation accompanies Jim along a year-long road trip that he takes after receiving an unexpected inheritance from the disengaged father who deserted him when he was only two. He drives endlessly in all corners of America and, when the money is about to run out, he knows that the time is approaching for him to decide what to do after he will not be able to fund his directionless journey anymore. Before a decision is made, Jim meets Jack Pozzi, a young gambler whose invitation to invest what is left of his money in a poker game against a couple of eccentric millionaires becomes too alluring. Jim understands that he wants to keep his wandering and that special feeling of being alive that descends from it. Winning the large sum of money that Jack’s game might bring in is the only way to assure that and avoid going back to a working life that can only provide for basic necessities. Jack’s offer is Jim’s “last chance to do something for himself before it was too late” and just like that Jim decides to “ride with Lady Luck”, to use again the words that Waits’s driver sings in the chorus of “Ol’ 55”. The road trip stops and the central part of the novel is all absorbed by the meeting with Flower and Stone, the eccentric rich men, and the “little job of poker” that ensues in their mansion. The card game deprives Jim of what

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236 *Ibid*.
remained of his inheritance money and the man, who was looking forward to protracting his freedom, finally finds oppression. Trying to win back what they lost, Jim and Jack contract a debt that they cannot honour and have no choice but sign an agreement to repay Flower and Stone by staying on their property to build a wall in the meadow. The last part of the novel, the account of the forced labour that the two protagonists undertake to erect a useless wall, represents the negative of the first part. The book opens with Jim Nashe’s extreme freedom and closes with the man’s captivity. When gambling does not prove to be the source of new money, he is forced to go back to work. However, the work that he has to perform for Flower and Stone represents the worst form of proto-capitalist exploitative physical labour, void of any basic right, a sort of primitive version of the same job that he sought to avoid by entering the poker contest.

The reassuring west coast sound of “Ol’ 55” is no longer adequate to follow Jim’s descent into enslavement. Waits’s rich songbook provides a more appropriate tune to the transition from freedom to confinement in “Heigh Ho”, the Seven Dwarfs’ marching song that he covered for Hal Wilner’s tribute album to the music of Walt Disney films, *Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films* (1988) and re-released in 2006 for his own album *Orphans*. It only takes Waits a slight change in the line “From work to home we go” into “It’s off to work we go” to radically morph a happy after-work tune into a desperate labour chant. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the Dwarfs sing the cheerful melody on their way out of the diamond mine. Imagining them on their way back to work, Waits turns the melody into a lament. A distorted harmonica signals a clear passage from white to black music, replacing the flutes and jolly whistling of the original Disney version. To complete the sound, pump organ and pounding bass and drums bury any resemblance to the original song irreversibly. And to make the message clearer for the listener that this is a song about exploitation and forced labour, the singer adds an extra verse that recalls the comforting power of slave chanting in America: “Got to make your troubles go/ Well you keep on singing all day long.”

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239 The informed reader knows that the character’s name already contains an indication on how the card game will end. Both Mark Brown and Bernd Herzogenrath indicate that Auster’s character shares his name with the sixteenth century English writer Thomas Nashe, whose most famous picaresque novel was called *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594). See Brown M. (2008), p. 102 and Herzogenrath B. (1999), p.162.

240 See Herzogenrath B. (1999), p. 164. The Paul Auster scholar finds in *The Music of Chance* a chiastic relation between an oppressing liberty and a liberating oppression that makes Nashe experience the Lacanian idea of the anxiety of the modern individual for which “freedom and oppression somehow constitute each other”.

241 Biographer Barney Hoskyns defines the song a “malevolent industrial blues”, which “Disney freaked out on hearing it” threatening a lawsuit that was eventually dropped. See Hoskyns B. (2009), pp. 477-78.

the two songs of Tom Waits that I am suggesting as an accompaniment to The Music of Chance reinforces the central subject of Auster’s novel: the unforeseen twist of fate in the story of Jim Nashe and the crossing of the abstract thin line that separates freedom and oppression, life and death, which the open road conceals for all the restless American road men. The reference to music in the title of the novel is linked to the fact that Jim is an amateur pianist who loves classical and jazz music. Jim listens to audiotapes in his car and there is a passage in the book in which Auster writes about the character’s predilection for the unresolved harmonies of his favourite piece of music, François Couperin’s Les Barricades Mystérieuses (1717), a composition that “continued to advance, pushing on toward a resolution that never came.” A music melody or harmony is unresolved when it carries unexpected endings or dissonant notes that do not fit in the western musical syntax, like the lines in a poem that do not rhyme as anticipated. Couperin’s piece makes Jim think of his repetitive work in the meadow of which he cannot foresee the end. The same story of Jim resembles an unresolved melody; an unexpected change in the course of a song opened up to unpredictable endings, of which, in pop music, Tom Waits is a master.

Jim Nashe is the most complete road man in Auster’s literature, a character that absorbs the challenges and dilemmas of a desired life of freedom in a contemporary world where freedom is gained with the financial profits of a working life, which in turn demand people’s free time. Freedom seekers like Jim, who long for absolute freedom, gamble their lives away risking losing their whole freedom. Comparing the descending trajectory of Jim Nashe’s on the road experience with Waits’s musical transformation from West Coast sound to experimental music anticipates the similarities of the road men depicted by both the writer and the musician. Like Auster, Waits has followed this literary character since the beginning of his career. Whereas the novelist has kept a consistent profile of a man caught between desire and reality – and bad luck most of the times –, who spends only a fraction of his time on the road, Waits moved from the stereotypical road man of the 1970s to a delusional drifter who gets lost on the road in the 1980s and finally to the more troubled migrant figure of the Depression who has no other home than the road.

Tom Waits’s early version of the road man is a direct descendant of the Beat generation, in particular of Dean Moriarty, the fictional character inspired by Neal Cassidy in Jack

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243 Jim Nashe’s piano skills are reminiscent of another restless road man, Robert Eroica Dupea, the character played by Jack Nicholson in the 1970 road movie Five Easy Pieces by director Bob Rafelson. At one point in the book we find Jim playing his Baldwin piano before getting rid of it, in the same manner Robert does at the beginning of the film. See Auster P. (1990), p. 10.

244 See Auster P. (1990), p. 10 and p. 165.
Kerouac’s *On The Road* (1957), the “prototypical road man, [...] a faithless lover and a terrible provider.”

We find him driving a car or a truck in songs like “Diamond on my Windshield”, “The Heart of Saturday Night”, “On A Foggy Night”, “Big Joe And Phantom 309”, “Jack & Neal”, “Burma Shave”; kissing his lovers or dear ones goodbye in “Old shoes (& Picture Postcards)”, “San Diego Serenade” and “Semi Suite”; singing of a life of irresponsibility and independence in “Better Off Without a Wife”. As the music of Waits evolved into new sounds, the character of the road man lost many of the clichéd traits of the hipster wanderer and, in the 1980s, he transformed into the central figure of the albums *Swordfishtrombones* (1983), *Rain Dogs* (1985) and *Franks Wild Years* (1987), Frank O’Brien, a man whose dreams of success and freedom lead to failure. After burning bridges with his past by literally burning down his house, as he explains in the song where he first appeared (“Frank’s Wild Years”, 1983), he begins his road trip driving recklessly on the highway under the protection of Saint Christopher, the patron of safe travel (“Hang On St Christopher”, 1987) only to end up stranded in East St. Louis, after many ups and downs, penniless and unable to get on a train to go back home (“Train Song”, 1987). Frank is Waits’s version of the ghost of the 1960s and 1970s road man whose life choices are finally getting the best of him.

In more recent years, the road in the singer’s vast repertoire has become the place of countless hoboes and restless Americans lost in a rural space, remote and out of time. These characters do not drive cars or trucks anymore but ride on trains or simply walk, like Marco Fogg does for months at the end of Auster’s *Moon Palace*. If one wished to trace an ideal evolution of the traveller in Waits’s music, looking at the opposite ends of his production might be helpful, from the already mentioned “Ol’ 55”, which opened his first album, to “Chicago” that opens his latest release, *Bad As Me* (2011). In the latter song, the journey does not follow the sun but is northward; the car is replaced by the train and the “I” singer/driver is substituted by “We”, migrant people who are on the move against their will to secure survival for their dear ones. They do not feel so alive as the road men of the early years when they have to say goodbye to all they have ever known for a place they have never seen before. The evolution is underlined by the change in sound as well. The road trip inside the Ol’ 55 is accompanied by

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246 In his review of *Bad As Me*, journalist and biographer Barney Hoskyns writes: “If anyone out there can connect the Waits of 2011 to the Asylum singer-songwriter of 1973’s *Closing Time*, I shall tip my fedora to them.” Hoskyns is right when he implies that there is no point in looking for musical connections in Waits’s career’s opposite ends. The only musical link between the two is their author and the pairing of these records only serves the purpose of describing the evolution of a man’s creative work. However, a thematic equivalence is evident in the choice of the journey as the central subject of songs as stylistically different as “Ol’ 55” and “Chicago”. See Hoskyns B., “Tom Waits: Bad as Me” in *The Word*, November 2011. Available at: [www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/tomwaitsbadasme](http://www.rocksbackpages.com/Library/Article/tomwaitsbadasme) (last accessed 26/06/2018).
a piano, an upright bass and soft drumming, harmonizing vocals and acoustic guitars and one can visualize a cool singer, right hand on the steering wheel, left elbow leaning out of the window in the comfort of the driver’s seat. On the contrary, in “Chicago” the migratory journey on the train is mimicked by huffing, puffing and chugging horns and drums, bluesy harmonica and electric guitars and a voice that shouts “All aboard!” The song begins and ends in the same way a train would move across a station or a tunnel, growing louder and louder and disappearing softer and softer. The train comes and goes and creates trepidation for the travellers who have to be fast to catch it and are not comfortable and in control of their journey anymore.

At the beginning of his career Waits was a young man out of touch with his generation, who wanted to live like a Beat poet and proclaimed his disdain for the 1960s and that very counterculture,247 embraced by his peers, that derived from the Beat culture. With a song like “Chicago” we understand that his interest in later years has shifted to an even older American narrative, that of the Dust Bowl Exodus. His hoboes recall the human displacement of the 1930s and the epic of the Joad family, while his American narrative has evolved from a solitary point of observation to a communal experience. In this sense Waits’s recent music (“House Where Nobody Lives”, “Come On Up to the House”, “Take It With Me”, “Cold Water”, all from the 1999 album Mule Variations), contains strong resemblances to Woody Guthrie’s and recuperates the grand narrative of the 1930s culture of the people. However, the original idea of the road man as a lone wanderer has never completely disappeared from Waits’s song catalogue. To prove this point, when Waits put Jack Kerouac’s lyrics from On The Road into music with “On The Road” (1999) and “Home I’ll Never Be” (1997),248 music reviewer Tim Perlich wrote that the song “was […] born of a fragment from the past that serendipitously came his way.”249 The “on the road” hipster is indeed a fragment from Waits’s

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247 Perhaps in his early stance against the 1960s, the young Tom Waits perceived a fundamental distinction between hipster and hippie culture without articulating the terms of this difference. The 1960s popularized the hip attitude that belonged to a small underground avant-garde and made it a mass phenomenon. Music critic Robert Christgau explained this drift between two related cultures voicing his discomfort of producing rock music journalism in the 1960s from the simultaneous “paradoxical position as enthusiast of a dissident subculture and cog in the music industry’s publicity machine.” See Blake C. N., “Rock as Experience” in Modern Intellectual History, Vol. 14, Issue 1, April 2017, p. 298.

248 Waits recorded two versions of the same song, using two different titles. “Home I’ll Never Be” is a 1997 live version in the form of a ballad with Waits sitting alone at the piano, that was published on the album Orphans in 2006. “On The Road”, also published on Orphans, was recorded in a studio with the band Primus and Charlie Musselwhite was released with the album Jack Kerouac Reads On The Road (1999, Rykodisc). The latter is the version I am referring to in this work.

musical past that splendidly matched his present raw blues sound that comes from a tradition that predates the Beats. The character of these songs becomes therefore a timeless American restless wanderer who holds a biographical importance for the singer, when he calls out for a father who left home when he was only a ten-year-old child. With the road man of this song another point in common between the narratives of Waits and Auster is revealed. I refer to the experience of having an absent father or none at all, which the singer of “Home I’ll Never Be” shares with many an Auster’s character, from Marco Fogg and Solomon Barber in *Moon Palace* to Thomas Cole in the movie *Smoke* (1995), Archie Ferguson in *4321* (2017) and, of course, Jim Nashe in *The Music of Chance*.

Notwithstanding the changes in the character of the road man in Waits, the road remains a constant point of reference for a varied gallery of drifters, wanderers and dreamers. On the road they discover America, its people, its problems and acquire new awareness and sensibilities after losing their dreams and delusions. The evolution of Waits’s road man from a solitary masculine hero to a group of travellers is somehow opposite to the evolution that occurs in Jarmusch’s cinema, where early multiple protagonists left the lead role to solitary (and lonely) male characters.

One of Jim Jarmusch’s loners is Don Johnston (Bill Murray) in *Broken Flowers* (2005). With this film, the director inverts the narrative of the quest for the long-lost father, following a man who receives an anonymous letter that informs him that he is the father of a never met before nineteen-year-old son who has left on a road trip to retrace him. At first unimpressed by the news, Don goes on the road himself, pushed by his friend and neighbour Winston (Jeffrey Wright), in order to discover whether the child really exists and who he is. The middle-aged man’s journey will take him to the lovers he had twenty years before with the idea to find out who the author of the letter is. Don lives in a big house of an affluent suburb in the fictional Center City, somewhere in the eastern states. In the first scene, as it is often the case with his films, Jarmusch turns to popular culture to provide his audience with precious information about his characters and the story that is rolling in front of their eyes. The television is on and showing *The Private Life of Don Juan* (1935, dir. Alexander Korda) while

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See Perlich T. (2006). Perlich writes: “Despite the song’s being credited to beat poet Jack Kerouac, the forlorn hymn to the highway life turns out to be one of Waits’s most personally revealing. When he poignantly sings the lines “Father, father, where you been? I’ve been in this world since I was only 10,” it’s not really Kerouac’s life he’s singing about. Waits is calling out to his own father, who left home never to be seen again after a divorce in 1960, when Waits would’ve been 10 years old”. In the same article, the journalist also quotes Waits saying “I found Kerouac and Ginsberg when I was a teenager, and it saved me. Growing up without a dad, I was always looking for a father figure, and those guys sort of became my father figures. Reading *On The Road* added some interesting mythology to the ordinary and sent me off on the road myself with an investigative curiosity about the minutiae of life.”
Don is sitting silently on his couch, and his girlfriend Sherry (Julie Delpy) is packing to leave the house for good, tired of being treated like a mistress by a man who is not even married and lacks clear goals in life. The picture is then complete: Don is a forlorn apathetic man, who has been incapable of settling down with any of the many lovers he has had, another example of that “faithless lover and terrible provider” that the traditional road man personifies. There is an overshadowing sense of emptiness in Don’s life caused by years of vacuous pleasure. Umberto Mentana describes the film as “a last farewell to the hope for a different world undertaken by many outsiders on Jarmusch’s highways.” The dream of an alternative life away from the mainstream society has faded. Don is the aged version of Jarmusch’s early drifters, a former rebel who has conformed to the comforts of middle-class living without being able to establish meaningful affections, “increasingly cut off from the promises of the past and the possibilities of the present.” The anonymous letter sets him on a journey that he would gladly avoid if his friend’s insistence did not force him to go. Focused on his task to retrace the old flames, Don looks the most alive in the film when the road man in him awakens and is at the wheel of a rented Ford in between every new encounter. Little by little, the man finds out what has happened to his former partners, and he learns something about himself and his life choices, while the mystery of the alleged child (and mother) remains unsolved in an open ending that is Jarmusch’s cinematic version of an “unresolved harmony”. None of the four women whom Don meets openly admits or gives the impression to have given birth to his child. In the final sequence of the film, Don, back in his town, after approaching a young man whom he mistakenly takes for his son, exchanges a glimpse with another young man in the passenger’s seat of a car, listening to the same music that accompanied him in his road trip. The young man is decidedly not handsome and the look on Don’s face suggests fear in his mind that he might have finally found his progeny in this ugly person. It is a comical ending of a film otherwise charged with serious considerations on life and human relations.

Don is the third lone road man created by Jarmusch after the figures of William Blake (Johnny Depp) in Dead Man (1995) and Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker) in the eponymous film of 1999 and before Lone Man (Isaach de Bankolé) in The Limits of Control (2009). These

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254 Another clue to solve the mystery of Don’s son (or to complicate it) is given by the fact that Bill Murray’s real life son, Homer Murray, is the young man seated in the car passing by at the end of the film.
four men fit in the category of the road man insofar they are outsiders in the scheme of standard living and all find themselves on a journey or quest that is both physical and metaphysical. Before individual male protagonists took centre stage in Jarmusch’s cinema, the filmmaker’s movies offered a series of “collective” protagonists that anticipated many of the traits of the later road men. The first on-the-road characters for Jarmusch were Willie and Eddie (John Lurie and Richard Edson) in Stranger Than Paradise (1984). The two misfits gain a little money at a poker game in New York and the first thing that crosses their minds is to get on a road trip. Money once again, like in Auster’s The Music of Chance, buys freedom and this freedom is sought on the highway. The road buddies, however, are far from resembling the heroes of cult road movies like Easy Rider (1970, dir. Dennis Hopper) and Two-Lane Blacktop (Monte Hellman – 1971), not to mention the happy bunch of friends of Fandango (1985, dir. Kevin Reynolds), a 1980s polished revision of some the themes of the Sixties counterculture (youth, freedom, the Vietnam War) released only three months after Stranger Than Paradise. In comparison with those heroes, Willie and Eddie are clueless and awkward and their trip is nothing but a forgettable experience. Bad weather accompanies them from the moment they leave New York. As they drive on, long silences are interrupted by short uninteresting conversations. They spend some time in a freezing Cleveland where they reconnect with Willie’s cousin Eva (Ezster Balint), the other major character who appears at the beginning of the film on her arrival to New York from Budapest, where she spends some time before going to live with her aunt in Ohio. The trip resumes when the girl joins them on their way to sunny Florida. Notwithstanding the dullness of the landscape and of the journey itself, the travellers do show some excitement about being on the road and the places they are trying to reach (which inevitably turn out to be different and less appealing than what they hoped for).

With his following work, Down By Law (1986), Jarmusch again used three road buddies, but this time the journey is on foot. Jack (John Lurie), Zack (Tom Waits) and Bob (Roberto Benigni) are three prison fugitives who are trying to leave their chasers behind in the swamps of Louisiana. The open road ignites new energy for the inmates; it brings new life and hopes and their escape, although ruled by the immanent task of finding safety, contains all three of the already mentioned myths of the American journey. Looking for freedom, the three men form that male bond observed by Leslie Fielder in his works, with Bob as the alien other that

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256 In the case of Ghost Dog, the protagonist does not undertake a road trip but follows one strict self-imposed mission like an obedient pilgrim on a spiritual journey.
the American man meets in the wilderness. Jarmusch’s second full-length film is therefore a work that “revises the myths and the literary and cinematographic clichés produced by America on America.”

Through his collective protagonists, Jarmusch unexpectedly explores classic tropes of American culture. The road trip offers the opportunity to visit American natural landscapes, delve into the excitement and the boredom of liberation, and observe the transformation of the traveller as the journey carries on. Jarmusch’s cinema, therefore, operates that revision of the American myth mentioned above, that connects his works with Paul Auster’s literature and Tom Waits’s music. Creating the Other America, these three contemporary authors all investigate traditional American narratives through their road books, movies and songs, refuting the old ideology of the land of plenty and its false promise of success and equality for all, while embracing other promises of American life, such as the possibilities of freedom and self-transformation. This is what emerges from the revision of the three fundamental road myths: Nature, Freedom and the New Man.

**Nature, Freedom and the New Man: the American myth under scrutiny.**

*Hard travelling in the land.*

The first contrast between the customary narrative of the American journey and the journey in the Other America is the absence of “America the Beautiful” in the latter. Road stories represent an opportunity to take a look at the American natural landscape for authors otherwise renowned for their urban sceneries. This landscape at times appears dangerous, monotonous, inhospitable, and plainly ugly in the eyes of the outcasts who travel through it. The ugliness of the land is a major departure from an important trope of American ideology. The patriotic celebration of the beauty of the American landscape has been shared by the whole political spectrum of the nation, from Walt Whitman to the anti-communist Cold War agenda. We find this beauty celebrated even in Woody Guthrie’s journey alongside desperate hobos in the days of the economic depression of the 1930s, when the singer writes in his autobiography that from the boxcars he rode in one could see “enuff sunshine an’ fresh air ta cure all th’ trouble in th’ world!” The worship of the land is also present in *Easy Rider* – especially in the spectacular cinematography of Laszlo Kovacs—, a film that offered a countercultural criticism on the state of the nation and its inherent violence, intolerance and

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258 Ibid., p. 36 (my translation from Italian).
racism at the end of the sixties and yet embraced one of the pillars of the American ideology, indulging in the magnificence of the landscape in America with “picturesque road montages.” The film’s reception of the transcendent beauty and power of America’s nature shows a link between counterculture and a significant US tradition, namely the idea of nature as the carrier of the highest American values. Such tradition has high ancestors in the nineteenth century Transcendentalist writers who worshipped nature like their descendants, the Beat poets, would do a hundred years later. In films, this tradition is best reprised in the Westerns. Therefore, Easy Rider’s motorcyclists, with their adoration for nature, recall the figure of cowboys, the male heroes who find their manhood in the wilderness. Whereas the Other America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, on one hand, would share the critical spirit against mainstream patriotism with the sixties counter-culture, on the other, this American idea of nature’s intrinsic spiritual superiority does not belong to its narrative.

Just as the cinematography of Easy Rider signifies that film’s engagement with ideologies of nature, the aesthetics of Jarmusch’s films, Auster’s novels and Waits’s songs speak to nature’s brutality. In Down By Law, the three heroes slowly wade the waters of the swamp. The camera catches them from a short distance, never revealing an overall view of the landscape in which the fugitives and their invisible chasers are moving. The cramped scenery is completed by the surrounding bald cypresses that block any possibility to contemplate the horizon. A similar impression is reproduced in the road trip of Willie and Eddie in Stranger than Paradise, in which the low clouds and heavy snow obstruct the view of the land. Moreover, both films’ black and white photography accentuates the dejected look that Jarmusch’s characters cast on nature. The same look comes from the eyes of Auster’s Walter Claireborne Rawley in Mr. Vertigo (1994). Walt embarks on a long road trip from Philadelphia to California at the end of the twenties; a young man who is insensitive and untouched by America the beautiful. Approaching the end of the journey he declares, “after four thousand buttes and six hundred canyons, I’d had enough of the scenic tour to last me a life time. ‘If this is God’s country’ I finally said, ‘then God can have it.’”

Auster offers another glimpse of dismal nature with the meadow of Flower and Stone’s mansion in The Music of Chance. Forced to work on it at the beginning of a cold autumn, Jim

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260 See Klinger B. (1997), p. 188. Klinger describes Easy Rider as a “strange bedfellow to the counter-revolutionary strategies of the 1960s mainstream magazines” like National Geographic, Life and The Saturday Evening Post, which offered photographic issues to promote patriotism through the splendour of the American nature (p. 192).
261 This point is made explicit in the film with a sequence where the protagonists change a motorbike tyre while a cowboy is shoeing his horse.
Nashe is confronted with a grey, flat landscape that is found as the background of many songs that Waits himself called “surrural”. Corinne Kessel describes Waits’s “surruralism” as a “surreal aesthetic melded with rural sounds, themes, and images.” With the album *Mule Variations* (1999), the singer fills the American landscape with weird, poverty-stricken, mentally ill and lost characters and tells of brutal domestic violence (“Get Behind The Mule” which reprises a theme already present in 1992’s “Murder in the Red Barn”), or exploitative work (“Lowside of the Road”), or again addictions (“Cold Water”).

If these examples seem to diminish America’s landscape and hint at a lack of interest in the traditional reverence of America’s natural beauty, the depiction of nature assumes a direct ideological connotation in two works that openly deal with the theme of the American western frontier: Auster’s *Moon Palace* and Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*. The novel retraces the myth of the frontier through the tales of three generations of Americans at the end of the 1960s, represented by a dying man, Thomas Effing, a middle-aged one, Solomon Barber and the young protagonist-narrator, Marco Fogg. The three men undertake westward journeys (both imagined and real), with which Auster addresses “stereotypical conceptions of the West”: “Native American subjugation, the romanticization of the West in art, and the political need […] to be conquering new frontiers.”

Effing, the one character that boasts to have witnessed the closing of the western frontier in first person, tells of his meetings with two nineteenth century painters: Ralph Blakelock and Thomas Moran. Both landscape painters who travelled West in the 1870s, Blakelock and Moran’s inclusion in the book provides a comparison between two different ways of reproducing nature in American art. Effing instructs Marco to observe Blakelock’s *Moonlight* at the Brooklyn Museum. Spending an hour in front of the painting as demanded, the young man realises that the natural landscape he is viewing is an allegory of the idyllic balance between inner and outer living that Blakelock believed the Native Americans mastered before the arrival of the colonists. Nature in *Moonlight* is imagined and comes from a deeply personal reading of a painter who thus created “a memorial, a death song for a vanished world.” In contrast, Moran’s landscapes are presented as an objective rendition of “what the West looked like.”

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265 About these songs, Waits said: “There’s an element of something old about them and yet it’s kind of disorienting, because it’s not an old record by an old guy”. See Hoskyns B. (2009), p. 419.
able to “represent [nature] ‘as it is’ is merely to impose one’s own viewpoint on it and is therefore an exercise in power and dominance rather than an expression of an emotional truth.”

And Moran’s point of view turned out to be very influential. His works are among the most famous paintings of American Romantic Naturalism. Effing tells Marco that the “first painting of the Grand Canyon was by Moran […] the first painting of the Great Salt Desert, the first painting of the canyon country in south Utah – they were all done by Moran.”

These works were the visual rendition of the Manifest Destiny of America, showing to the nation the majestic beauty of “the last bits of the continent, the blank spaces no one had explored”. Needless to say that the characters of the novel have a predilection for Blakelock as emerges from Effing’s caustic comment, “I didn’t hold any of that romantic bullshit.”

Jim Jarmusch seems to share Effing’s point of view in Dead Man (1996), the filmmaker’s first and, until now, only attempt at the Western genre. Shot in black and white, the film reprises Down By Law’s claustrophobic natural setting for a couple of fellow travellers and the chasers on their trail. The characters ride across barren woods, surrounded by dirt until they arrive on a small beach on the Pacific Ocean. Jarmusch intentionally avoids the conventional Western movie shots of the imposing nature that pioneers and cowboys crossed in their journey through the new land. The inhospitable land of Dead Man confutes the idea of a romantic ideal past, as suggested by George Hanson (Jack Nicholson) in Easy Rider when he states that “this used to be a hell of a good country.” Jarmusch equates America’s territorial expansion with violence, blood, brutality and savagery. Hence, his message is that the past was as bad as the present; there never was a “hell of a good country.” Like today’s America, Dead Man’s old Northwest is a land inhabited by white savages, namely the pioneers who exploited and damaged the land that they conquered, expelling the Native Nations who preexisted their arrival and whom, ironically, our collective memory recalls as the savage people.

In challenging the myth of and the nostalgia for the West, Jarmusch seems to follow Jane Tompkins’s observation on the Western genre when she writes: “To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die.” Once his heroes reach the coastline

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271 Ibid.
272 Ibid.
273 Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum calls Dead Man “one of the ugliest portrayal of white American capitalism”, which Jarmusch delivers with a style that is “casual and poetic rather than preachy”. See Rosenbaum J. (2000), Dead Man, (London: BFI Pub.), p. 18 and p. 20.
their earthly lives come to an end. This ending implies that the myth of the new frontier, too, is false. Once the last frontier is reached, the American journey is over and there is no possibility to reinvent the frontier or find a new one. That would also explain the aimless wandering of Jarmusch’s characters in modern-day America.

Revisiting the Western narrative, both Dead Man and Moon Palace reject the myth of the West as the free land, which is in itself the bearer of a new democracy, like Frederick Turner asserted in his frontier essay. The Manifest Destiny and the Western frontier myths are charged with biblical symbols – the new Adam, the Garden of Eden, the Exodus – which ignored certain facts like the presence of Native Americans, poverty, and the exploitation of the land. The land was not the pristine uninhabited nature of Moran’s paintings, but the home of the native people seen in Blakelock’s Moonlight and Jarmusch’s Dead Man. And the “civilisation” that followed the westward expansion was not the perfect social order of James Adams’s American Dream, but the chaotic society in which Moon Palace’s Marco Fogg and the other road men of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits struggle to fit in. It is precisely the chaotic society that the characters of the Other America try to escape from when they hit the road. They seek freedom from its entangling competition to wealth and success.

“Another word for nothin’ left to lose”.

The road in the narrative of the Other America is taken as an escape from the capitalist society. There is a trace of traditional left-libertarianism in this choice, namely an approach to individual freedom that rejects ideas of competitive social Darwinism and espouses the egalitarian position of the culture of the people, that belief in a Whitmanesque “absolute soul” that makes all human beings equal. The road hence gives its travellers an opportunity not to become independent, well-off, members of society like the myth of the frontier implies when it suggests that new land fosters economic equality, but an opportunity to dissociate oneself from society and chase an individual freedom from social constraints and conventions.

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275 In Turner’s vision, democracy, the highest moral value, is based on free land. This notion, according to Henry Smith, clashes with the idea of the so-called new civilization that the pioneers brought to the West, which was nothing but a re-enactment of the European way of living, leading to industrialisation and the depletion of the very free land upon which democracy is born. See Smith H. N. (1950), pp. 257-60.


Film scholar Bennet Schaber traces a line in the evolution of the American narrative of the road in the different ways road movies portrayed travellers before and after World War Two. He argues that until the forties the road in films was a symbol for the destiny of a whole nation, the place where multitudes of people meet and become one, whereas, after the war, the road became a territory in between a start point and a destination for single individuals in search of personal freedom. After the war, therefore, the road becomes the symbol of a lonely journey, undertaken by one or two men. It is the story of the destiny of drop-outs who do not fit in a nation that has stopped its exodus. Tom Waits’s late predilection for the narrative of the exodus signals the opposite direction of that described by Schaber for his road songs. The element of the “people” has come back into his music in times of uttermost individualism. The car of his solitary drivers has been left for a crowded train that often reappears in his songs as a home, a refuge, and a salvation to many characters. The train carries them across the country in search of survival and redemption, a sort of spiritual, inner freedom rather than material freedom (“Down There By The Train” and “Bottom of the World”, 2006).

These hobos are at odds with a post-war society that finally found its stability in the economic model of the bourgeois family granted by the affluence of the 1950s in new suburban spaces that transformed the face of the country and that appear in some of Auster’s novels (Moon Palace, Mr. Vertigo, Timbuktu), in Jarmusch’s Broken Flowers and in Waits’s “Frank’s Wild Years” (the song that offered a prelude to the album, four years before its release). After the war, the road is not occupied by the “People” of the 1930s anymore. The economic measures of the New Deal adopted to contrast the depression, brought relief and succeeded in generating a diffuse prosperity, which was symbolised by home ownership for average Americans. It was a political and economic triumph that changed the fate of common American in a matter of less than two decades. Average citizens were finally off the road and safe in their new suburban living. Among their children, those who could not be part of the new “people”, so to say, a society that was increasingly wealthy, materialistic and competitive, left home and took on the road. The post-war traveller therefore is not on a biblical quest like his predecessors were. He is an outcast, seeking freedom from a smothering society, with no specific destination. From the 1950s onwards, he becomes that irresponsible...

279 According to the Tom Waits Fan Archive online, the word ‘train’ is used in over 40 songs between 1973 and 2009, whereas ‘car’ appears 35 times. See http://www.tomwaitslibrary.info/lyrics-common.html (last accessed 26/06/2018). This means of transport also matches Waits’s rediscovery of rural music and landscape and the luddite approach against technological new sounds. See Kessel C. (2009), p. 95 and Hoskyns B. (2009), p. 327.
road man that is found in the Other America.

In “Me and Bobby McGee” (1970) Kris Kristofferson sings “Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose,” a motto that redefined failure as the gateway to American freedom; and the road man, who is a failure in the eyes of mainstream society, is searching for his freedom. It was mentioned earlier how the pursuit of freedom has been filtered through the representation in literature of a conflict between male and female experiences, with men running away from the civic, religious and domestic values that women embodied. In the Other America, the superior force that the road men are running away from is not represented by women’s sphere in society, rather by something created by men themselves: the marketplace. These characters show no wish to be part of an economic system that imposes values of success, material wealth, and social prestige, limiting individual freedom. In Auster’s The Music of Chance, Jim Nashe’s desire to maintain his “freedom and irresponsibility” on the road comes from his refusal to go back to his previous working life, which robbed him of his time while providing the minimum necessary to get by. In another book of the writer, The Brooklyn Follies, Tom Woods is what society refers to as a failure, someone who missed his chance to be someone. Willie and Eddie in Jarmusch’s Stranger Than Paradise are plain ambitionless oddballs. Don Jonhston in Broken Flowers has retired from a business that provided him with funds enough to live what is a lazy and comfortable life for an apathetic man. But these characters’ search for freedom comes at a high cost and is never successful. First of all, in order to move in today’s America, the road men face the paradox of needing money to be able to stop making money and be on the road. Those on the move in the Other America of Auster and Jarmusch, therefore, have money – Tom Waits’s old time drifters conversely have none and they either hitchhike (“Burma Shave”, “A Little Rain”) or jump on trains. Don in Broken Flowers can fly and drive around America to see his former lovers because he has both time and money. Willie and Eddie can get a car only after they get their hands on some cash with a card game in Stranger Than Paradise. Auster’s characters are on the road after receiving an inheritance – which is the case of Solomon Barber in Moon Palace and Jim Nashe in The Music of Chance – or are supported by someone else’s money – Solomon’s money allows Marco Fogg to be on the road in Moon Palace; Tom Woods is on the road thanks to his uncle Nathan in The Brooklyn Follies – or have some savings of their own – like Walt Rawley in Mr. Vertigo. Moreover, these characters’ pursuit of freedom fails.

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283 Auster P. (1990), p. 11.
Walt Rawley witnesses violence and death on the road, which forces him to interrupt his travels and the dreams linked to them; both Marco and Tom have to face the loss of dear people; Jim Nashe finds captivity in Flower and Stone’s mansion; Don Johnston cannot get rid of the ghosts of his past; Willie in *Strangers Than Paradise* finds boredom and sense of guilt.

Notwithstanding the negative outcome of their search for freedom on the American roads, these men present a quintessential American quality. They do not follow a call imposed by others but are on an errand of their own, like the old pilgrims described by Perry Miller. In our contemporary society, perhaps these men are less responsible and less mature, but they are closer to the original American freedom than the yuppie or the career-driven man are, with their set of goals predetermined by the market place. And this pursuit of freedom from social and economic norms leads them on the path to become new men.

*The regenerative power of the journey.*

One element of the American myth that persists in the Other America is that of the new man that Turner envisioned in his Manifest Destiny and Fiedler remodelled with his literary studies. Even if the ultimate goal of freedom may not be reached, the journey will bring a different consciousness, leading the road men to new perceptions.

Auster’s Marco Fogg ends a long journey of immeasurable lows and extraordinary twists of fate in *Moon Palace* with the announcement of his rebirth: “This is where I start, I said to myself, this is where my life begins.” At the end of *The Music of Chance* Jim Nashe, for a short moment, is again on the driver’s seat of his car, which he pushes to maximum speed to signify an inner triumph for a man who is not afraid of anything anymore. The aloof and careless Willie does the unimaginable by getting on a plane to Hungary, at the end of Jarmusch’s *Stranger Than Paradise*, when tenderness and affection prevail on the selfishness that accompanies him throughout the film. Reconnecting with the women of his past, Don Johnston in *Broken Flowers* realizes what his life has lacked to be fully lived and, upon his return home, he is willing to welcome Sherry back in his life, perhaps this time indefinitely. Tom Waits’s Frank O’Brien at the end of *Franks Wild Years* is a defeated man. His dreams have vanished and he is penniless, stranded in a rough town, unable to resume his journey. Singing of remorse and nostalgia, he might be a complete loser but he now knows what is important in his life. Regeneration is also possible for the hoboes of the singer’s “surrural”

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songs in which the train offers “the potential for change and the opportunity to move on to a new place, to a new start.” However, the idea of the journey as a life-changing experience has been present in Waits’s compositions since his debut. “San Diego Serenade” in the album *The Heart of Saturday Night* (1974) reminds listeners that the journey takes one away from the certainties of home and sheds a new light on what is left behind in a series of paradoxical epiphanies, like “I never saw my hometown till I stayed away too long” and “I never saw the East Coast till I moved to the West.”

In the road stories of the Other America, in addition to the above-mentioned example from the movie *Down By Law*, Auster’s *Mr. Vertigo* and Jarmusch’s *Dead Man* both reprise Leslie Fiedler’s myth of the birth of a new man through the encounter between a white transplant and an alien other in the wilderness. In *Mr. Vertigo*, Walt, a metropolitan little scoundrel, becomes a new person when, much to his disgust, he is admitted as the new member of an odd rural family formed by a Hungarian Jew, Master Yehudi, a disabled Ethiopian boy named Aesop, and a senior Native American woman, Mother Sioux. With Walt, who is a “representative of white urban underclass”, this family represents the “margins of the American society.” The strong ties that the young protagonist of the book develops with these characters, overcoming his initial ignorance and racism, transform him into a compassionate and emotionally rich individual. Walt’s relationship with the Master is central to this transformation. The man treats him with absolute strictness, rigour and rigidity, yet Walt warms up to him and finally looks up at him as a father figure. It is the bond between them that sees to the birth of a new Walt.

If *Dead Man* is “one of the few Westerns to see through the cheesy mythology […] that white people were the first ‘real’ or ‘true’ North American settlers”, Fiedler’s myth of the new man is an integral part of the story in the film. The male bond in the wilderness is formed between William Blake (Johnny Depp), a white clerk who relocates to the North West from Ohio and Nobody (Gary Farmer), a cultivated Native American who is an outcast from his tribe. The two meet in the woods where Nobody takes care of an exhausted fugitive William, who has been wounded in a gun fight. Running away from bounty killers hired by the father of the man whom William shot and killed, the two become close and take each other’s side in various occasions along their westward journey. William slowly grows a new

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290 Ibid., pp. 78-79.
awareness of the world, forced to become a killer in a place where violence is the rule and Nobody is the last living human he encounters in a society dominated by brutal white savages. The journey will take both to the final stage of life, and in death William will finally become the new man that Nobody talks about during their journey and in their last dialogue:

**N**O**B**O**D**Y: I prepared your canoe with cedar bows. It’s time for you to leave now, William Blake. Time for you to go back to where you came from.

**W**I**L**L**I**A**M: Do you mean, Cleveland?

**N**O**B**O**D**Y: Back to the place where all the spirits came from, and where all the spirits return. This world will no longer concern you.

After these final words are pronounced, Nobody pushes William’s canoe on to the vast western ocean into that territory “west of everything” that in Western culture has symbolised the afterlife since the days of Homer’s *Odyssey*.291

Nobody and Master Yehudi are both outcasts, cultured, wise, disillusioned mentors. They work as the conscience of the main characters. They lead them into a new life open to diversity, doubt, confusion against dogmatic attitudes and ignorance. More importantly, in this encounter between the white traveller and the alien other, the first one represents savage people (WASPs and their violence are depicted as savagery) whereas the two wise men are descendants of superior civilisations. The roles within the male companionship of Fielder are therefore inverted: Nobody and the Master are civilized; William and Walt are savages who slowly become civilized thanks to their travel companions. This inversion assumes an important meaning in works that “question the origins of the myths in the creation of the country.”292 The new man cannot be the initiator of America, the new country, but he is instead admitted into a pre-existent civilisation that mainstream America refuses to acknowledge. Therefore, the journey in the Other America discloses a land which is “no longer the exclusive province of WASPs [but] has the potential to accommodate ethnic difference”, like Alys Moody writes in regard to Auster’s version of the American Eden and the representation of different ethnicities in his writing.293

In conclusion, the perpetuation of the ideology of the American manifest destiny in the symbol of the road is interrupted in the Other America. The road men in the road books, road movies and road songs of the Other America do not find that equality foreseen in Turner’s frontier thesis and Adams’s American Dream. However, they reach a form of inner freedom.

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or consciousness that promises new beginnings and self-reinvention. The inattention to the American landscape and its occasional ugliness, on one hand, suggest a refusal of a blind patriotism that equates America’s moral greatness with its natural splendour. On the other, the rebirth of the characters into new men, and their newly acquired awareness imply that the state of the nation ultimately lies with its people and not its natural grandeur. Democracy is not born of free land, if there ever was one, but is the result of a community’s agreement. A nation’s hope in a better future lives on when its people are capable of regenerating themselves. Hopefulness for the people of the Other America passes through this regeneration. After spending a long time drifting on the road, the characters of the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits finally rediscover a long lost domesticity that bestows hope to hopeless characters, which is the subject matter of the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4

SURVIVING IN THE OTHER AMERICA. HOPE AND THE COMFORT OF HUMANITY.

«Sing to my soul, renew its languishing faith and hope,
Rouse up my slow belief, give me some vision of the future,
Give me, for once, its prophecy and joy.»\(^{294}\)
- Walt Whitman

«In the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope.»\(^{295}\)
- Barack Obama

BOB: (in strong Italian accent) Jack, why are you put in this prison?
JACK: I don’t know, Bob. It was voodoo or something, you know… I was framed, I was completely innocent, you understand?
BOB: Yes, you are innocent man, I understand. And you, my friend Zack, why are you put in this prison?
ZACK: I was set up Bob, just like Jack. -continues in mocking Italian accent- I h-am a innocent man.
BOB: I see, you two are innocent men.
ZACK: (in mocking Italian accent) So Bob, for why are you in this prison put?
BOB: Me? I killed ‘hay’ man.
[Long silence follows]
ZACK: You killed a man, huh? Why did you do that for Bob? The guy didn’t like Walt Whitman?
BOB: I never asked this man if he liked Walt Whitman…

Three inmates in Jarmusch’s Down By Law (1986) slowly get to know each other thanks to the conversations that Bob incites. The odd character, an Italian visitor arrested in New Orleans, becomes the glue of an implausible trio. A little, nervous man who barely speaks English, he is the one who finds the way out of jail for himself and his two surly American companions, Zack (Tom Waits) and Jack (John Lurie). The two men hardly communicate to each other and are too proud to show any signs of emotion. Bob, on the other hand, is like an

\(^{294}\) From the poem “The Mystic Trumpeter”, first published in 1872 in the Kansas Magazine and included in the cluster “From Noon Starry Night” in the 1881 edition of Leaves of Grass.

open book, unafraid of sharing his innermost feelings and always in a state of need for human contact that translates in an unstoppable flow of words and questions that irritate the two loners. Some of his words are verses from Robert Frost that he recites by heart in his mother tongue, while other words are used to convey his declaration of love for Walt Whitman. Poetry quoted in this least of poetic places sustains the prisoner’s attachment to life and takes him to an imagined world of beauty that elevates his spirit.

Bob’s character was penned by Jarmusch specifically for Roberto Benigni, the Italian actor whom the filmmaker first saw in Giuseppe Bertolucci’s Berlinguer, I love You (1977) and then met at a film festival in 1985. Raised in a peasant family during Italy’s years of profound industrial and social transformation, the comedian rose to fame in the mid-seventies for his caustic attacks on the establishment, and on the country’s mainstream morality and shared beliefs. Highly disturbing for the increasingly educated, affluent and urbanised middle-class that emerged with the economic boom, Benigni represented the claims of a neglected class made of alienated youth and frustrated left-wing workers. He did so first as a stage actor and a singer and then appearing late at night on national television as a stand-up comedian, before working for the big screen. His act introduced a new form of entertainment: irreverent, loud, profane and vulgar, one which drew from the crudity and the physicality of the countryside in order to confront a refined and intellectual city audience on questions of social unrest that afflicted the nation at that time. Undeterred by the problems he presented, his constant display of jubilation, excitement and joy was a reminder that, yes, people might be oppressed, but they retain the power to laugh and their right to physical pleasure. His was a character that would fit in well among the picaresque derelicts of John Steinbeck’s Tortilla Flat and Cannery Row. Begnini’s main quality is thus his ability to celebrate beauty in face of adversity, in a combination of hopefulness and realist depiction of the hardship of life. Jarmusch, an avid viewer of foreign films, perceived this quality in the actor and was able to reproduce it, untouched if not amplified, in an American context.

Waits, whose portrayal of Zack was his first major role in a movie after a series of cameos for other American directors, praised Benigni for his hopefulness, and gave an effusive description of the man asserting that “Benigni is filled with hope […] He takes off his hat and all the birds fly out of his head. He still believes in songs and things he saw in movies. He walks between the raindrops. So all things come to him, he's a force of nature, he's like a

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296 Jarmusch and Benigni were both in the jury of the Film Festival of Salsomaggiore, Italy. See Hertzberg L. (2001), pp. 63 and 121.
magnet. [...] And you gotta hope you have a little bit of Bob Benigni in you, you know?”

Hope in Benigni’s *Down By Law* character is the force that leads the three men out of prison and into new chapters of their lives. At the end of the film, the exuberant Italian ends up in the arms of a woman, while the two ever-wandering Americans find themselves in front of a crossroad in a shot that recalls the Frost poem recited by Bob, “The Road Not Taken.”

As mentioned above (chapter 2), the Other America in the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits indirectly calls attention to ethical principles built around the notions of kindness, compassion, racial harmony and social justice. These are not explicit subjects in the fiction in question, such as one could find in the works of other American contemporaries centred on social issues, like the songs of Bruce Springsteen, the films of Spike Lee or the novels of E.L. Doctorow. Nonetheless, these themes are evident also in our three authors from passages that hint at unfair treatment of people and injustices still present in today’s society. If such ethical principles endure, and are able to bring some balance in the life of the characters who populate the America of these authors, that is possible because of the persistence of a general hopefulness. Hope ensures that the world charged with decay and loneliness depicted by Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, although rough and forlorn, is not dystopian. Indeed, this world is a realist and reproachful portrayal of today’s America, rather than a negative made-up future, present or past allegoric America. In fact, utopian elements, particularly the idea that a better life is achievable, are detectible in dreams and desires that provide many characters with an anchor to hang on to against the alienation they encounter in the mainstream society.

Confidence in the possibility of human improvement and progress is the central tenet of the modern age and a permanent fixture of the American narrative. After all, the words “Utopia” and “America” appeared in Europe simultaneously in the early decades of the sixteenth century. The work of Thomas More was to give the imprint to long-lasting efforts in planning

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298 Poetry as a leading stream in Jarmusch’s cinema is analyzed in detail by Piazza in her study of the filmmaker’s relation with music, words and sound. The author defines and presents the poetic character in Jarmusch of which, she asserts, Bob represents the epitome. See Piazza S. (2015), pp. 242-282.

299 Dystopia is a genre on which these three contemporaries have conducted little experiments. A generic apocalyptic world is in the background of some songs of Tom Waits like “Earth Died Screaming” (1992) and “Misery is The River of the World” (2002). Jarmusch has offered a frightening version of America’s past in *Dead Man* (1995), but amid the allegories contained in the story the film is not dystopian as it makes full use of historic research of what life in the north western frontier was like for Native Americans and pioneers at the end of the nineteenth century. On this point, see Rosenbaum J. (2000), *Dead Man*, (London: BFI Pub.) pp.18-26. Auster has played with the idea of an imaginary dystopian country more than the other two authors with *In The Country of Last Things* (1987), his only dystopian novel to date, and partly with the short novels *Travels in The Scriptorium* (2006) and *Man in the Dark* (2008), where the writer explores alternative would-be Americas that have never occurred, one where George W. Bush’s first election leads to a new civil war and one in which wars take place in the past of a non-recognizable New World.
and forming the ideal society, which ultimately influenced the American ideology.\(^{300}\) The New World offered the chance to experiment with the theories of modernity, that is the post-medieval era in which man replaces God at the centre of the universe and becomes responsible for his own destiny. Far from the constrictions of the feudal system in the Old World, America offered a physical space to create a new social order founded on principles of liberty, tolerance and equality and, most notably, on the pursuit of happiness, which is quoted as an unalienable right in the Declaration of Independence. The creation of the Republic became the principal endeavour in forming a modern society that responded to the political doctrine of popular sovereignty through representative democracy. Along with the Republic, America, throughout its history, enabled several other attempts at the making of the perfect utopian society within small sized communities, from the Puritans’ “City on the Hill” to Richard Owen’s New Harmony, to more recent hippy communes.\(^{301}\) The lowest common denominator for these social experiments was the very fervour that animates the American Dream, that is to say, the anticipation of good things to come.\(^{302}\) In one word, hope.

Hope is the quintessential idea at the core of the American culture. In *The Promise of American Life* (1909), Herbert Croly, a leading figure of progressive thought in America and the founder of *The New Republic* magazine, described the American nation as one bound together by its future. Americans, he wrote, “[…] believe that somehow and sometime something better will happen to good Americans that has happened to men in any other country; and this belief, vague, innocent, and uninformed though it be, is the expression of an essential constituent in our national ideal.”\(^{303}\) Indeed, the whole conception of America as the New World was shaped by a narrative of hope, largely fuelled by the exodus parable of the Promised Land and the millions of migrants who have arrived on its shores like Bob and other Jarmusch characters.\(^{304}\) The early settlers carried an “impulse of utopian thought, the spark


\(^{302}\) Aside the hopeful element, Christopher Benfey indicates further five basic premises that all utopian communities in America shared: society should be based on cooperation and not competition; the nuclear family of the mainstream society should be incorporated in the larger community; property is shared in common; women are not subordinate to men; all works are to be treated with dignity. See Benfey C., “Building the American Dream” in *The New York Review of Books*, Issue 6 April 2017.


that gave hope to the perfectibility of the human life”, as the narrator in Auster’s *City of Glass* (1985) reminds us. In *The American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (1999), American scholar Andrew Delbanco suggests that hope is what gives meaning to life. Human beings need to organize their existence into a meaningful story that helps them navigate through their lives. This story may also carry a grand purpose that transcends the little allotment of years in a person’s lifetime on earth. When many share such a story, this becomes a nation’s culture. The culture of the Americans, the shared story of that nation, has always been identified as a culture of hope. But something seems to have interrupted the inexorable march of hope initiated with the early arrivals of the pilgrims on the western shores of the north Atlantic. Delbanco laments that hope in America at the turn of this century has reached its lowest degree. Americans have become unable to build a new collective story, as a result of a cultural crisis typified by melancholia, selfishness and the disappearance of judgement – namely, the inability to distinguish between highbrow culture and products of mass consumption. For philosopher Richard Rorty, the reason why hope has started fading from America’s inborn character is mainly political and is to be found in the New Left’s predilection for “knowledge”, a term that indicates the construction of a highly sophisticated and abstract social critique that pays no direct attention to common people’s immediate needs. Consequently, by abandoning hope as one of its constituent principles, the left has dimmed its engagement in the political life of the country forging exactly what the oligarchy they criticize dreams of: “a Left whose members are so busy unmasking the present that they have no time to discuss what laws need to be passed in order to create a better future.”

According to sociologists Carolyn and Robert Perrucci, the crisis of hope in American people is to be looked for in the country’s economy and most notably in a labour system that no longer provides financial stability and undermines people’s confidence in providing for their relations. If one may discuss whether the causes of the vanishing American hope are cultural, political or economic, what appears to be a common assumption today is the fact that, after President Obama’s efforts to reposition hope at the centre of American life, a pessimistic vision on the state of hopefulness is sadly prevailing in a country where the

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308 See Rorty R. (1997), p. 139. One can only wonder how Richard Rorty would have commented on President Obama’s attempt at restoring hope as the foundation of the American left, had he lived beyond 2007, the year when he passed away.
current president launched his candidacy by announcing that the American Dream is dead. Lately, *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks, echoing Delbanco’s words almost twenty years after they were first printed, wrote: “one of the things we’ve lost in this country is our story. It is the narrative that unites us around a common multigenerational project, that gives an overarching sense of meaning and purpose to our history.” In other words, the journalist here is talking about the loss of the original republican and utopian impulse for believing in a better future.

Almost two hundred and fifty years since the foundation of the Republic, a shared meaningful common story for the future of the country, one that transcends all forms of divisions, is struggling to survive in a polarized America. Without this story, mainstream American culture might go through an epochal shift from hopefulness to cynicism. However, scholars who have observed the phenomenon of the eroding American Dream suggest that a certain fundamental belief in progress, freedom and equality is planted deeply in America’s culture and will continue to exist through difficult times so that a new narrative of hope will return as strong as it was in the past.

One particular aspect that transpires from these observations is that the main victims of the erosion of hope are the Americans who live in the lowest socio-economic strata of the society. As a result, a correlation between hope and wealth is suggested and implies that a shared hope will be restored once the economic hardship of many is put to an end. Material deprivation necessarily generates hopelessness for poor people, according to a logic that considers economic needs as the central instance of a good life. Whilst no one disputes the state of desperation that material necessity can lead to, hope cannot depend solely on what is perceived as a good or reasonable economic condition. A newly prosperous America might as well be hopeless if its original confidence in a better future is lost. The character of Bob in *Down By Law* is a reminder that hope is an attribute of the spirit that resists all sorts of adversity and becomes even stronger in times of trouble. A shared meaningful story for a

country, call it utopia or dream, is achievable in economic restrictions when principles of justice, liberty, tolerance and equality come before sectorial interests. That is when a diffuse disposition to solidarity and human interconnectedness is still present. Only then, hope resurfaces and guides people to new beginnings. After all, Bob, Jack and Zack have the courage to regain their freedom only when a connection among the three is finally established and personal differences are set aside.

**Hopefulness in a hopeless world.**

Auster, Jarmusch and Waits conceive America as a country where poor and disenchanted heroes are estranged from the promises of the American Dream. The myth of “The Land of Opportunities” seems to be foreign in this imagined country where there is no room left for hopeful living. Yet, against all the odds, a trace of hope is always present in the Other America. The “losers, drifters and boozers” described in chapter 2 are outcasts who wander in desolate spaces, facing difficulties given by misfortune often aggravated by their inability or willingness not to fit in the society around them. These ill-equipped characters, struggling against external forces, together with the recurrence of wastelands, and the inharmonious, unexpected proceedings in the plots all hint at an atmosphere of general hopelessness that precludes conventional happy endings. The ambiance of general hopelessness is implied also by the fact that each work of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, as suggested above, results in the rejection of the idea of America as the land of milk and honey. The rhetoric of the American Dream means nothing to the men and women who inhabit these authors’ stories. Disillusioned, and lacking the proverbial ambition of their compatriots, they do not take part in the race to fortune and fame as they lack direction in their marginal America.313 Readers, viewers and listeners will not find the reassuring images of self-realisation and achievement that they have been accustomed to through the victory narrative of mainstream cultural productions. They, instead, encounter a negative commentary of the American society and its hyper-individualism, consumerist excesses, and false promise of happiness that inevitably leaves many outsiders behind. They are confronted with a depiction of America as a country at the mercy of a ruthless market place, subjugated to inequalities, and a lack of opportunities or social justice, which are the very causes of the perceived erosion of hope observed in the scholarly studies mentioned above.

313 Writing about Jim Jarmusch’s films, Renda (2008) states: “It is a marginal and transient America for which the journey and the search become more important than the goal itself”, p. 27 (translated from Italian). On the theme of the aimless journey of Paul Auster’s characters, see Shiloh I. (2002), *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest: On the Road to Nowhere* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing).
How then can a trace of hope be present in these works? In conveying their discontent and disapproval for their country through their art, the three contemporaries appear at first to be anti-systemic exponents of American culture. A deeper look into their art reveals, conversely, that they indeed place their roots in a traditional American narrative from which they adopt many elements and incorporate them in their books, films and songs, as seen above (Chapters 1 and 3). Asked whether he feels like a stranger in his native land, Jim Jarmusch in 1989 said: “I do feel somewhat distanced from America and yet very American and all of that enters in [my films]”. Likewise, America is the main focus in all stories of Auster and Waits. Auster, in his correspondence with author John Coetze writes: “I feel […] skepticism […], but I am also of this place and deeply attached to it, and whenever America blunders (far too often), my pain is intense”. Tom Waits’s entire musical career can be understood as a reinterpretation of the whole spectrum of American music, from his early pop and folk influences to his more recent attention to rural forms of blues. The art of these authors is therefore entrenched in American cultural heritage. Contrary to a first general impression of their work, one aspect nested in their oeuvre is the presence of hope, that anticipation of good things to come, which is the quintessential idea at the core of American culture. In Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, hope is an element that actually emerges from the implicit social critique conveyed in their texts. The critique itself does not offer a solution to the persistent problems of inequality and lack of social justice but is dictated by the belief that, in the world’s richest country, an answer to people’s avoidable misery must be found. In this sense, Auster, Jarmusch and Waits belong to a traditional lineage of American artists and thinkers who, from Walt Whitman onwards, have criticised their country, while still hoping for the possibility of a better life for the people who live in it, including the newcomers. Hence, hope is one archetypal facet of American culture that survives in the Other America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits although it does not coincide with conventional middle-class values and goals of success, money and social upward mobility. Every major character, even the most unfortunate, carries a degree of hope that does not consist in thirst for material accumulation, but takes on the form of a strong yearning to improve one’s fate through the rediscovery of human relations and the nurturing of actions that connect one to a greater sense of living. They long for affection, friendship, love, and make life worth living through a series of meaningful action. They write poems, make music, take photographs of the same spot over

and over again, draw, play cards or devotedly perform any other activity that brings meaning to their lives. These characters begin their stories with very little. Sometimes they stumble into a small or big fortune, but they inevitably end up with very little again. They do not advance on the social ladder, as they do not take part in the big race to ownership, wealth and status. However, there are hopeful moments in their stories when they find solace in their peers and comfort in their ventures. That is what they strive for, against the hopeless backdrop of the marginal America in which they live. Despite the hard conditions and lack of direction in their lives, they are able to preserve a strong will to continue on as they hope to experience something good through their aimless wanderings. Hope therefore resists amid adversity as it rests on the principle that life is worth living even when the worst is inevitable. As British intellectual Terry Eagleton points out: “One would not refuse a glass of water to a man trapped under a roof beam simply because […] the rest of the building was about to fall in on him.” This attachment to life is what sustains hopefulness in a hopeless world.

In Auster hope often stems from failure. His characters can see the light only when they reach the bottom of their existence. It is the essence of his “romance of failure”, as literary scholar William Marling calls it, a fiction that is frequently reminiscent of the writer’s experience of living as a starving artist in his twenties and thirties. The list of failed or failing characters is long but each one of them never questions the belief that life is worth living. Some of them find a reason to live on by embarking on specific tasks. Like David Zimmer who, torn after the death of his wife and children, spends the new phase of his life devoting himself to the difficult task of completing a project that becomes more and more evanescent and hard to accomplish as his story evolves in the *Book of Illusions* (2002). Yet, he informs the readers at the end of the book that he is determined to finish his job by saying “I live with

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318 On the presence of hope in Auster’s books, Kathrin Krämer analyzes the writer’s Jewish background and a “Judaic spiritual attitude”, which would explain a certain resilience and belief in hope in novels like *In the Country of Last Things* and *The Book of Illusions*. See Krämer K. (2008), *Walking in Deserts, Writing out of Wounds. Jewishness and Deconstruction in Paul Auster’s Literary Work* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag).


320 The Quarterly Conversation finds hope even in the apocalyptic dystopian future city of Auster’s “In The Country of Last Things” (1987), where “the people who populate this city have no choice but to cling to hope in the face of an impossible situation. In essence, hope is the city’s only resource, and everyone must use it” (see [http://quarterlyconversation.com/in-the-country-of-last-things-by-paul-auster-review](http://quarterlyconversation.com/in-the-country-of-last-things-by-paul-auster-review); last accessed 11/04/2017).
that hope”.\textsuperscript{321} Willy G. Christmas in \textit{Timbuktu} (1999) follows a similar path. He is a man who failed in his life to a point that he “joined the ranks of the walking wounded” after shock treatment therapy at the age of twenty.\textsuperscript{322} Yet, he is adamant that he must track down his high school English teacher, Mrs. Swanson, before he dies; she is the only person in the world he believes worthy of keeping his treasured seventy-four notebooks filled with a lifetime of writing. He “[…] had no delusions about himself. He knew that he was a troubled soul and not fit for this world, but he also knew that much good work was buried in those notebooks, and on that score he could hold his head high”\textsuperscript{323} This conviction keeps him alive and makes him wander for days in search of one last human connection with the person he cherishes the most in his poetically rich and fantasy-prone mind. In \textit{Oracle Night} (2004), a character named Ed Victory, a World War Two African-American veteran who “went down into the bowels of hell”\textsuperscript{324} when his unit liberated Dachau, devotes all his energies to the “Bureau of Historical Preservation.” Ed’s project consists in the collection of thousands of telephone books from American, Canadian, Mexican and European cities. To him, those books contain the names of the living and the dead and putting them together in one large archive helps Ed believe that “mankind isn’t finished.”\textsuperscript{325} Other characters find hope through relations with their fellow humans. What keeps \textit{Moon Palace}’s Marco Stanley Fogg afloat is the presence in his life of unselfish characters who look after him with affection and love. They produce a “crumbling of his inner walls” and bring “an earthquake in the heart of his solitude”\textsuperscript{326}, which, in turn, generates hope for a better life in this young man, an orphan, who seems doomed from the very beginning of the novel. Miles Heller in \textit{Sunset Park} (2010) is a squatter in Brooklyn in a company of peers battered by the hardship imposed by the great financial crisis. A man eroded by guilt who has given up on any plan for his future, Miles rediscovers hope through Pilar, the underage girlfriend he left in Florida, who will join him in New York once she reaches the age of 18. Finally, other characters become hopeful after life-changing events. Sydney Orr finds hope at the end of troubled times only when his beloved wife Grace is hospitalised at the end of \textit{Oracle Night} (2003). The old retired journalist of \textit{Man in the Dark}
(2008), August Brill, lingers on after a car accident and regains strength when he starts to witness signs of improvement in the wrecked lives of his daughter Miriam and his granddaughter Katya as “the weird world rolls on.”

In Jarmusch, hope accompanies his foreign characters along their journey through America. These characters are dreamers who land in the States with a formed idea of what their ideal country is about. They all have cultivated their own American Dream living in faraway lands and, no matter how disappointing their journey might turn out to be, they keep their ideal dream country alive: an ideal that often comes from those bits of popular culture that Jarmusch himself cherishes and subtly disseminates in all his movies. And so the country that the foreign characters project is the product of poems and songs that they love to quote and talk about constantly. That is why Bob in *Down By Law*, deprived of his freedom and confronting a tough reality, clings to Whitman and Frost’s America. Likewise, in *Mystery Train* (1989) Jun and Mitsuko, two teenagers from Japan on a rock’n’roll pilgrimage, cope with a rather disappointing visit to a decaying Memphis by talking endlessly of their music heroes – Elvis Presley for Mitsuko and Carl Perkins for Jun. In *Stanger Than Paradise* (1984), Eva (Eszter Balint), a young woman who arrives in New York from communist Hungary, incessantly plays Screaming Jay Hawkins’s “I Put A Spell on You” at every step that she makes on her lonely and disenchanted contact with America. For these characters, fragments of American culture provide a reassuring evidence that a better America, the America of their dreams, is real and, even if it has failed to reveal itself in real life yet, it continues to exist somewhere in the pages of a book or the grooves of a record. Another instance of hope in Jarmusch that generates from the pleasures associated with art and popular culture is that of the vampires in *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013). Adam and Eve are condemned to live through history forever. Weary of the horrors of humanity, the two creatures are able to endure their endless existence thanks to the enjoyment of the great artistic achievements of mankind of which they are ardent and insatiable users. In the film one can trace a long list of writers and poets; composers and musicians; scientists and painters; actors and directors; quoted in different ways, directly or indirectly by the protagonists. This list is a reminder of what life is worth living for — according to the filmmaker from Akron. However, hope in Jarmusch’s oeuvre is not limited to the beauty of art. Other characters show positive feelings of anticipation without referring to the use of soothing songs or poems. Raymond (Isaach De Bankolé), the ice cream man in *Ghost Dog* (1999), displays a happy

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attitude towards the world while talking to his customers notwithstanding the fact that nobody understands him, as he cannot speak English even if he has lived in America for a long time. William Blake (Johnny Depp), the nineteenth century well-educated accountant from Ohio in *Dead Man* (1995), is lured West by the promise of a new job to find himself on a self-discovery path animated by the hopeful search for rescue and recovery. One also assumes that hope is the main energy left in the dreamy old man at the end of *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2002). This character, played by Taylor Mead, a New York underground artist who was already in his late seventies when he acted for Jarmusch, opens the last segment of the film announcing to his fellow coffee drinker and artist, William Rice, “I feel so divorced from the world”. He suddenly uses his imagination to turn their coffee into champagne in order to celebrate life and make a toast to *joie de vivre*. It is a scene wrapped in a surrealist atmosphere. The two men are dressed as factory labourers, even if they look too old for assembly work. Caught in what could be a post-industrial version of a circle from Dante’s *Inferno*, perhaps the two men are not among the living anymore and are seen celebrating beauty and hope in the afterlife.

Hope in Tom Waits’s compositions is sometimes linked to a religious element, which has gained significance in his work through the prolific collaboration with his wife, Kathleen Brennan, started in the early eighties. Although never going through any sort of conversion or illumination in the steps of Bob Dylan’s Christian period, Waits’s attention to the spiritual sphere comes mostly in the guise of a plea for mercy and redemption, and in the form of quotations from the Bible that would fit in well with the performances of old time preachers. This is present in several songs but is mostly prominent in two compositions: “Come on Up to the House”, a choral hymn of salvation with an upbeat tempo that closes the album *Mule Variations* (1999) and “Take Care of All My Children”, a dying man’s call to the heavens for his children’s protection that is the main theme in the score of Martin Bell’s documentary *Streetwise* (1984). Unexpectedly, a religious fervour is present even in a collaboration with Keith Richards, “That Feel” from *Bone Machine* (1992), a song that biographer Barney Hoskyns describes as “a testament to endurance of the spirit and the indestructible worth of *In the classic theology of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, hope is one of the three Christian virtues, charity and faith being the other two. See Eagleton T. (2015), 39-41. An analysis of the spirituality in Waits’s music appeared on *La Civiltà Cattolica* the main journal of the Society of Jesus, one of the principal academic congregations of the Catholic Church: Spadaro A., “Tom Waits ‘e l’alba esploso come una frustata”, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 2007 1, no. 3762, pp. 551-564. The author insists on the fact that Waits’s characters might be “stray dogs” but they are never hopeless: “There is a radical instinct for what makes humans happy in all Waits’s characters, who, in spite of everything, tend inevitably to this happiness”, p. 563 (my translation from Italian). *Asked what his wife brought into his lyrics that wasn’t there before, Waits answered: “A whip and a chair. The Bible. Book of Revelations. She grew up a Catholic, you know, blood and liquor and guilt. She pulverises me so that I don’t just write the same song over and over again. Which is what a lot of people do, including myself.” See Silverton P., “The Lie In Waits” in *VOX (USA)*, October 1992.*
Hope is the central emotion also in other songs that have no specific spiritual content but present love as their main subject like, to mention one, “Hold On” (1999), about which Waits himself said: “I thought that was a real positive thing to say. It was an optimistic song. Take my hand, stand right here, hold on. We wrote that together, Kathleen and I, and that felt good. Two people who are in love writing a song like that about being in love. That was good.”

These are some examples of hope in the hopelessness of the Other America, where many characters are romantic men in a world where indifference has taken over solidarity and where no one seems to care anymore about the promise of equality and happiness contained in the Declaration of Independence. Only a few of these characters reach a happy ending, but their romantic hopefulness in a cynical, cold, unromantic world is repaid by moments of love, friendship and basic human interactions that provide a glimpse of generosity, commiseration and humanity still present in people’s hearts. These stories confirm how hope relies on human relations. As philosophy scholar Patrick Shade writes: “hoping lives in concrete relationships, especially in the habits and ideals we share with family and friends.”

For Thomas Aquinas hope “causes one friend to count on another.” This connection between hope and relationships is present in most of the fiction of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits and reassures the audience that there is something better to believe in despite the carelessness and greed that affect modern society. For the most part, the stories that we are looking at tell us that there can be hope in the world of those who live outside the material values imposed by the economic system. If most people in Western societies devote their existence – so to say, their time and the space they live in – to establish and maintain financial security, our characters’ goal in life does not come from fitting into prearranged schemes and a steady job – a recurrence that the three authors have deliberately avoided in their own youth. Rather, it originates from the wish to be part of humanity’s microcosm of relationships, affection and protection.

331 See Montandon M. (ed.) (2005), Innocent When You Dream (London: Orion), p. 268. See also Gilbert E., “Play It Like Your Hair's On Fire”, GQ magazine (USA) June 2002, on which the journalist describes “Hold On” as “a song of unspeakably aching hopefulness that was nominated for a Grammy and became the cornerstone of his album Mule Variations”. In the same article, Waits is quoted saying: “We were on a bus coming to L.A. And it was really cold outside. There was this transgender person, to be politically correct, standing on a corner wearing a short little top with a lot of midriff showing, a lot of heavy eye makeup and dyed hair and a really short skirt. And this guy, or girl, was dancing all by himself. And my little girl saw it and said, ‘It must be really hard to dance like that when you're so cold and there's no music.’”
Something kind about mankind.

However desired and sought-after a well-paid job might be, when it offers little chances to connect with others and live a full social life it can be as depressing as having no job at all. Here lies the dilemma of living in an economic system that promotes a Darwinian competition in the market place. Having to choose between economic stability and free time sets an important difference between the values that hold up the sophistications of the mainstream society – the one that follows the materialism in the American Dream – and the values behind the simplicity of the other America. The primacy given to economic stability in mainstream society relegates personal human interactions to a negligible sphere of life and makes their nurturing an activity that is secondary to the imperative of moneymaking. Human relations, on the contrary, are essential to survive in the Other America, where people are very much dependent on contact with their peers – those whom they reach out to when in need of guidance, help or simply company along their journeys. This is true even for Jarmusch’s drifters like the aloof loner Allie (Chris Parker) in *Permanent Vacation* (1980) and his middle-aged spiritual equivalent, Don Johnston (Bill Murray), in *Broken Flowers* or for Jim Nashe, the ex-fireman who breaks all his ties to pursue a “life of freedom” penned by Auster in *The Music of Chance* (1990). The vital need of human relations is the core drive of the alternative family of *Mr. Vertigo* (1994) seen in Chapter 3. All these characters at some point need human company.

The mainstream society and the Other America are however realities not completely foreign to one another. In a city like New York they exist side-by-side, in each other’s sight, as Mark Brown detects in the opening scene of Auster’s *Smoke* (1995), where the camera moves from the skyline of Manhattan, the centre of global capital, to the streets and the stores of a somehow homier Brooklyn.334 *Smoke* and its follow-up, *Blue in The Face* (1995), were written and, in the case of the second one, co-directed by Auster for director Wayne Wang. Both films provide a glimpse of a community that revolves around the “Brooklyn Cigar Company”, a store managed by Auggie Wren (Harvey Keitel) in the cosmopolitan suburb of Park Slope, Auster’s home for the past three decades. The place is a meeting point where a group of men can develop friendships and find refuge from “the intensities of the contemporary metropolis”.335 Along this line, the two films celebrate a special kind of human warmth that arises out of the urban jungle when men are not caught in a nine-to-five routine and have time to cherish their acquaintances, share their personal stories, ups and downs, fears

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335 *Ibid*. p. 180
and hopes. In *Smoke*, Auggie meets a good friend in Paul Benjamin (William Hurt), a regular customer who in turn befriends a young man, Thomas Cole (Harold Perrineau), to whom both men become fatherly figures. The three find balance in their friendship and occasionally a relief from the twists and turns and the chaos of their lives, amid broken families, tragic deaths, drug addiction, and life threats. Each man also cultivates a special interest when in solitude. Auggie takes photographs of his tobacco store every morning at the same time from the same spot, Paul is a writer, and Thomas draws sketches of the world around him. In the background of their stories, the tobacco store remains the pulsating centre of a community that makes use of a public space to develop the private sphere of their relationships.

The “Brooklyn Cigar Company” becomes the very protagonist in *Blue In The Face*, the follow-up that Auster and Wang decided to film in order to develop and emphasize the minor characters that populate *Smoke*. Illustrious New Yorkers, like Madonna and Lou Reed, also join in for a choral movie that glorifies Brooklyn’s community or, as Auster puts it, “the great People's Republic of Brooklyn”. The film insists upon the ethnic diversity of the borough, showing brief street interviews with people of all origins who share various facts about Brooklyn’s multicultural life. Among the famous faces that appear in the movie, Jim Jarmusch acts in an amusing scene in which he discusses smoking, sex and films while puffing on his last cigarette in the store with Auggie before quitting smoking. It has been noted previously that the men and women who wander around the America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits are compatible to a point that one could imagine that they know each other; that there must have been a time when they crossed path in stories that nobody has ever told. *Blue In The Face* is probably the only piece of fiction in which the worlds of the novelist and the filmmaker actually meet. John Lurie is seen playing saxophone on the streets of Manhattan in *Permanent Vacation*. Fifteen years later he crosses the bridge and blows the

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336 The same atmosphere is recaptured by the novelist ten years later in the choral and comical celebration of life of “*The Brooklyn Follies*” (2005), where Nathan and Tom, uncle and nephew, resurrect from hard times and find comfort in each other’s company and in their illusory project of “Hotel Existence”; a place where all friends and family live together away from the chaos of the world.

337 Solitude is the special moment that, according to Auster, allows a person to appreciate the importance of human relations. On this point, see above chapter 2.

338 The writer is one of a long list of characters that over the years has shared some biographical features with his creator. In this case the novelist lends the name Paul Benjamin to the character, which is the pseudonym that Auster used to publish his first lengthy fictional book, *Squeeze Play* (1982). The dissemination of little autobiographical references in his works is a recurrent mechanism that allows Auster to play with the notion of authorship and cross the thin line between reality and fiction or, as Auster says, “to bring reality and fiction as close together as possible, to leave some doubt in the reader's mind as to whether the story was true or not”. See Auster P. (2003), *Three Films: Smoke, Blue in the Face, and Lulu on the Bridge* (New York: Picador), p. 16

339 See Brown (2008), p. 180

same saxophone in front of Auggie’s Brooklyn store. For a moment, spectators might think that it is indeed a Jim Jarmusch movie that is rolling in front of their eyes when Lurie performs in the background of a scene with Giancarlo Esposito, wearing the clothes of Tommy Finelli, a regular customer of Auggie’s already present in *Smoke*.\(^1\) Quick-witted and open to dialogue with strangers, Tommy might be the older brother of Yo-Yo, another Brooklynite interpreted by Esposito for Jarmusch’s *Night On Earth* (1991). In both films, the different characters played by Esposito engage with the same vitality in a comical conversation about identity and race with a stranger who epitomizes hope. Yo-Yo meets Helmut Grokenberger (Armin Mueller-Stahl), a migrant taxi driver who accepts the long ride to take him back home from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Recently arrived in America from East Germany, Helmut is a middle-aged man who is starting his life again in a new country, in a language that he barely speaks and in a car that he can barely drive. He represents the figure of the foreigner in Jarmusch’s work; someone who arrives in the States with his own big American Dream. Tommy, in turn, talks with the Watch Man (Malik Yoba), a young African-American who walks around Brooklyn selling watches from a briefcase that everybody assumes are stolen and has big dreams of a career as a rapper. In both dialogues Esposito acts as a disillusioned man who plays down his hopeful interlocutors by suggesting caution and vigilance but whose own exuberance and fondness for his neighbourhood imply a certain degree of love for life and hope, nonetheless.

Auggie’s store is one of those places that are increasingly hard to find today as a result of contemporary technology driven communication in a world where, as political commentator Andrew Sullivan wrote in 2016:

> the allure of virtual interaction has helped decimate the space for actual community. When we enter a coffee shop in which everyone is engrossed in their private online worlds, we respond by creating one of our own. When someone next to you answers the phone and starts talking loudly as if you didn’t exist, you realize that, in her private zone, you don’t. And slowly, the whole concept of a public space – where we meet and engage and learn from our fellow citizens – evaporates.\(^2\)

\(^1\) Giancarlo Esposito remembers how: “*Blue In The Face* came out of a conversation. Wayne [Wang], myself, and Paul [Auster] were talking about the cigar shop and how there was so much spontaneity going on within the scripted writing that he thought, “We should make another movie just about the cigar shop.” And that’s how *Blue In The Face* came up. We discussed it, and I said, “I think it’d be a great idea to hang out for a couple of days and do just improvisation.” So he talked to Harvey, and we got four days tacked on to the film, and we just riffed. It was a highlight of my career”. See Giancarlo Esposito’s interview for the website A.V. Club, 25 March 2013: [www.avclub.com/article/giancarlo-esposito-on-irevolutioni-and-bullying-vi-94204](http://www.avclub.com/article/giancarlo-esposito-on-irevolutioni-and-bullying-vi-94204) (last accessed 04/05/2017).

In his most recent feature film, *Paterson* (2016), Jarmusch pays attention to the importance of a rite that seems to be fading away from our metropolitan living. The male protagonist, Paterson (Adam Driver), stops for a drink at the same bar, Shade, walking the dog after dinner at the end of every working day. He interacts with Doc, the bartender played by Barry Shabaka Henley, and other regulars of the bar with whom he engages in conversations that little by little reveal something about each other. They talk about family, sport, work, music, love, the city they live in (Paterson, New Jersey), and every new sentence adds a piece of information for what one day might become a deep friendship like the one that Auggie and Paul share by the end of *Smoke*. Filmed twenty years after the big screen appearance of the Brooklyn Cigar Company, *Paterson*’s Shade bar defies current social habits by offering a traditional physical place for interaction where no one seems to behave, according to the practice described by Sullivan, as if public spaces were now all used as private ones. People interrelate face-to-face in a communal ritual that brings them together every night, momentarily sheltered from the outside world and their private lives. Paterson himself is an odd character in today’s world because of his stubborn decision not to own a mobile phone, a device that would certainly deprive him of precious moments of solitude in which he reads and writes poems.

*Paterson* is a remarkably hopeful work that praises the beauty of simple daily activities, of the slow passing of time and of repetition. Rather than from direct human contact, hope in this film comes from the solitude of the artist’s creative moment. It is in that moment that the individual connects with the outer world and interacts with imagined characters, muses and readers. Following a week in the life of a bus driver, the main character Paterson, and his wife Laura (Golshifteh Farahani), *Paterson* is possibly the least plot-driven work of Jarmusch, built like a song, or a lyric poem, made of different verses – the days of the week – and refrains – the actions recurring again and again with every new day. Repetition and episodic form offer a habitual structure for most of the filmmaker’s works, in what is a reflection of his fondness for music and literature. In this film more than others, poetry is the central subject. The verses composed by the protagonist fill in the screen as he writes on the bus.

11/04/2017), in which the author, a renowned blogger, describes his struggle to overcome his addiction to the internet and denounces the state of current social alienation caused by modern electronic devices. After 27 years, Jarmusch’s wish to “make a movie about a guy walking his dog” seems to be finally accomplished. See Chapter 2, note 63. Piazza calls this a “musical and poetical structure”. See Piazza (2015), p. 130.
before his work-shift, at home early in the morning or during his lunch break. Poetry then becomes part of his living functions, like breathing or eating and, as such, it does not need an audience. His art is not aimed at gaining riches and fame. He does not yearn notoriety and there is no trace in him of the burning ambition of the young man who wants to establish himself as an acclaimed professional artist. Jarmusch seems to suggest that art, rather than the result of study or mechanical and exhausting training is, in the words of critic Richard Brody, “a letting-go, a yielding to circumstances, a generous acceptance of the flow of life—a solitude that’s one with the world.” Art does not have to coincide with work, which is the message the director is hinting at when he reveals that Paterson’s favourite poet is William Carlos Williams, the author of the epic poem Paterson (1946), who in his daily life was a medical doctor. The artist’s creation therefore does not put food on the table but fulfils a man’s private urgency: a hopeful search for meaning in life through creativity. As Auster says, the artist has no choice but to respond to the fundamental human impulse to create. The object of this creative process, art, is something that the novelist calls “magnificently useless” but that the spirit of men needs as desperately as their body needs food. Paterson follows the call to create verses in his solitude that eventually no one outside his household will ever read. But the lack of a tangible audience has little importance as long as the poet will continue to respond to his impulse of creating fiction and interact with the imagined others.

Even though Paterson’s words are not destined to an audience outside his home, ultimately fiction is created to enable communication between people. And storytelling and the recounting of anecdotes animate communal spaces where people meet, like the cigar store in Smoke and the bar in Paterson. Similarly, a live performance of a musician stands as an occasion for storytelling where the singer entertains his audience with short narrations.

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345 The actual authors of the verses that appear in the film are New York poet Roy Padgett and Jim Jarmusch himself.
346 In an interview for Time magazine, Jarmusch said: “There are all kinds of ways to make films or art or poetry. And one reason I’m attracted to the New York School of poets is this idea of writing to one person. Not standing on top of the mountain, saying, “Here is what I believe!” See Zacharek S., “Jim Jarmusch Talks About His New Movie, Paterson, and the Exuberance of Great Poetry” in Time, 22/12/2016, [http://time.com/4605637/jim-jarmusch-paterson-interview/](http://time.com/4605637/jim-jarmusch-paterson-interview/) (last accessed: 24/04/2017)
348 Auster explicates his idea of art and writing in an essay written for the British newspaper, The Guardian. See Auster P., “I Want to Tell You a Story”, The Guardian, November 5, 2006. [www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/05/fiction.paulauster](www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/05/fiction.paulauster) (last accessed 06/05/2017)
349 Ibid.
sketches and tales, a craft that Tom Waits has mastered over his long career.\(^{350}\) The singer becomes a storyteller also in recorded songs when he talks into the microphone to an invisible audience and narrates of something that happened to somebody else, somewhere else, in another time, as in songs like “Frank’s Wild Years”, “Gun Street Girl”, and “The Ghosts of Saturday Night (After Hours at Napoleone’s Pizza House)”. In Auster’s novels and Jarmusch’s films, characters, like the performing singer, often become storytellers. Auster shows a propensity for storytelling in that his characters are regularly engaged in telling each other stories, from personal to anecdotal. And also, the narrator himself, be this one of the characters or an omniscient third person, sometimes wanders in long pauses to tell stories from the past that appear to be disconnected with the main plot. This is the “story-within-the-story” ploy, the hypodiegetic device that characterizes Auster’s books, a tradition that he intentionally borrows from classic authors such as Cervantes, de Chateaubriand, Hammett, and Hawthorne. Similarly to what a reader can find in Auster, Jarmusch’s movies contain stories within stories, which are simply told by one of the characters with none or very little visual aid: the women of Broken Flowers tell Don what happened in their lives in the previous twenty years; all the characters in the short episodes of Coffee and Cigarettes are occupied in the recounting of stories; in Paterson, the passengers on the bus tell each other stories about famous people who lived in their city; in Down By Law, Bob’s poor English is sufficient to deliver the tragicomic event of his murderous accident. Storytelling assumes a crucial role in bringing people together, it facilitates contact, creates intimacy, empathy and the human warmth that generates comfort and hope. Looking once again at Smoke, the film opens with the cigar store patrons gathering around to hear Paul tell a story about Sir Walter Raleigh. The movie ends with more storytelling when Paul buys Auggie lunch to hear the recount of a true event that he will be allowed to use to honour a commission for a Christmas story from a newspaper. Paul sits in silence while Auggie takes his time to narrate in detail what happened to him some twenty years before. The store manager tells a story of two complete strangers who spend Christmas Day together and find solace in each other’s odd company, presenting a tale that questions the meaning of truth, lying, stealing, and giving “in rather odd and unorthodox ways”.\(^{351}\) The spectators, who listen to the whole story as it is told word by word by Auggie, are soon after rewarded with a visual rendition of the same tale in what is a compelling sequence of two radically different ways of telling one story. In addition to the

\(^{350}\) An example of Tom Waits’s storytelling dexterity is contained in his participation to the VH1 live music television series “Storytellers” in 1999, where the singer entertains his audience in between songs with amusing short tales of bizarre happenings, dubiously real life experiences, and everyday wisdom.

fact that the film offers the possibility to hear it first, and then watch it, the story can also be read as it originally appeared in written form on the Christmas Day edition of the *New York Times* in 1990, and was published as a book in 2009.\textsuperscript{352} The cinematic version of Auggie’s tale at the end of *Smoke* is a powerful representation of the human warmth that the film intends to celebrate. Fully silent and shot in black and white, as to suggest an idea of old time fables, this visual recounting of the story is a reminder of the fact that in the art of moving images alone can have the virtue to convey emotions and meaning without the aid of words. In this particular case, though, emotion and meaning are also emphasized by the use of a fitting song: “Innocent When You Dream” (1987) by Tom Waits.

**Dream away.**

Looking for hope in Tom Waits might sound at first as a wasted effort. Taking into account that this is the man who transformed “Heigh Ho”, Snow White’s Seven Dwarfs’ cheerful song, into an apocalyptical urban blues,\textsuperscript{353} one could give up the search easily. Without paying attention to his lyrics, listeners do perceive a lack of hope in the music of Tom Waits. If there is a sound the songwriter is famous for, that is probably coming from his experimental arrangements inspired by Harry Partch, whose influence on Waits has become evident since the release of *Swordfishtrombones* in 1983 (see chapters 2 and 7). Waits’s musical explorations for this album introduced for the first time the possibility of creating music out of anything that is not necessarily a musical instrument: metal objects, sticks, chairs dragged across the floor, broken abandoned tools, as well as tribal drumming and unusual acoustic instruments such as the pump organ, the glass harmonica, the bullhorn or the bass marimba.\textsuperscript{354} All of these, combined with the prominent sound of Mark Ribot’s suspended and off-key guitar notes, produce a sonic mood that is diametrically opposed to the clean and flat electronic sound of synthetiser music that dominated the 1980s.\textsuperscript{355} The results of such experimentation are songs characterised by a sound that at a first listen inspires as much fright

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\textsuperscript{352} The book was published with the title *Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story*, (New York: Faber&Faber) with original illustrations by Isol. Soon after it appeared in the *New York Times* in 1990, this short story was the spark of the whole film project in the mind of director Wayne Wang, who was successful in finding the necessary financial resources and, more importantly, involving the writer in the making of *Smoke*. See Auster P. (2003).

\textsuperscript{353} Waits covered “Heigh Ho” for producer Hal Wilner’s tribute album to the music of Walt Disney films: *Stay Awake: Various Interpretations of Music from Vintage Disney Films* (1988). On this song, see above Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{354} For a detailed list of unusual, odd and recycled instruments that Waits has used in his recordings until 2006, see the Tom Waits online archive at: [http://tomwaitslibrary.info/otherinstruments.html](http://tomwaitslibrary.info/otherinstruments.html) (accessed 21/08/2018).

\textsuperscript{355} In 1987 Tom Waits stated in an interview: «Texture is real important to me; it's like attaining grain or putting it a little out of focus. I don't like cleanliness. I like surface noise. It kind of becomes the glue of what you're doing sometimes» See Forman B., "Better Waits Than Ever", in *Music & Sound Output*, Vol. 7, No. 11. October 1987.

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and anxiety as classic Tin Pan Alley tunes can inspire hope and happiness. There is a
dissonance and rhythmic obsession that, together with the singer’s deep, rough voice,
complete a quality of sound that takes the listener into a world of darkness and dismay. They
are the kinds of songs that would prevent any child from sleeping alone in the dark. If this is
the trademark of the songwriter, hope struggles to find its way into this soundscape.

Nevertheless, like with Jarmusch’s urban desolation and Auster’s narrative of failure, hope
is found in the cracks of such a sound. It is in every note that bears the legacy of the black
musical tradition of America. In particular, the bending, prolonged notes of the blues, that
music genre which enabled generations of musicians to expand the language of popular music
and incorporate in it the whole spectrum of human experience, beyond its initial anguish.
Waits calls this expanded language America’s living music, that is to say black music is “the
only music that’s changing and evolving.” Hope, therefore, in Waits’s sound is strong in
tracks that draw inspiration from black music genres, like gospel and the blues, which offered
musicians an escape from their material world and a bridge to an emphatic, imagined
transcendent or human audience. Music then becomes the very source of hope for the
hopeless in America, just like writing brings company to the solitary author. As Delbanco
remarks, hope in his conception of a nation’s culture was denied to certain instances of the
African-American population and has been replaced by “fear and rage, which today are still
constituent elements of the black experience in America”. Music then becomes an
expedient to regain the negated hope. Reflecting on the experience of black Americans in his
12 Million Black Voices in 1941, writer Richard Wright insisted, “black folk […] are a mirror
of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we
endure is what America is.” With these words Wright asserted that the narrative of hope in
American culture is not solely the prerogative of WASP America, but belongs to the African-
American reality as well, and music, in particular, is the form of expression that magnified
people’s “feverish hunger for life” and a “longing for freedom and opportunity.” And the
blues, in particular, is “an epic as noble [and] as essentially American as any in [United
States] history. It’s the story of a small and deprived group of people who created, against
tremendous odds, something that has enriched us all.” If a man sings the blues it is not
simply to grieve but also to pronounce his lust for life. Writer Luc Sante explains that the

357 See Delbanco (1999), pp. 68-79.
359 Ibid., p. 128.
blues is not one-dimensional and does not exist as a simple answer to white culture, rather it emerges from the monochrome of its name as complicated and diverse as the people that play it and encompasses “anguish as well as defiance, humor, lust, cruelty, heartbreak, awe, sarcasm, fury, regret, bemusement, mischief, delirium, and even triumph.”

Paying attention to the song lyrics, aside from the quasi-religious songs mentioned above, hope is present in other forms. It appears unexpectedly in the lies of the jailed drug addict woman who sings in Tom Waits’s “Christmas Card From A Hooker in Minneapolis” (1978). She creates a fictitious perfect world that is the inverse image of the one she lives in, where she is cared for, happily in love and expecting a child. But when the sad truth is told, she lingers on her one last, thin chance for recovery: She will be eligible for parole on Valentine’s Day. The woman’s falsehood conceals what probably is her dream of a normal life. And dreams are indeed the natural place where hope lives on for characters that find tranquillity only in their sleep. The word “dream” is one of the most recurrent in Waits’s songs. It is the leading thread of Franks Wild Years, Waits’s theatrical piece that premiered in Chicago, in 1986, performed by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company. The singer recorded the score of the play a year later in the album bearing the same name. Frank’s story is one of stardom dreams, disappointment and failure. In “Frank’s Theme”, the main hero dreams away all the burdens that make his life harsh while he awaits a better tomorrow, a turn in the road that will bring joy. His sleep brings relief in “Innocent When You Dream”, the melancholic slow waltz that also provides the perfect accompaniment for Auggie’s story in Smoke. The singer wails about affection and happiness that are long gone in a heart-rending interpretation. Images of good times are preserved in the past, like in the little Auggie’s Christmas tale, and that is why the singer is a thief of memories in his dreams, an act for which he receives self-absolution. In the stupor of sleep and dream, the singer is innocent and happy again. This idea is taken to its extreme when the sleep is eternal and, like in the classic folk tune “Long Black Veil”, listeners hear the words pronounced directly by a deceased person. This is the case of “Good Old World” (1991), a song that Waits wrote for the soundtrack of Jim Jarmusch’s

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362 The song is part of the album Blue Valentine (1978), a melancholic blood tinted work, which makes room for another tune of hope, Leonard Bernstein’s Broadway musical classic “Somewhere”.
363 According to the Tom Waits Fan Archive online, the word dream appears over 90 times in his lyrics between 1973 and 2009, coming after the words night (used 145 times), old (135), love (122), time (117), day (116), eye (97), moon (93) and before home (87) and rain (81). See http://www.tomwaitslibrary.info/lyrics-common.html (last accessed 06/05/2018).
364 Written by Danny Dill and Marjorie Wilkin, “Long Black Veil” was originally recorded by Lefty Frizzell before becoming a standard ballad covered by several artists, including Johnny Cash, Joan Baez, The Band, Mick Jagger, Jerry Garcia.
Night on Earth. Even though life was not always easy, the singer dreams of going back to earth, where he would be eager to try his luck again and savour the things he loved the most: summertime, walking in the rain, the yellow hair of his lover, the red colour of wine.

Waits celebrates hope with yet another contribution to a film soundtrack, when he asserts that the fulcrum of circular time is one main season:

\[ \begin{align*}
&\text{You can never hold back spring} \\
&\text{You can be sure that I will never} \\
&\text{Stop believing} \\
&\text{The blushing rose will climb} \\
&\text{Spring ahead or fall behind} \\
&\text{Winter dreams the same dream} \\
&\text{Every time}^{365}
\end{align*} \]

These words are sung in “You Can Never Hold Back Spring”, written for Roberto Benigni’s The Tiger and The Snow (2005). The song is a short piano ballad with a slow tempo punctuated by long notes softly played by a trombone and a clarinet, over the delicate accompaniment of drums and upright bass. The singer’s voice carries the distinctive “78rpm” lo-fi quality, that background noise of an old record that like a dusty blanket covers the sounds of a song for its entirety, adding a sense of past wisdom that talks to the people of the present. Such device, used by Waits in most of his post-1983 albums, confers an aura of early twentieth century record pioneering.\(^{366}\) Like the actual analogue recordings that date back to the times of Charlie Patton’s folk or Paul Whiteman’s pop music have the power to take the listener back to a long gone era, this song published in our hi-fi digital present suggests a return to the safety of old times. The crackling old record noise brings the listeners back to a golden age idealised by the memory of an easier life, closer to the cycles of nature (an image that well describes Benigni’s representation of life). The wish to return to the past, the search of a lost happiness, assumes an important meaning when one links this song to the war in Iraq launched by the Bush Administration in 2003, which offers the backdrop to the story told in the film. War is part of the cycle of history and like the seasons in a year, it seems to return regularly as the winter of humanity’s story. In their darkest moments, men lean on to memories of a pre-war life and confide in the knowledge that peace will come again, just like spring.

\[ \text{You can never hold back spring} \]

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\(^{366}\) Other examples of songs that bear the 78 sound filter are: “The Ocean Doesn’t Want Me Today “ (1992); “Circus” (2004); “Innocent When You Dream (‘78)" (1987); “It’s Over” (1999); “On The Road” (2006); “Black Market Baby” (1999).
Even though you’ve lost your way
The world keeps dreaming of spring

When the world loses its way and violence overcomes harmony, hopefulness remains alive as people embrace the power to dream. And spring, like hope, takes its place in dreams.

Whereas the conflict depicted in The Tiger and The Snow is not mentioned in “You Can Never Hold Back Spring”, war as an explicit subject returns in some of Waits’s more recent albums. One song in particular combines the experience of warfare with a feeling of hope: “The Day After Tomorrow”, the last track of the album Real Gone (2004). This is probably Waits’s major attempt at the protest song tradition, which Jeffery Keuss calls a “plea for unity and peace”. It is a letter from an American soldier who is looking forward to going home from the front and seeing his family again. The young man is a professional soldier who, as it has become customary for the majority of U.S. soldiers after the Vietnam War, joins the conflict overseas for economic reasons (I been saving all my pay). He writes to his dears on his twenty-first birthday and early on in the songs he announces that he still has faith in the world (I still believe that there's gold/At the end of the world). We learn that despite this positive announcement, his life will be scarred forever by his war experience in a foreign land, when he grieves: I know we too are made/Of all the things that we have lost here. His letter goes on denouncing the brutality of war and the meaningless killing of people on the other side, people who pray god as much as the Americans do. But if the trust in the system that offered him a job, and to whose orders he diligently obeys, seems to have disappeared – or maybe it never existed even before his involvement in the war – hope in this man is nonetheless present. And it takes the form of a yearning for familiar everyday actions that a man performs around the safe haven of his home.

What I miss, you won't believe
Shovelling snow and raking leaves
And my plane will touch down
On the day after tomorrow

In this song lies the dichotomy between the vanishing of a shared national hope, that story of a common goal for the American nation, and the survival of a somewhat small-scale hope nurtured within the relations that tie individuals together. The soldier will not celebrate

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369 We assume the person is a man, but the song does not contain hints on what the soldier’s gender actually is. Given the fact that female soldier personnel participated in the military campaign that commenced on 20 March 2003, the protagonist that gives voice to the song might as well be a woman, a viewpoint that, as seen above, would not be unusual for the Californian singer.
victory on his arrival home the day after tomorrow, he is not expecting a triumphant return but he is longing to replace the rifle with a shovel and get on with his life, interrupted by the will of a third entity, namely his employer, the American nation.

The comforts of home, therefore, appear in Waits as providing a sanctuary of hope against the worldliness of mainstream society. This is similar to the way “home” is used in Auster’s *Smoke* and *Brooklyn Follies* as well as in Jarmusch’s *Paterson*. The three authors’ vision of hope, made of homely life and joyfulness in simple actions and creativity, offers a depiction of men who are not ashamed of invoking wishes of domestic life, like the vagabond in Waits’s “My Pony” (1999) who “lived on nothing but dreams and train smoke” and whose ultimate desire is to be in “Evelyn's kitchen/With old Gyp curled around my feet.” This image of simple living signifies the lack of ambitions imposed by the American Dream. With their accounts of hopefulness in the hopeless world, Auster, Jarmusch and Waits recuperate a central narrative trope of American culture, stating their belief that a better future is achievable but avoiding any form of sentimentalism and patriotism. Their American hope is not in the false promise of a materialistic American Dream, but rests solely in the kindness and warmth of sincere human relations, as seen in the films *Smoke* and *Paterson*, and in the joy found in simple things and actions that Waits celebrates in his songs. Human relations and simple living provide little bites of hope in these storytellers’ Other America and find an answer to Auster’s rhetorical question: “if you don’t have hope, how can you get up in the morning?”

The presence of the road and hope in the works of the Other America, seen in this second part of the present work, sets a familiar American background upon which Auster, Jarmusch and Waits create their understanding of America. This understanding is underscored by a critique that originates from the paradox of enduring poverty, disadvantage, and alienation in the world’s richest economy. Setting hard material conditions for their characters and singing their failures, the three men tell the story of America’s undelivered promise of happiness for all. This is the most realistic trait of their works, which deserves observation with the following part of this work.

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Part Three

THE DEMOCRATIC HERO
Chapter 5

The needs of the body: Depictions of street life, wasteland, and downward mobility amid the culture of wealth.

«The poor can be described statistically; they can be analyzed as a group. But they need an American Dickens to record the smell and texture and quality of their lives.»

- Michael Harrington

«In poverty you may still retain your innate nobility of soul.»

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky

«You can only create if you can care.»

- George Orwell

Let us imagine that somewhere in this world of diffuse digital mass communication someone still exists who has no knowledge whatsoever of America, its society, culture and vast influence over the rest of the planet. If this hypothetical person were to learn about America from the novels, the films and the songs of our three authors, what would be the result of such an education? It is likely that our reader could form an idea of a country where poverty haunts too many, forcing them into isolation and exclusion, while giving them few prospects of improvement.

In the previous chapter we saw how hope keeps people together and offers support in an existence otherwise fraught with difficulties. In most stories, material shortcoming provides the background to the lives of the main characters. Many a protagonist from the stories of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits is penniless or concerned with economic security and when they are not, they often become observers of impoverishment around them. Poverty casts a grim shadow in the narrative of the Other America, everywhere, at all times. It mirrors injustice and inequality in a country that has boasted the title of world’s largest economy with no

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interruption for over a century. So, why are there poor people in a place like America and who are they? These questions become inevitable when one reflects on the whole body of the works this thesis deals with. The answers are not revealed in any direct way, since poverty is hardly ever the main subject of the narration. However, the recurrent portrayal of neglected life at the margins of American opulence provides several hints about the authors’ viewpoints over the issue of who is poor and why poverty is an unresolved problem of American life. A message that comes through the fiction of the Other America is that anyone can become poor, regardless of his or her origins, ethnicity, gender and age. This reality is the result of a widespread “culture of wealth” that ignores poor people, when it does not plainly blame them for their own misery. The humane portrayals of dignified poor in the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits shrug off the stereotype that poor are undeserving lazy people entrenched in a vicious culture and admit that poor people are “normal” people. They are our equals; they are us. This approach to the theme of poverty is at odds with a widespread assumption of the “otherness” of the poor, regarded as alien subjects from the mainstream. Paul Auster clearly contested this assumption criticising his fellow New Yorkers who, in front of the poverty display in their city streets, discuss “about what to do with them” when what they “should be talking about is what to do with ourselves.” To the novelist, who wrote these words in the wake of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s declaration that the homeless had no right to sleep on the streets, the poor are indeed part of our society, and among them are people with degrees who once held jobs and supported families before falling on hard times. “Who are we to think that such things couldn’t happen to us?”

James Truslow Adams, writing in 1931 about the many scars that obstruct the spiritual growth of the American civilization, affirmed that “people refuse to look on the seamy and sordid realities of the country.” This summarizes the general attitude of the mainstream

376 The exact moment in history that saw the US surpass the other nations of the world in terms of economic wealth is debated. Combining the available historical data, The Economist suggests the early 1900s (see chart available at on www.economist.com/node/16834943 - last accessed: 06/03/2018). Historian Adam Tooze indicates 1916 as the precise year when America conquered world economic supremacy, in the introduction of his 2014 study of the First World War: Tooze A. (2014), The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order, 1916-1931 (New York: Viking), fig. 1. Other sources suggest as early as the 1890s. See Thompson D. “The Economic History of the Last 2,000 Years in 1 Little Graph”, in The Atlantic, 19 June 2012 (www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/06/the-economic-history-of-the-last-2-000-years-in-1-little-graph/258676/ - last accessed: 06/03/2018).
society towards poverty: indifference. Three decades later, in 1962, Michael Harrington published *The Other America*, a fundamental sociology book for the post-war debate on the questions of American poverty that inspired the social policies of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.³⁸¹ The text offered a picture of the scale of poverty that was astonishing for an audience that had lost touch with the dire reality of many of their fellow citizens, while busy getting richer in the age of affluence and economic boom. Harrington believed, however, that only an American Charles Dickens could fully describe poor people’s conditions in America.³⁸² Perhaps, he wanted to suggest that American literature does not have a widely popular and influential author who is held as the public supporter of the cause of poor people, and revered as a cultural institution by all audiences, regardless of their economic status. One may argue that American literature has indeed seen several writers who looked into poverty since the times of Emerson and Thoreau as literary scholar Gavin Jones demonstrates with his *American Hungers*.³⁸³ Whether Harrington’s sentence is valid from a literary point of view or not, what matters in his statement is the idea that a complex phenomenon like poverty is best portrayed through artistic endeavour, rather than scientific observation. Only a work of art is capable of evoking the emotional burden of poverty. A single shot of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Kid* (1921) carries pathos and empathy that hundreds of history book pages on the state of the American slums a century ago cannot convey. Lines from John Steinbeck, Richard Wright or Charles Bukowski; photographs of Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans; Appalachian folk songs or Blues music, all have the power of bringing the audience closer to, if not inside, the world of America’s down-and-outs. The works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits provide yet another window on that reality, following in the steps of those who have tried to give a voice to the people neglected by the larger society. Their media give visibility to the poor by endowing them with a full personality that challenges the prejudice and stereotypes that have attended poverty throughout American history.

A sense of unease has traditionally accompanied the perception of poverty in America. A simple equation has dominated the common thought since the early days of the Republic. There ought not to be room for poverty in a democracy based on equal opportunities and

freedom on a rich land that offers soil to anyone willing to work it. Conventionally, therefore, poverty is nothing but an anomaly in America. In 1831 Alexis de Tocqueville greeted American soil as a place where a “confused clamour rises on every side, and a thousand voices are heard at once, each expressing some social requirements,” commending the Americans for their pledge to the principle of egalitarianism. These words were published at a time when the Enlightenment idea of the superiority of reason over religious beliefs was finding its way through American life. The nation was slowly substituting a Puritan creed with a secular civic religion devoted to the country’s modern mission to create a fair society through democracy and social justice. Until then, poverty had been expected as a natural element of society. Poor people were met as a permanent, fatalistic element of God’s creation. As such, they were accepted into every neighbourhood. That changed in the secular and reformist nineteenth century, when God’s will was no longer assumed as an explanation for differences in social status. According to historian David Rothman, Americans two hundred years ago began to perceive the poor “as a separate, distinct, and hostile class. Rather than appear as brothers with a common bond of interest in the community, they appear paupers, endangering the balance of the system.” To prevent the poor from falling into dangerous social practices, their isolation from society was deemed necessary. Alms-houses were created in all States to “end public outdoor relief, insisting that the poor […] must be removed from the society, to a place where temptations to vice could be eliminated, and where their behaviour could be controlled with appropriate rewards and punishments.” Poverty therefore was treated as a social illness requiring rehabilitation. In the worst cases, poverty was explained with the concept of pauperism, namely, voluntary poverty chosen by immoral people, who led a life made of vices. Paupers were undeserving poor, entirely responsible for their economic misery. This way of thinking has survived throughout the decades and can be found today in the assumption that poverty is the negation of American values and that welfare policies do not relieve but exacerbate poverty by fuelling laziness. Poverty thus

386 Ibid. p. 171.
387 Ibid. p. 179.
continues to be perceived as un-American.

When Harrington’s seminal work on poverty was published, the idea of the poor as a distinct entity, alien to the mainstream society, was still dominant. Whereas the book and the debate that it generated were crucial in recognizing poverty as an American problem, the attitude towards the poor was still founded on an “Us vs. Them” approach, as it was evident from the wording used in the 1964 *Economic Report of The President* adopted by the Council of Economic Advisers, which stated: “The poor inhabit a world scarcely recognizable and rarely recognized by the majority of Americans. It is a world apart, whose inhabitants are isolated from the mainstream of American life and alienated from its values.”

Is poverty really a world apart? *The Other America* of Harrington seems to suggest so, especially when the author writes: “[to] be poor is not simply to be deprived of the material things of this world. It is to enter a fatal, futile universe, an America within America with a twisted spirit.” Conversely, the Other America of the fiction of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits seems to hint at the idea that poverty is not a separate world, but an integral part of everyday America, where anyone’s material condition can deteriorate at any time.

Another idea that was conceived in the sixties and which found fertile terrain in the US came from the socio-anthropologic analyses of Oscar Lewis, whose theory of the “culture of poverty” was presented in a 1966 essay. Lewis was convinced that, more than economic, poverty’s causes were to be found in deep-rooted cultural traits that are hard to eradicate. The culture he termed was based on self-deprecation, lack of self-respect, pessimism, passivity, and despair. The theory of the culture of poverty, therefore, described poor people as fatalist, lacking will, present-minded, incapable of deferring gratification, unambitious, disorganized. Furthermore, poverty was understood as hereditary, familial and intergenerational; it passed on from parents into children. This theory reinforced the idea of the “otherness” of poverty and, although both Harrington’s and Lewis’s intention was to launch an appeal against the shame of poverty in the age of affluence, social policy advisor Elizabeth Wickenden warned that their theories could be distorted to support the dangerous idea that poverty is “something other than the absence of money […] and that the poor are poor by their own fault.”

Insisting on the idea that poor form an “underclass” distinct from

“have been trying to reinvent their image, professing sympathy for the less fortunate. But what their party really believes is that if you’re poor or unemployed, it’s your own fault.”


the rest of the society “highlights the peculiarly American tendency to transform poverty from a product of politics and economics into a matter of individual behavior.” According to poverty historian, James Patterson, shifting the observation of the phenomenon of poverty from economic evaluations to cultural considerations did revive the stereotype of the undeserving poor and relieved Americans of their sense of guilt towards the needy. The Other America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits likewise disputes the theory of the culture of poverty. Not only is poverty an integral part of everyday America, but also it does not generate its own separate culture. That is because the destitute people that one encounters in the fiction of the Other America are not the product of a subculture or an underground other world. They are average Americans, with their strengths and flaws like anybody else. Only they come with stories of hardship and failure.

**Nobody was born a bum.**

The narrative of poverty in Auster, Jarmusch and Waits is largely related to three subjects: America’s wasteland, downward social mobility and street life deprivation. Presented together, these issues deliver a picture of social injustice that is the negation of the promise of happiness for all. The characters we encounter are men and women whose mental and physical faculties would not prevent them from enjoying the fruits of the land of plenty. However, they are kept outside the pastures of opportunities that the free world has to offer by entering Harrington’s “fatal, futile universe”, which a busy money-making mainstream America cannot see.

It was mentioned earlier that the main narrator of Waits’s songs is a man who recounts stories of trouble and beauty in America (chapter 2). Hoboes, tramps and bums populate his world.

*My Daddy told me, lookin’ back  
The best friend you’ll have is a railroad track  
So when I was 13 I said, I’m rollin’ my own,  
And I’m leaving Missouri and I’m never coming home*  

*I’ve seen it all boys, I’ve been all over  
Been everywhere in the whole wide world*  

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395 *Ibid.* p. 124. Against the theory of the culture of poverty, Patterson asserts that statistics show that most poor people suffer poverty in the short term; are not lost in a culture of poverty; are able to find jobs and cross the poverty threshold (p.122). At the same time, Patterson adds that consumerism shows how it is the middle class, which lost its ability to save, and not the poor, to be incapable of deferring gratification (p. 122).

I lived on nothin' but dreams and train smoke

These verses, from “Bottom of the World” (2006) and “Pony” (1999) respectively are two of several Tom Waits lyrics that might have come from the repertoire of wandering singers like Woody Guthrie or Harry McClintock. Aside from the romantic formula of the poor hobo-hero on his perpetual itinerary across the American land that Waits himself has fuelled with his own public persona, the frightening brutality of poverty emerges all throughout his oeuvre. It appears behind images of dishevelled rural households, addictions, shattered dreams, war veterans’ exhaustion, petty criminality, and loneliness. The sight of misery on the streets of New York – the same sight that strikes Auster’s Daniel Quinn in City of Glass – inspired the subject matter of the song “Rain Dogs” which provides the title to the album released in 1985. The rain dogs are the street people that the singer observed during his stay in the Big Apple in the mid-eighties, persons who are invisible until the rain comes and they suddenly appear under doorways. After spending time in New York, the singer increasingly expressed an interest and sympathy toward the homeless who became the principal subject of numerous songs and other works. The singer seems genuinely attracted to a world of hardship without romanticizing poverty. As journalist Kristine McKenna wrote as early as 1983, “being broke or drunk doesn’t necessarily make a man brilliant. Nonetheless, some monumental souls do get lost in the cracks of this creaking world, and Waits is out to resurrect a few of them.”

On the screen, Waits played the part of homeless “Rudy the Kraut” in Ironweed (1987, dir. Hector Babenco). Rudy is Francis Phelan’s road comrade, the central character played by Jack Nicholson in a story set in the Great Depression. The two men are part of a community of homeless drifters, caught in a spiral of poverty and alcoholism, who travel to Albany, NY, where Francis goes back to reestablish contact with the family he abandoned. One message that comes across from the personal tragedy of the protagonist, a former successful sportsman, is that behind every homeless person there is a story of a previous life of possessions and comfort. That is an indisputable truth for Francis as he tells Rudy, who believes that a woman in their community, Sandra (Priscilla Smith), has been a bum since the day she was born:

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398 In a radio interview for the promotion of the album in 1985, Waits explained: “a rain dog is somebody who eh… people who sleep in doorways; people who don’t have credit cards; people who don’t go to church; people who don’t have, ya know, a mortgage, ya know? Who fly in this whole plane by the seat of their pants.” See Maher P. (ed.) (2011), Tom Waits on Tom Waits. Interviews and Encounters (London: Aurum), p. 169.
“No, nobody’s been a bum all her life. She had to be something else before she was a bum”. Babenco said the film was “about the courage and beauty of people who we don’t usually think of as having deep and complex emotions.”

Biographer Patrick Humphries believes that Rudy was Waits’s best performance to date, giving the character “a dignity, which enables him to rise above mere caricature.”

The musician affirmed that the experience of wearing the clothes of a tramp made him realize that being a hobo is a dramatic condition and does not simply imply “running away from home […] letting your beard grow, eating out of cans in hobo jungles under a railroad bridge.”

He must have relived the feelings that he experienced playing the part of a dispossessed man when he wrote the verses for the book *Hard Ground* (2011). With its photographic portraits of homeless people in Austin, Texas, made by Michael O’Brien, this work was thought as a successor to James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), which documented the devastation of the Great Depression on sharecroppers in the South. Like that book, *Hard Ground* combines black and white images with words and defies conventional depiction of poverty in order to expose the carelessness and negligence of richer Americans, namely the readers of the book.

Each person is photographed up-close with a grey screen in the background; readers thus have a chance to look into the eyes of the people whom they inattently pass by every day. In the words of the photographer, these images tried to confer to their subjects “something tangible – a print that bore a testament to life”, in order to affirm that they exist even if nobody pays attention to them. The photos show men, women, families, black, white, young and aged people as if to say that poverty knows no boundaries. In the statements they released, which are printed in the last pages of the book, most of the people photographed by O’Brien assert that they cannot fully grasp what has happened to them and explain why and how they became homeless. Waits’s verses are concerned with the inhumanity of homelessness. People with no apparent impediment to succeed in life find themselves on the streets and struggle to grasp the reason and the meaning of their experience. In Waits’s words, they ask: “Can I get up off the mat/ Like a wrestler that has/ Been beaten, beaten/ Can I get up and come/ Roaring back?”; “Sometimes I wonder if there is/ Another life inside of this one/ I was supposed to live.”

And if it is hard for adults to make sense of poverty, children never doubt that

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poverty has no sense at all. In the last lines of the book, a child asks his dad why there are men sleeping outside in the rain, instead of going to their warm and dry homes.

Children are the main focus of *Streetwise* a 1984 documentary by director Martin Bell that features an original score by Tom Waits. Bell follows a group of destitute kids who live on the streets of Seattle, one of America’s wealthiest cities. A modern real-life version of Bunuel’s *Los Olvidados* (1951), the documentary shows how poverty in America is not simply a phenomenon of the rural South, but is found also in the affluent, urban, white Northwest. The nine children whom Bell films have lost their innocence too soon; victims of a world where the survival of the fittest is the norm. Whilst conducting a rough existence, they nonetheless show moments of purity and reveal intelligence and feelings that any child possesses. Visions of squalid urban existence, desperation, petty crime and prostitution, are accompanied by Waits’s gospel tune, “Take Care of All My Children”, which evokes images of a Christian American rural past, with the words of a father whose prayer is to have protection for his children while he is “going up to see [the] Lord”. The song, with its prayer and its Salvation Army marching drums and trumpet arrangement, builds a virtual bridge between the old America of pioneers struggling for survival while following a dream and the film’s modern vision of poverty and bare survival in a nation that has not fulfilled its dream yet.

Waits sings about poor street children in “On the Nickel” (1980), which provided the main theme for Ralph Waite’s film baring the same title. “The Nickel” is the nickname of Los Angeles’ Fifth Street, where homeless people used to gather. Waits, who drove around Los Angeles trying to locate the set of the film, was contacted to compose the title song for the movie. The film, unlike *Ironweed* years later, drew on the lighter side of the mythology of the tramp, offering some comedic sketches of street people looking for a good time. Waits’s song is a romantic ballad that insists on the image of the “little boys” on the streets, never combing their hair, never saying their prayers, and running away from home. It is a Dickensian portrayal of street kids, which Auster revives with his *Mr. Vertigo* (1994).

Walter Claireborne Rawley is an orphan raised on the streets of 1920s Saint Louis, until he is dragged away from Missouri’s urban life and taken to the countryside in Kansas. With some imagination, one might envision Walt sharing street experiences with the man who left Missouri at the age of thirteen in Waits’s “Bottom of the World”. Looking back at his childhood some sixty years later, Walt describes himself as a “fiery little dunce” who was “a

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product of the people and places [he’d] come from.” 406 With his arrival in Kansas, Walt receives an education that changes the course of his life. Knowledge is the key to release an inborn potential in the child that would have gone wasted under the indifference of the street and the negligent care of his Uncle Slim and Aunt Peg. Mid-way in the book, after long strenuous training sessions, his mentor, Master Yehudi, who called him a “piece of human nothingness” on the day they met, finally asserts: “You have a quick mind son. Maybe there’s hope for you yet”. 407 There is hope even for a begging, good-for-nothing, streetwise rascal. The protagonist rises from deprivation into stardom, falls back into the urban underworld, gets rich and then loses everything again, gets married, becomes an alcoholic widower, and finally settles down with a steady job and a woman he loves until he starts to write the book of his life which is Mr. Vertigo.

The extraordinary story of Walt represents a rare occurrence in Auster’s work, together with that of Hector Mann in The Book of Illusions (2002), insofar it tells a story of someone who, at least for a short time, escapes poverty to become rich. A more customary plot for the author is rather that of a reverse path along a downward social mobility. Born into the comforts of a middle-class family, Auster experienced first-hand the hardship of a meager economic condition in his twenties (chapter 2). Before then, his father’s obsession with money saving had already made him well aware of the fact that becoming poor is a concrete possibility for any well-to-do American. In The Invention of Solitude (1982), Auster traces a profile of his late father, Sam, as a man who grew up among poor migrants and, despite a reasonable economic success achieved in his adult life, lived in constant fear of poverty. In that book, Auster notes how the sight of impoverishment made him feel unwell when he was a child, “as if poverty were more than lack of money, but a physical sensation, a stench that invaded [one’s] head and made it impossible to think.” 408 The visits to his father’s tenants in the slums of Jersey City and Newark, the father’s recurring warning to the son on the importance of money-earning to avoid a life in the “poor house”, and his own experience as a moneyless young writer are moments in Auster’s life that left a permanent consciousness of the fact that poverty is real and can hit at any given time. Far from wanting to be part of the race to riches, the author developed a rational approach to the necessity of material possession in order to get by in a capitalist society dominated by the social principle of “every man for

408 Auster P. (1982), p. 62. It is unlikely that Auster was thinking of Harrington’s Other America when he wrote this sentence, however, his words bring to mind the theorist’s plea for an American Dickens to record the smell of poverty.
himself” and the “inhumanity of the marketplace.” Money is essential to survive and when there is not much, the writer and his characters must be pennywise. Being economical is crucial because life is unpredictable and, even if a sum is inherited every now and again, it is never enough to let the guard down. This parsimonious approach, or lack thereof, is part of the fortunes and misfortunes of his characters. The spectre of material disadvantage, therefore, is virtually present in all of his novels, where Thoreau’s Walden core value of frugality is adopted most of the times because of necessity rather than choice.

Auster’s latest novel, *4321* (2017), confirms the idea that poverty is not in the DNA of people but can strike anyone at any time. Following four separate narrative lines, the writer imagines different fates for the same family, the Fergusons. In one story the family is affluent; in two other stories, the Fergusons struggle economically; and in yet another story they are struck by tragedy. Depicting possible different destinies for the same characters, the novelist is refuting the idea of the hereditary vicious cycle of the culture of poverty.

Above all novels, *Sunset Park* (2010) stands out as the work dedicated to the impoverishment of the middle class in today’s America. The book opens with the image of the vanishing families that ran away from their houses in the thousands as a result of the economic crisis of 2008. It is a stark picture that goes against the notion of poverty as a parallel, invisible world.

The absent people all fled in haste, in shame, in confusion, and it is certain that wherever they are living now (if they have found a place to live and are not camped out in the streets) their new dwellings are smaller than the houses they have lost. Each house is a story of failure – of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure – and [Miles] has taken it upon himself to document the last, lingering traces of those scattered lives in order to prove that the vanishing families were once here, that the ghosts of people he will never see and never know are still present in the discarded things strewn about their empty houses.

This passage from the first page of the book introduces the topic of downward mobility, the intrinsic subject in a novel in which young, white educated Americans face the adversities of an economic system that does not guarantee high standards of living for them anymore. The phenomenon hits that part of society which was believed to be sheltered from economic instability for decades. The threat of poverty for the new generations of white, middle-class and educated Americans comes with an extra burden of shame and confusion. The protagonist of the novel, Miles Heller, whose job is to clear abandoned households from objects left

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behind, takes photos in order to record what is left of the lives that once animated the places he visits, before sudden deprivation hit in a combination of surprise and horror. Scaling down one’s lifestyle, and living in fear of losing everything one has accumulated are relatively new preoccupations for many Americans. These Americans are not used to dealing with necessity and scarcity, but now they find themselves fleeing in a hurry without taking their precious personal possessions. As the story develops, Miles moves from the “sprawling flatlands of Florida […] filled with abandoned structures”\(^{411}\) back to his hometown of New York where he squats in “a shack, […] a piece of architectural stupidity”\(^{412}\) with some friends in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park.

Architectural stupidity and abandoned structures are emblematic of many long shots that the eye of Jarmusch has caught across some US metropolises. The allure that the deteriorating face of the American landscape has on the filmmaker brings us stunning sequences of city streets, neighbourhoods, small towns and even countryside that speak of neglect and scarcity. Jarmusch’s America is the negative of the grandiose Hollywood visions of lush nature and exciting city life. If there is a connection between space, land and wealth then Jarmusch’s landscape belongs to the lowest socio-economic classes of America. His images anticipate the claims, contained in historian Nancy Isenberg’s *White Trash* (2016), that “class identity and the material and metaphoric meaning of land are closely connected in America” and human worth is measured “by the value of the land people occupy and own.”\(^{413}\) Chapter 2 mentioned how decay, for Jarmusch, is the leading aesthetic in sites that are anonymous and monotonous. Whilst, the main warning that transpires from the pictures of decay is one of rapid decline of the American Empire, the anonymity and repetitiveness of the landscape inform the viewer on the economic conditions of the people who inhabit and move across these lands. The opening shots of *Stranger Than Paradise*, *Down By Law* and *Mystery Train* serve that purpose well. Visions of cities at their worst anticipate chronicles of aimless wandering, incarceration and abandon. Poverty does not cripple the characters, but it is an underlying reality for them when they can barely afford to pay twenty-two dollars for a night at the Arcade Hotel in Memphis, or have to eat “TV food” in a dismal New York apartment or are kicked out by their girlfriends to wander on the streets of New Orleans after they lose their job. Twenty years later, we follow Don on his road trip in *Broken Flowers* through an America that is once again unimpressive, but not abandoned and poor. The landscape in


*Broken Flowers* is the exception to the deteriorating America of Jarmusch. Don, after all, is not concerned by poverty. He is a wealthy man and the women he visits on his journey are not poor. If one can talk of poverty in this film, it is a spiritual poverty that floats around comfortable lives. Therefore, we see a neat, well-kept landscape that is neither spectacular nor hideous. It is the reflection of “averageness” among America’s middle-class, whose world is witnessed within this work.\(^{414}\) However, Don finds one woman, Penny (Tilda Swinton), whose life has not brought any material comfort and security. Penny lives in a trailer park with a gang of bikers, one of whom, her boyfriend, knocks Don out with a punch in the face. Penny is hardened by the filthy conditions she lives in. She is the only woman in the film who does not show any form of politeness and shows no surprise when Don appears at her doorstep. She is plainly annoyed and does nothing to hide it. If Don, on one side could be the aged version of a male character of Jarmusch’s early films, Penny on the other might be one of the Seattle children in *Streetwise*, grown-up disillusioned, angry, and violent. Observing the other female characters of the film, we assume, though, that Penny was once a well-off girl like the others who dated Don in the past and that something happened in the meantime to force her into a squalid existence, among broken objects and abandoned machinery.\(^{415}\) Like Francis in *Ironweed* would say, no one was born a bum.

The relation between landscape and economic status is evident also in the feature films released by Jarmusch in the Nineties: *Dead Man* (1995) and *Ghost Dog* (1999). In the latter, the main hero walks along the destitute streets of Jersey City.

> The last time I was in Jersey City […] the place had the look of a disaster area, as if it had been pillaged by Huns. Gray, desolate streets; garbage piled everywhere; derelicts shuffling aimlessly up and down. […] I sat down and looked out at a bank across the street. No one came out, no one went in. The only living things were two stray dogs humping on the steps.\(^{416}\)

These words are not pronounced by the protagonist played by Forest Whitaker, who is taciturn and detached, but they could accompany his walk if only Jarmusch used off-screen narrating voices in his films. Auster wrote them in *The Invention of Solitude* to describe the desolate state of the city his father lived and worked in. The building where Ghost Dog is a squatter could have been one of the many that Sam Auster managed throughout his real estate career and where his son Paul became aware of poverty early on in his life. If *Ghost Dog*

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\(^{414}\) See Mosca (2006), p. 132. For Mosca the anonymity of the landscape in *Broken Flowers* stands for a common rediscovery of the importance of familial ties in the post 9/11 America.

\(^{415}\) Among these objects, Don spots a pink typewriter, perhaps the same used to type the anonymous letter that set him on his road trip. That is one of many clues that stimulate the audience’s intellect without taking it to a resolution of the movie’s mystery. See above, chapter 3.

captures once more the state of American cities today, with *Dead Man* poverty emerges from America’s past. Chapter 3 showed how the frontier in this western movie does not symbolize adventure and new life; instead it is a frighteningly menacing and dangerous place. This film, too, offers a long shot of urban wasteland, although we look into an old, fictitious town, called Machine. The place is a bleak settlement, covered in mud, and populated by sinister and disease-ridden people that well match Isenberg’s description of the disposable class of “white trash” men and women who were forcibly pushed out of the Eastern colonies to pave the road for future landowners in the West. What really oppresses Machine is the intimidating factory that overlooks the town from a hill and darkens its sky with black smoke. Whoever lives there is doomed to a life of exploitation and misery inflicted by the hand of a ruthless business. Instead of brave pioneers who meet their fortunes in the beautiful landscape of the West, Jarmusch’s take on a classic film genre delivers a Dickensian picture of working class mistreatment and wretchedness. Machine is a settlement of working-poor, an example of those shantytowns that, according to historian Lisa Goff, have always been an integral component of America’s rural and city landscape. Ignored by the official historiography for too long, towns like Machine have survived in the memory of Americans thanks to popular culture, through several paintings, songs, plays and movies, to which Jarmusch’s *Dead Man* represented a late addition in the mid-1990s.

This parade of poverty-stricken people and places in Jarmusch, Auster, and Waits tells of material disadvantage first and foremost. The people depicted in their works are in a state of need because they do not have the appropriate means to access available resources and opportunities. They either never possessed these means, – like in the case of Walt, the little boys of “On The Nickel”, the derelicts of *Dead Man* – or they lost them along the way – the squatters of Sunset Park, Francis or Penny. Through these stories, the reader finds out that poverty is synonymous with economic scarcity and does not belong to the “more nebulous discourse of personal failure,” like Gavin Jones writes. This claim is not universally accepted in a nation where many still believe that poverty is a matter of individual

417 Isenberg N. (2016), p. 216. The author criticises Frederick Turner’s frontier thesis, which presumed that western migration had alleviated poverty for the Eastern State. Isenberg states that by the 1930s, challenged by the epic internal migrations of the economic depression, the thesis no longer worked.

418 Jarmusch’s unusual choice to place imposing and scary factory in America’s Western frontier recalls the images of early industrialisation contained in Dickens’s books. The protagonist of the film, William Blake (Johnny Depp) visits the factory where he is supposed to be employed as an accountant. Upon his arrival, he is badly treated by the business manager of the factory, played by John Hurt, whose British accent provides a link to Charles Dickens’s depiction of English factories.


responsibility. The works that this thesis examines challenge this common notion. What they put under question is therefore the idea of the otherness of the poor and the existence of a so-called culture of poverty, that psychological condition that transforms people into needy weak members of society.

**Those who can care.**

Instead of focusing on the innate psychological profile of the underclass, why doesn’t one change viewpoint and concentrate on the psychological traits of non-poor classes? Could one assume that there is something of a “culture of wealth” that is the reverse of the culture of poverty described by Oscar Lewis? That would be a culture that pushes people towards a competitive, future-minded attitude and regards ambition as one of its core values, together with strength of will, optimism, methodical organization, and self-esteem. It is reasonable to believe that such a culture, or better yet, such a set of values, which are dominant in Western societies, instills unfriendliness for poverty, a condition that, according to Lewis’s theory, is based on lack of ambition and fatalism. A culture of wealth, then, could be seen as the principal cause of marginalization of the poor, and of the general opposition to social policies that use public money to alleviate poverty. This idea, of course, needs proper sociological analysis to avoid simplistic conclusions. What I would like to propose here is that if one is willing to pay attention to the idea of a hereditary culture of poverty, one should then be willing to accept the notion that wealth too can be based on pre-fixed behaviour and beliefs that instigate the prejudice and stereotypes which have marked poverty in modern times for so long.

Many of the dispossessed inhabitants of the Other America appear intelligent, have dreams and hopes, in other words, they do not match the psychological profile implied by the culture of poverty. For instance, Pilar, Miles Heller’s young girlfriend in *Sunset Park*, is the negation of Lewis’s theory. Despite her poor immigrant background and the fact that people around her live in “a bag of humdrum daily routines,” she is a top student in school, curious and ambitious.421 If there is one thing that this girl will inherit from her family, it is material disadvantage, not laziness. In the Other America the viewpoint on class division is from the bottom up. Instead of accepting a one-dimensional description of poverty, this fiction offers a multifaceted picture of needy Americans, who are excluded from the mainstream economy. Their condition derives from material, economic causes and not from inborn qualities.

Auster’s position on the debate about the economic and cultural causes of poverty is clear when he writes that free market economy rests on the principle that “wealth creates poverty.”\footnote{Auster P. (1999), p. 502.} One may add that the culture of wealth creates the culture of poverty. In other words, a blind trust in the principles of the market economy feeds the idea that poor ought to be undeserving, lazy people, responsible for their lack of wealth.

In recent years, the debate on poverty in America has regained prominence in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008. Media pundits and scholars renovated their concerns on a troubling phenomenon that has become more visible to many Americans. Studying the history of the working poor, Nancy Isenberg believes that everyone in the United States should “wonder how such people exist amid plenty. As she cast her eyes upon southern trailer trash in the middle of World War II, the Washington Post columnist Agnes Meyer asked, ‘Is this America?’”\footnote{Isenberg N. (2016), p. 312.} Readers, viewers and listeners of the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits might have been asking the same question over the past thirty years or more.

The Other America of these works sets its eyes on the underprivileged and delivers a realist account of their conditions, against the idea of the otherness of poverty and the Us vs. Them mindset that are entrenched in the theory of the culture of poverty. No matter how absurd or surrealist their stories sometimes become,\footnote{On the topic of realism in literature, critic James Wood. in a negative review Paul Auster’s body of work, asserts that “[t]he reason Auster is not a realist writer [...] is that his larger narrative games are anti-realist or surrealist.” See Woods J., “Shallow Graves. The novels of Paul Auster” in The New Yorker, 22 Noveber 2009. www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/11/30/shallow-graves (last accessed: 28/02/2018). Against this description of his works, the author defended his idea that life is stranger than fiction in 2012: “I think one of the problems with so-called realist fiction, which is the dominant aesthetic especially in America for a long time, in those books, the eccentricities of life are often eliminated for a kind of typological portrait of human beings. The weird and uncanny don’t play a part in it. And I think when people object to other kinds of writing, it’s because they’ve read so many of those books and they’re not looking at the world — because the world is a crazy place”. See Daley D., “Paul Auster: “I Think of the Right-Wing Republicans as Jihadists” in Salon, 19 October 2012. www.salon.com/2012/08/19/paul_auster_i_think_of_the_right_wing_republicans_as_jihadists/ (last accessed: 05/03/2018).} reality is present in the guise of the background decay and poverty of the land and its people. Poor people always make an appearance in the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits in some ways. Isn’t that the case with real life in America, where poor people appear far and wide in big cities, small town and countryside alike?\footnote{For a picture of the geographical distribution of poverty in the US, see “The 2017 Distressed Communities Index” of the Economic Innovation Group available at: www.eig.org (last accessed: 06/03/2018).} The Other America replicates this simple fact into its fiction, because its authors direct their attention to conditions of disadvantage.

The actuality of the depiction of street life, wasteland, and downward mobility is confirmed by recent studies on poverty. Data show that the widening income gap and stagnant
wages relegate eighty percent of the population to the category of low median income working class,\textsuperscript{426} among which many cross the poverty threshold back and forth.\textsuperscript{427} Moreover, the highest increases in the percentage of poor people after 2007 concern groups that were traditionally spared by poverty: white and highly educated Americans.\textsuperscript{428} The Economic Innovation Group believes that 52.3 million Americans live in distressed community, where “the years of overall U.S. economic recovery have looked much more like an ongoing downturn.”\textsuperscript{429} The studies on poverty published in the 2010s look back at the past three decades of industrial decline that left many workers without jobs, during which our authors have released the great part of their oeuvre. Poverty is a phenomenon observed with new eyes in scientific publications, with a special attention to categories of poor that were not taken into account before, namely middle-class citizens. Among the many titles, the already mentioned \textit{White Trash} of Nancy Isenberg insists on the fact that class division has always been part of the social fabric of America, which has allowed and nurtured the presence of an underclass of disposable working poor among its citizens; Lisa Goff rediscovers the perpetual reality of shanty towns throughout US history; 2017 Pulitzer prize for nonfiction, Matthew Desmond’s \textit{Evicted}, recounts the choice of its author to live side by side with working poor, who have to pay up to eighty percent of their income in rent, and tries to explains why they cannot come out of the poverty spiral they are caught in;\textsuperscript{430} Sasha Abramsky’s \textit{The American Way of Poverty} (2013) denounces poverty as a systemic problem and looks for a way out through taxation and welfare policies.\textsuperscript{431} A common thread in these works is that poverty is a persistent problem in America that has not found a solution despite the prosperity of the country’s economy. This new literature generally sees the dismantling of welfare programs as a major cause of inequalities and advocates for new social policy reforms and state intervention as an answer to the escalation of indigence.\textsuperscript{432} More than Harrington’s \textit{The Other

\textsuperscript{426} Samuel L. (2012), p. (196)
\textsuperscript{428} \textit{Ibid.}, table 1 p. 123
\textsuperscript{429} See “The 2016 Distressed Communities Index”, p. 4, available at \url{http://eig.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-Distressed-Communities-Index-Report.pdf} (last accessed: 06/03/2018). The organization defines distressed communities as areas with no residential investment, and with the highest numbers of shuttering business and disappearing jobs. The number of people living in those areas has increased by 1.9 million between 2016 and 2017.
\textsuperscript{430} Desmond M. (2016), \textit{Evicted. Poverty and Profit in the American City} (New York: Crown Publisher).
America, the spiritual predecessor of these writers is John Kenneth Galbraith’s The Affluent Society (1958), which insisted that poverty’s causes are economic and not cultural, the main obstacles to upward social mobility being lack of college education and income inequality.\textsuperscript{433}

If the picture of destitution in the fictional Other America seems to correspond to that analysed by scientific publications in recent years, this fiction contains no answers to the problem of poverty. There is no direct or indirect mention of social policies, or lack thereof, in the stories of the marginalised characters of the Other America, although the sympathy that they rouse for the poor could lead the reader to believe that political action is necessary to tackle the problem. Perhaps, Auster, Jarmuch and Waits would agree with the words of Walker Evans when he affirmed that his art wasn’t deliberately political. The photographer said:

the work produced in the Depression looks like social protest. It wasn’t intended to be. It wasn’t intended to be used as propaganda for any cause. I suppose I was interested in calling attention to something and even shocking people, but I don’t think I had the purpose of improving the world. I like saying what’s what.\textsuperscript{434}

An artist’s main concern is in the emotional relationship, a sensory connection that a work of art can establish with reality and not the creation of a program for political action. However, books, films and songs that insist on poverty do convey political and social messages. In his incomparable essay on Dickens, George Orwell asserts that the classic author had “not even a clear grasp of the nature of the society” he wrote about, but he had an emotional perception that something was wrong.\textsuperscript{435} Hence, Dickens could create his art because he could care about the problems he witnessed around him in London.\textsuperscript{436} Orwell adds: “every writer, especially every novelist, has a ‘message’, whether he admits it or not, and the minutest details of his work are influenced by it. All art is propaganda.”\textsuperscript{437} Willing or not, the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, too, have a political content when they disclose care for the poor and the forgotten against power and indifference. Perhaps, the most powerful message that these works contain is an invitation to change point of view, and see the world from a position of material disadvantage. And maybe, embracing poor Americans as equal brothers and sisters or neighbours, rather than observing them as scientific “other” subjects, is key for a change in the dominant mentality that in the long run could help alleviate poverty more than welfare


\textsuperscript{435} Orwell G. (1940), pp. 25-26.

\textsuperscript{436} Ibid, p. 25.

\textsuperscript{437} Ibid, p. 20.
reforms may do. Disregarding the idea of a poverty subculture, revising the priorities in a nation’s moral and social values and shifting from materialism to selflessness might all be beneficial actions in the continuing efforts to overcome poverty. Twenty-two years after the publication of *The Other America*, Harrington’s observation of poverty was extended to the new poor in the Reaganomics age and a new appeal was made by the author who wrote: “it is my deeper hope that […] when we join, in solidarity and not in noblesse oblige, with the poor, we will rediscover our own best selves – that we will regain the vision of America.”438 This sentence, not only does embrace the value of human brotherhood, but also presents the very idea of America as a nation founded on it. Human brotherhood, with freedom and equality, are the pillars of Western popular culture on which Dickens’s fiction rests, according to Orwell. These pillars transpire from the fiction of the Other America, not only as a hopeful yearning for human relations, but also in the authors’ choice to view America from the eyes of the outcasts. This is an inestimable quality in times when even economists attest that the “country lacks a broad sense of community, […] common goals and ideas about civic responsibilities.”439

Going back to the initial question, – why are there poor people in a place like America and who are they? – given the picture traced with the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, the answer seems to be: there are poor people in America because its economic structure is based on a market place competition that excludes those who are materially dispossessed and offers no relief to poverty. Poor people are common American citizens who either are born into poverty or fall into bad times and struggle to cope with impoverishment within an indifferent society. More than anything, these disadvantaged people would benefit from a change in society’s mentality from contempt to human brotherhood. In the meanwhile, whilst readers, viewers and listeners are left to make up their mind on the many open questions that surround such a perennial problem as poverty, the Other America of these three men continues to offer shelter to those who do not adhere to the culture of wealth and live at the margins of the mainstream society and its insatiable appetite for opulence. Instead of stories of personal success, these people candidly tell stories about their failures.

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On a cold February morning P., a man in his early thirties, goes downtown to meet the president of a large corporation. After years of wandering, building up a resume of odd jobs, P. has decided it is time to strive toward a solid financial position. He has assembled a refined card game for sports enthusiasts that he wishes to sell to a big toy company. Thanks to a series of personal connections he has secured his interview with the top man in the field. For the first time in his life, P. is coming face to face with a representative of the corporate world. He wears his best clothes – a jacket and the only tie he owns. Not knowing exactly what to expect, he arrives on time and is greeted by a man approximately his age, impeccably dressed and impassive, cold and fast. He wastes no time with introductions or casual chatter but instead asks P. to show him what he has got. P. sits down, unwraps his cards, places them on the desk, and commences to illustrate his creation. A few seconds into his demonstration, P. observes the other man’s hand reaching out for him. Not understanding that this means his time is up, he goes on demonstrating the game’s rules, only to be interrupted: “Thank you.” P. is dismissed. A sense of humiliation pervades him as he collects his cards, while the other man turns away. P. has reached the lowest point of his life. He is a failure.

This happened in real life to Paul Auster in the late 1970s. The writer describes this moment in all its horrifying details with Hand to Mouth, his 1997 memoir that bears the

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440 Marcus G. (1975), Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock’n’Roll (2008 New York: Plume), p. 20
At that moment in his life, Auster was anxiously looking for a source of revenue to support his young family without having to sacrifice his time, the most precious asset for the aspiring writer. Confronting the corporate environment, as represented by this meeting with the business manager, felt brutal to someone with an arts degree and no such background. More than anything, what bothered Auster about that meeting was the lack of respect with which he was treated. In his memoir, he compares the president of the toy company to a Nazi officer, a heartless executive who has no regard for fellow humans whatsoever. The man’s behaviour shows how the race to riches has turned people into emotionless monsters. Who is then to take the blame for this malfunctioning of society? The shameful loser who cannot secure decent social status for himself and his family? Or, is it the heartless winner on top of the social ladder who has no sympathy for anyone below him? Auster’s experience demonstrates that failure is not the prerogative of purposeless or unintelligent, lazy people. It strikes even those who have ideas and do their best to be part of an economic system that rejects them.

Failure certainly feels personal, as demonstrated by Auster’s recollection. Yet it is the by-product of the economic system or, as historian Scott Sandage argues, it is the foundation of the American Dream. The economic strength of the country and its promise of wealth are based on failure as much as they are on success. Those who fail, then, should not be ridiculed as unworthy members of our society, because they strive to contribute to its prosperity like those who succeed in their goals. Yet, they are marked as losers in a nation whose people “sprint as much to outrun failure as to catch success.” Sandage illustrates this theory in *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (2005), an inquiry into the experience of nineteenth century men whose businesses failed, crippled by the ever-changing market economy, despite their hard work and good intentions. Similarly to what the literature on poverty says regarding the systemic presence of indigence in US history, Sandage suggests that for every success story in America there is a counter story of failure. Just as poverty mirrors a culture of wealth, failure then is the outcome of a culture of success. In other words,

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445 Ibid. p. 2.
446 For an analysis of the literature on the subject of poverty in The United States, see above, chapter 5.
447 Sandage explains that the voices of men who fail are forgotten because historians have focused their interest on middle-class consumerism, desire and accumulation as the hallmarks of American life, forgetting that failure, disgrace and dispossession are as present in the nation’s history as much as victory. See Sandage (2005), p. 9.
to extrapolate from Auster when he states that wealth creates poverty,\textsuperscript{448} one can assume that success creates failure. Failure is indeed an “option” open only to those who may attain success. Whole tiers of American society do not have such an option, being born and caught in the phenomenon of poverty described in the previous chapter. This is the fundamental distinction between the topics of poverty and failure. Whereas the first indicates a condition of material disadvantage, the second belongs to an intangible, mental condition that often does not coincide with necessity.

The obsession with success as the ultimate goal in life is part of the American capitalist ideology that took form in the century between the administrations of two “icons of individualism and progress,”\textsuperscript{449} Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt (1801-1901). Before this ideology was fully shaped, failure was considered a misfortunate event that occurred to entrepreneurs; but when business and the pursuit of wealth became the predominant activities in everyday life, language evolved so that someone does not cause failures anymore, someone is a failure.\textsuperscript{450} For Americans, failure has become an identity category dictated by the economy and something that frightens the average citizen. A strong social pressure to succeed creates a psychological state for which nothing is worse than being a failure in the eyes of others, not being able to achieve success in the land of plenty. A good American, therefore, is an ambitious American. Ambition is the entry point in the marketplace, which is at the heart of American life in the mainstream, generating great expectations of wealth and success in a nation’s collective consciousness. To put it bluntly, to fail in America is to be unable to take part in the economic system and make money. However, everyone must try to be part of it, unless one is unambitious, which means to be a natural born failure with no chances whatsoever to succeed in life. The absence of ambition in people upsets society more than their lack of accomplishment; “low ambition offends Americans even more than low achievement.”\textsuperscript{451} The fact that low ambition is unethical or immoral on some level reaches back to the Puritan roots, like Americanist Perry Miller pointed out by quoting John Cotton, one of the most preeminent theologians of the first settlers, who said: “if thou hast no calling, tending to publique good, thou art an uncleane beast.”\textsuperscript{452} While Auster provides an eloquent account of failure from his own life, Jarmusch provides an illustrative example of the inconceivability of the unambitious life in his film \textit{Night on Earth} (1991). The

\begin{itemize}
\item Sandage S. A. (2005), p. 5.
\item \textit{Ibid.} p. 11.
\item \textit{Ibid.} p. 2.
\end{itemize}
following story is an example of how a person’s lack of great ambitions is incomprehensible for Americans.

It is 7:07 pm in Los Angeles. Victoria Snelling (Gena Rowlands) has just stepped off a private jet back from a work trip. She is good-looking, elegant and independent. At the airport, while awaiting her luggage at baggage claim, she is engaged in work conversations over the phone. She then meets Corky (Wynona Rider), a young female taxi driver who offers her a lift. Corky has just fixed her car and her face and baggy clothes are greasy. For a moment, Victoria looks apprehensive when Corky puts her dirty hands on the expensive woman’s expensive luggage. A self-consumed businessperson, sure of herself and immersed in her thoughts, Victoria pays little attention to Corky as they head to Beverly Hills. She resumes her phone conversations in the backseat. She picks up her mobile phone, a rare sight for the year 1991 – what many people back then would have called a “cordless telephone” – and discusses matters related to her line of work. Victoria is a casting agent. She is supposed to provide new actors for a forthcoming movie production, but her task is proving difficult. Her calls do not produce the desired results and, as the taxi moves on, Victoria is losing hope she will be able to secure a contract. The phone rings again and, while she is about to declare defeat, she realises that the foul-mouthed, chain-smoking, pretty little driver who sits in front of her could be the person she has been hoping to cast. At the end of the run, outside the car, the woman unleashes her best smooth talk to offer the girl the chance of a lifetime: to act in a Hollywood movie. Victoria is sure that Corky will accept, because “everybody” wants to be a movie star. Given this familiar rags to riches narrative, it is more than likely that – with just a little hard work -- this modern-day Cinderella will find fortune and fame. All the premises for a great American fairy-tale are in place. The only setback in this story is that it was generated by the mind of Jim Jarmusch, who plays with film genres never fulfilling any expected outcome associated with mainstream cinema. The story does not go on with Corky transitioning from a rude, working-class brat into a high society lady, adored by her fans, and contented by the film industry. In fact, the story does not go on at all. The story ends there, with that conversation outside the taxi when the two ladies part after Corky declines the job offer of Victoria, whose incredulous face speaks to how difficult it is to accept and understand someone’s lack of ambition.

This is the first of five episodes that make Jarmusch’s fourth full-length film, Night on Earth. In this scene, and for the first time in his career, the director references the mainstream movie industry. He does so by employing the familiar plot of the fortuitous encounter in the City of Angels that changes one’s life forever, and using the clichéd, shark-like attitudes and misleading language of agents.\(^4\) The dialogue between the two women introduces a trope of American life that is larger than the immediate subject of the film industry, namely personal ambition. Corky refuses Victoria’s offer because she does not want to compromise her plan to quit driving and become a mechanic. Her “low ambition” goal is mindboggling for Victoria. How would anyone rather be stuck in a dead-end job than seize the chance to become rich and famous? In the Other America of Jarmusch’s films, this is possible, thanks to a reverse success narrative where Corky, void of social aspirations yet true to her own desires and preferences, is the real winner and Victoria, the dynamic businesswoman, has to accept defeat in front of someone who does not conform her or society’s expectations.

The same inverted narrative was in the mind of a shaky, nervous and elusive young Tom Waits in the 1970s when he often joked around in interviews with the idea that he was a living example of someone who had success without a college degree.\(^5\) The musician referred to another trite American narrative about the power of ambition, namely the possibility open to anybody with strong ambitions and good ideas to become a successful entrepreneur without training.\(^6\) Calling himself a success story, Waits was making fun of the American dogma of success. His physical appearance did not suggest an accomplished life at all and, in music business terms, his albums were not certainly hits – failing to enter the charts despite his visibility in the music press and a steady fan base that indeed assured him what one may call underground or “indie” success. Waits was aware of the paradox and used it to ridicule American conformist views as well as rock music mythology as if to say: “Look at me on television: I am a degenerate being and I fooled you all by becoming a big star.”

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\(^4\) The vacuous world of Hollywood returns years later in two segments of Coffee and Cigarettes (2003): “Cousins” and “Cousins?” in which actors Cate Blanchett, Steve Coogan and Alfred Molina, who play themselves, ironically display the idiosyncrasies of people in that industry.


\(^6\) Success without college is another example of the rags to riches narrative. Perhaps Tom Waits in the seventies was thinking of classic examples of this narrative like John D. Rockefeller or Henry Ford, or his contemporary David Geffen who then built the music industry empire of which he was part. The appeal of the subject is still strong nowadays as contemporary motivational literature on the subject of success without college takes inspiration from the stories of famous businessmen such as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg. Some best-selling titles are: Ellsberg M. (2012), The Education of Millionaires: Everything You Won't Learn in College About How to Be Successful (New York: Portfolio/Penguin); Boles B. (2012), Better Than College: How to Build a Successful Life Without a Four-Year Degree (Loon Lake: Tales Peak Press); Lee L. (2001), Success Without College: Why Your Child May Not Have to Go to College Right Now—and May Not Have to Go At All (New York: Doubleday).
is that, to reach the position of recording and touring artist in his twenties, the musician had to go through a long troubled journey of personal growth, obstructed by both financial and emotional insecurity. He has known failure.

Failure, arising either from lack of ambition or bad luck, is a well-known subject for Auster, Jarmusch and Waits. Indeed, the subject of failure has been a core question in American literature since its inception. Failures have been the principal characters of American books, from Bartleby to Gatsby and as well as the heroes of many films and songs.\textsuperscript{457} According to literary scholar Gavin Jones, American authors have looked into failure as an inner condition as well as a social and economic category.\textsuperscript{458} He believes that “American literary identity was born from an overwhelming sense of decline.”\textsuperscript{459} The scholar argues that failure for the American writer is a “process of thinking, knowing, feeling and being,” a totalising experience that descends directly from the “difficult material condition of authorship.”\textsuperscript{460} Being an artist does not guarantee a social status and economic stability. Hence, the artist, or better, the aspiring artist who has not yet obtained public recognition is not assimilated in the economic and social system. Failure is his/her permanent social and inner condition, or, as Jones calls it, the artist’s foundational ongoing experience.\textsuperscript{461} Auster clearly describes the figure of the young artist as an outcast of society when he writes about his own dilemma of choosing between a steady job to make money and satisfying the needs of the body or devoting all his time to write and satisfying the needs of the soul.\textsuperscript{462} Reflecting on the condition of intellectuals at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Ellen Willis illustrated the same difficulty when she stated that “the lives of American intellectuals and artists are defined by one basic problem: how to reconcile intellectual or creative autonomy with making a living. They must either get someone to support their work – whether by selling it on the open market or by getting the backing of some public or private institution – or find something to do that somebody is willing to pay for that will still leave time to do their ‘real work’.\textsuperscript{463} Economic and social failure therefore, despised and feared by

\textsuperscript{457} Sandage S. A. (2005), pp. 266-271.
\textsuperscript{459}Ibid., p.12.
\textsuperscript{460}Ibid. p. 13 and p. 53.
\textsuperscript{461}Ibid. p. 155.
the majority, is common ground for the arts. Auster, Jarmusch and Waits are familiar with it, both in their personal experience as artists and through the characters that populate their creations. Failure is a recurrence in their works that has redeeming powers for their characters, opening up to new possibilities. In their America, those who are addressed as failures by the surrounding society are not ashamed of their story, as they have found or are looking for new prospects in alternative ways of life.

**A fully experienced life.**

Three different types of failure inhabit the stories of Jarmusch, Waits and Auster: the careless, the destitute wanderers and the middle-class dropouts. That is the director’s failure characters are simply too distracted to worry about their social status; the musician sings of people who coexist with failure in every step of their life; and the writer observes the ruin of the children of well-off families.

Film scholar Julian Rice claims that “social failure is the gateway to a fully experienced life” for Jim Jarmusch.464 Despising the idea of “fashioning your life around money, or lifestyle,” the director states that there are ways of living other than the one driven by the American Dream.465 The depiction of failure that emerges from his films derives from the filmmaker’s own life and work choices. Freeing himself from the drive to box office success in his field, Jarmusch has been able to develop his creativity without boundaries imposed by commercial taste and other industry requirements. This means that he may still have to go to work on foot, crossing Manhattan from the Lower East Side all the way to the West Side to work on separate projects,466 but his artistic trajectory has remained coherent with the punk values of free expression, which influenced him at the beginnings of his career. Since the release of his first movie, Jarmusch has turned down the competitive scheme of work ethics in America. In 1987 he lamented that in his country:

> there’s such a concern with ambition. We’re so fed up with it, this idea of ambition and success. […] It’s something I’m not interested in, something I

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466 Talking to the online interview magazine, The Talks, Jarmusch said: “I started Gimme Danger almost eight years ago. I spent almost $40 000 of my own money and realized I can’t pay my rent, what have I done? So I stopped and we prepared Only Lovers Left Alive. Then we got a very wonderful financier for Gimme Danger and started working on it again while editing Only Lovers, then we stopped again to make Paterson and then continued while editing both at the same time. I would go from the Lower East Side in New York from the editing room of Gimme Danger, walk across to the west side and work all afternoon on Paterson.” See Sturm R., “Jim Jarmusch: ‘What Are They Afraid Of?’” in The Talks, November 23rd 2016, [http://thetalks.com/interview/jim-jarmusch](http://thetalks.com/interview/jim-jarmusch) (last accessed 10/01/2019).
don’t like, that all my life I’ve been taught that I have to achieve a certain stage on some economic scale. Who and what is considered important is also based on this economic way of thinking.\textsuperscript{467}

Such an economic way of thinking is absent in his fictional America. Both his foreign and American characters are indifferent to the pressing call of social status. This indifference is their salvation. They may have to face difficulty in their lives but, unlike Willy Loman, the sad protagonist of Arthur Miller’s \textit{Death of a Salesman}, their apparent social failure is not the source of painful regret or angst for them.\textsuperscript{468} Lack of great ambitions shelters them from the concerns imposed by the market economy, so rampant in the eighties and so absent in the filmmaker’s works of that decade. His “centre-less” American drifters, characters like Will and Eddie in \textit{Stranger Than Paradise} or Jack and Zack in \textit{Down By Law}, who usually find company in the other key figure of Jarmusch’s cinema, so to say, the “stranger”, “are not obsessed with ambition or climbing to the top.”\textsuperscript{469} They retain a child-like innocence in their instinctive love for life as Rice discovers in his observation of the character Nobody (Gary Farmer) in \textit{Dead Man}.\textsuperscript{470} And as children, they do not seem bothered by status and money. This attitude leads them – unconsciously, it appears – to adopt alternative life styles and enjoy the intensity of the life fully experienced of which Rice writes. Even if the mainstream mindset disregards them as ambitionless, they do strive for something other than the prize of success and money. Even Paterson, Jarmusch’s most settled character, falls in this category, too. His experience perhaps holds a simple advice to untangle Auster’s and Willis’s dilemma of the artist/intellectual who wishes to pursue her/his creative or intellectual work but has no financial means of support. That advice is: don’t quit your day job.\textsuperscript{471} Paterson maintains his bus driver’s position to provide food and a home for himself and his wife and he uses his

\textsuperscript{467} Ibid., p. 79.
\textsuperscript{468} For Sandage, Willy Loman is the best fictional representation of American failure and its psychological implications. Even if he did not do anything bad or wrong in his life, Loman, under the pressure of social expectations and delusions perceives himself as a failed man and takes his life away. See Sandage S. A. (2005), pp. 258-277.
\textsuperscript{469} See Hertzberg (2001), p. 35.
\textsuperscript{470} See Rice J. (2012), p. 19.
\textsuperscript{471} On the subject of financial stability for artists, Rebecca Cohen praises \textit{Paterson} as a “cinematic rarity” with its depiction of a writer with budgets and a day job. However, given the current low wages of the US job market, Cohen believes that the movie offers a too rosy notion “that it’s possible to live on the wages from a single blue-collar job and make your art as long as you do it in a postindustrial town”. Cohen R. “How ‘Paterson’ Does Money” in \textit{Billfold}, 24/02/2017, \url{https://www.thebillfold.com/2017/02/how-paterson-does-money/} (last accessed 29/04/2018). The source of financial stability, or instability, of Jarmusch’s characters is always easy to detect, a part from one film, \textit{Only Lovers Left Alive}, in which the non-human protagonists, the vampires Adam and Eve, live a life of luxuries with no apparent earnings. Jarmusch tried to explain the fact in a deleted scene collected in the dvd edition of the film, in which Adam says to a friend who asks him how he gets his money “I am independently wealthy like Gomez Addams”. See “Deleted Scenes” in \textit{Only Lovers Left Alive}, DVD format released by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2014.
spare time to write poems, an activity that he cultivates to nurture the needs of the soul, without subtracting too much from the needs of the body. And, it is also clear that becoming a published poet is not his goal. Society might think of him as an ambitionless man, a half-failure who is neither a white-collar worker nor an established artist. Victoria Snelling, the Hollywood agent in Night on Earth, might say that driving a bus is not much of a career, similarly to what she says to Corky about driving a taxi, but Paterson seems to have found a way to happiness nonetheless, away from burning middle-class ambitions. And Corky appears to follow a similar path with her plan to become a mechanic.

The figure of the dropout who cannot or does not want to follow social conventions is very much evoked in Jarmusch’s work through the presence of many musician friends who act or write scores for him. Although the frequent inclusion of musicians as actors gives his movies an aura of “coolness” that has been equally praised by fans and criticised by detractors, this casting choice is indeed a form of endorsement of alternative social values and life choices. According to critic Ryan Gilbey, “Jarmusch’s soundtracks and cast lists have created a cumulative portrait of the US musical underclass, much of it African American, that reflects his films’ interest in the marginal or overlooked”. More specifically, this aggregation of musicians who enjoy cult fame without reaching superstardom echoes the idea that it is possible to lead a life outside common practices, even amid the difficult material conditions that Gavin Jones calls the artist’s foundational ongoing experience in America. This is evident most notably in Gimme Danger (2016) and Year of the Horse (1997), Jarmusch’s documentaries on Iggy Pop’s band, The Stooges, and Neil Young’s band, Crazy Horse. The films show how rock musicians live an alternative existence, made of alternative families – their bands and/or other communities – and constant travelling. Their immersion in an

472 On this point, see both Rice J. (2009) and Andrew G., “Why ‘cool’ doesn’t do Jim Jarmusch justice” on the British Film Institute Website, 24/04/2015: http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/why-cool-doesnt-jim-jarmusch-justice (accessed: 03/05/2018). Both authors argue that too much emphasis is put on Jarmusch’s look and rock music acquaintances to the detriment of the deep messages of spirituality and humanity delivered with his movies.


enthraling and consuming form of art that becomes a lifestyle seems to detach the musician from common concerns over money-making, or a mortgage to pay, and other everyday cares. Choosing a life of songs automatically assigns the musician to the outskirts of society and its economic way of thinking. Musicians exist outside the system, they do not “make the economy grow” like Bobby Charles happily sang from his Woodstock retreat in 1972. Charles, for a short period in the fifties, was a rising star with the hit “See You Later Alligator” (1955). After that time, he continued to record and play music as a semi-unknown songwriter all his life, like many of his generation who took part in the rock’n’roll explosion of the pre-Beatles era. In this world, life can be pretty uncertain even for people who have been in business for a long time. In the end, musicians might appear careless and untouched by everyday cares, but like anyone else they will have to deal with them sooner or later. This is, of course, unless one meets immediate and enduring wide popular success, which is not the case with most of the artists who have worked for the filmmaker – from John Lurie to Iggy Pop or Tom Waits to Screaming Jay Hawkins. In the collective imaginary, therefore, musicians more than other artists embody the idea of life on society’s fringe, where economic failure is the immanent reality of the daunting task of making a living out of sound.

Gabriel Solis writes that, although a wide range of people have enjoyed Tom Waits’s music through the years, the archetypal Waits fan is “born in the late 1960s and 1970s, middle class, over-educated, and looking for alternative ways of being in the world”. In a way, such an audience expects to encounter some form of failure in their experience, given their refusal to embrace mainstream economic and social conventions. When Waits sings his stories of wanderers whose lives are already beyond failure, he does not need to mention the term for an audience that is sympathetic and intrigued by the context he is depicting. Correspondingly, the word failure is virtually nonexistent in Tom Waits’s songbook. The singer’s best representation of this lot of American followers is perhaps delivered in “I Don’t Wanna Grow Up” (1992), Bone Machine’s strumming anthem to rebellion that was

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475 In *Year of the Horse*, during one of the many talks Jim Jarmusch and Neil Young hold on the bus that takes the band from a city to another during their 1996 American tour, the director is bemused by the musician’s unawareness of the difference between old and new testament.

476 Outside the rock-pop music scene, an example of this condition is given by the biography of American avant-garde composer Harry Partch, whose musical creations have influenced Tom Waits. Partch “made no effort to find work to take care of the day-to-day expenses. From time to time, this created real hardship for him.” See Gilmore B., Johnston B. “Harry Partch (1901-1974)” in Sitsky L. (ed.) (2002), *Music of the Twentieth-century Avant-garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press).


478 The word has appeared in Waits’s lyrics only once, in its plural form, in the song “Road to Peace” (2006) and it does not refer to one’s personal experience, but it is charged with political criticism in the line “But Bush is reluctant to risk his future, with the fear of his political failures”.

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appropriately covered in 1995 by the Ramones, an emblematic band for unconventional living. The song can be read on two levels. The immediate one is pointed out by Barney Hoskyns when he reminds readers of his Waits biography that the singer wrote and recorded “I Don’t Wanna Grow Up” a few years after settling down permanently in Northern California, aged forty-two, married and a non-smoking sober father of two children. After two decades on the road as a touring artist, the switch to domestic life must have been difficult and the song served as a “howl of indignation at the pressures of mid-life responsibility”.

The second layer hidden in the words of the song is the repudiation of a middle-class, conformist and hypocritical life. In the same call and response pattern of songs like The Who’s “My Generation” (1965), the singer is incessantly repeating “I don’t wanna grow up” while observing the problems of an adult world made of big loans, TV sets and medicine chests, fights, unnecessary hard work, and unwanted concerns. Looking for a different way of being in the world, the answer to all the materialist anxieties given in the song is to rebel and live for today, careless and ambitionless. As someone who claims not to long for the “biggest amount”, the singer is surely on his voluntary way to failure. Appropriately, the song’s video, which portrays a grown-up Waits acting like a child, singing into a tiny microphone placed under a table, was directed by Waits’s friend, Jim Jarmusch.

Apart from this direct hymn to ambitionlessness, a strong metaphor for failure in Tom Waits is in the returning presence of the train in his songs, as a shelter for many “on the road” characters (see Chapter 3). The train pulls away and becomes smaller until it disappears into oblivion in “Time” (1985); it makes people become small and disappear, too, as it gets farther away and its roar covers everything the passengers want to say in “2:19” (2006), contributing to the effect that failure has on the “disintegration and diminishment of identity”. It is a train that takes Frank O’Brien to his final destination on a long, frenzied journey made of big dreams and illusions. In “Train Song”, Frank is finally facing his defeat repeating “it was a train that took me away from here, but a train can’t bring me home”. The tune is the cry of sorrow and regret that closes the story of Franks Wild Years with its broke hero, who left without packing in his pursuit of success, and is now lonely and sorry for what he has done.

Frank’s is a traditional American story of shattered ambitions and failure. Corinne Kessel sees the character as the link that unites the albums Swordfishtrombones, Rain Dogs and

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479 Hoskyns B. (2009), p. 394. Hoskyns also calls the song “a child’s honest perception […] of the adult world, and a cry of alarm at how quickly life was zipping by”.

480 See Kessel C. (2009), The Words and Music of Tom Waits (Westport, CT: Praeger), pp. 95-96.

Franks Wild Years. Frank first appeared with the song “Frank’s Wild Years”, from the first of these albums, which is a portrayal of grey, unexciting middle class life. Fed up with it, Frank burns his possessions to the ground and leaves. Years later he would become the protagonist of the play Frank’s Wild Years that was staged in Chicago in the summer of 1986, and whose songs were released on the homonymous album a year later. Although no direct references to Frank are contained in the middle album, Kessel is right when she affirms that Rain Dogs “provide[s] the foundation for the emotional and psychological development of [the] transient character” through the topics of loneliness, irrational behaviour, lies, mental instability in songs like “Time”, “Clap Hands” and “Tango Till They’re Sore”. With the play and the last album of this trilogy, we discover that Frank is an accordion player with great expectations of becoming a successful entertainer, and a national sensation. He left what seemed a steady and safe life to give way to his inner desires and now he is on the road following his dream. Frank does not quit middle-class comfort on the basis of a higher spiritual or moral ground. It is important to note that his dream is a typically American one as is his consequent failure. He wants to be rich and famous; he wants the money and visibility that his previous life could not provide. Unlike the young taxi driver in Jarmusch’s Night on Earth, Corky, he is a victim of the culture of success at its extreme, namely, the promise of grandeur that the entertainment industry transmits. In “Straight to the Top”, his ambitions run wild and the man announces that he wants to “live for tomorrow”, chasing his great American Dream. The ensuing inevitable failure makes him realise that the domesticity he despised so much is a good life after all and memories of his past become the only consolation left for him.

The admission of failure in the songs of Franks Wild Years is accompanied by the distinctive sound of the accordion – the very instrument that Frank plays. Appearing late in the production of Waits, the accordion is used in songs that recall the vaudevillian and European polka and tarantella traditions that the musician incorporated in his music in the eighties. The stuttering sound of the instrument that has dominated folk music in all corners of the old continent provides the sonic equivalent of the images of rainy streets where Frank is

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482 Kessel C. (2009), p. 100. The same view was expressed by David Smay who writes about the “Frank Trilogy”. See Smay D. (2008), Swordfishtrombones (New York: Continuum), pp. 70-71.
484 Two years after the release of Franks Wild Years, Uncle Victor, a minor character in Auster’s Moon Palace, is a failed musician whose band quits “the rubber chicken circuit for a run at the big time” only to reappear a few pages later with a defeat story made of “broken engagements, flat tires, a drunk who bashed in the saxophonist’s nose”. See Auster (1989), pp. 11-18. Victor’s experience recalls in many points that of Frank. One wonders whether Auster at the time he created Victor already knew of Frank O’Brien, whose sad cry “Innocent When You Dream” will feature prominently in the soundtrack of the writer’s film Smoke in 1995.
lost at night. Suggestive of heavy breathing, the texture of the accordion’s sound alone discloses stories of disappointment, whether the instrument is played slowly in full chords by David Hidalgo (“Cold Cold Ground” and “Train Song”) or through a melodic “bal-musette” line by William Schimmel (“More Than Rain” and “I’ll Be Gone”). The accordion conveys the same atmosphere again in Rain Dogs’ “Time” and, only if for a brief moment, in “Whistle Down The Wind”, a piano ballad about the impossibility of following a dream beyond a small town confines from Bone Machine. The song, that takes the title from a 1959 novel by Mary Haily Bell, is dedicated to Tom Jans, a Californian musician whom Waits and his wife Kathleen Brennan befriended before he died in 1984. With only four hard-to-find records released during his career over ten years, Jans was a hard-working singer who, despite his beautiful song-writing, was a commercial failure. In the small world of music business, he was yet another American man with ideas and talent, whom the system in place rejected.

Tom Waits’s portraits of failure to a great extent share the indifference that Jim Jarmusch’s characters have for middle-class values and dominant economic demands. In other words, they do not seem worried about failing, Frank’s ambitions notwithstanding. For Gavin Jones, the fear of failure in America is a phenomenon that mostly concerns those who have internalised institutionalized expectations, especially white middle-class men, “members of a privileged class who flounder before the tyranny of the ought”. Auster himself floundered in front of the tyranny of the ought as it is evident in the narrative that opened this chapter, the account of his troubled encounter with the corporate world. Despite the disastrous outcome of the mortifying meeting with the president of a toy company, Auster insisted on presenting his invention to other companies. The results were always negative. All his efforts were crushed and he understood that he did not have what it takes to succeed in the marketplace. The whole experience left him with a sense of failure that had nothing to do with the dire economic conditions he was in. The writer explains that his brief intention to enter the corporate world was a negation of his own beliefs: “I had already accepted defeat – [...] not just of my half-assed foray into the business world, but of all my principles, my lifelong stand toward work, money, and pursuit of time”.

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486 In March 2018, Joan Baez released Whistle Down The Wind, an album that contains a cover of Waits’s song dedicated to Tom Jans. Baez’s version features an accordion that plays throughout the whole song, conferring a strong sense of the passage of time and loss. Baez’s sister, Mimi Fariña formed a duo with Jans in the early 1970s and the two released a record together called Take Heart (1971). After the duo broke up, Tom Jans released four solo albums: Tom Jans (1974); The Eyes Of An Only Child (1975); Dark Blonde (1976); Champion (1982).
as in giving up the dream of being master of his own time and sustaining himself through his writing. Failure does not come from his inability to enter the productive system, but from the loss of personal integrity. The aspiring writer must find a paid job if he wants to survive. In other words, he must give up his writing. Failure is not about not finding the right job or securing a big contract with a company. It is about betraying your principles, or like Greil Marcus writes in *Mystery Train*, it is the betrayal of big hopes.\(^{489}\)

Extending the thought of Jarmusch’s “social failure [as] the gateway to a fully experienced life”\(^ {490}\) to Auster’s oeuvre, social failure is the beginning of fully experienced lives for the writer’s characters, too. They struggle with conventional commitments when they face the difficulty of finding their place in the world. In true contrarian fashion, it is failure that becomes the very source of hope for them, providing a new understanding of life and a passageway to self-discovery and rebirth. Henry David Thoreau said that opportunities can be found in failure, using the metaphor of the man who reaches the deepest pit from where he looks up and discovers the stars and the sun.\(^ {491}\) This is what happens to Auster’s Marco Fogg in *Moon Palace* (1989), Miles Heller in *Sunset Park* (2010), Archie Ferguson in *4321* (2017), Tom and Aurora Wood in *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), and Sidney Orr in *Oracle Night* (2004). These characters all come from white middle-class families and, for different reasons, discover in the early stages of their adulthood that they cannot cope with the social pressure of ambition and expectation. They endure their breakdowns by giving priority to relationships and family, abandoning the competition for social status and the pursuit of success. Tom and Miles, above the others, are failures in the logics of the mainstream society. They both were brilliant students whose future looked bright until they dropped out of college. Tom quits his ambition to become a lecturer in an English department when he realizes that he does not have the strength to complete his doctorate and returns to his home in New York as a “twenty-eight-year old has been without a clue to where he was headed or what turn his life was about to take”.\(^ {492}\) At first, Tom is too self-conscious of his failure and he acts as if his life was over. Not for one moment, in the pages of Auster’s *Brooklyn Follies*, does he ever think about reclaiming his goal and start from where he left on the same path. Judgement and pressure from the culture of success that surrounds him are too tough. Once a failure, Tom will always be a failure with no redeeming chances. For years, he stops looking after his health and, as a

\(^{489}\) Marcus G. (1975), p. 20


\(^{491}\) See Henry D. Thoreau’s *Journal’s* 20 June 1840 entry, where he notes down: “From the deepest pit we may see the stars, if not the sun.”

form of penitence, keeps a taxi-driving job that he despises. He is suspended in a state of “hibernation, wrestling blindly against a dark angel of despair”.\textsuperscript{493} That is the scale of the impact of failure on him. And his experience also has an impact on the people he interacts with, especially old friends whom he comes upon and the women he dates.

Tom slipped from the ranks of the anointed, and his downfall seemed to shake [his friends’] confidence in themselves, to open the door onto a new pessimism about their own prospects in life. It didn’t help matters that Tom had gained weight, that his former plumpness now verged on an embarrassing rotundity, but even more disturbing was the fact that he didn’t seem to have any plans, that he never spoke about how he was going to undo the damage he’d done to himself and get back on his feet. Whenever he mentioned his new job, he described it in odd, almost religious terms, speculating on such questions as spiritual strength and the importance of finding one’s path through patience and humility, and this confused them and made them fidget in their chairs. Tom’s intelligence had not been dulled by the job, but no one wanted to hear what he had to say anymore, least of all the women he talked to, who expected young men to be full of brave ideas and clever schemes about how they were going to conquer the world.\textsuperscript{494}

Failures like him become objects of observation, and worrisome reminders of what could happen to anyone who gets off the path to success. Even his physical appearance becomes a mark of defeat in mainstream America. And although he is still the same person, no one really desires to have a friend mired in failure. More importantly, Tom’s philosophical reaction to his academic fiasco corroborates the idea that failure affects the inner life of an individual and leads to a new process of being. Tom’s penitence eventually ends when he finally accepts a job offer as a bookshop assistant and subsequently reconnects to his loved ones through the unexpected reunion with his uncle Nat, the central character and narrator of the novel. Spending time with him will make Tom realise that his own life path is indeed to live with others, “sharing a life with people I love and respect” in one of Auster’s best detailed proposals of alternative living, the utopian project dubbed “Hotel Existence”, a utopian fantasy that accompanies uncle and nephew along their adventures.\textsuperscript{495}

Sunset Park’s Miles Heller is another 28 year-old college drop-out, whose failure to succeed in his studies derive from his sense of guilt toward his broken family, after the death of his step-brother. The boy was going to succeed at university, but when he finds out that he

\textsuperscript{493} \textit{Ibid.} p. 27.
\textsuperscript{494} \textit{Ibid.} pp. 25-26.
cannot summon the courage to face his parents anymore, he decides to quit his studies, too. This dramatic resolution forces him to give up all plans to build a successful life, abandoning any sort of ambitions or hopes and their inevitable bag of disappointments. His only achievement in the seven and a half years he spent away from home is to have gained the discipline to conduct the ‘un-American’ existence summed-up in the Tom Waits lyrics in “I Don’t Wanna Grow Up”, “the only thing to live for is today”.\(^{496}\) Miles lives in the present with an extraordinary ability “to confine himself in the here and now”, not wanting to accumulate any material or social reward.\(^{497}\) Avoiding contact with his family and friends he is able to escape immediate judgement and advice and lives on careless of what society might think of young restless wanderers like him. His indifference to failure provides a shield that Tom does not have and brings Miles very close to Jarmusch’s centre-less young men who have no aspiration to rise to the top. Unlike Tom’s, his failure is a fully foreseen consequence of his personal choices, therefore he immediately adapts to a new alternative way of living. He does not hide from public living, he is still immersed in everyday society in order to get by with any odd job he can find, but he refuses to share the anxieties imposed by the pressure of ambition, concentrating exclusively on his own troubles. And when circumstances force him to leave Florida and return to his native New York, he joins a community of squatters with no hesitation. His situation will eventually allow for love, friends and family, once again following an important line in Auster’s narrative; to take Miles’s life to that stage of ‘fullness’ that a linear path to success might miss.

Auster explores life after failure in several stories that depict a fall from grace. The experiences of Walter Claireborne Rawley in Mr. Vertigo and Hector Mann in The Book of Illusions follow a customary narrative of the American Dream in the roaring twenties. Like Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, these two characters become rich and famous and then go through failure and disappear from public life into obscurity. In “Jitterbug Boy”, from the album Blue Valentines, Tom Waits interprets someone who has lived through the twenties like Walter and Hector. He sings of a glorious romanticised past in a tall tale in which he exaggerates how far he has fallen just to have someone to talk to, while he is “holding a lamp-post.”\(^{498}\) Inebriated and untrue, the Jitterbug Boy sounds like someone who could not cope with the frantic highs and lows of that decade. Walter and Hector, too, spend the twenties on a roller-coaster, but once the frenzy is over they manage to avoid the sad fate of Waits’s negative hero. The reader

discovers that they continue to live on in the decades that follow as unassuming citizens whose existences are safe in the privacy of domesticity, in that protective homeliness that provides human warmth and hopefulness.\textsuperscript{499} Perhaps the two characters offer a comforting portrait of what Gatsby might have looked like in the years that followed his fall. Their recovery from failure leads to a downsized existence, where the disappearance of their previous great ambitions and riches surprisingly brings balance and, possibly, even happiness. One more example of this kind of newly found stability in a simple unassuming life is given by Auster with one of the four parallel versions of the father of Archie Ferguson, the protagonist of \textit{4321} (2017), in which the man, a successful entrepreneur is forced to give up most of his business enterprise and rediscovers the pleasures of a peaceful living with his wife and child, as opposed to the other versions of the same man, who invest all their energies on a busy career that keeps a father distant from his family, making him incapable of building strong ties with his son.

Whether careless, destitute or a dropout, the failures of Jarmusch, Waits and Auster live a fully experienced life in the Other America, having to face troubles and reinvent their way of being in the world. They recognize, accept and coexist with failure. And their alternative ways of living on society’s fringe share one main aspect, that of simplicity.

\textbf{As little as humanly possible. Rediscovering Thoreau.}

With \textit{Leviathan} (1992), Auster introduces his most Thoreauvian character in Benjamin Sachs, an idealistic writer who starts his own form of civil disobedience after a personal crisis that culminates in a physical and metaphorical fall that almost kills him. He voices his failure when he says that his “whole life has been a waste, a stupid little joke, a dismal string of petty failures. I'm going to be 41 years old next week, and if I don't take hold of things now, I'm going to drown. I'm going to sink like a stone to the bottom of the world.”\textsuperscript{500} Breaking up with his past, Ben begins his new life in a cabin in Vermont where his life is “reduced to its bare-bones essentials.”\textsuperscript{501} This is a recurrent image in Auster’s novels: the portrayal of the hermit who finds inner richness surrounded by outer exiguity. Miles Heller is another example of

\textsuperscript{499} Comparing these two characters, Mark Brown writes: “Hector is the slapstick star Walt never became in \textit{Mr. Vertigo}.” For Brown, both Hector and Walt give Auster the chance to present the ‘full manuscript’ of a character’s life, following the idea suggested by another character, \textit{Moon Palace}’s Uncle Victor, that a man’s life is a ‘manuscript’ that remains incomplete until his death. See Brown M. (2007), p. 100 and p. 119.


someone who freely chooses simplicity as a form of living. In seven years on the road he has lived “with as little as humanly possible”. Cutting out “smoking and drinking, he no longer eats in restaurants, he does not own a television, a radio, or a computer. He would like to trade in his car for a bicycle, but he can’t get rid of the car, since the distances he must travel for work are too great”. The only thing that Miles hasn’t renounced is reading because “books are not luxuries so much as necessities, and reading is an addiction he has no wish to be cured of.”

Choosing an economised life, these characters espouse the nineteenth century republican ideology of simplicity in their “virtuous privation as a pathway to higher gratification”. Henry David Thoreau embodied this ideology with the life choices he described in *Walden*. Whereas his romantic impression of poverty as a precious garden herb that one ought to cultivate does not coincide with the more true-to-life depiction of poverty as material disadvantage described above, the myth of the simple life is present in the Other America of our three authors, aligned with their shared aesthetic leaning toward minimalism. Mark Ford observes that “Auster's characters are [...] prone to pursuing illumination through the rituals of self-denial. Like Thoreau, [...] they find themselves declaring independence and embracing the austere *via negativa* of the American hermit.”

Jarmusch’s Paterson and Ghost Dog adopt simplicity, too, in order to nurture their souls and follow their artistic or spiritual call away from material distractions. Waits’s songs recall images of simple living in the ever-present dime-stores, broken objects and the lamentations of penniless wanderers. The sound, too, supports the idea of simplicity especially in the new course of his career through the employment of acoustic instrumentation instead of the rich orchestrations of his late 1970s records, as well as the use of odd object as percussions.

American literature scholar Lawrence Buell recalls how voluntary simplicity in American life is a form of rebellion that has never ceased to fascinate certain people who look for alternative ways of living, even in times of prosperity, and want to escape the conformist American culture “of capitalism, of consumption, of plenty and of individual upward

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In his research, Buell finds out that the argument in favour of voluntary simplicity is that simple living is a win-win proposition that makes people happier and brings benefit to the world. For many, voluntary simplicity is also a political instrument that allows one to live below the taxation threshold, avoiding financing a despicable governmental system. For these people Thoreau is the undisputed model of voluntary simplicity. A myth was built around the writer that describes him as a saint, or a monk who has inspired experiments more extreme than his own. As Buell points out, the reality is that Thoreau’s retreat to Walden was temporary. He wanted to part from his neighbours for a while, but often visited towns while living in the woods. And his basic diet was dictated by economy rather than belief. Likewise, simplicity for the failure characters of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits does not arise from political or economic ideology. They live simple lives, whether voluntary or not, as a consequence of their failures. Simplicity, in other words, is not politically motivated. It is the natural outcome when one is ambitionless and stays away from the pursuit of wealth of the marketplace. In such a condition, there is simply no money to consume and they treasure what they have. Simplicity is then a necessity that eventually leads to the discovery of new or forgotten values that offer an alternative to consumerism. Tom Wood, the failed character of Auster’s *The Brooklyn Follies*, for example, redisCOVERS the importance of family ties only when he is no longer busy achieving his aspirations and life forces him to live in “a dingy one-closet cell”.

For scholar Thomas Woodson, it is ironic that Thoreau became the beacon of mid-twentieth century activists instead of proto-socialists like Orestes Brownson and Theodore Parker who actively pursued social justice in nineteenth century America. Thoreau was not an activist and lacked compassion for those poor who longed for material riches and wished to be part of the same economic system of which they were victims. The thinker was mostly concerned with the spiritual poverty of the rising middle-class and sought wisdom and freedom in voluntary material austerity, as a form of individual retirement FROM an oppressive social order and its “blundering oracle” of the accumulation of goods. Woodson explains that heroism was Thoreau’s answer to social problems, instead of socialism or philanthropy. Radical detachment from public life allows one to pursue inner freedom, turning an individual...

into “one of the worthies of the world.” Accordingly, “Thoreau’s democratic hero is, […] removed from the places and events of power – from the battlefield, the Areopagus, the marketplace, even from the academy – as far as to a rude hut near the shore of a pond, or even to the inside of the county jail.” This description corresponds to the common men that populate the Other America of Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits. Their heroes experience a more subtle isolation living within the mainstream society, being marginalized and (self)excluded from the prevailing bourgeois lifestyle. The democratic hero of the Other America combines poverty and failure, being at the same time accustomed to the problems of material disadvantage and going through the inner struggle of that process of being that is failure.

At this point, one may wonder whether Auster, Jarmusch and Waits themselves have followed the path of heroic simplicity. There is a thin line that separates the Thoreauvian heroism from failure. In fact, Emerson considered Thoreau as “the worst kind of failure,” whereas, it is hard to classify our authors as failures. Even if they might have met the hardship of being outcast from the mainstream society and its marketplace, their biographies also show how the virtuous privation of the aspiring artist who does not want to trade his time for money may eventually bring success and money. This paradox is expressed clearly by both Jarmusch and Auster. The filmmaker said: “My only aspiration is to be able to keep working, to be able to pay my rent and not have to worry about money. That’s really my biggest ambition. It’s sort of a contradiction, in a way.” He knows that he needs enough economic power money to survive as a film director and be able to retain his independence. In his 1997 memoir, Auster writes that after years of living hand to mouth, financial stability finally arrived when he published his commercial novel, Squeeze Play, under the pseudonym of Paul Benjamin. To use the words of one his characters, Adam Walker in Invisible (2009), “one needs to play the system in order to beat the system. A little twist of hypocrisy I suppose, but everyone has to put food on the table, everyone needs a roof over his head.” As critic Mark Ford writes, Auster seems “uneasily aware that it is exactly [his] exemplary acts of resistance which have helped win for him the institutional status that enables him to present [his] failures as an integral part of this American success story.” We can assert that those of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits are indeed success stories. They have become public figures, and they have made a

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511 Ibid. p. 25.
512 Ibid. p. 27 and note 33.
living out of their artistic creations. Their persistence in doing what they wanted to do granted them access to economic revenues that allowed them to create art instead of devoting their time to any dayjob just to make ends meet. In this sense, they remained faithful to their dreams like a good American does. As Ellen Willis would put it, they sold their work on the open market and found someone to support them, namely their followers (most of whom live outside the United States).518

The success of these three American artists cannot be labelled as mainstream. Auster, Jarmusch and Waits are not popular superstars but people who have found notoriety following their ambitions to create their own art independently, so to say, an alternative form of ambition that does not chase fame and fortune as its ultimate goals. Nonetheless, these artists focus on failure as a pivotal life event that enables people to grow stronger, generate new lifestyles and find their place in the world. The gallery of failures in the fictional America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits confirms once more that people who are ostracized or self-excluded and ridiculed by mainstream society are human beings like any other, who deserve respect and attention. The fictions of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits follow in the traditional trail of American literature, analysed by Gavin Jones, unfolding a description of failure that “becomes essential to an understanding of what makes us human – both within and beyond the pressures of social context.”519 Similarly to what happens with the dignified depiction of materially disadvantaged people, failure is revalued and appreciated in the Other America. It refers to the spiritual or psychological sphere of the individual and it offers the pathway to different modes of living, most notably, in the adoption of simplicity and in the search for human warmth over wealth. Writing about Jarmusch’s films, Geoff Andrew remarks that they are “warm, and admirably human both in their pleasingly modest scale and in their abiding concern: what is the best way to live in what [Down By Law’s] Roberto calls this “sad an’ beautiful world”? Time and again, Jarmusch seems to be telling us that love, friendship, respect for others, and an open, imaginative mind are key to answering that question.”520 It is particularly hard to be a failure within the culture of success, in a nation that despises, fears and resents failures. But when one accepts and makes sense of his/her condition, life goes on with a new set of priorities (relationships, love, respect for others, artistic creativity) sheltered from the anxieties given by social and economic pressures. Once again, with failure Auster,

Jarmusch and Waits turn American values upside down with something that makes the audiences appreciate the humanity of their characters. Auster has recently affirmed:

the very act of writing a novel or a poem strikes a blow for democracy, because you're talking about the sanctity of life, the sanctity of individuals. It doesn't matter what the subject matter is... the essential thing is that you as a reader are entering the hearts and minds and souls of people you don't know, who become real in the course of reading, and can affect your sense of the world.521

With the topics of failure and poverty, the works of the Other America deliver an upsetting description of contemporary America. These topics affect the audience’s sense of the world, showing how everyone deserves respect and a place in society – even the unambitious taxi driver or the unsuccessful card inventor. As shown in this chapter, failure becomes an instrument to investigate human nature and confer dignity to common people, turning society’s shameful losers into democratic heroes. This is the transformative effect of a process of revaluation of failure in fictions that ignore norms and values of the marketplace that assign a stigma on the notion of failure. The redeeming power of failure in Auster, Jarmusch and Waits leads to new ways of living and this becomes especially important in times of economic, political and cultural decline, when the number of unsuccessful stories inevitably multiplies.

Part Four

THE ENEMY OF CONVENTIONAL SOCIETY
CHAPTER 7

FACING THE CRISIS: AMERICAN AUSTERITY AND DECLINE FROM RONALD TO DONALD.

«If you feed the horse enough oats, some will pass through to the road for the sparrows.»
- John Kenneth Galbraith

«There does exist a mentality which will take advantage of the liberties allowed by society in order to conspire for the ultimate suppression of those same privileges.»
- Perry Miller

In the first pages of his political essay, Democratic Vistas (1871), Walt Whitman pens a prophecy on the future of the great democratic American experiment: “The United States are destined either to surmount the gorgeous history of feudalism, or else prove the most tremendous failure of time.” More than a hundred years later, the works of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits tell of an America that seems to follow the path of failure, rather than carrying out the role of beacon of democracy Whitman wished for. A sense of ubiquitous decline looms large in the background of the Other America. As we have seen in the previous chapters suspended endings, discordant sounds, and filthy locations suggest a decaying universe where people encounter failure, indifference, poverty and lack of social justice.

The works present multiple allusions and comments about a decaying world. To mention one example for each author, in Jarmusch’s Permanent Vacation (1980), Manhattan is literally crumbling. New York is an unrecognizable dilapidated city, where the male protagonist, Allie (Chris Parker), wanders around with nothing to do, as if crossing a post-war zone that in the eye of more than one spectator in the early eighties might have resembled Beirut in the midst of the Lebanese civil war. In Auster’s Brooklyn Follies (2005) Nathan Glass, spending time with Lucy, his niece’s nine year-old daughter, finds out that the girl has


never seen or heard of Charlie Chaplin. He thinks that the kid’s lack of knowledge is “further evidence of the collapse of American education”. This is a stock phrase that one overhears in street chatters, but it contains a sense of persistent awareness that the society in which we live is deteriorating. Waits, in “Sins of My Father,” (2004) sings about a civilisation in decline, where everything has turned upside-down (the tree’s branches and roots), no one can rely on old certainties (the horse has gone blind) and hope has disappeared (the futility of throwing the dice):

_The horse is steady but the horse is blind_
_
_wicked are the branches on the tree of mankind_
_
The roots grow upward and the branches grow down_
_
it’s much too late to throw the dice again I’ve found_

The murky sound of softly played rhythmic instruments creates a feeling of stillness. The song does not move forward or backward for over ten minutes. It wades into muddy waters and squelches. The listener enters a swampland where the high-pitched guttural voice of the singer blends with the other instruments, before a “spaghetti-western” guitar solo takes the song to desolate visions of deserts and vultures.

As seen in chapter 3, when confronted with the myths of the origins of the country, the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits seem to question nearly everything those myths have passed on to collective knowledge for over two centuries, most notably the promise of equality and prosperity for all. Outside the realm of symbols and myths, if one looks at the picture of contemporary America that emerges from our three authors, nothing matches the status of the world’s most powerful country and the slogans that support that status. For over thirty years, the prevailing image of their works is that of a permanent crisis, which provides the anatomy of the stories of incertitude and misfortune that they tell. What is this crisis exactly? Is it something that afflicts only marginal realities of society or is it a general malaise? I believe that Auster, Jarmusch and Waits are artist-observers who picture a general problem that interests the whole nation and not only the beloved outsiders that populate their stories, films and songs. To attempt a description of the crisis depicted in Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, it is worth revisiting recent history in order to understand the changes that the American society has gone through. I will focus on two events that have dominated public life since the 1970s: the adoption of public economic austerity and the ascent of consumer culture. The works that I am analysing reveal both facts insofar they illustrate a society crippled by the disintegration of solidarity and community, and the intensification of division and

materialism. In other words, the decline depicted with the Other America has its causes in specific political and cultural trajectories that have interested America after the 1960s.

The present chapter deals with the idea of crisis and the so-called politics of austerity, a phenomenon that has become the defining element of everyday living to this day. From the 1980s onwards, a shared assumption that prosperity comes with a free market economy and not through public welfare and redistribution of wealth has prevailed in economic and political analyses.\(^{527}\) A strong trust in new *laissez faire* theories became then the dominant ideology behind economic policies that have gradually changed the role of the public sector in the US in little less than four decades. The term austerity is generally used to indicate economic measures that Western countries have increasingly adopted to diminish unnecessary spending and reduce public debt. To put it simply, austerity policies aim at wiser public budgetary management, while liberating, through reductions in taxation, resources deemed necessary to stimulate private initiative and boost the economy. A quick glance at these policies shows that the rhetoric of austerity has well served the purpose of reducing the size of government through cuts in both taxation for the wealthiest brackets of the population and public spending for social programs, education and health.\(^{528}\) Such economic measures, adopted equally by right and left governments, have provided economic advantages for the wealthy and compromised the standard of living of less wealthy working and middle classes. Subsequent privatization of services has led to higher costs of living that have accentuated the inequality between “haves” and “have-nots”.\(^{529}\) While the rich got richer, the middle-class has shrunk and entered the downward spiral into poverty that Paul Auster portrays in his *Sunset Park* (2010), observed in chapter 5. The richest classes have been able to accrue their wealth exponentially, whereas reduced lower and middle class incomes have made everyday living much harder for the majority of people. The receding presence of the state in public life has therefore resulted in a tightening of the belt for the less fortunate in a country where “the wealthy won’t pay for public goods or collective welfare, and the declining middle class


\(^{529}\) According to the latest statistics on inequality in the United States, the richest 1% of the population owns a share of 41.8% of the household wealth of the country, while the bottom 90% amounts to a 22.8% share (and the top 0.01% totals a staggering 11.2%). In 2012, the average real wealth of the bottom 90% households was $92,100, while the average real wealth of the top 1% was $15,237,000. Source: *World Inequality Report 2018*, pp. 212-218, available on [https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-full-report-english.pdf](https://wir2018.wid.world/files/download/wir2018-full-report-english.pdf) (accessed: 11/07/2018). On inequality in America as a result of economic policies, see Perrucci R., Perrucci C.C. (2009), *America at risk: the crisis of hope, trust and caring* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), p. 9 and pp. 144-145; Samuel L. (2012), *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse University Press), pp. 168-169.
can’t.” Many of the policies adopted under the umbrella of austerity responded to the belief that the American government on both national and state level had become a “soup kitchen” like the governor of California and future President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, suggested in a famous televised speech in 1964. His words not only expressed distrust for the role of public institutions in ensuring equality but also concealed the old ideology for which if you are poor in the land of plenty it is your fault and public relief will only make you a parasite on the shoulders of the good hard-working part of society (see chapter 5). Reagan’s speech was delivered in support of the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater, a strenuous advocate of the limitation of state intervention who was defeated by Lyndon Johnson whose social plan for a Great Society was then overwhelmingly preferred by the American voters. In the short span of twenty years, when Ronald Reagan was securing his second term at the White House, an inversion in the economic agenda of the national government opened the way to the reform process that would finally lead to the devolution of state roles and the reduction of welfare programs. It was a pivotal shift that is best understood by noting the stark contrast between the inaugural speeches of Richard Nixon in 1969 and Ronald Reagan in 1981. Whereas Nixon listed the many goals that a government must pursue with the increase of its expenditures, Reagan pronounced the often-quoted statement that government is not the solution to America’s problem; government is the problem. Economic theories and practical evidence today show that austerity policies have not solved but intensified the very problems that they were meant to contrast, namely bigger budgetary deficits, public debt, and slower economic performance, while inequality levels have increased. Notwithstanding its failures, austerity is still common practice in many of


532 Richard Nixon’s words were: “In this past third of a century, government has passed more laws, spent more money, initiated more programs than in all our previous history. In pursuing our goals of full employment, better housing, excellence in education; in rebuilding our cities and improving our rural areas; in protecting our environment and enhancing the quality of life--in all these and more, we will and must press urgently forward.” From the inaugural address of the thirty-seventh President of The United States, Richard Nixon, 20 January 1969. Available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=1941 (accessed 24/08/2018). For Ronald Reagan’s famous inaugural address statement, see Gorski P. (2017), American Covenant. A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present. (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press), p. 175.

the rich economies of the world, where the rhetoric of rigour and fiscal discipline has permeated society. Almost twenty years ago, Ellen Willis observed that, presented as a moral imperative, austerity politics have persuaded people of “their own alleged lack of social discipline and unrealistic expectations, [and] it discouraged rebellion in favour of guilty, resigned acquiescence.”534 Referring to austerity as a politically motivated choice rather than an economic necessity, Willis described how the economic agenda inaugurated forty years ago has had a major impact on American culture as a whole, crippling cultural communities and their ability to manage their time to freely produce intellectual and creative work as a consequence of the general exorbitant prices for housing, education and other services which impose day-jobs in everyone’s life.535 For Willis the adoption of austerity measures coincided with the beginning of the process that has brought to the current primacy of the business model over any form of human organisation, including government. Productivity, work ethic, efficiency have become “unquestioned axioms of economic, political, and cultural common sense”536 in a system that measures progress with wealth and justifies every public decision with the mantra of economic growth. Another axiom that has filtered through the culture of austerity is the thought that hard work is the sole safety net one needs to get by in life. Addressing the European public, concerned with the way austerity politics are changing the fabric of societies in the Old Continent, writer Susan Campbell writes:

Stories about austerity measures in the EU don’t get much attention in the States, mainly because austerity is already our reality. Our safety net is knit together by charities and faith groups which do the work that government could more easily and efficiently accomplish. We ignore the reality that so many of our fellow citizens aren’t making it—and we ignore that the opportunity for social mobility is greater in other countries than it is here. Through the rose-colored glasses of the American Dream, the people who are falling short simply Are Not Trying Hard Enough.

10/07/18); Elliot L. “Austerity policies do more harm than good, IMF study concludes” in The Guardian 27/05/2016, www.theguardian.com/business/2016/may/27/austerity-policies-do-more-harm-than-good-imf-study-concludes (accessed: 11/07/18). For the correlation between austerity measures and economic inequalities see Goodman P., “In Britain, Austerity Is Changing Everything”, in The New York Times, 28/05/2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/28/world/europe/uk-austerity-poverty.html (accessed 04/07/18). On the subject of debt growth, see McGahey R. (2013), p. 719. The economist writes: “To understand how austerity continues to dominate the policy debate, it is important first to understand how the current debt was generated—mostly under the policies of Republican presidents. This seems like a paradox, as Republicans often are the most strident advocates of austerity policies. But a closer examination of how Republican ideas on the economy and debt have evolved shows that their economic ideology is aimed more at attacking the size of government, and that they have been willing, sometimes even advocating, growth in the national debt in order to cripple the government’s long-term ability to expand social programs.”

535 Ibid, pp. 375-379. See also, Chapter 6 of present work.
536 Ibid. p. 378.
They’ve Earned Their Low Rung On the Ladder. Oh, and: They Are Sucking The Rest Of Us Dry.\textsuperscript{537}

According to historian Kimberly Phillips-Fein, the 1975 fiscal crisis of New York City provided the first and most important opportunity to implement austerity plans in America.\textsuperscript{538} In order to adjust its finances, the city accepted aid from the federal government but was forced to revise its social programs, fire thousands of public employees and freeze wages. The city avoided default, allowing more space and incentives for private investments and changing irreversibly many of the policies that guaranteed free or low-cost services to New Yorkers, from education to health, housing, transportation and culture. A new prosperity ensued which made the city more functional, cleaner and safer yet less accessible for lower income workers. The programs that were dismantled embodied “the aspiration for a more egalitarian New York. By supporting a greater level of economic equality, they once helped create a more open city.”\textsuperscript{539} Visiting New York in 1982, Reagan praised the role that private sectors had in rescuing the city from bankruptcy and announced: “I think we’ve made our choice and turned a historic corner. We’re not going back to the glory days of big government.”\textsuperscript{540} It was then time to close the “soup kitchen” anywhere else in the country. The New York austerity experiment, with its mixture of public spending cuts and benefits for private interests, was ready to be translated from the city to the national level where it has been applied incessantly until the present day by all the administrations that followed.\textsuperscript{541} It was the triumph of the so-called theory of the trickle-down economy, namely the idea that liberating more financial resources for the rich will generate more work and wealth for the people at the bottom of the economy. It is what economist John Kenneth Galbraith caustically described with the metaphor of feeding the horse more oats so that the sparrow can pick up whatever falls on the

\textsuperscript{539} Ibid. pp. 306-7.
\textsuperscript{540} Ibid. p. 303.
\textsuperscript{541} In his two presidential mandates from 1992 until 2000, Bill Clinton managed to reduce the national deficit and debt, and even create a budget surplus by the end of his presidency, by reducing public spending in welfare programs. See McGahey R. (2013), p. 732. His successor, George W. Bush, favoured industry and other high-income groups with large tax cuts. Economist McGahey writes: “the Bush tax cuts were, and remain, the single largest contributor to the reversal of the debt's downward glide path under Clinton”. McGahey R. (2013), p. 721. On this point, see also Samuel L. (2012), pp. 168-196, in which the author says that the President’s personal history and fiscal policies tested the ideology of the American Dream, making it available only to those who “have the right connections, the leveraging on other people’s money and the right stock options”. Bush’s administration, however, abandoned the small-scale government conservatism that inspired Reagan’s speeches and expanded the role and intervention of State through increased spending, mostly in defence, and regulation. For a conservative critique of this aspect of Bush’s presidency, see Tanner M. D. (2007), Leviathan on the Right. How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution (Washington: Cato).
Cuts in welfare benefits and public jobs and reduction of taxation for high incomes represent the core of the economic agenda even for the current federal administration of Donald Trump, who once was one of the private players in the transformation of New York after the economic crisis. Public debt is still evoked to explain further austerity measures and “to force through an ever more constricted vision of government – one in which health care, schools, and food stamps matter less than tax cuts for developers to build shiny, glass-wrapped hotels.”

In short, these are the premises of the economic, social and cultural decline that the characters of the Other America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits have to live with. Austerity is one of the instruments that made the American democracy resemble a plutocracy, where the common man is increasingly pushed to the margins of history, and the old imperative of war on poverty has morphed into a war on poor. In Auster’s work we see the state of the nation from the viewpoint of those who are direct victims of austerity measures. In the cinema of Jarmusch, we look at the physical decay of cities left in the hands of the private initiative that Reagan praised in 1982. The music of Waits creates a sound that evokes images of rubble and garbage, what is left of a corporatized world that chases economic growth at all costs. Let us now have a look at each author’s contribution to the depiction of decline in the Other America before considering how their works together are a testimony to the crisis of the American social covenant.

**Far more poetry than justice.**

Although austerity is never explicitly mentioned, the phenomenon weighs on major and minor characters in virtually every novel that Paul Auster has published. Often looking at the crucial years of his own passage to adulthood when American society was torn by the war in Vietnam, Auster traces the lives of men and women who went through the great bender of dreams, ideals, hopes, rebellion, protest and frustration in the sixties and woke up to the unpleasant hangover of the 1970s having to face the reality of making ends meet in the time between the age of prosperity to the age of austerity. They all come across the difficulties of getting by in an ever more demanding and competitive economic system.

*Invisible* (2009) is a complexly structured novel where the story of its protagonist is stitched together from different subjects at different times, leaving the reader wondering about

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reality and fiction, truth and lies in what is a common outcome of Auster’s postmodern
literature.\textsuperscript{544} As with most of the works that forge the Other America, beyond the author’s
artistic intentions we find the illustration of a problematic country. Adam Walker, another of
Auster’s many characters whose young adult life in the late sixties is spent around the Upper
West Side of New York as a student of humanities at Columbia University, decides to enter
“the thing-in-itself, the sensorium of the real”\textsuperscript{545} when in the mid-seventies he abandons his
dream of making a living out of poetry and returns to college to become a legal aid worker.
The idealism of his youth is transported from thought into action in order to:

do some good, to work with the poor, the down-trodden, to involve myself
with the spat-upon and the invisible and see if I couldn’t defend them against
the cruelties and indifference of American society. More high-minded
claptrap? Some might think so, but it never felt that way to me. From poetry to
justice, then. Poetic justice, if you will. For the sad fact remains: there is far
more poetry in the world than justice.\textsuperscript{546}

Forced to stay home and fight leukaemia at the age of sixty, Walker writes these words in
2007, shortly before dying, in a letter to a long-lost friend. In it, we learn that the man has
spent almost three decades defending people in black neighbourhoods of San Francisco,
witnessing police brutality and any sort of rights denial, taking the side of those on the low
end of the inequality balance, where poverty meets racial issues. Seemingly at peace with his
consciousness for having tried hard to secure justice, he laments the decline he has observed
over the years in a country that is “no less cruel than it was then, perhaps more cruel than
ever”.\textsuperscript{547} In another passage of his letter, Walker mentions how “medical bills have made a
severe dent in my savings, over the past two years.”\textsuperscript{548} In the resigned tone of Walker, the
health expenses are a minor preoccupation for a man whose savings are reduced to a small
amount that will suffice for the very limited time left for him to live. On the contrary, this
type of expenses becomes an insurmountable obstacle for a survivor of an illness in \textit{Oracle
Night} (2004). Sidney Orr is a 34 year-old novelist who is alive despite his doctors’

\textsuperscript{544} For literary analyses of the novel see: Momeni J. and Faharani B. J. “Reading Difference in Identity:
Lacanian Reasoning in Paul Auster’s Invisible” in \textit{Advances in Language and Literary Studies} Vol. 8 No. 3;
June 2017, pp. 82-90, which focuses on the concepts of “Real, Symbolic and Imaginary” in a Lacanian
theoretical framework; Waller K. “Echoes of Sophocles's Antigone in Auster's Invisible”, in \textit{CLCWeb:
Comparative Literature and Culture}, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, which is centred on “Deleuze's idea of becoming in a
virtual world versus merely living in the actual, physical world”; and McLaughlin R. L. “Paul Auster. Invisible.”
tricks: a narrator who may or may not be Paul Auster; a memoirist whose truth-claims are called into question; a
layering of testamentary texts that muddle the truth instead of revealing it.”

\textsuperscript{545} Auster P. (2009), \textit{Invisible} (London, Faber & Faber), p. 83.

\textsuperscript{546} Ibid. pp. 83-84.

\textsuperscript{547} Ibid. p. 84.

\textsuperscript{548} Ibid. p. 85.
prognostications after a debilitating illness. He slowly regains his physical independence and spends his days trying to summon the necessary strength to go back to his writing, while his wife Grace is away for work most of the time. The medical bills have amounted to several thousands of dollars, which in 1982 jeopardize any possibility to make future plans for a middle-class couple without children. When Grace tells Sidney that she is pregnant, she does not show happiness and questions whether they should consider terminating her pregnancy. The couple have to face the same drama that Marco and Kitty went through in 1970 as told in *Moon Palace* (1989). Kitty decides not to have a baby because she does not feel ready to become a mother. She longs for new experiences in order to gain full independence and maturity. A decade later Grace – who is not certain who the father of the child is but cannot confess her doubt to Sidney – puts forward the couple’s economic condition as a reason for abortion. As the stories develop in the two novels, each couple goes through very different experiences with Kitty actually terminating her pregnancy and breaking up with Marco and Grace deciding to have her baby only to lose it after a violent assault from an old acquaintance. These stories encapsulate the attitudes and priorities for a couple at different times of post-war America. Marco and Kitty do not discuss as much about financial responsibilities as personal growth and experience. Sidney and Grace, in a post-crisis austerity scenario, are impelled to consider the aspect of the incertitude of their income. Grace’s initial idea of not giving birth to her baby because of ordinary economic motivations represents a mentality shift, which is the result of living under the pressure of shrinking prosperity, surrounded by a culture of wealth that imposes the pursuit of money as a moral obligation.

An unexpected donation at the end of *Oracle Night* frees Sidney from his medical bill debt, unlike what happens to Betty, the older sister of August Brill, protagonist-narrator of *Man in the Dark* (2008). Manager of her own store in Laguna Beach, married to Gilbert, a brilliant labour lawyer and strike mediator, Betty’s life is ruined when her husband becomes ill for eight long years. Upon Gilbert’s death, Betty returns to New Jersey, heavily indebted and in poor health herself. A once proud and animated woman, August’s sister spends the last four years of her life in a state of permanent grief until her death in 1987, all for the “luckless hand she was dealt by marrying a man who died young.”549 Auster’s oeuvre insists on the central idea that “the world is governed by chance”550 and that every single step that we take might drastically change the course of our life or end it. With that in mind, one wonders whether the aftermath of certain common life events that fill many stories of the writer, like illness, old

The Music of Chance (1989) contains another reference to the heavy burden imposed by health costs on a person’s life in America. Jim Nashe is an example of the “Road Man” who wanders across the Other America after receiving an unexpected large inheritance. Auster opens the novel pondering over the mysterious nature of (missed) chance and how things would have been completely different for Nashe had his inheritance arrived on time. The money would have prevented the whole chain of events that turned him into a wanderer. It is his difficult financial state that ruins his relationship and eventually drives his wife out of home shortly before receiving his inheritance. Consequently, unable to look after his little daughter while working, Nashe has no choice but leave her with his sister in Minnesota. Once the inheritance arrives, he is a lonely man and, as such, he decides to use the money to pursue a life on the road. Why does he lack money in the first place? He is not a lazy man. He has a job at the fire department, which keeps him busy all hours of the day and the night. His salary is not low, but a large part of it is spent on a monthly check for the repayments of his deceased mother’s debt to a rest home in Florida. He pays for the welfare of his late mother but cannot adequately support his wife and child. The narrator mentions this part of Nashe’s story briefly and the reader takes it for granted that a hard-working man in the richest economy in the world cannot cope with everyday life if one of his old physically impeded parents needs assistance. Hence, Nashe’s adventures are the result of coincidence as much as of an economic system that wears out its workers without giving them the possibility to live a fully dignified life. It is precisely that system that Nashe does not want to return to when he follows his crazy gambling scheme, his extreme challenge to chance that will finally take him to a far more oppressive confinement than the one of a working life. When Nashe is running out of his inheritance money he knows that going back to his former job (or finding a similar one) will never allow him to accumulate the money needed to live a life on the road as he wishes. He needs big money to attain the freedom he longs for. Regular jobs in the age of austerity only provide for minimum necessities and when they do not, workers have no other choice but have more than one job and Nashe wants to avoid all that. He is then caught in the

capitalist paradox of needing money for his freedom, but the act of procuring money itself generates a form of subjugation.\textsuperscript{552}

Most of Auster’s characters have to face this dilemma at some point. While they all embrace simplicity as a way of living and a form of compromise to meet, at least partially, both the needs of the body and the needs of the soul, as we have seen in Part III of the present work,\textsuperscript{553} the other character alongside Nashe to follow a radical solution is Benjamin Sachs in \textit{Leviathan} (1992). Nashe’s radical path to freedom is gambling, Sachs’s way is extreme civil disobedience that turns into terrorism. Described as a John Brown lookalike who wore a beard “because Henry David had worn one,”\textsuperscript{554} Sachs authored a historical novel while imprisoned for resisting military service during the Vietnam War. The book called \textit{The New Colossus} was a denunciation of America’s decline in the Gilded Age seen as a metaphor for the America Sachs lived in. In 1986 Sachs decides to quit writing to turn his ideas into actions in order to re-establish justice in a corrupt country, similarly to what Adam Walker decides to do in \textit{Invisible}. Sachs’s actions, however, do not turn to legal aid or charity work, but into open conflict with the system, a direct confrontation that he conducts in disguise under the pseudonym of “Phantom of Liberty”, blowing up small-scale models of the Statue of liberty around the States. Unlike other Auster characters who are uncomfortable with capitalist ethics, Sachs does not settle for compromise. He is neither affected by the common guilty acceptance of the system’s rules nor by the imperative of making money. He wants radical change and decides to obtain it through violent acts hoping to shake the country’s dormant consciousness. If Sachs as a public intellectual in 1970s America had an audience that paid attention to his political stance against the misdeeds of the government, most notably the war in Vietnam, in the 1980s his ideas become more and more disregarded. The decision to do something concrete instead of producing intellectual work is very much a consequence of the political and cultural atmosphere of the decade that the narrator of \textit{Leviathan} summarizes with these words:

\begin{quote}
The era of Ronald Reagan began. Sachs went on doing what he had always done, but in the new American order of the 1980s, his position became increasingly marginalized. It wasn’t that he had no audience, but it grew steadily smaller, and the magazines that published his work became steadily more obscure. Almost imperceptibly, Sachs came to be seen as a throwback, as someone out of step with the spirit of the time. The world had changed around him, and in the present climate of selfishness and intolerance, of
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{552} See Peacock J. (2009), \textit{Understanding Paul Auster} (The University of South Carolina Press), p. 105. The author reads \textit{The Music of Chance} as an example of Auster’s critique of capitalism.


\end{flushleft}
moronic, chest-pounding Americanism, his opinions sounded curiously harsh and moralistic. It was bad enough that the Right was everywhere in the ascendant, but even more disturbing to him was the collapse of any effective opposition to it. The Democratic Party had caved in; the Left had all but disappeared; the press was mute. All the arguments had been appropriated by the other side, and to raise one’s voice against it was considered bad manners.\textsuperscript{555}

Hence, to shorten the gap between “what he thinks and represents in his writing of America and what he experiences in the place called America”,\textsuperscript{556} Sachs choses to quit words and detonate bombs to shake the nation. His lonely battle, however, like Nashe’s choice to try his luck at gambling, leads to defeat when he dies manipulating another homemade bomb.

Twenty years later, bombs reappear in the narrative of \textit{Man in the Dark} (2008). The “man in the dark” is August Brill, an academic in his seventies who, lying awake unable to fall asleep at night, makes up in his head the story of a parallel world where America is at war not in Iraq but on its own land. The Supreme Court’s decision regarding the recount of votes in Florida that allowed George W. Bush to become the forty-third President of the United States in 2000 is met by violent protests and the creation of new political forces.\textsuperscript{557} Soon the country experiences a new civil war. Two new subjects emerge after secession: The Independent States of America in the North and Midwest and Pacifica in the west. Federal troops attack everywhere; New York is bombed; the death toll reaches two million in four years; the international community recognizes the new states but is unable to intervene to stop the conflict. In August’s imagination, the new states present a radical change in domestic policy when they promise that with the end of the war there will be: “universal health insurance, no more oil, no more cars or planes, a fourfold increase in teachers’ salaries (to attract the brightest students to the profession), strict gun control, free education and job training for the poor”.\textsuperscript{558} The fantasy of the bloodshed at home insists on the reality of the division within American society over the adoption of a liberal domestic policy. And to remind us of the fact

\textsuperscript{555}Auster P. (1992), p. 104.
\textsuperscript{556}See Zhang M., “Pen and Bomb: Creative Agency in Paul Auster's Leviathan” in \textit{Journal of American Studies}, 1-20, March 2018, pp.2-3, in which the author observes how “Sachs’s writing is inseparable from his action. Although in \textit{Leviathan} the one seems to be set against the other, essentially they belong to the same dynamic of creation. Likewise, though the “pen” and the “bomb” might be treated as conflicting concepts or tropes, both imply, among other things, the detonation of energy.”
\textsuperscript{557}Talking about the Supreme Court decision of 2000, Auster stated: “I’ve always looked at it as an illegal coup, the Supreme Court handed to George W. Bush the election. I was always appalled that America just rolled over and let it happen when it was so clearly illegal. And I’ve never gotten over it, to tell you the truth. And so much damage has been done to the country and the world because of that horrible decision by the US Supreme Court.” See “Paul Auster’s Dirty, Devouring New York”, interview with Alexander Bisley for \textit{Electric Literature} magazine, 18 February 2017, available at: https://electricliterature.com/paul-austers-dirty-devouring-new-york-aa1e3ae7f2a (accessed: 18/07/2018).
\textsuperscript{558}Auster P. (2008), p. 51.
that reality is not much better than dystopian fantasy, August thinks back at the days of the Newark’s race riots of 1967.

That was my war. Not a real war, perhaps, but once you witness violence on that scale, it isn’t difficult to imagine something worse, and once your mind is capable of doing that, you understand that the worst possibilities of the imagination are the country you live in. Just think it, and chances are it will happen.559

America’s latent racial tensions and violence are observed with dread and as a potential trigger for “the nightmare of social collapse”560 with the loss of solidarity and the basic value of respect for human life. That nightmare is precisely what Auster explored with his fourth novel, In the Country of Last Things (1987). The book is written in the form of a letter composed by a woman, Anna Blume, who tells of her experience in an unnamed city fallen into chaos and desperation, where she arrived a few years before looking for her brother.561 The society Anna writes about is torn by an impending atmosphere of post-apocalypse where “the pursuit of death has replaced the business of life”.562 Under the constant risk of dying, Anna quickly adapts to the unwritten rules of a place where all moral, social, and economic norms are collapsing and everyone and everything is under the threat of extinction. Anna survives thanks to her resilience, the love she feels for a man, Samuel Farr, and the care of a charity shelter, Woburn House, that she receives when she loses her lover, and the child she was pregnant with. In the intentions of the author, the dystopia created in the novel is not so much a look into a possible bleak future as an investigation on past and present human catastrophes. The publisher of In The Country of Last Things, Gerald Howard, reported how upon reading the manuscript of the novel his first thought was to associate New York to the fictional city in which Anna Blume is trapped. To him the novel was about New York, “a New York in which the plagues of homelessness, poverty, and drugs had simply been extrapolated to their grim conclusions”.563 In 1994, the Sarajevo Festival Ensemble staged the

559 Ibid. p. 67. Newark is the birthplace of Place Auster. The 1967 riots were an important event in the writer’s life that served as an eye-opener on the social problems of the country when he was twenty. The riots are featured also in 4321 (2017).


561 Although never mentioned, the readers can assume that David Zimmer is the addressee of the letter. Zimmer is a secondary character in Moon Palace (1989) and the protagonist of The Book of Illusions (2002). In the first novel, Anna Blume is briefly mentioned as Zimmer’s former girlfriend who leaves New York in search of her brother in an unspecified foreign place. See Auster P. (1989), p. 86.


563 See Howard G. (1994), pp. 92-93. Howard also adds: “The author has confirmed my suspicion on this score”, p. 93. Literary scholar William Marling comes to the same conclusion through the reading of “Letters from the City” a short story that Auster published on the Columbia Review when he was a student in the late sixties. The story was an early version of what would be published as In The Country of Last Things. For Marling, the
novel in Sarajevo during the city’s siege. The director, Haris Pasovic informed Auster that the novel resembled the state his city was in during the war of the 1990s. In a short statement for the program of the Ensemble’s tour in Europe, Auster wrote that the working title of the book was in fact “Anna Blume Walks Through The Twentieth Century” and that the events he had in mind when he composed the novel were: the siege of Leningrad, the Warsaw Ghetto, the civil wars in Africa and his own New York. He wrote: “[if] the book is “about” anything, it is about the struggle to remain human in the face of dehumanizing terror and catastrophe.”564 Auster was saddened that the book could strike a chord in the present but also added that it “meant everything to me that my book was meaningful to a man who was in a position to understand its meaning”.565 In other words, the dreadful scenario of the novel is not the result of pure imagination but the echo of the darkest actions of men, which can be fully understood only by those unfortunate ones who witness the tragedy of war, with its loss of humane sensibility and reasoning.

The stories reported above share the common thread of injustice, from the medical bills of Adam Walker to the apocalypse of the imaginary city of Anna Blume. When undisputed, injustice is the trigger of a society’s decline. Reading Auster, we see how the lack of a social safety net affects the course of people’s lives. Seemingly rational political decisions like the ones that led to austerity economics, therefore, can have a great impact on people’s everyday behaviour and ethics. And in the worst of possible worlds explored by Auster, such behaviour leads to war and destruction.

The sand’s at the bottom of the hourglass.

Whereas war has not yet been a theme in any of Jarmusch’s movies, destruction, both moral and physical, has been a recurring subject since the debut short film Permanent Vacation (1980), with shots of a New York in ruins. Jarmusch’s early films offered a window on the depressing scenario of inner city living in 1980s America. Stranger Than Paradise (1984), Down By Law (1986) and Mystery Train (1989) form a sort of trilogy for the director that speaks of the material decline of the American metropolis. New York, New Orleans and
Memphis, three key cities in the building of American culture are shown at their worst. The eye of the director produces images that illustrate the unstoppable decline of the American empire. Although with later films the filmmaker explored new subjects, the crumbling American background has remained a visual feature of his cinema.

In more recent years, the process of destruction that Jarmusch documents with his films seems to have reached its peak with his most nocturnal work, Only Lovers Left Alive (2013). Anguish for the approaching end of times is the consuming sentiment of the male protagonist of the film, Adam, played by Tom Hiddleston. He and his wife Eve (Tilda Swinton) are the heroes of the director’s eleventh feature film. Their vision of the world, which is at odds with the society that surrounds them, allows Jarmusch to deliver his point of view on the overwhelming social, economic, cultural and environmental decline of the world today. This is a stratagem that the director used in most of his previous films through the induction in an American context of foreign characters, whose different perspectives on life amplify the flaws of the American society. With Only Lovers Left Alive, Jarmusch for the first time uses non-human characters as if to say that his desire is not to simply distance himself from his own country but from humanity as a whole. Adam and Eve are vampires; quasi-immortal beings that can die only if deprived of their main sustenance (human blood), exposed to sunlight or pierced in the chest by solid wood. Some thousands of years old, the two live apart, Adam in Detroit and Eve in Tangier. Eve decides to leave Morocco to be close to her husband when she perceives that he is contemplating suicide. Together again the two are capable of renewing the deep and pure love that has kept them together through the centuries. Eve’s presence injects new energy into Adam’s self-imposed solitary confinement in a house-cum-music-studio, where the male vampire, away from the noise of the outside world that disgusts him, composes and records his music. Adam thinks that the current dissipation of culture, moral values, scientific progress, and the environment is the sign that “the sand’s at the bottom of the hourglass”. A more optimistic Eve reminds him that they have already lived through the Middle Ages, the Tartars, the Inquisitions, plagues and floods and that every difficult moment in history comes to an end and the world regenerates itself. Therefore, when

566 In a 1989 interview with Luc Sante, the director affirmed that he believed that America was going through the last days of its empire and was facing its inevitable decline. See Hertzberg L. (2001), Jim Jarmusch: Interviews (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), p. 93.
567 The original score that is attributed to Adam in the film is indeed composed by Sqürl, Jim Jarmusch’s music project with Carter Logan. For the score of Only Lovers Left Alive, Sqürl collaborated with Dutch lutenist Jozef Van Wissem. The duo is behind the original scores of two other Jarmusch’s films: The Limits of Control (2009) and Paterson (2016). The name “Sqürl” was first mentioned in “Cousins”, one of the segments of Coffee and Cigarettes (2003).
the sand is at the bottom of the hourglass, Eve tells Adam, it is time to turn it over. But Adam remains negative, as he has no confidence in humanity anymore. According to him humans of today are the true monsters, soulless and greedy zombies who are depleting mother earth and all the good things that other men did before them. Perhaps the different attitude with which the two face the current times is a reflection of the cities where they live. Eve’s Tangier is an “ancient city forever on the cusp of rebirth,” one of those places on earth that have witnessed the passage of different nations and eras and are still standing despite the brutalities of history. Adam’s Detroit is a city of the new world, a much younger place that is not accustomed to the long cycles of human history and finds itself in the midst of its first major crisis as if it was going through its very last days.

With this film Jarmusch confirms once more his inclination for post-industrial American desolation, delivering images of a Detroit that embodies the disastrous situation of humanity that Adam complains about. The subject of innumerable documentaries and reports, the decline of Detroit seen through Jarmusch’s lens shows ruins that are not yet romantic. We are not in front of the picturesque beauty of a crumbling old castle or temple. The ruins of Detroit are new. They come from a past that is too close to our present and evoke nothing but sadness and indignation for a dilapidated city that once concentrated extraordinary economic and cultural force in what, like Jarmusch reminded, was the Paris of the Midwest. What we see is that a nation has allowed one of its major urban centres to go to waste. Houses, office buildings, factories and cultural centres are equally abandoned and stand as the visual testimony of an extraordinary decline that depleted the city’s population, which collapsed from almost two million in the fifties to the current six hundred thousand, of which forty percent live under the poverty threshold. The city shown in the film might serve as the visual rendition of Auster’s apocalyptic city of In The Country of Last Things. Adam’s

569 Detroit’s economic troubles, criminality, and urban decay have been reported over the years. The works released in the past decade alternate from apocalyptic tones, such as in Detropia (2012; dir. Heidi Ewing, Rachel Grady) and Rollin: The Fall of the Auto Industry and the rise of the Drug Economy in Detroit (2010; dir. Alan Bradley), to the optimistic visions of American Dream: Detroit (2018; dir. Michael Bolton) and Detroit Comeback City (2018, History Channel).
571 In 2013 the city declared bankruptcy. Notwithstanding signs of subsequent economic recovery, the population has been decreasing year after year. Today Detroit counts a population of approximately 670,000 people, which is 25,000 less than the total population in 2013 when Jarmusch was filming Only Lovers Left Alive in the city. Source: The United States Census Bureau’s website. For the latest data, see https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/detroitcitymichigan/PST045217 (accessed: 08/08/2018) and for a historical comparison, see https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tabs/jsp/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF (accessed: 08/08/2018).
neighbourhood is deserted and bleak like the streets where Auster’s Anna Blume walks. When he ventures outside his house for the first time in the movie, the backyard where his car is parked looks like a replica of Dr Morgan’s (Vincent Price) plot in the 1964 low-budget sci-fi horror The Last Man on Earth (dir. Ubaldo Ragona, Sidney Salkow). Morgan is one of the last of the almost extinct human beings in a world inhabited by vampire-zombies from whom he strenuously defends himself in the feeble hope of regenerating life as it was before the diffusion of a new plague. On the contrary, in Only Lovers Left Alive, an unspecified new plague contaminates human blood, and threatens the survival of vampires. Adam and Eve struggle to find clean provisions of blood from their secret suppliers in hospitals. Upon their return together to Tangier, the two discover that even that part of the world is affected by the plague and have no other choice but suck human blood from living people. This act, which Eve scorns as old-fashioned fifteenth century vampirism, is the last resort to avoid the extinction of these enduring creatures who are the depositories of a vast knowledge through history witnessed first hand.

What seems to trouble Jarmusch the most about the decline that he depicts is how America easily disregards its cultural heritage and culture in general, a theme that was already present in the depiction of Memphis at the end of the 1980s in Mystery Train (1989). This vampire film is then an occasion for the director to disclose his cultural interests and influences through his democratic amalgamation of highbrow art and popular culture. Both Adam and Eve find a refuge from the dismal reality of current times in the great creative achievements of humankind: art, literature and music, above all. They can read Infinite Jest and Doctor Faustus at the same time, while listening to soul, classical or Middle Eastern music. The audience is therefore exposed to a great array of literary quotations and sounds. Jarmusch seems to reproduce art also visually in one of the last scenes where Adam and Eve are at the deathbed of their mentor Christopher Marlowe, whom Jarmusch pictures as an old vampire

572 Auster P. (1987), pp. 5-6: “Wherever buildings have fallen or garbage has gathered, large mounds stand in the middle of the street, blocking all passage”.


574 On the democratic approach to culture in Only Lovers Left Alive, see Mentana U. (2016), Il Cinema di Jim Jarmusch (Ariccia, Italy: Aracne), p. 149. On Jarmusch’s cultural hybridizations, see above, chapter 2, notes 83 and 84.

575 For a complete list of the books that Eve packs for her journey from Tangier to Detroit, see www.goodreads.com/list/show/74724.Only_Lovers_Left_Alive_Eve_s_Books (accessed 09/08/2018); for a list of fifty-seven portraits of famous men and women on Adam’s wall, see http://draculahistoryandmyth.com/only-lovers-left-alive-adams-wall-heroes (accessed 09/08/2018).
who dies because of today’s polluted blood. With the help of director of photography Yorick Le Saux, the last moments of the great poet resemble a painting from another sixteenth century artist, Caravaggio, in a play of shadows, dim light and darkness. It is another homage to art in a film that is an exhortation to preserve what is good against decline. This does not regard art alone, but also the environment and scientific progress. In one of the dialogues between the two lovers, Eve reminds Adam that he still has his beloved scientists to restore his faith in humanity:


**EVE:** Well, if we’re going to have a litany of all the zombie atrocities of history, we’ll be here till the sun comes up. 576

In a world of careless zombies who have polluted the very sources of their own existence, knowledge is fading fast and risks to become extinct like the vampires. The protagonists of the film are pure souls who elect self-exclusion in the face of the world’s deterioration. They become outsiders and hide in the dark, reminiscing about the past and waiting for better times to come while humans follow their path to self-destruction. Critic Umberto Mentana observes that the names Adam and Eve suggest hope for the regeneration of the planet, 577 as if they could be the initiators of a new humanity when they plunge their teeth on the necks of two innocent lovers at the end of the film. Having decided to subtract enough blood to keep their victims alive and ‘transform’ them into new vampires, Adam and Eve give hope for the continuation of life on earth. And to regenerate life what better victims are there than two lovers caught in a moment of romantic tenderness? The final message of the film seems to imply that, whereas culture temporarily protects Adam and Eve from the decay outside their home, only love will be the ultimate saviour of the world.

Aside from the recurrent depiction of American decline, two works of the filmmaker are concerned with finding an explanation of its causes. *Limits of Control* (2009) points at the worship of material goods like gold and other objects whose value, arbitrarily imposed by capitalism and its resulting consumer culture, is the cause of much trouble for mankind. The

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unconventional portrayal of the western frontier in *Dead Man* (1996) suggests that the decline of today has its roots in the faulty origins of the American empire, mostly in the elimination of Native Americans and the destruction of their land. The film introduces a series of themes that strike a chord with contemporary America: violence, racism, pollution, and workers’ exploitation.\(^{578}\) A recurring joke in the film on tobacco and its different uses among Native Americans and white people is also a reminder of changing habits in contemporary America, where smoking has become increasingly restricted since the 1990s. The parallels between the past and the present deliver criticism on the current state of the nation further to that already contained in the films set in present day America. *Dead Man* therefore suggests that if the birth of modern America is barbarous and inhuman, we should not be surprised by today’s problems and deterioration. To add an extra layer to the atmosphere of decay rendered by the black and white cinematography of Robert Müller, Jarmusch asked Neil Young, one of his favourite musicians, to write the score for the film. The Canadian songwriter improvised the music over two days of repeated viewing of the film, playing his electric guitar.\(^{579}\) Whereas Young reached worldwide fame in the seventies with his acoustic, modern country compositions and his collaboration with the supergroup of David Crosby, Stephen Stills, and Graham Nash, his electric guitar style is the most distinctive trait of his music. Jarmusch, who released *Year of the Horse* in 1997, a documentary on Young and his band, Crazy Horse, calls his electric guitar playing “the more wild side of Neil’s music”.\(^{580}\) Young uses a heavy reverberation with a distorted sound that generates the effect of a long distant howl. His lines are truncated, unresolved and unpredictable melodies, solos, and riffs that have an impromptu feel. In *Dead Man* this music style accompanies the journey of the protagonist to his final stage of earthly life. The main theme of the score is hypnotic and insists on a chord that “does not close, does not present an end, but opens a new cycle, a new beat, a new journey”,\(^{581}\) in line with the main message of the film that death is only the continuation of the cycle of life. The texture of the score is dark and offers the sonic equivalent of Jarmusch’s inhospitable West, inhabited by white savages, which we have considered against the myth of the frontier in chapter 3. Young translates wasteland, continuous violence, and barren woods into a repetitive melody and chords in a minor key. The marriage of visual and sonic rendition of decline is evident in one short scene where Cole Wilson (Lance Heriksen), one of the bounty

killers on the trail of the main character, is filmed top-down on the slope of a mountain from which the vision of a depleted wood surrounded by fog reminds of the landscape in a post nuclear holocaust movie. While the bounty killer inspects the ground looking for any sign of the passage of his prey, Young plays fragmented notes on the low register of his guitar with a menacing echo that magnifies the atmosphere of widespread devastation.

Jarmusch’s sense of the decline of America has been evident since the director’s early works. The recurring references to a world in decay are suggestive of a humanity on the path of self-destruction. This process is most evident in Only Lovers Left Alive, a film in which the main characters, depicted as the guardians of the best things life can offer, are too good to be humans. The world shown in the film has deteriorated beyond any possibility of salvation if not through a complete regeneration of the human species. If injustice is the thread that unites Auster’s stories of American decline, decay is the common line in Jarmusch’s the filmmaker’s movies. Pairing his vampire film with Dead Man, we conclude that the present decay and the process of self-destruction have a long history in America, as long as American history itself.

**Bad coffee and debris.**

American history and the decline of the country in the music of Tom Waits are, more than in casual textual references, in the sound of the songs. Waits, throughout the decades, has offered a compendium of American music with songs that span a tradition extending from eighteenth century broadside ballads to the crooning of Frank Sinatra and the raw punk of the Ramones. His songbook is an open source to the rich musical journey of America, its fundamental streams (folk, jazz, gospel, pop, black pop, country pop and rock-'n'-roll), 582 and its many influences and strands (indigenous, colonial, religious, secular, classical, Caribbean, African, French, Hispanic). All these different musical elements come together in the sound that the musician pursued and perfected through the years since the early eighties, which we previously mentioned as the experimental sound Tom Waits’s music is often associated with (chapter 4). Writer Luc Sante called this sound the “line B” of Waits’s musical production, which followed “line A”, namely the jazzy and beatnik musical quality of his 1970s records. 583 Reflecting on the stylistic evolution of “line B”, critic Robert Christgau said that

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Tom Waits recuperated an “American weirdo past.” The journalist’s claim was referred to the vaudevillian and medicine-show character of Waits’s performances on stage as well as the inclusion in his recordings of the musical inventions of Harry Partch, the American composer who wrote music outside the boundaries of Western canons, reproducing notes that are not contemplated in the scales played with conventional instruments. Chapter 4 observed how Waits employs Partch’s percussive instruments to introduce dissonant and frightening sounds in his songs, thus intensifying the atmosphere of hardship and marginalisation that his lyrics refer to. At the same time as the influence of Partch was becoming evident in the albums of Waits, critics detected the presence of another new musical inspiration for the songwriter in Kurt Weil, the German composer whose music is inextricably connected to the atmosphere of decadence of the short-lived Weimar Republic in Germany, which came before the rise of the Third Reich. Outside American avant-garde and German operetta, a third crucial inspiration for Waits in the creation of his new sound and aesthetics came from the rock music of Captain Beefheart, who employed cacophonous sounds, odd tempos and guttural singing at a time when his records were too weird even for the hippies, almost two decades before Waits followed his example.

Glimpses of the musician’s new direction were present in the arrangements of songs like “Red Shoes By The Drugstore” (1978) and “Circus Girl” (1982), and in the album Heartattack & Vine (1980). The soundtrack to Francis Ford Coppola’s movie One from the Heart (1982) offered further examples of the sound that was yet to emerge. However, Swordfishtrombones (1983) is the record that sparked and unveiled the sonic transformation of the songwriter in its complexity. The music that Waits has generated from that album onwards, drawing from the American “weirdo past”, is pervaded by an idea of crisis, of something that is not going the right way. This is implied in the dissonances dispersed in his sound that generate an immediate feeling of discomfort, if not distress or disgust. The Collins English dictionary defines “crisis” as “a crucial stage or turning point in the course of something”. The word has its origins in the Greek term krisis, which means decision. Ten years after his debut, Waits was at a crossroad and a crucial decision awaited him: whether to

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587 From that album, see in particular the songs “Instrumental Montage” and “You Can’t Unring a Bell”. It is interesting to observe that this early taste of what would become the sound of Heartattack and Vine first, and Swordfishtrombones later, is contained in Wait’s most “Tin Pan Alley nostalgia” kind of album.
consolidate the position of modern boozy crooner he had gained or unbind his music from the career he built until then and become an independent voice in music business. An established piano player, singer-songwriter, with a string of excellent albums that paid homage to the Great American Songbook, Waits emerged in the summer of 1983 as a new artist. Determined to pursue his own music path, introduced to unusual sounds and encouraged by his recently married wife, Kathleen Brennan, the musician dodged all expectations from critics, fans and industry alike, widening the distance that separated him from mainstream music. When Swordfishtrombones was released, the charts were dominated by Michael Jackson’s Thriller, the soundtrack of the movie Flashdance (1983 dir. Adrian Lyne), The Police’s hit single “Every Breath You Take” and a crew of new synth-pop bands, like Eurythmics, Wham! and Spandau Ballet. While radio stations were incessantly broadcasting “Maniac” and “What A Feeling”, listening to the opening song of Swordfishtrombones, “Underground”, must have made more than one listener wonder what was wrong with Tom Waits. A combination of baritone horn and bass marimba opens a tune about a creepy underground world that exists in a danger zone beyond the gopher holes where unnamed creatures are awake while the rest of the world is sleeping. Described by Waits as a journey to the centre of the earth, the song is a march dominated by percussive instruments with bass and drums accentuating every syllable of the singer’s growl with a beat, while an electric guitar plays staccato notes as a counterpoint to the melody. Those who went past this vexing and confrontational song met more difficult sounds in the following “Shore Leave”, which opens with the noise of a chair dragged across the recording studio floors; and in the third track, the instrumental “Dave the Butcher”, probably the most challenging in the album, of which Waits ironically said “I don't think it's going to get a lot of airplay, unless we put a nice vocal on it.” After these first three songs, whoever had the patience, or courage, to listen to the album in its entirety and over again would finally gain access to a way of recording and presenting music that answered exclusively to its creator’s personal compulsions. With the eighties, Waits

592 “Maniac” and “What a Feeling” were the two successful singles taken from the soundtrack of Flashdance, sung respectively by Michael Sembello and Irene Cara.
595 See Island Records music industry 12” promo, 1983.

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masterminded a music of his own by refuting the canons of pop-music songwriting and arrangement, moving from the rigour of sophisticated orchestration of his previous albums to recordings driven by intuition and impulse. With his musical transformation, Waits the songwriter espoused a new way of conceiving music. Using hunting or fishing allegories to explain how he creates a song, the musician sees himself as a receiver-transmitter, rather than an auteur. He thinks he is a conductor or a portal that “catches” songs that live in him or around him and crafts them into something that the audience can hear. A song pre-exists its composer or, to use Waits’s words, “there are things coming in through the window and through you and then down to the piano and out the window on the other side.” The recording process, therefore, aims at reproducing the instant in which the musician is capturing the song as he thinks it should sound or as he hears it in his head. This approach is the main generator of the strange sounds that the listeners were exposed to for the first time with Swordfishtrombones.

Talking to his old friend and musician, Francis Thumm, in 1988 Waits described his shift towards the new sound like a move as dangerous as moles building tunnels underneath a watercourse, while the interviewer reminded him that in ancient Greece bold musicians were punished:

FT: Much of Swordfishtrombones - the sound, the instrumentation, the song styles, even the record cover - was a bold departure from anything you'd done before. What impelled you to do that?

TW: I don't know. It's like the moles underneath Stonehenge; that's one of the largest mole communities on the globe, and they have a whole hierarchy there. They actually salute moles who have had the courage to tunnel beneath great rivers, because of the risk involved. If you make one bad move, you bring the whole river back up to the tunnel and wipe out a whole community. They also have punishments for those who have done that.

FT: In ancient Greece they tried you if you were too adventurous with their music system.

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TW: You could go to jail for that.

FT: Yeah, that's a Harry Partch story. He talked about Timotheus who was banished from a city because he added two strings to a three-string lyre, and Partch says: “My lyre has seventy-two strings, and I shudder to think what would have happened to me in ancient Greece.”

TW: God, they would have boiled him.^{600}

Waits was not boiled for his daring choices. On the contrary, critics applauded the change and over the years his audience grew.^{601}

His experiments delivered a music texture that has been labelled gothic,^{602} an impression that is confirmed most notably in his theatrical scores, *The Black Rider* (1993), *Alice* (2002) and *Blood Money* (2002). According to writer David Smay, with his 1983 album Waits “traded in his Edward Hopper imagery for something closer to [Pieter] Brueghel”,^{603} the Flemish renaissance painter known for his pictures of death, fallen angels, monsters, and other hellish fantasies. Whilst this association is a fitting description of his sound, – especially in the songs in which he plays with the themes of death, murder, suicide and apocalypse – the gothic feel is just one layer he uses to dress his compositions with. Repeated hearings of his records reveal that underneath the exterior sound, a large portion of his songs is indeed the result of a juxtaposition of sweet melodic and harmonious tunes with rough sounds and difficult topics. His songs remain fundamentally anchored to the simple chord progressions of American folk and blues music. His music then can be approached and reproduced in innumerable ways like the impressively long and varied list of artists who covered his music confirms.^{604}

Likewise, seen in the specific historical context that we are examining with this chapter, the aesthetics of Waits’s music can take on further meaning beyond the immediate dark or disconcerting texture. If sociologist Philip Ennis is right when he says that music is a

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^{603} Smay D. (2008), p. 4.

“palpable part of social reality,” the musical evolution of Waits underlines some of the social changes of his time. The musician, interviewed in 2004, ironically summarized these changes by saying that “it’s getting harder and harder to find a bad cup of coffee” in America. This comment hardly conceals how uncomfortable an artist like Waits must be in an age of rapid gentrification that, “erasing the old welfare-state landscapes”, makes his failed characters less and less visible in the major centres of the country. The main single from Swordfishtrombones, “In The Neighborhood”, praised resilience and livelihood amid the mess and racket of working class decadent urban areas, where one could certainly find a bad cup of coffee. The precarious urban reality that he sang of, reproducing the sound of a Salvation Army marching band, is becoming a rarity, being either left in a state of utmost abandon – like Jarmusch’s Detroit – or threatened by expensive redevelopment plans that attract big private capital and push low-income residents away – like witnessed in most areas of New York’s lower Manhattan.

Examining the music, instrumentation and voice of Tom Waits, Corinne Kessel suggests that the independent and adventuresome musical course begun by the musician in the 1980s channels the “spontaneity of a junkyard orchestra that just happened to be where the story was taking place”. The songs are not pre-arranged to follow a style or genre, but belong to a place where they observe and report life as it happens. The singer captures the songs around him and, in turn, these capture the mood of the land with music “banged out on whatever strikable object happened to be around”. This is music made out of the remains and debris left by the post-industrial age. Describing his DIY instrumentation, Waits expressed concern for the disposable amount of objects abandoned in the consumer culture world:

I think something is gonna come out of this garbage world we're living in, where knowledge and information are becoming so abstract and the things that used to really work are sitting out there like big dinosaur carcasses, rusting. Something's gonna have to be made out of it that has some value. What can we do? Bury it and live on it?

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609 Ibid., p. 33.
610 Ibid., p. 131.
In the song “Earth Died Screaming” (1992), Waits whispers quotations from the Bible before screaming for the arrival of “the great day of wrath”612 while the music, a primitive tribal beat, is almost entirely played by the “Boners”, namely, Waits, his wife and engineer Joe Marquez who banged sticks on the ground outside the recording studio. The “scariest opening track of Wait’s career”,613 as music writer Barney Hoskyns called it, the song is an admonition against the self-destruction of man through the exploitation and mistreatment of our planet.

Abandoning the old beatnik persona, the new character that emerged with the music created with Swordfishtrombones is that of Waits the junk collector. This role is made visible on the cover of Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers and Bastards (2006) in which Waits is photographed in a basement surrounded by all kinds of used objects: a wooden chair, an old fridge, bullhorns, electric cables, lamps, a guitar, a tape recorder, phonographs. All around him are ghosts of dead people, whose disturbing presence is a reminder that “recording for [Waits] is like photographing ghosts”.614 The album in itself was the result of a recycling operation, collecting old and new songs recorded in over two decades, fifty-six “orphans” of an intense music career. Whereas the boozer of the seventies seemed inattentive toward political issues, the garbage man of the later phase of Waits’s music career has shown a political and social consciousness, as proven by songs like “Take Care of All My Children” and “Road To Peace” in the 2006 album, as well as by the use of rescued objects in his music. Like Neil Young who is able to convey the barren wasteland and violence of Jarmusch’s West with his repetitive guitar lines, Waits’s junkyard symphonies translates American waste into music. The detritus of a careless materialistic society is recycled to create a form of art. In this sense, Waits’s music offers a score to that same decline of contemporary America that is present in different forms in the novels of Auster and the films of Jarmusch.

What Waits did in Swordfishtrombones was not new in pop-rock music. In addition to the already mentioned Captain Beefheart, Dr John’s 1968 debut, Gris Gris and Roger Waters’s Music from The Body (1970) were albums in which music was loosely made with unusual instruments or objects. The Rolling Stones’ “Just Wanna See His Face” (1972) is another example of rock music experimenting with uncanonical percussions, structures and rhythms.615 What differentiates Waits from most other rock musicians who experimented with

615 Waits has mentioned “Just Wanna See His Face” as his favourite Rolling Stones song on several occasions. One of these was an interview with Patrick Humphries in 1981. In his Waits biography, Humphries writes: “if
sounds outside their music field was the fact that *Swordfishtrombones* did not remain an isolated work, an odd experimental album in an artist’s career, but became “the musical foundation on which his following album[s] could build”. Rain Dogs (1985) and *Franks Wild Years* (1987) deepened the roots of Waits’s music into the weird past, with the inclusion of accordions and carnivalesque music. With *Bone Machine* (1992), Waits pushed his sound to new extremes, with a masterful use of silence and external noises, exposing melodies in their simplicity with stripped-down, rudimentary instrumentation. This is probably the album that best reflects Waits’s desire to capture the essence of a song, according to the idea that songs pre-exist their composition. Less extreme but still innovative and unconventional, the following album, *Mule Variations* (1999) continued to offer images of a hidden marginal America with its “surrural” sound, a mixture of folk and experimental music (chapter 3). But it is when his musical trials were probably becoming predictable for his audience that Waits offered the most politically motivated album of his career, *Real Gone* (2004). In releasing a record with the most basic instrumentation (bass, guitar and drums), the soundscape of *Real Gone* was dominated by the abundant use that Waits made of beatboxing, providing most rhythmic patterns with his mouth. That was the only musical innovation introduced with an album that is otherwise remembered for its lyrics. The barren sound of the record, wilfully sought by Waits, offers the frame to a look into current affairs. As journalist Jonathan Valania writes, the album “ripples in the same troubled waters we all find ourselves bobbing in these days.” The singer, describing the thread that runs through the songs of the record, openly expressed in interviews his contempt for George Bush’s presidency and his military campaigns. Alarmed by American interventionism in Afghanistan and Iraq, Wait’s anti-war sentiments are strong in “Hoist That Rag” and “The Day After Tomorrow”, while the already mentioned “Sins of My Father” contains references to the president’s biography, his family and his “rigged games” that go beyond the “gavel and the laws of man” in the

I’d followed Waits’ lead, gone back to *Exile On Main Street* and played ‘Just Wanna See His Face’, I’d have got a couple of years jump on his next career move – and then *Swordfishtrombones* wouldn’t have come as such a surprise”. See Humphries P. (2007), p. 143.

621 Music writer Patrick Humphries believes that the preoccupation with Bush’s wars occurred at a time when Waits’s son, Casey, reached the age of military draft, an event that would have Waits ponder over the loss of young lives in Iraq and Afghanistan. See Humphries P. (2007), p. 290.
“humiliation of a fallen state”. Waits’s songs had never contained such direct statements, or “moral prescription” as journalist Andy Gill writes, observing the musician’s “angry and affecting” indignation. If Jarmusch’s characters in Only Lovers Left Alive prefer to stay away from the world’s troubles immersing themselves in the joy of art, Waits with Real Gone decides to use art as an instrument to denounce today’s problems, like the fictional character of Benjamin Sachs did with his writing in Auster’s Leviathan. Events have developed in such a way that the musician could not hide his rage any longer. “I’m not a politician. […] I keep my mouth shut because I don’t want to put my foot in it. But at a certain point, saying absolutely nothing is a political statement all of its own”. These words summarize how he finally felt compelled to add explicit lyrics to what his sound had suggested until then about the decline of contemporary America.

Waits’s music, at odds with prevailing trends and sounds, has indeed offered a testimony to its times, like art often does. His radical transformation into an independent original voice in American music business and the subsequent sound that emerged in his works have provided an accompaniment to the mounting troubles of a greedy and wasteful world where marginalised people cannot find relief, even after they return from the wars they fight for their country.

The mutilated country.

Although undeniably grim, the works we have examined in this chapter are not fatalistic or apocalyptic. They are realistic. The crisis observed through the narrative of the Other America provides a window on real problems of a country that is facing cultural, economic and political decline. As we have seen, the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits over the years have touched upon such issues as the shrinking standards of living, the disappearance of social safety nets, the eruption of violent protests, the fear of chaos and conflict, dilapidation of major urban centres, exploitation of nature, war. The problems presented with the stories and the aesthetics of our three authors lead to one main fracture within American society, which Auster pointed out recently. According to the novelist, America is divided between “people who believe that we live in a society together and we’re responsible for one another, and those of us who believe that America is here to give everyone individual freedom and not

feel compelled to have a social conscience.” In other words, the crisis has its deep roots in an opposition that undermines the social covenant, the fundamental pact that forms the basis of civil coexistence. Americans are divided on what their communal project represents: is America a collective initiative or a shared space? On his analysis of Paul Auster’s *Leviathan*, literary scholar Mark Osteen writes that the book “suggests that the liberty of solitude is a phantom and that true liberty emerges only through covenants and bonds of social life. Those bonds are themselves phantoms, secrets, specters; they weave the nets that both ensnare us and catch us when we fall”. This sentence summarizes on which side of the debate, not only the novel *Leviathan*, but the whole imagined country of the Other America is collocated. The country described in the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits is anchored to the idea of freedom through social justice and equality. Unfortunately, this vision seems to clash with a prevalent “corruption of the American understanding of freedom”, as sociologist Philip Gorski has recently observed in his study of the American covenant. The scholar suggests that this corruption takes several forms, among which the *laissez-faire* idea that freedom coincides with private interests and anti-statism. This is the ideology behind an interpretation of the role of the state and of the meaning of public interest that “looked like a defense of freedom [but] was actually an attack on freedom. The freedom of the many was being sacrificed for the freedom of the few.” As a result, Gorski laments that today “American democracy is suffering from a severe case of oligarchy.” As seen above in this chapter, the economics of austerity marked the triumph of new *laissez faire* ideas at the end of the twentieth century, depressing wages, increasing inequalities and crippling intellectual creativity. These policies are the effect of the hypocrisy of a ruling class that imposes economic rigour on the majority of citizens while pursuing its private interests and getting richer. It is the same hypocrisy that lies behind the conflicting actions of ringing the alarm bell on public budgets and slashing taxes at the same time.

The oligarchy, with its private interests, is therefore responsible for the problems of the common people in Auster’s novels, the dilapidated state of the urban centres filmed by

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629 Ibid. p. 227.
630 Ibid. p. 228. Gorski goes on by saying that a renewal of civic memory is necessary to maintain the spirit of citizensy. “The founts of memory [are] to be refilled through civic education and civic ritual. In the United States these founts have run dry – or, rather, they have been plugged up with detritus from the culture wars.”
Jarmusch and the detritus with which Waits creates sound. It is also responsible for the state of hopelessness of young Americans pictured in Auster’s *Sunset Park* (2010). The novel closes with a long sentence that symbolizes the state of confusion of Miles Heller, the main character, who has just been arrested. Miles’s mind goes back to the image of Homer Parrish, the handless World War Two veteran played by Harold Russell in the film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946, dir. William Wyler). Miles thinks of his future as a mutilated one. Like Homer, Miles at the age of twenty-eight, still relies on his parents to get by. While the war veteran needs physical help for his little everyday actions, the protagonist of *Sunset Park* needs financial support to get out of his troubles. It is a portrait of a young American who, after the Great Financial Crisis of 2008, finds himself with very little chances to become economically sound and independent and abandons any form of hope to live only for the present. It is the story of a mutilated nation whose youth has given up its dreams of success and happiness and become cynical, disillusioned, disheartened. The loss of faith in the future only fuels more individualism and weakens a shared social conscience.

In order to bring the country back on the anti-feudal path envisioned by Walt Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, a renewed belief in a common goal of equality and democracy is necessary. A counter-culture against the dominant materialism, individualism and the primacy of private interests over public good is a first step toward that direction.

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Weaving fictional stories in times of decline, Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits have exposed the contradictions of a capitalist system that increases economic wealth exponentially but cannot assure basic dignified standards of living for all. With their accounts of injustice, poverty, failure, moral and material deterioration, these three contemporary artists build their own American resistance against dominant tendencies of selfishness and greed. Writing during the Depression, James Agee stated that a good artist is “a deadly enemy of society.” An artist defies collective ethics, as Agee himself did by revealing the struggle of poor American families in the nineteen-thirties amid the indifference of the majority of the population. Some fifty years later, Auster, Jarmusch and Waits work as antagonists of society, by creating narratives that question its conventions and reject its values. On one hand, if almost each story of these authors offers a realistic background of the problems of contemporary America showing “life as it is”, on the other hand, their whole body of work

generates a social critique that points to “life as it should be”. Their works, therefore, are a combination of social realism and something akin to utopianism, not in the sense of the creation of perfect future societies but imbedded into alternative visions of everyday life. For this reason, their fictions achieve a revolutionary power by demonstrating what Richard Wright described as “a new and strange way of life” which is countercultural. Their main characters do not wish for the material prizes promised by the capitalist society but aim for a more rewarding kind of emotive living. The marketplace, which dominates mainstream culture, is removed from the everyday life in the alternative worlds imagined in the works of the Other America. That is the central countercultural element of these works. The crisis portrayed in the Other America originates from specific political and cultural directions.

Chapter 7 examined how austerity economics was one of the post-1960s political choices that changed the face of America, worsening social and economic inequalities. This chapter will focus on the cultural causes behind the American decline depicted in the works under examination. More specifically, the present chapter will consider how the values of the Other America imagined in those works resist those found within a consumerist mainstream culture.

One of the early inquiries into consumer culture in America was conducted in the mid-twenties by sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd with their so-called Middletown studies. Their research portrayed middle and working class people as subjugated by the “dominance of the dollar.” Observing several aspects of life in an average American town, the Lynds came to the conclusion that in only a matter of three decades, society’s habits and ethics changed dramatically as a result of labour and technological innovations. Community and neighbourhood life lost most of its appeal for families that increasingly spent their free time listening to the radio or staying away from their homes and neighbourhoods due to increased mobility via their newly acquired automobiles. More importantly, both skilled and unskilled labourers dedicated their energy and the majority of their time to work, away from their families and, oftentimes, their communities. This work ethic was justified by the desire for “big money” and the “diffusion of urgent occasions for spending [it]” The mass production

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637 The Lynds published two books under the name “Middletown” that were highly successful: Lynd R. S., Lynd H. M. (1929), Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture (Orlando: Hartcourt); and Lynd R. S., Lynd H. M. (1937), Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts (Orlando: Hartcourt).


639 The object of the Lynds’ study was the town of Muncie, Indiana. Its population was approximately forty thousand and the majority of its residents where white.

of new consumer goods, accompanied by the novelty of “instalment buying” and the belief that the “way to make the economy boom is to buy”, made consumption a new necessity that demanded of the average citizen a “double duty” to produce and purchase.\textsuperscript{641} In this context, citizens were transformed into \textit{consumers}: People who happily substituted their hopes and dreams for the future with instant material satisfaction, something that can be bought.

The dynamics observed in Middletown studies have survived through the decades and have become deeply rooted in mainstream culture. With the end of the twentieth century, these dynamics have become even more evident in a country that rediscovered \textit{laissez faire} ideas through its austerity policies. The absolute faith in the ability of a free market, exclusively regulated by supply and demand laws, in assuring prosperity was met with an upsurge in consumerism. In the 1990s scholar Andrew Delbanco observed how at the turn of the century the establishment of “instant gratification as the hallmark of the good life” has become a constituent element of contemporary American society.\textsuperscript{642} In the same years, economist John Galbraith described the formation of a “contented majority”, a middle-upper class that espouses the principles of consumerism and the ideology of money-making.\textsuperscript{643} The vote expressed by this majority decides the ruling class in the country. Therefore, conservatives and liberals equally chase this vote by satisfying the contented majority’s requests to reduce taxation and increase its privileges. According to sociologist Zygmut Bauman, the theory of the contented majority would explain the “amazing sea-change in public mood” that, in a matter of two decades, between the 1960s and the 1980s, transformed welfare and taxation in “an anathema on politicians’ lips and an abomination to electors’ ears”\textsuperscript{644}. The outcome of this sea-change was the public support to the increase of inequality,\textsuperscript{645} through the demise of the welfare state (as observed in the previous chapter). Bauman explains how there is a connection between consumerism and political economies. On one hand, the “culture of success” (see chapter 6) attaches a stigma to beneficiaries of welfare. In a society where the ideology of the American Dream suggests that anyone can achieve success by his or her own means, to rely on public help is a shameful admission of failure. On the other hand, ever more sophisticated consumers elect choice as their primary value. In the consumer society, the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{641} Ibid. p. 88.
\textsuperscript{642} Delbanco A. (1999), \textit{The Real American Dream: a Meditation on Hope} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 96-97. The author observes how the desire for instant gratification in America derives from two opposite ideologies: the 1960s counterculture and the 1980s yuppie materialism, which for different reasons (individual freedom on one side and wealth on the other) both contributed to the same end.
\textsuperscript{645} Ibid. p. 56.
\end{footnotesize}
ability to choose is the essential trait of the citizen-consumer. The welfare state is at odds with this value, limiting the freedom of choice with its undifferentiated provisions.646 Bauman explains how market and welfare are domains relying on opposite concepts: the first on the “cult of difference and choice”, the second on the “idea of the sameness of the human condition, human needs and human rights”.647 The 1980s, a time during which public debate was dominated by free market ideas, saw the intellectual victory of neo-liberalism648 and the indoctrination of a new consumer culture, which advocates for the “wisdom and efficiency of the markets”, as historian Daniel Rodgers writes.649 Hence, the decade witnessed the primacy of ‘difference’ over ‘sameness’. In his detailed analysis of the politics and the economics of the eighties, Rodgers affirms that the widespread success of new theories on the superiority of the market in generating prosperity was accompanied by the dissolution of society into its “individual, utility-maximising parts”, namely the consumers.650 Individualism’s extreme manifestations – which can be viewed as selfishness and greed from outside the market-driven values – became commonly accepted attitudes as made clear through the words of financial investor Ivan Boesky. In 1986, at the inauguration of the academic year of the Berkeley School of Economics, Boesky pronounced “Greed is all right, by the way, I want you to know that. I think greed is healthy.”651

To this day, the cultural legacy of that decade, as summarized in the excessive comment of Boesky, could not be changed even by an epochal event like the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. For a short time, in the wake of the destruction of the Twin Towers, America rediscovered values of solidarity, the common good and human connection.652 Very quickly, however, the notion that “markets could do everything best” was reinstalled.653 Even the President, representing “the logic of a business civilization,” soon after the attacks, bothered appearing in a television commercial to invite his fellow citizens to travel by plane again and

647 Ibid. p. 59.
648 The term “neo-liberalism” is used here in connection with the political economic choices described in chapter 7, which resulted in the dismantling of welfare and social programs and the formation of an oligarchy that imposes economic rigour on the citizens while pursuing its private interests.
650 Ibid. p. 63.
652 For an account of the climate of solidarity among common citizens in New York for several weeks after the terror attacks of September 11, see Gitlin T. (2006), The Intellectuals and the Flag (New York, Columbia University Press), pp. 125-156, in which the scholar, a once protagonist of the “Students for a Democratic Society” activist group of the 1960s, investigates a newly found sense of patriotism of the left after the tragedy of 2001.
A culture like this, which applies market rules to every human activity, has one again gained ground since 2001.\textsuperscript{655} Despite the economic troubles that forced the contented majority into a downward social mobility, nobody today seems to dispute the fundamental values of an economic system that requires more and more hours of work for lower incomes in return. As writer Alissa Quart recently observed, an overwhelming sense of guilt affects anyone today who is not capable of earning the amount of money that they need or want.\textsuperscript{656} This is how far the neoliberal ideology is instilled in our contemporary society.

What the Lynds called the ‘dominance of the dollar’ in their classic study from almost one hundred years ago is still very much the fulcrum of our culture; a culture that worships money, revolves around economic logic, and fully believes in the myth of consumer sovereignty. This ‘America’ is the one Auster, Jarmusch and Waits disapprove of and resist through their works of art with which they, willingly or not, play the role of enemies of the conventional society. The following discussion maps these artists’ pathways of resistance and, in doing so, locates and more carefully defines their visions of the Other America.

\textbf{Broken Things.}

The Other America can be found in all those aspects of life – objects, words and deeds – that do not belong to a consumerist society. For instance, the dominance of the language of business is evident today not only in work-relations but in all other fields of life: Politics, entertainment, sport, education, and the arts.\textsuperscript{657} Terms like “productivity”, “growth”, and “efficiency” are used to describe the functioning of nearly every human action. The prevalence of these economic precepts imposes wealth as the ultimate prize for all strata of society. We increase production and consumption of goods with the belief that such behaviour will increase general wealth, too. And we are compelled to do so \textit{efficiently}; namely without wasting time and other resources as the doctrine of austerity stipulates. This mindset is foreign to the Other America of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, where the ultimate prize of wealth is not the final goal for the people who populate their stories. The language used in their work is virtually free from market and business terminology. It is not only such vocabulary that is absent from their work, but also key symbols of contemporary consumerism. For example, the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{654} See Gitlin T. (2006), pp. 143-144.
\item \textsuperscript{655} Ibid. p. 264.
\item \textsuperscript{656} Quart A. (2018), \textit{Squeezed. Why Our Families Can't Afford America} (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins). Quart focuses mostly on how young and highly educated middle-class families cannot afford to have more than one child for economic reasons in today’s America.
\item \textsuperscript{657} See Sandage S. A. (2005), \textit{Born Losers: A History of Failure in America} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 6, who writes about “the language of business applied to the soul”.
\end{itemize}
characters of their stories are generally not directly involved in the production and consumption of consumer goods. They almost never eat at a restaurant. They do not shop in malls. They never visit holiday-resorts. They very rarely travel on airplanes – except for those who clearly belong to the ‘contented majority’ like Auster’s David Zimmer in The Book of Illusions (2002) or Jarmusch’s Don Johnston in Broken Flowers (2005). And they never use addictive modern electronic devices, including, in the more recent works, mobile phones.

These characters, however, are not completely disconnected from the world around them. In the majority of cases, they are neither hermits nor direct antagonists of the system. They are mostly indifferent to dominant practices of consumption, but not radically opposed to them. Even if some of them abandon society to pursue an alternative lifestyle (see Auster’s Leviathan and Mr. Vertigo, or Jarmusch’s Ghost Dog), there are many moments in which the pleasure of material possession is valued. These authors themselves have not hidden their interest in particular objects. Tom Waits has often mentioned in his songs and in interviews his weakness for old cars. Through the male vampire protagonist of Only Lovers Left Alive (2013), Adam, Jim Jarmusch expressed his delight for vintage electric guitars. Paul Auster confessed in many interviews his fondness for typewriters and fountain pens. Rather than consumerist compulsions, these possessions reveal an element of pleasure in the collection and care of what may be considered beautiful mechanical objects. After all, the actual preservation of old (and odd) objects is a form of rejection of the disposable nature of goods in a consumer society. Rather than accumulating unnecessary new possessions, some characters try to rescue what already exists (and is often considered better than what is being produced in the present). That is the case of Bing Nathan, an anti-consumerism hero who appears in Auster’s Sunset Park (2010). Bing is a current day hipster with a fondness for analogue objects, which he mends, professing his refusal of the idea of infinite technological progress. He strenuously avoids modern digital technology, which to him has reduced the possibilities of life, robbing people of their free time. He runs a tiny store called “The

658 Jim Jarmusch’s movies show four other airplane passengers who, unlike Don Johnston, do not belong to middle-class: Eva (Ester Balint) in Stranger Than Paradise (1984) who is a Hungarian migrant; Lone Man (Isaach de Bankolé) in The Limits of Control (2009) who is an assassin; and the vampires Adam and Eve (Tom Hiddleston and Tilda Swinton) in Only Lovers Left Alive (2013).

659 On this topic, Heike Jenss explains how recuperating and collecting “vintage” products “has become one of the major developments across […] popular culture in recent decades, tying in with the promotion of ideas of individuality and authenticity”. Jenss H. (2015), Fashioning Memory: Vintage Style and Youth Culture, (London: Bloomsbury Academic), p. 1. Such practice though can become an “unhealthy fixation on the bygone” as Simon Reynolds calls it in reference to music fans’ obsession with the replication of the past, which is exploited by the music industry to generate revenues from the reproduction of the same products over time. See Reynolds S. (2011), Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past . London: Faber and Faber, p. xxx and p. 307.
Hospital for Broken Things” where he repairs “battered artefact[s] from the antique industries of half a century ago, and he goes about it with the wilfulness and passion of a general fighting a war.” And, in his spare time, Bing plays in a jazz band; so to say, the musical equivalent to his old, forgotten objects. His ideology is also reflected in his choice to illegally occupy an abandoned house in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park with friends. The radical choice, in Bing’s mind, is not merely dictated by the economic difficulties he and his friends are experiencing, but also by his call to protect fragile things:

a crumbling wooden house standing empty in a neighborhood […] is nothing if not an open invitation to vandals and arsonists, an eyesore begging to be broken into and pillaged, a menace to the well-being of the community. By occupying that house, he and his friends are protecting the safety of the street, making life more livable for everyone around them. Bing and his friends commit an illegal act that, in many respects, symbolizes the righteousness in Auster’s stories. It is an act that breaks both property laws and commonly accepted moral rules. It is also justified by good will and Bing’s strong beliefs in justice and community living. And just like the house becomes a small community of old and new friends who face life’s adversities collectively, Bing’s store brings people together and helps them save memories and communal living, giving old, treasured objects a new life.

The Hospital for Broken Things is a place where Tom Waits would probably spend a lot of his time. Many of the songs that we hear on his albums are made following the same philosophy that animates Bing Nathan. We mentioned earlier how the distinctive sound of Waits’s post-1983 productions is the result of the musician’s concern for abandoned objects which he collects and transforms into musical instruments that are played by his “junkyard orchestra”. Aside from the inventive use of unorthodox instruments, Waits employs actual musical instruments produced for the consumer market that have fallen out of use by his peers. His songs are therefore enriched by synthetisers, guitars, and keyboards that once were commonly used to make pop music until discarded and replaced by newer commercialised models. Among Waits’s instruments we find objects that American teenagers used in the fifties and the sixties and may have bought from the popular Sears-Roebuck retail catalogues: the Chamberlin 2000, the Mellotron, Farfisa organs, Harmony guitars, and the Optigan. The last instrument listed here was a late 1960s synthetiser described as a “music maker”, a compact instrument that employed floppy discs to create different grooves and sounds. The

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661 Ibid. p. 77.
662 See Chapter 2 of the present work, subheading *Alternative values*.
producer was the toy company Mattel that promoted it as a family pastime. Soon out-dated and replaced by other synthesizers in the market, the Optigan was forgotten by buyers in a matter of a few years. After (re)discovering it for his Franks Wild Years album, Waits said that the Optigan is “like everything else in popular music. It finally washes up in the Salvation Army twenty years later, and someone picks it up, brings it home and makes a hit record out of it. Bury me, then dig me up — that’s like the code of popular music.”

Employing disposable instruments for his recordings, Waits is once more making a stand against a culture that turns valuable objects into garbage and finding beauty and value in what other people see as rubble.

In line with the spirit that animates the Hospital for Broken Things and Waits’s use of forgotten instruments, Jarmusch once said: “My movies are kind of made by hand. They’re not polished – they’re sort of built in the garage. It’s more like being an artisan in some way.”

Looking at his films, the one character that somehow adopts the recycling philosophy of Bing Nathan and Tom Waits is Ian (Anton Yelchin), the young man who supplies Adam the vampire with old guitars and other objects in Only Lovers Left Alive. In exchange for large sums of money, Ian is able to feed Adam’s desire to preserve beautiful, old artefacts from the self-destroying madness of humans in contemporary consumerism. Conversely, Broken Flowers presents a protagonist that would never make use of Ian’s or Bing Nathan’s services. The main character Don Johnston (Bill Murray) offers a portrayal of middle-class consumerism and its never-ending search for satisfaction. Don’s house is filled with the latest consumer goods to which Don pays no attention. He himself has made a living out of working for the informatics industry, a sector of the economy that heavily relies on mass consumption. However, his endless quest for satisfaction is mostly marked by his relationship with the opposite sex rather than in the consumption of material goods. Don is paying his dues in terms of loneliness and boredom for a life during which he has entertained countless (and mostly short-term) relationships with women. In his objectification of these women, they become ‘things’ to be used and enjoyed in the same way consumerists view any number of goods. Thus, he has disposed of several hearts along the way, much like the average consumer disposes of objects that are surpassed by new models or fads. And just like

664 See original television commercial on www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY4hyWds6Qk (last accessed 5/10/2018).
the voracious tendency to dispose of material goods and replace them with new ones - which leaves the consumer with a constant feeling of dissatisfaction - Don’s broken relationships form a spiritual void in his life. If someone like Tom Waits is concerned with the amount of abandoned goods that humanity is getting rid of day after day and tries to rescue some of them to make his music, Jarmusch seems concerned with the lives of women objectified by men, the ‘broken flowers’ whose post-relationship existence and dignity give his film depth and compassion.

Broken things, the disposable objects of our consumer culture, are rescued and assume importance in the stories of the Other America, whether appearing as old loved artefacts, forgotten musical instruments or even, at the most distorted level of our consumerist habits, people. These neglected “unsaleable” objects and people are the emblems of a resistance against a consumer culture that animates the economy and social life of the mainstream society.

Pre-fab doghouses, commercials and the arbitrary nature of reality.

Compulsive consumption of goods is the ultimate end of a working life for the contented middle class. The Middletown studies of the nineteen-twenties observed how work at the turn of the century morphed from a skilful activity into an almost mechanical action driven exclusively by the necessity and desire to accrue money and possessions. Whereas characters created by these three artists live in worlds removed from consumerist pursuits or concerns, nevertheless the theme of money and lack thereof is a recurrence in Auster’s writing in which his characters have an evident difficulty to earn it or save it. The writer’s criticism of capitalism and the free market economy is therefore always implied in his many novels through the characters’ struggle to lead the life they want under the constant imperative of finding sources of financial security. In at least two books, his commentary on the economic system is more pronounced than elsewhere. I refer to Leviathan (1992) and Sunset Park (2010), where the main characters are either openly hostile to or critical of American capitalism. However, looking for a specific critique of consumer culture, one title that comes to mind is Timbuktu (1999). Auster entrusts one of his most poignant characters, the dog Mr. Bones, with the task of illustrating the spiritual void of consumerism in the heart of America.

After losing his much-loved master, the troubled drop-out and wandering poet Willy G. Christmas, who dies on the streets of Baltimore, Mr. Bones finds some protection in a young migrant boy named Henry Chow. The boy’s attention and love of the dog are directly proportional to his father’s hatred for animals: Mr. Bones is forced to leave Henry once the
man finds out that his son is secretly sheltering a dog. After more wandering, the animal finally arrives in Virginia and finds a new home with the Joneses, the archetypal American happy family of four: Richard, an airline pilot; Polly, a stay-at-home mother; and Alice and Terry, two children of eight and two years of age. They live in a large house in a residential suburb, where the dog is admitted and renamed as Sparky after some negotiations between a reluctant husband and a dog-loving wife. The day after his arrival on the Joneses’ lawn is a Sunday and Richard buys a deluxe model of a pre-fab doghouse, an accessory that the dog perceives as unnecessary. When Monday comes and everybody leaves the house going in different directions, the dog is chained to a bouncing wire. Mr. Bones understands that he is not free anymore and that he has “sold his birthright for a mess of porridge and, an ugly ready-made house.”

Through his eyes, ears and nose, the reader discovers a monotonous life made of the same repeated movements, sounds and smells dictated by the weekly calendar. The predictability of this life brings loneliness and isolation in the long days spent alone not only by the dog but also by Polly, the young wife-mother to whom Mr. Bones becomes the main confidant. Both these characters are taken away from their natural inclinations – a career for Polly and companionship for Mr. Bones. The woman and the dog are therefore victims of the dynamics of “power, control and homogenization in suburbia” embodied by Richard, the breadwinner, whose rigid undemocratic rules oppress both of them.

Whilst family shelters in other Auster books become places of hope and new beginnings (Brooklyn Follies; Man in the Dark; Sunset Park), even in boring suburban settings like at the end of Mr. Vertigo (1994) or in 4321 (2017), the family of Timbuktu is a smothering imprisonment. As days, weeks and months pass by, Mr. Bones comes to accept the price he has to pay in terms of limited freedom in exchange of protection and “the trappings of the good life.”

The dog appreciates that he is finally on the inside of America’s contented society, which his first owner Willy despised with all his might. It is a place where only “white middle-class affluence is considered normal; anything else is deviant and threatening”, namely, the ways of living that Mr. Bones’s two previous owners represented (hippy culture and migrant ghettos) as well as all the other ways of living that are not contemplated in suburbia and that Auster explores in the melting pot of all his “urban” novels. The dull life of the Jones family revolves around the father’s work, which provides money necessary to maintain their standard

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669 Ibid. p. 158.
670 See Peacock J. (2010), Understanding Paul Auster (The University of South Carolina Press), p. 179.
of living, while also keeping him away most of the time. To break their cyclic existence and spend some time together, the family looks forward to going on a vacation to Disney World, an activity that does not contemplate Mr. Bones’s company. That is when the dog finally realizes that he is wanted but not necessary within his host family. Desired and useless, like any other consumer good. Left in a kennel, feeling unwell, the dog eventually understands that, despite the security and food that the Jones family provides, that is not the life he wants. He longs to see Willy again, whose spirit the dog believes to be safe and happy in an afterlife place that his master called “Timbuktu”. “All he had to do was step into the road and he would be in Timbuktu” after playing a “venerable, time honoured sport” called “dodge-the-car”. And on that road ends the earthly adventure of Mr. Bones, the dog who refused to be a spoiled domestic animal and an unnecessary accessory.

In consumer culture, dogs transformed into house pets become consumers themselves via their owners. In 1981 Tom Waits employed his deepest, most masculine and intense voice to pronounce these words in a television commercial for the dog food industry:

As dog travels through the envied and often tempting world of man, there’s one thing, above all, that tempts him most: the taste of meat! And that is why Purina makes Butcher’s Blend. Butcher’s Blend is the first dry dog food with three tempting meaty tastes. Beef, liver, and bacon. All in one bag. So come on, deliver your dog from the world of temptation.

Facing a crossroad in his career and personal life after the release of Heart Attack and Vine in 1980 (Chapter 7), Waits took this voice-over job at a time of financial difficulties. “I was down on my luck […] and I’ve always liked dogs”, he supposedly said to justify the only time he allowed himself to be involved in the advertising industry. Notwithstanding the fact that the commercial is an entertaining multi-awarded short video and “Tom’s reading is like a one

673 See Purina Dog Food television commercial on: www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYOMPU18QjA (last accessed, 10/10/2018). Writer David Smay reports that the ad actually gave Waits a much needed financial independence at a time when the artist was reinventing his music. See Smay D. (2008), Swordfishtrombones (New York: Continuum), p. 13.
minute’s movie”\textsuperscript{675}, this episode can be seen as an embarrassment given the musician’s otherwise impeccable anti-consumerist integrity. Over the years Tom Waits has adopted a strict approach against commercial campaigns, tirelessly denying the use of his music, voice and image in ads. One powerful tool for the sale strategies of corporations is music accompaniment in commercials. Tom Waits elucidated that well in his own words with a letter to \textit{The Nation} on which he wrote:

\begin{quote}
Songs carry emotional information and some carry us back to a poignant time, place or event in our lives. It’s no wonder that a corporation would want to hitch a ride on the spell these songs cast and encourage you to buy soft drinks, underwear and automobiles, while you’re in the trance. Artists who take money for ads poison and pervert their songs.\textsuperscript{676}
\end{quote}

These words explain how preservation of one’s music is far more important than commercial success for Waits, who has stubbornly refused every generous monetary offer for the use of his songs in commercials. In this regard, and as noted in her study of the musician’s work, Corinne Kessel clearly describes the flaws of contemporary popular music in contrast with Waits’s stance against commercial logic when she writes:

\begin{quote}
True popular music is supposed to be indicative of the voice of the people; however, the influence of capitalism, with its concern with record sales, cross marketing, and high commercial sales figures, has changed the face of music consumption. However, Waits has managed to pursue a 30-year career defined by his personal aspirations and with little concern for financial gain. He has been driven by his intense desire and compulsion to create, rather than by commercial success.\textsuperscript{677}
\end{quote}

As a result of this, Waits’s “music is spread primarily from friend to friend, musician to musician, teacher to student, and so forth, rather than through advertising and marketing”\textsuperscript{678}, in contrast to what happens with most pop musicians. Paradoxically, the unauthorised play of Waits’s songs in commercials eventually produced a profitable outcome for the musician every time he filed and won legal suits against various large corporations who did not respect his will.\textsuperscript{679} Through his legal actions, the artist has imposed a permanent ban against the use


\textsuperscript{676} From a letter of Tom Waits to \textit{The Nation}, 19 September 2002, reported in Hoskyns B. (2009), p. 356.

\textsuperscript{677} Kessel C. (2009), \textit{The Words and Music of Tom Waits} (Westport, CT: Praeger), p. 126.

\textsuperscript{678} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{679} Tom Waits’s court cases involved the companies Frito-Lay (see above, chapter 2), Audi, Levi’s, MP3.com, Opel and Third Story Publishing. For details on each case, see the “Tom Waits Library” website on \url{www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/copyright-main.html} (last accessed 10/10/2018).
his music for product sales. By doing so, not only has Waits defended his personal integrity as an anti-consumerist artist but he has also prevented his songs from becoming soulless disposable goods in themselves. The repeated airplay of ads transforms songs into jingles that lose their emotional strength and become forever associated to a specific product only to be finally discarded along with it when the product goes out of fashion. The “bury-me-dig-me-up code” that Waits sees as the dominant rule in the (disposable) musical instrument market is also valid for creative products like songs. Employed as consumer goods, songs become like any other commodity: they are collected, used and forgotten. They can satisfy passing trends, or the wants of mass consumption that respond to the desire of owing whatever newest product the market is offering, including tunes. Against such commodification of popular music, Waits remarked: “Pop is music and business sleeping in the same bed together. You see these trends come down the pike and you know you’ve seen ‘em before and that they won’t be around too long.” His stance against the commercial uses of music responds to a refusal of “the assumption that music is an effective means to other ends” and of the trends imposed by the music industry in order to transform art into profit. In between the industry and the song are the artists who risk becoming commodities in themselves, so to say, public figures with no private life. Waits, who has jealously protected his privacy against the curiosity of media, sings of the devastating effects that stardom or the dreams of stardom have on the mind in the record Franks Wild Years (1987) and in two of the few rock-music-sounding songs of his repertoire, “Going Out West” (1992) and “Big in Japan” (1999), in which self-delusional characters boast merits and success that will never come. With these works Waits appears suspicious of pop music in the way of a traditional left that looked at the early twentieth century mass entertainment as dangerous homogenisation imposed by totalitarian regimes. Political considerations aside, the singer in both his public pronouncements and in his work expressed his opposition to an industry that generates art on demand in order to make money, mostly with the fundamental help of the manipulating power of marketing practices.

Such practices have worked magic in transforming useless objects into most desirable possessions. Marketing campaigns, a vital resource of modern trade, have the power to influence people’s choices and turn futile products into indispensable objects of desire. In

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680 For the discourse of popular music as “authentic art” versus “commercial profit”, see the work of sociomusicologist Simon Frith, in particular Frith S. (1981), Sound Effects. Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock’n’roll (New York, Pantheon Books), pp. 130-150.
doing so, commercials contribute to what Jim Jarmusch repeatedly calls “the arbitrary nature of reality” in *The Limits of Control* (2009). Throughout this piece the filmmaker hints at the idea that “material possessions are marketing illusions calculated to kill commonsense perception” for the largest possible base of buyers, who unquestioningly become addicted to consumer goods. 683 This idea is found in Paul Auster’s words, too, when the author refers to the fictional value that we give to the worthless paper we call money: “the system runs on faith. Not truth or reality but collective belief.”684 For Jarmusch this is the case with diamonds and gold, two goods that often appear in his film to symbolize centuries of exploitation and suffering, from the Spanish conquests to modern-day free market economy. *The Limits of Control* is the most overt anti-capitalist Jarmusch film and, interestingly, the least commercial of all his works, grossing a mere two million dollars worldwide despite a cast of popular actors like Bill Murray, Gael García Bernal, and Tilda Swinton. 685 The main obstacle to commercial viability for this movie is its complex and impenetrable narrative. Nearly plotless, *The Limits of Control* is first and foremost an allegoric story narrated through static frames. If a film can be viewed as a painting, that is what *The Limits of Control* offers. The film itself is therefore an anti-consumer product due to its atypical format. It requires active and repeated viewing to catch its many visual, sonic and verbal details and symbols that form a mosaic of clues to the messages (or knowledge) the director intends to pass on to his audience. The film therefore cannot be fully appreciated with a first and single screening. It calls the spectator back to unveil new pieces of information with every new viewing. In this regard, the movie does not respond to the usual entertainment “needs” of audiences that the film industry is always attempting to please. It does not provide the immediate gratification that movies assembled as consumer goods guarantee.

683 See Rice J. (2012), *The Jarmusch Way: Spirituality and Imagination in Dead Man, Ghost Dog, and The Limits of Control* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press), p. 179. In his one hundred and thirty page long analysis of *The Limits of Control*, Rice offers a detailed account of the history of diamond marketing in America, recalling how the obsessively repeated slogans used by the diamond industry made these stones the most desired symbol of love to a public oblivious of the tragic fate of the regions of Africa where diamonds come from.

684 See Auster P. (1997), *Hand to Mouth*, (New York: Picador), p. 51 where the writer tells the real story of H. L. “Doc” Humes, a novelist whom the author met during his college years in New York. Doc had the crazy plan of bringing down the government by handing out fifty-dollar bills to random strangers on the street so that they could realize that the system can change if the perception of the value of things changes and if people finally understand that “money is a fiction […] worthless paper that acquires value only because large numbers of people choose to give it value”. Doc’s experiment served as inspiration for *Moon Palace* whose main characters try the exact same experiment in the summer of 1969. Auster talks about Doc also in Immy Humes’s documentary *Doc* (2008), which collects testimonies about this counterculture figure by Timothy Leary, Norman Mailer, and George Plimpton.

685 *The Limits of Control* grossed two million dollars worldwide, of which only $427,000 in the States. Source: [www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?view=Director&id=jimjarmusch.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?view=Director&id=jimjarmusch.htm) (last accessed: 21/10/2018).
Shot in different locations in Spain, Jarmusch ironically described it as “a hard-hitting big budget Euro-trash action film, [with] violence, sex, men in black, fast cars, helicopters… sexy girls.” The Limits of Control indeed refers to all these action movie devices, never employing them directly. The director experiments with the action genre by carefully removing the four main things that the audience expects from a story about a hit-man: plot, violence, action, sex. Accordingly, The Limits of Control is “an action movie without action”, indeed the negative of an action movie: a meditative slow film with long silent sequences and very little dialogue. The story closely follows an assassin with the code name of Lone Man (Isaach de Bankolé), who travels from Madrid to Seville and then to the Andalusian countryside. He spends his days waiting for different informants to provide coded messages contained in matchboxes that give him cryptic instructions about the next meeting he will have. Once he collects the last piece of information, he is taken to his final destination: the highly guarded headquarters of the character listed in the closing credits as “American” (Bill Murray). After a brief but intense exchange of words, Lone Man kills American. Mission accomplished, he returns to Madrid and appears one last time after changing his clothes in the restroom of a train station to finally disappear in the crowd. For one and a half hours, the audience follows the main character never knowing what is exactly happening in the film. Never does a clue reveal the goal of the protagonist’s job or the identity of the people he meets. The final confrontation with his antagonist helps connect some of the symbols and dialogues of the film, but this still does not solve most questions concerning the plot or explain many of the visual clues presented in the film. The film remains like one critic wrote, a “puzzle, […] where the pleasure often lies in disorientation in the accumulation of cryptic clues and resonances rather than in solutions.”

If in Only Lovers Left Alive (2013) the world survives its decline thanks to non-humans, in this film the rescuer of the world is a human who represents outsider society. Virtually wordless, Lone Man is an “intellectual gangster”, as Jarmusch described him. He is a character of African origins who bears a name that derives from the Native American

690 See Jim Jarmusch Q&A session after the presentation of The Limits of Control at the New York Film Society, Lincoln Center 30 April, 2009: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b60oNOcpfK4 (accessed 25/10/2018).
mythology, to signify some of the people who suffered the most in modern history as a consequence of the imposition of the arbitrary value of gold and diamonds and the exploitative economic system connected to that value. The protagonist enters into contact with a “covert intellectual and artistic résistance” made of the interlocutors who provide him instructions for his job. Each new person he meets represents a metaphor for a way of being. They are artists, poets, musicians, thinkers, and actors who defy common conventions and live on the fringes of society. The ideas that they share with Lone Man testify to a world that refuses the reality created by a commerce-driven culture. The protagonist listens to them patiently, never commenting on one word he hears. He is respectful of every subjective experience because the world can only be understood subjectively, as he will later explain to his victim, American, who criticizes him for not understanding how the world really works. With his dismissive and rude language, and his declaration of superiority over the people whom Lone Man represents, American is an allegory of power, the ultimate target of Jarmusch’s criticism in this film. The political, economic and cultural power personified by American imposes a mono-dimensional reality to all – the reality that Lone Man supposedly does not understand (according to American) and one that is founded on monetary evaluation of every material and immaterial thing. In such a reality, the only power that is disregarded is the power of imagination, so to say, the ability of humans to conceive new and better ways of living. As one commentator wrote, “imagination can open an abyss and create an interruption, a space in our lives capable of challenging power again; that is, deconstructing our own life.” It is exactly the power of imagination that allows Lone Man to enter the fortress of American and eliminate him at the end of the film. In the altercation between the two, the assassin strangles his enemy with a guitar string, as if he literally followed the message carved on Woody Guthrie’s guitar: “This machine kills fascists.” Lone Man’s victory over American is art’s victory over the homogenized market; more specifically, the use of the guitar string as a weapon represents music’s victory over commerce, that very

Lone Man is a mythological figure for the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes. See www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Legends/FirstCreatorLoneMan-Mandan.html (last accessed 24/11/2018). Lone Man was also the name of the Lakota man who passed the knowledge of the sacred pipe, “the most well known ritual object of the Native Americans”, on to anthropologist Frances Densmore in 1911. See Rice J. (2012), pp. 12-13.


See Jarmusch Q&A session after the presentation of The Limits of Control at the New York Film Society, Lincoln Center 30 April, 2009: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6ooNOcpfK4 (accessed 25/10/2018).


institution that exploits art to make profit, as Tom Waits has complained about on many occasions during his career.

*The Limits of Control* is the work that allowed Jarmusch to place his political views at the centre of the narrative more than in any other film. The director seems to trace a line that connects the colonial past to today’s capitalism. Colonialism is symbolised by the filmmaker’s choice to shoot in the country that began the world expansion of the European powers. Capitalism is represented mainly by the figure of American at the end of the film. Driven by the thirst for material wealth and power, these historical phenomena -- by imposing different forms of control and economic exploitation -- have caused tragic consequences for humanity. The optimistic message at the end of the film is that individuals can potentially win against a whole system. Lone Man absorbs a series of ideas, cultivates oriental spiritual practices and, once he collects all the clues he needs from the people he meets, is ready to defeat the bad man. Through the final victory of Lone Man over American, Jarmusch tells us that it is possible to defeat the unjust capitalist society by refusing the smothering conventions of an artificial control of reality that imposes false idols and values like gold and diamonds. There lies the faith in an individual’s ability to free him- or herself from the constrictions of consumer society; not through the creation of a new ideal society, a “non-place” that does not exist yet, but through the adoption of values and ways of life that already exist outside the mainstream society. That is Jarmusch’s Other America.

The examples above show how these three American contemporaries resist consumerism insofar that they remind us of its worst effects: From the spiritually void and lonely life of the average family in Auster’s *Timbuktu* to the commodification of the arts denounced by Tom Waits, and the imposition of a dull reality and brutal economic exploitation criticized in Jarmusch’s *The Limits of Control*. Their depictions of resistance do not end in mere criticism, but generate in their works the presence of a utopian impulse in the search for alternative ways of living.

**A sensible alternative. A counterculture of the 1980s?**

In addition to the rejection of the culture of wealth and the culture of success (chapters 5 and 6), the refusal of consumerism completes the countercultural significance in the work of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits. Simplicity, failure and sameness of the human condition are the counter-values that these works put forward in the midst of a dominant culture steeped in ideals of wealth, success, market dynamics and consumerism. These values sit at the core of
the countercultural alternative to the mainstream society that emerges from the stories that we have compared with the present work.

The opposition to the dominant culture is one aspect of our authors’ art that is most indebted to the nineteen-sixties. Aesthetically, the collective work of the three contemporaries do not show signs that they have embraced the lessons of that decade. Waits, since the beginning of his career, has been adamant in keeping his distance from the generation and the music that preceded him. Jarmusch’s cinema, as well, does not resemble the taste of the sixties, but is instead influenced by the underground and punk scenes of the 1970s. Auster, although setting many of his stories in the 1960s, very rarely attended to the main (counter)cultural and hedonistic elements of that decade, whether the drugs, the music, or the sexual liberation. Nevertheless, the three absorbed the democratic spirit and the civil rights conscience that animated that decade. Most of all, the main legacy of the sixties that endures in the works of the Other America is the desire for a better future, that transpires from the general sensation of hopefulness that we described with chapter 4. The counterculture of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits therefore allows room for utopian thinking.

At the turn of the new millennium, utopian thinking lost its political appeal. This occurred for two reasons. First, the liberal-democratic model (with its values of freedom, tolerance, equality) triumphed over the socialist model. This convinced many around the world that humanity was finally reaching the finish line of a linear path to unstoppable progress, making any form of utopian thinking unnecessary; an idea best condensed in political scientist Francis Fukuyama’s much debated theory of the “end of history.” Subsequently, the crisis of that very model, crushed under the contradictions of a rampant capitalist free-market economy and the emergence of anti-liberal sentiments and movements, has cemented a feeling of hopelessness for the future. It was mentioned above how the liberal-capitalist model has generated extreme inequalities, insufficient social security and shrunk general standards of livelihood (chapter 7). As a result, generations of young Westerners have been left with dim economic prospects for their future and distrust in the possibility of human improvement. A widespread pessimism has caused a weakening of utopian ideals, which have appeared as a

696 See Fukuyama F. (1992), The End of History and the Last Man (New York: Free Press), in which the author suggests that, with the end of the Cold War humanity approached the peak of its socio-political evolution through the universalization of the liberal-democratic form of government.


futile and unrealistic exercise for contemporary politics and culture.\textsuperscript{699} Hence, exercises in utopian thinking have fallen into disuse and utopia in itself can then be viewed as countercultural in today’s ubiquitous pessimism. To restore a utopian spirit and faith in the possibility of social and political change, the creation of credible alternative societal models for the future is expected mostly from new efforts in the fields of political sciences, philosophy and economics. Art, however, has a unique potential to have an “inspirational value”\textsuperscript{700} capable of reshaping what audiences assume as immanent and unalterable, revealing alternative values and life choices. That is when art is susceptible to generating culture, representing “our sense of ourselves and of our world, past and present.”\textsuperscript{701} Therefore, art can help both grasp the complexity of current political situations, and inspire the imagination of alternative ways of living, providing an antidote to political fatalism.\textsuperscript{702}

That is what the works of the Other America are capable of in today’s context. They reveal the struggles that many Americans have been facing for the past three or four decades, without renouncing their quintessentially American desire for a better future. Without being overtly political or social, the works of art I have examined provide a strong link to what philosopher Richard Rorty called the “noblest imaginative creation”: the utopian social hope.\textsuperscript{703} For Rorty the ultimate goal of modernity’s utopian thought is human happiness through the realization of a society in which love is the only law, class and caste are unknown, unnecessary suffering comes to an end, and power is the result of free agreement among an equal and well-educated electorate.\textsuperscript{704} The philosopher ironically affirmed that his descendants might have to wait another millennium before the creation of such society, admitting that he did not know how this could become reality.\textsuperscript{705} Auster, Jarmusch and Waits do not have a definitive answer either. Nonetheless, their stories contain a utopian impulse for a form of human happiness that has nothing to do with customer satisfaction or economic growth, but resembles that which is described by Rorty; so to say, happiness that derives from love and togetherness. Their art is concerned with the rediscovery of common emotions,

human connections, community living and a solidarity “that can truly unite our full variety of sufferers”. These values are best described as antithetic to dominant consumer culture and materialism. In this sense, the utopian thought in the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits can be seen as a form of resistance, or counter-culture, against that very culture produced by capitalism and consumerism that has generated our futureless present.

In Auster’s *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), Tom Wood, a young passionate student of American literature, tells his uncle Nathan about his comparative study of Poe and Thoreau’s imaginary Edens:

Both men believed in America, and both men believed that America had gone to hell, that it was being crushed to death by an ever-growing mountain of machines and money. How was a man to think in the midst of all that clamor? They both wanted out. Thoreau removed himself to the outskirts of Concord, pretending to exile himself in the woods – for no other reason than to prove that it could be done. As long as a man had the courage to reject what society told him to do, he could live life own his own terms. To what end? To be free. But free to what end? To read books, to write books, to think. To be free to write a book like *Walden*. Poe, on the other hand, withdrew into a dream of perfection. Take a look at ‘The Philosophy of Furniture,’ and you’ll discover that his imaginary room was designed for exactly the same purpose. A place to read, write, and think. It’s a vault of contemplation, a noiseless sanctuary where the soul can at last find a measure of peace. Impossibly utopian? Yes. But also a sensible alternative to the conditions of the time. For the fact was that America had indeed gone to hell.

A sensible alternative to America’s current state is one of the main denominators that allows the contextualization of the *oeuvres* of different contemporaries like Auster, Jarmusch and Waits. The works of these contemporaries not only help navigate through the landscape of a mutilated country, but find a way out of the difficulties of this country in an “imaginary Eden”, an ideal place where their characters find refuge -- if not physically, at least philosophically. We have seen how Waits’s characters are happy mostly in their dreams or how Jarmusch’s heroes are nostalgic creatures or, again, how Auster’s men and women “distort reality by wishing, dreaming and speaking of a better life.” However, the ideal place that the Other America offers to its inhabitants is not an impossible, unattainable dream but, eventually, something that is concrete. The utopia that I see in these three artists’

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collective work is very much anchored to the everyday; to a tangible reality that is obscured by mainstream norms and values. For instance, human warmth is something that is meaningless to a hyperactive and compulsive corporate reality, but is also something that often saves the soul of the many outcasts and lost characters of the Other America. My suggestion is that the utopia of the works of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits is concerned with the immediate realization of sincere human relations, rather than with something that will come later or that only exists in fantasy. It is a form of utopia that is close to the contemporary utopianism that sociologist Lisa Garforth describes as “embedded in everyday life rather than displaced into formal representation.”

An instance of this form of utopia is found in *Timbuktu*. Analyzing the novel, two observers note that the death of the four-legged protagonist is an indication that a better place to live is “literally out of this world” and that “heaven is [only] in the head.” They are both right insofar Mr. Bones is happy only in his dreams where he can see his old master Willy. The problem for Mr Bones is that now Willy is not flesh and bones anymore and, since the only thing that the dog wishes for is to rejoin his old human friend in the afterlife called ‘Timbuktu’, there is nothing left for him but “stepping off the grass onto the eastbound shoulder of the highway”, finding his death at the end of the book. Beyond the dreams and desires of the book’s main character, I believe that the novel actually suggests, very much in line with the rest of Auster’s oeuvre, that Mr. Bones’s Eden is not pure fantasy, but something of this world. The dog’s Eden is, or rather was, in the company of Willy, namely of someone who made him feel happy, loved and useful. The alternative to the oppressive world “designed to suppress freedom and difference,” therefore, is not only in the imagination of a non-place with a future, perfect society that will never come. It is in the care for “sympathetic relations, human touch and compassionate feelings.” This is the happiness that the materialist society’s prizes of wealth and success cannot guarantee.

In almost every one of his films, Jarmusch’s characters look for a way out of the surrounding world and eventually find it in the connection with fellow travelers or loved ones.

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711 Ibid., p. 118.
Jarmusch himself described his own interest in the small events of everyday life as a remedy against the problems of the world:

I think that the small things which happen between people are very beautiful… the very special things that happen on this planet. And if we experience them as humans, at least we’re still here to experience. But in general I don’t have a lot of respect for the way governments have treated this planet, my own country in particular.\footnote{See Hertzberg L. (2001), \textit{Jim Jarmusch: Interviews} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), p. 83.}

This motif remains constant in the films where his protagonists dream of ideal places away from the mainstream world. In \textit{Only Lovers Left Alive}, the vampires Adam and Eve’s ideal place is a world made of books, fine arts, music, and beautiful objects, but their refuge in the real world is in each other’s arms and in the love that unites them. The same is true for the poet driver of \textit{Paterson} (2016) who seems to find harmony from both his ideal universe of verses and rhymes, and his everyday flesh and bones companion, Laura. Even solitary heroes learn that “only love and friendship liberate and that they are inseparable from courage.”\footnote{Rice J. (2012), p. 253.}

This is the courage that Lone Man, Ghost Dog and Will Blake all find in their pursuits of freedom in three of the most spiritual Jarmusch films: \textit{The Limits of Control, Ghost Dog} and \textit{Dead Man}.

Tom Waits sings of much desired human companionship in many songs, making an explicit distinction between the futility of material possessions and the worth of love in “House Where Nobody Lives” (1999):

\begin{quote}
\textit{I have all life’s treasures,}
\textit{And they’re fine and they’re good}
\textit{They remind me that houses}
\textit{Are just made of wood}
\textit{What makes a house grand}
\textit{Oh, it ain’t the roof or the doors,}
\textit{If there’s love in a house}
\end{quote}

This song states that love is essential for the realization of a better world. That is the very message of another song that the musician released. Love is the main force behind the bravery of a partisan who fights the fascists in the traditional Italian chant “Bella Ciao”, which Tom Waits has recorded for a collection of protests songs in 2018 with the accompaniment of a video directed by Jem Cohen that explicitly denounces today’s American Administration as a
totalitarian one.\textsuperscript{719} Music once again becomes an instrument of resistance and a reminder that, against the imposition of unwanted norms and values, love is the most potent answer. This is the essence of the utopian thought of Waits, Auster, and Jarmusch, which rests on the concrete possibility for each individual to build a better life with the support of human warmth. In other words, an ideal world is possible when people, free from the unnecessary frills and preoccupations of the materialist society, let love guide their lives.

In conclusion, with this part of the present work we have seen how years of austerity policies and consumerist culture have shaped the values of mainstream society, turning the middle and working classes to capitalist imperatives of money-making and to support the same subjects that promoted the dismantling of welfare and social benefits. The underprivileged seem to believe that the embodiment of the American Dream are the super-rich celebrated in various forms of popular culture, from glossy magazines to television shows, music videos and, now, even the Presidency of the United States. The Other America recedes in times like this when every individual and national choice seems dictated by the economy and the pursuit of wealth (or growth). It becomes smaller and less visible. But it is still there to support those “desires for thicker and deeper notions of society”\textsuperscript{720} and togetherness that transpires from the marginal parts of the nation portrayed in the figures that populate the works of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits. Fulfilling their role of artists as enemies of society, these authors’ works challenge the values of the dominant culture. Electing sameness over choice,\textsuperscript{721} simplicity over wealth, and failure over success, their stories praise the universal needs that all humans share. This is ultimately the central theme of the art analysed here. The works of the Other America recuperate a culture of the people that defies current tendencies of isolationism, greed and selfishness that are typical of consumerism. Against the dominant culture, these artists propose a return to an ideal human brotherhood that is the main principle of a long tradition of Americans who, throughout the decades, formed a resistance against the surrounding culture (chapter 1). The Other America of Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits might be fictional, but it is a reminder of life as it is, mirroring a harsh American reality of injustice, decay and sorrow and never abandoning a utopian impulse for life as it should be.

CONCLUSION

«Se avessi potuto scegliere tra la vita e la morte/Avrei scelto l’America»  
- Francesco De Gregori

«Everybody I like is either dead, or not feeling very well.»  
- Tom Waits

I find myself in this quotation from Tom Waits. I always felt nostalgic for times I never lived in. Throughout my teenage in the 1980s and 1990s I listened to dead musicians’ or dismantled bands’ records, I tried to catch up with old movies and read classic literature. Paul Auster, Tom Waits and Jim Jarmusch were a lucky exception to that. Their works have accompanied me since 1988, when I watched Jarmusch’s Down By Law for the first time. I consider myself fortunate to have been able to witness the evolution of these three American authors with every new release of theirs as the years went by. Since 1996, an idea has stuck with me after watching a double billing of Smoke (1995) and Blue In The Face (1996). These films brought together Paul Auster, in the guise of screenwriter and co-director, Tom Waits, whose songs are used in the soundtracks, and Jim Jarmusch, who has an acting role in the second film. After the screening it finally dawned on me how close the works of the three authors were. I imagined these men having a secret agreement to project the same image of America through their different crafts. Twenty-one years after that first recognition, research at the “Paul Auster Archive” in the New York Public Library disclosed something that went beyond my most fervent hopes: correspondence in friendly terms that Auster has exchanged with both Waits and Jarmusch. Other than the renowned collaborations between Jarmusch and Waits in the movies, none of the reviews and the biographic works on the three artists mentions a bond between the writer and the other two. It was a great discovery for me. Foolish fantasies about secret pacts aside, a fact was finally cleared. The letters I had the chance to view

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722 De Gregori F. (1976), “Buffalo Bill”, Buffalo Bill (RCA Italiana). Translation from Italian: “If I could have chosen between life and death, I would have chosen America”.


724 The “Paul Auster Collection of Papers” is held by the New York Public Library’s Berg Collection. The writer mentions this collection in his memoir Report from the Interior (2013), which recalls many of the letters that are deposited at the New York Public Library.
confirmed a mutual knowledge and appreciation of each other’s works. It would be interesting
to discover one day how much they see of themselves, if at all, in the others’ productions. But
that goes beyond the purpose of this study, which is based on a personal reading of their
works.

Even if it is still true that everybody I like is dead or not feeling well, luckily that is not the
case with Auster, Jarmusch and Waits. As I am writing these words, the filmmaker is about to
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been active also with his band Sqürl, with which he has spent the last few years recording and
performing live accompaniments to Man Ray’s silent films.725 News also describes him
shooting for a new feature film, which this time should pay homage to the zombie genre.726
Tom Waits’s voice was heard again recently, first on stage with Mavis Staples in 2017, and
later with the release of “Bella Ciao” for Marc Ribot’s 2018 protest songs album.727 The
musician has been working in films, too, appearing in a major acting role for the Coen
brothers’ Oscar nominated Ballad of Buster Scruggs (2018) and with a part in Robert
According to KCRW Radio in Los Angeles, Waits might be working on a new album as
well.728 Paul Auster, after the publication of 4321 in 2017, has held public presentations in
Europe and in the United States, the last being a conversation in New York with author and
scholar Todd Gitlin in February 2018.729 It was recently announced that one of his novels, Mr.
Vertigo (1994), might finally appear on the big screen, after years of speculations about a
readaptation by director Terry Gilliam.730 Whichever form the outcome of the next few years’
work of these three men will take, it is very likely that it will contribute with new elements for
the narrative of the Other America.

I opened this thesis with a quotation from Richard Rorty that contains an
invitation for one
to remain loyal to his/her ideal country, notwithstanding the wrongs of the real country. The

725 The new album is called An Attempt to Draw Outside The Veil released on 8 February 2019 for Sacred Bones
Records. See: https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/jim-jarmusch-jozef-van-wissem-new-video-
785801/ (accessed 28/01/2019). For the recent works of Sqürl, see http://www.squrlworld.com/about-sqrl/ and
(accessed 28/01/2019).
726 See: https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/bill-murray-and-adam-driver-to-star-in-upcoming-jim-jarmusch-zombie-
movie/ (accessed: 22/02/2019).
727 Waits appeared on stage with Mavis Staples in California to sing “Respect Yourself” in September 2017:
728 The news was given by DJ Chris Douridas in April 2018. See: http://eyeballkid.blogspot.com/2018/04/tom-
waits-working-on-new-album.html (accessed 22/02/2019).
730 Terry Gilliam announced the project during the Brussels International Film Festival in June 2018. Source:
philosopher continued: “unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.” Throughout the years, Auster, Jarmusch and Waits have been loyal to their imagined America. Their narrative has remained anchored to the American resistance tradition of Walt Whitman that agonizes in front of the choices of the real country but never abandons its democratic dream for the realization of a true liberal and egalitarian humanity. The ideal has not become actual, yet. Indeed, reality has never been this far from the realization of such an ideal. However, their art is still here to remind us of fundamental American values. In the early days of the Great Depression, literary theorist Kenneth Burke wrote:

[...] society might well be benefited by the corrective of a disintegrating art, which converts each simplicity into a complexity, which ruins the possibility of ready hierarchies, which concerns itself with the problematical, the experimental, and thus by implication works corrosively upon those expansionistic certainties preparing the way for our social cataclysms. An art may be of value purely through preventing a society from becoming too assertively, too hopelessly, itself.

This is what Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits’s artworks began to do some fifty years later. For four decades, they have worked corrosively against those certainties that led the way to a political cataclysm: extreme materialism, consumerism, and passive acceptance of neoliberal free market ideologies. As a consequence of these dogmas, the world today is facing an America at its utmost un-American spirit. Author and scholar Jonathan Kirshner expressed this concern well in an article that appeared during the US presidential campaign of 2016. The country is in the grip of a “know-nothing authoritarian-nationalism” that “represents the antithesis of everything America has stood for throughout its history.” Aside from specific political choices and the flaws of the new media environment that serves as echo-chamber for “easy slogans over serious policy proposals”, Kirshner finds the cause of this un-American turn of events in the radical inequality in which the American nation lives. The crisis of social norms that once provided relief for the needy, regulating the post-war capitalism, left too many behind in the economic system, while it allowed a few to become exponentially richer.

The new imbalance between wealthy and poor created a plutocracy against which powerhungry demagogues build their electoral fortunes. That is to say that a simple equation regulates political systems: there is no democracy with economic inequality. This inequality is present in the background of virtually every work of the Other America. Insisting on this topic, the texts analysed in this thesis anticipated the problems that dominate the public debate of today. More importantly, they mirrored the issue of inequality with a strong desire for human bonding and solidarity. Against the injustices of the free market economy, they urge upon their audiences the power of “love, friendship, [and] respect for others.” These are the answers that the Other America has for the troubles of the real nation. Writer Dave Eggers has recently commented how, in the face of compelling dramas like the forcible separation of children from their asylum-seeking parents, art may not seem a relevant domain to nurture. On the contrary, art is indeed crucial in times like the one we live in, because:

[…] with art comes empathy. It allows us to look through someone else’s eyes and know their strivings and struggles. It expands the moral imagination and makes it impossible to accept the dehumanization of others. When we are without art, we are a diminished people — myopic, unlearned and cruel. Today more than ever, artworks that show life under different angles from those offered by mainstream media and culture are needed to provide an antidote to racist, intolerant, nationalistic deviations.

This study has been a journey through an imagined America that disclosed facts about the real country. Beginning with a Whitmanesque tradition of American resistance from which the Other America descends, it explored the missed equal opportunities promised by the American Dream ideology. Nonetheless, it looked at the possibility of hopefulness for a better future, uncovering an imperishable humanity among the ruins of a capitalist system. These ruins are most evident in the state of necessity and in the failures that concern too many “other” Americans who struggle against a culture drenched in ideals of wealth, success, and consumerism. An unstoppable state of decay afflicts people, landscape, and objects, all of which become post-industrial, consumerist detritus. Once again, humanity is rescued from

734 Ibid. Writing about an American plutocracy, Kirshner anticipated a resentment in the U.S. electoral body against the financial elites that were liable for the 2008 great financial crisis which he dubbed as “anything-is-better-than-this backlash” that would favour the election of Donald Trump.


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this detritus every time someone looks for alternative ways of living, aiming for the utopian dream of a society ruled by love. This is in a nutshell how the Other America understands, explains and challenges the mainstream.

If young generations of artists in America may have absorbed and reused the aesthetics of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits in writing, filming and music recording, the true heirs of these artists will be those who continue on an imaginative path to what Richard Wright called “new strange ways of life,” questioning mainstream culture and placing human sameness and fraternity at the centre of their art. Auster, Jarmusch, and Waits’s legacy will result in a new utopian thinking based on emotions, not concerned with the imagination of future optimal societal models, but with the improvement of our present life through human connection. That is the greatest gift that comes from the pages, the pictures and the sounds of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits. Whoever will retain this gift through any form of art again will keep the hopes of the Other America alive.

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# Appendix

## Main Works by Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits: A Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Paul Auster</th>
<th>Jim Jarmusch</th>
<th>Tom Waits</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1973</td>
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<td>1974</td>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>Permanent Vacation</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td>Squeeze Play: The Invention of Solitude</td>
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<td>1983</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>The New York Trilogy; In the Country of Last Things</td>
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<td>1990</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>Auggie Wren’s Christmas Story</td>
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<td>1992</td>
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<td>2004</td>
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<td>Winter Journal</td>
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<td>Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011</td>
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<td>2013</td>
<td>Report from the Interior</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>Paterson; Gimme Danger</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>4321; A Life in Words</td>
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* Paul Auster published several essays, poems and translations in the 1970s. I excluded those publications from this list since they are not taken into account in this study. Most of those publications are included in *The Heart of Hunger* (1992). Jim Jarmusch’s music videos and Tom Waits’s acting roles are not included here for the same reason.
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Down By Law (1986)
Mystery Train (1989)
Night on Earth (1991)
Dead Man (1995)
Year of the Horse (1997)
Ghost Dog (1999)
Coffee and Cigarettes (2003)
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