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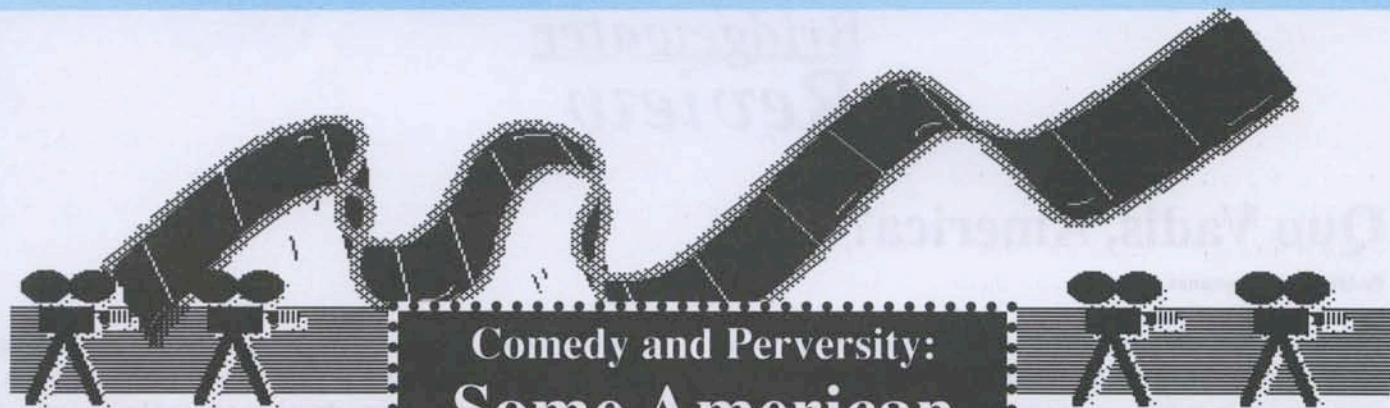
# Comedy and Perversity: Some American Films of the 1980s

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## Comedy and Perversity: Some American Films of the 1980s

About fifteen years ago I started keeping lists of all the movies I saw. Although I probably go to theater less now than ever, one or twice a month, with VCRs and cable I may be watching more movies than ever before.

It's pretty depressing, but usually I can find maybe ten movies a year that I would want to watch again. As I look over my list of one hundred films from 1980-1989, two things become apparent:

1. There is a higher percentage of American films on the list than in the previous two decades, roughly fifty percent. I don't think this is because I've gotten too lazy to read subtitles. [Fassbinder died, and Bunuel and Truffaut, of course. But British films have become more interesting.] Mainly I think the shift is caused by more American filmmakers doing the kind of quirky little movies that came from Europe in the 1960s and 1970s — thematically irreverent, formally audacious works by independent directors who had more or less complete control over what they put on film. I recently read an article that claimed that the 1970s were the heyday of the American art film. The writer goes on to claim that a film like Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy Pieces* couldn't be made today. This is all clearly nonsense. If *Barton Fink* and *My Own Private Idaho* got made last year and were fairly well distributed, things can't be all that bad. This kind of thinking belongs to a nostalgia for the 1960s and the 1970s that is very much a part of the subject matter for some comic films in the 1980s.

2. A large number of films on my list are

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comedies that deal satirically with various features of the "me decade." The humor in these films is often dark, and our reactions are often complex, uncertain: should we be laughing at this or not? These are comedies by virtue of their tone and their happy endings, but these endings partake of a kind of perverse undercutting that renders them problematic. Perverse in the sense of being "willfully determined or disposed to go counter to what is expected or desired: contrary." These films give us new ways to look at ourselves and our times.

Several comic heroes in American films of the past decade taste the joys of transgression, of a walk on the wild side. Leaving the comforts and complacencies of home, they go forth to encounter the reality of experience, which is slowly or swiftly transformed into their own worst nightmare.

Yuppies are especially vulnerable. In *Something Wild* (Jonathan Demme, 1986), a young stockbroker named Charlie (Jeff Daniels) meets Lulu (Melanie Griffith) when he attempts to leave a diner in Manhattan without paying for his lunch. Lulu spots him as a closet rebel, offers him a ride back to his office but, with his reluctant cooperation, abducts him instead. Lulu is a kook, "a wild thing," as the music on the soundtrack announces. When they stop at a liquor store, she cleans out the

register while the clerk's back is turned. Later, after checking into a motel with money from the office Christmas fund (most subsequent expenditures are

handled by plastic), Charlie gets handcuffed to the bed for a session of mildly kinky sex. The ride could end here — Lulu is going to visit her mother in Pennsylvania and suggests that Charlie catch a bus home — but it's only Friday and Charlie is free until Monday morning.

Lulu has provided Charlie with his fantasy of transgression ("Boy, I'm going to have to write this down," he gleefully says to himself in the shower), and now it's his turn to act out her dream of domesticity. Lulu's real name, it turns out, is Audrey, and for her mother and her classmates at a high school reunion, Charlie pretends to be her husband. Everything is kept light. Charlie survives what he can only imagine as the worst catastrophe when Audrey produces his lost wallet. Her fantasy of a normal life seems to have a fair chance of becoming true as the two discover a real attachment.

Enter Ray (Ray Liotta), Audrey's high school sweetheart, just out of prison after a five-year stretch for armed robbery. A jealous and impish psychopath, Ray shows both Charlie and Audrey that they are not who they say they are: Charlie's not a happily married man on a lark but is unhappily divorced, living an empty life in an all but empty house. It is Audrey who is married — to Ray. "You look like a TV couple," shrieks Ray, and the movie shifts into high gear, taking along its elements of

screwball comedy but mixing them with a real holdup, complete with gun and Ray's manic violence.

Charlie and Audrey manage to escape from Ray and return to Charlie's home, but Ray follows them in a stolen station wagon, a tired symbol of middleclass respectability. As if to impress upon Charlie that he should never leave home, Ray handcuffs him now to the kitchen sink. Charlie breaks free and inadvertently kills Ray with his own knife. It's as if we are suddenly thrown into another movie, but then there is a switch back at the end, when Audrey returns to the diner where it all began, dressed in "respectable" clothes and comes to fetch Charlie in a station wagon, wood-panelled no less.

A cautionary tale about the dangers of leaving the straight and narrow? It would seem so, and yet certainly nothing about Charlie's life is made to seem very desirable. When asked by a colleague what makes someone like Ray tick, Charlie tries to sum up his experience with a formula: "Better a live dog than a dead lion." We can't help but think that Charlie really wants it both ways.

Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* and Albert Brooks' *Lost in America*, both from 1985, get my vote as the flat out funniest films of the decade, and both direct their comic energies toward punishing their yuppie heroes for attempting to escape everyday life. In *After Hours* a word processor, Paul (Griffin Dunne), meets Marcy (Rosanna Arquette) in a late-night Manhattan diner, and she gives him her phone number. Thinking he might like to pursue the acquaintance, he gives her a call. She invites him over to Soho. His last \$20 bill flies out the window on the taxi ride down, beginning a relentless procession of disasters that will end some eight hours later when he falls from a moving van in front of his office building just in time to go to work.

The punishments that Paul receives are too methodically administered to lack design. At one point we see him from on high as he falls on his knees and asks,

"Why me? What have I done?" He does well to address his question to the camera, because it is clear that the man behind the camera is the Jehovah responsible for his afflictions. As if to underline this point, Scorsese himself appears in one scene in the film, again from on high, directing spotlights on the dancers in a punk nightclub — a scene in which Paul barely escapes receiving a Mohawk haircut. (He had gained admittance to the club with some difficulty only after listening to the bouncer/doorman quote from Kafka's parable "Before the Law." Paul might have expected this immersion in a Kafkaesque world because he had learned earlier that "different rules apply when it gets late. It's like, after hours.)

Most of the film is taken up with Paul simply trying to get home. His frustration peaks when he finds someone who will give him sub- finally who will way fare cover that girlfriend mitted pretty clear only to dis- this stranger's has just com- suicide. It's that the girlfriend is Marcy, and Paul's rudeness to her is at least indirectly the cause of her death. The coincidences keep piling up, producing some pretty strange locations: As Paul says, if the two women sound similar, "that's because they're the same person and they're both dead!" This death, as the one in *Something Wild*, comes as a shock because we have been responding to the comedy. The shock is softened, however, by the surreal events that are increasingly divorced from reality.

Much of the humor here stems from Paul's unshakable incredulity. He calls the police to report that his life is being threatened by a mob of local tenants who have decided that he is the burglar who has been pillaging the neighborhood and he cannot believe it when they hang up on him. He keeps expecting the rules of the daytime world to remain operative: "I just wanted to leave my apartment and meet a nice girl, and now I've got to die for it?" A covert reference to one of the dominant



concerns of the decade — the dangers of sexuality, especially on the singles scene — the line appeals to our sense of justice even as it undercuts that appeal with its self-pity. Paul may be just a nice guy looking for a good time, but his narcissism, reflected by his repeated trips to various bathrooms to stare at himself in the mirror, prevents our sympathetic identification.

Marrieds in the 1980s aren't immune to the dangers of deviation. *Lost in America* features a couple of dinks (dual-income-no-kids: remember?) who give up their jobs and their California "lifestyles" and hit the open road in a Winnebago. David Howard (Albert Brooks, who also wrote and directed) quits his \$100,000-a-year job in advertising in a fit of pique after he fails to get an anticipated promotion and is told he will be transferred to New York. His wife, Linda (Julie Hagerty), somewhat bored by the direction their lives seemed to be taking, follows his lead, and after liquidating their considerable assets, they go forth to encounter America, to "touch Indians," as David tells their friends. As they leave the city in their newly acquired mobile home — "Born to be Wild" on the soundtrack — David affirms his kinship with a passing bearded motorcyclist with a thumbs up sign. The biker responds with his middle finger.

Heading east, their first stop is Las Vegas, where they plan to renew their marriage vows to commemorate the beginnings of a new life. Linda, however, slips out of their room in the middle of the night, discovers she is a compulsive gambler, and loses their entire saving, their "nestegg," playing roulette.

David tries to sell the casino owner the idea that he should return their money as part of a promotional campaign. If he doesn't seem to realize how hopeless this is, perhaps it is because in the world of advertising, anything is possible, and he is unwilling to acknowledge that he has left this world behind.

Brooks never really attempts to distance himself from the characters. David is the same mixture of chutzpah and anxiety that

Brooks himself projects off-screen. He never relaxes, but he can look with some amusement at the predicaments he creates for himself. And there is none of the spooky mixture of comedy and terror that is found in Scorsese and Demme. No one will die in this movie, and the poke in the nose David receives from a crazed truckdriver serves only to bring him to his senses and to save his marriage, which was in danger of disintegrating when it looked as if he was going to force Linda to pay for her transgression at the gaming tables for the rest of her life.

The couple's luck is not all bad. At one point a highway patrolman doesn't give them a speeding ticket after Linda tells him that David's favorite movie is *Easy Rider*. "Really! It's mine, too!" Never mind that the officer's motorcycle is provided by the state, or that David's cross-country escape was to have been funded by the advertising industry, both men are not entirely wrong in saying they've modeled their lives after those of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper. As David points out to Linda, even those two 1960s iconoclasts had their nestegg, in the form of a large cache of drugs, stashed in their gas tanks.

The couple make it to a trailer park in northern Arizona, where they begin the day looking for jobs. At the unemployment office, David discovers he is a bit overqualified for the available jobs in the area. He accepts a position, however, as a crossing guard at an elementary school. Linda finds work at a fast-food restaurant. After one day of work they decide to stop this nonsense and go to New York, where David will try to get his old job back, regardless of the humiliation this might

involve. The final sequence is perhaps the most abstract road movie ever filmed, a three-minute trip across America, via the interstates, set to the music of "New York, New York," as sung by Frank Sinatra, whose political shift from the Kennedys in the 60s to Ronald Reagan in the 80s is perhaps emblematic of a national confusion of values.

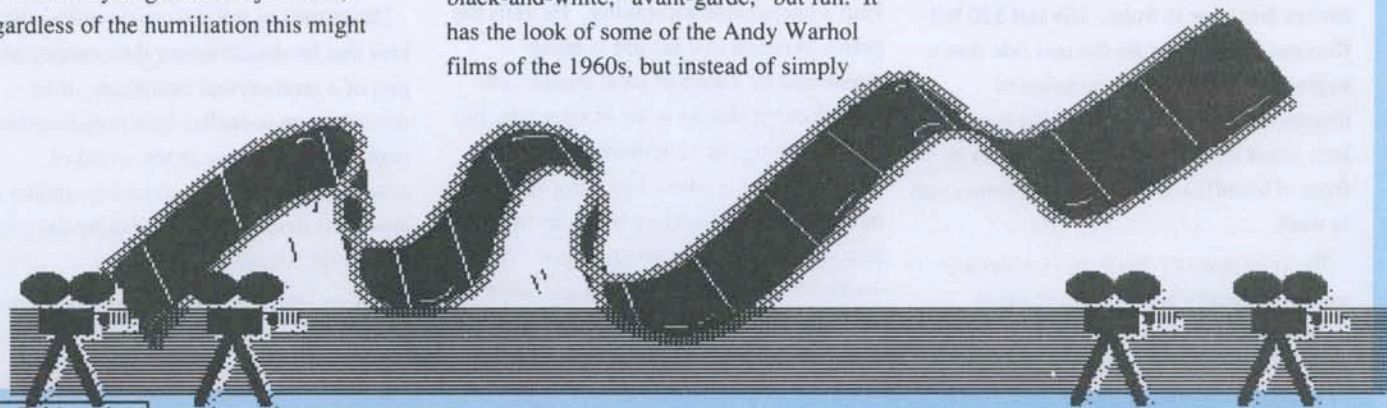
What seems most distinctive about these three movies is the wide range of ideological responses that they permit and perhaps encourage. Culturally hip, Demme, Scorsese, and Brooks each ridicule middleclass complacency even while they provide culturally square, politically conservative "messages" with happy endings that, despite a deeply felt cynicism, seem to present wholesale sell-out as the only sensible course of action.

The last two comedies I wish to discuss are Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) and David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986). They are, it seems to me, simply the best American movies of the 1980s: in part because they analyze nostalgia without being drenched in it; in part because each creates its own idiom, so that when we leave the movie theater, we see things as if they were framed by Lynch's camera or Jarmusch's rhythms. Each, in its own way, responds to contemporary reality by reflecting the middle by way of the margins. Each, in its own way, encourages repeated viewings by virtue of its richness, even as it resists an easy first reading by virtue of the intellectual and emotional demands it makes upon the viewer.

*Stranger than Paradise* is low-budget, black-and-white, "avant-garde," but fun. It has the look of some of the Andy Warhol films of the 1960s, but instead of simply

letting the camera run, it imposes upon its material a very strict rhythm: Each scene within the three titled parts of the film ends with the marked punctuation of a cut to black. Film comedy always depends upon the establishment of a comic rhythm, whether it is the meticulously planned sight-gags of the silent era or the perfectly timed line of dialogue in the Hollywood screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. Jarmusch discovers another source of comic rhythm by holding a shot just slightly longer than he should. We are perhaps twenty minutes into the film before we see how this works.

Willie (John Lurie) is a Hungarian-American living in the most depressing apartment in New York City and devoting what little energy he has to severing all his ethnic ties. He has no visible means of support, but that is hardly a problem, since his needs are so few — a frozen dinner, a black-and-white TV set, maybe a movie or a poker game with his only friend Eddie. Enter Eva (Eszter Balint), a cousin from Budapest who needs a place to stay for a few days until she can go to Cleveland to live with her Aunt Lotte. Willie isn't very nice to Eva, but she finally wins him over, somewhat, by demonstrating her abilities as a shoplifter. Part One ends with Eva leaving for Cleveland and Willie and Eddie having a beer together in Willie's apartment. Both men move slightly forward in their chairs as if they are about to speak. Nothing happens — cut to black. Trust me: It is hilarious. The film is filled with little moments like this, when the dramatic utterance is lost as the opportunity for speech passes. I want to say, however, that



the film is about talk, a sort of *My Dinner with Andre* (1981) with characters who have nothing to say.

As in the other films I've described, there is an attempt to leave the sterility of everyday life. We discover that both Willie and Eddie have been thinking about Eva for months, not by what they say but by their sudden decision to pay her a visit in Cleveland. In the most touching scene in the movie, the guys surprise Eva at her job in a fast-food restaurant, and Eddie is inordinately pleased that she remembers him. Even Willie loses a bit of his cool when he shows some jealousy over Eva's new boyfriend. What these tourists discover in their travels, however, is that nothing ever changes. There's nothing to see, nothing to do. "You know, it's funny," says Eddie, "you come to some place new, and everything looks the same," and Jarmusch's camera confirms the truth of this observation. Most of the time in Cleveland is spent playing cards and watching television. When the three characters finally decide to venture outside the house for some sightseeing, they go to look at Lake Erie. But it is the middle of a snowstorm, and all they see is an all-engulfing whiteness. Never has nihilism presented such a comic face, except perhaps in Samuel Beckett, but the Irish author kept on talking even after demonstrating there was nothing to say. Jarmusch shows us what it is really like to come to the end of words.

Like the characters in Gus Van Sant's films — *Drugstore Cowboy*, (1989) and *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) — Willie and Eddie express the problem of how to spend time, how to live outside the mainstream of American life. Some essential aspect of their acculturation just didn't take. They seem to want to enjoy the pleasures of tourism but finally just don't know how. Florida at the end of the film, is represented by a pair of sunglasses and a dreary motel room. The austerity of style here reflects a real emptiness. I won't give away the ending (I suspect fewer people have seen

this film than the others, although it is available on video), but say that magic does enter into the mundane and that the cool, unflappable Willie finally does discover that life contains surprises.

To simplify, if *Stranger than Paradise* shows us a world drained of color, *Blue Velvet* presents the garish colors of a carnival world. Both films are expressionistic in that they make us see things not as they are or as they are presented by film "realism." In Lynch's film there is a kind of hyper-realistic attention to minute detail even while its melodramatic mode is excessive and gives a cartoon-like

quality to its presentation of both innocence and experience: The good people of Lumberton belong in a mawkish

family sit-com, and the bad people are straight from hell.

Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) comes home from college to help with the family business after his father has a stroke. Walking across an empty lot one day on the way to visit his father in the hospital, he discovers a human ear. Although Jeffrey dutifully reports his discovery to the local authorities, he and a police detective's daughter, Sandy (Laura Dern), conduct their own investigation. Jeffrey, however, soon leaves his partner behind as the film becomes the story of his initiation into the darker areas of human experience, and he is forced to acknowledge his own complicity in the evil that surrounds him.

Even though Lynch frequently interrupts this story with a joke, it would be a mistake to conclude, "Oh, it's just a comedy." Even more than the other films mentioned here, *Blue Velvet* attempts to shock us with its violence. In this case the violence stems from a graphic visual and verbal depiction of deviant sexuality, mainly sado-masochistic in nature but not restricted to that.

While most film critics were quick to praise the film's originality and the power of its dream-like images, several, like Roger Ebert, had strong moral objections to the combination of elements of pain and degradation with what often seemed a sophomoric sense of humor. For Ebert, what Lynch does to his leading lady (Isabella Rossellini) is more sadistic than what his maniacal villain, Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper), does to her. As Ebert puts it, "What's worse, to inflict pain upon someone or to stand back and find the whole thing funny?"

But Lynch doesn't find the whole thing funny. It isn't funny when Jeffrey, after his first encounter with the dark side, asks why there is so much evil in the world. Nor is it funny when Sandy replies by describing her dream of the return of the robins in the spring, with the birds dispelling the darkness and bringing with them a world of sweetness and light. But this scene prepares for the film's parody of a happy ending, in which the forces of evil are destroyed, fathers recover from strokes, mothers are reunited with sons, and life is a weekend cook-out, complete with robins. But the robin shown close-up has a bug in its beak. On seeing this, Jeffrey's bird-like aunt says with disgust, "Oh, I could never eat a bug," even as she shoves another bite of food into her mouth. The humor of the scene is inextricably bound up with the horror of the discovery that even robins are predators.

If the 1980s come to be seen (to borrow a phrase from an Auden poem that summarizes the 1930s) as "a low, dishonest decade," a large portion of its dishonesty probably derives from its hypocritical attempt to maintain a rigid separation of the light and the dark, of "us" and "them," to call the placid surface "reality" and to demonize the darkness, to tell us we can visit the wild side without having to live there. Some comic filmmakers of the decade expose this hypocrisy by extracting a price for the laughter they invoke. ♣

