

MARGINALISATION AND UTOPIA IN PAUL AUSTER, JIM JARMUSCH, AND TOM WAITS

Adriano Tedde (author)

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Projecting a triumphant future for the United States of America in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), the ever-optimistic bard of the young nation, Walt Whitman, writes: “[America] will be empire of empires, overshadowing all else, past and present, putting the history of old-world dynasties, conquests behind [itself], as of no account—making a new history, a history of democracy, making old history a dwarf—[America] alone inaugurating largeness, culminating time.” But this vision of unparalleled grandeur is less totalizing than the previous quote alone might suggest. Whitman also cautioned the States about the “dangerous sea of seething currents, cross and under-currents, vortices—all so dark, untried” that stood between the newborn American democracy and its fullest realization—a perilous path threatened by the evil forces of greed unleashed on the nation by the unfettered capitalism that characterized the Gilded Age. Fast-forward a century or so, and Whitman’s hopes turned out to be a rather utopian—and even naive—reverie: the Great Depression and, more recently, the Reaganian dark ages and the subsequent Neoliberal hegemony, have populated America with a mass of destitute, forgotten people purposely barred from the enormous wealth that the financial oligarchies are keeping on amassing. After all, as Nancy Isenberg writes in *White Trash* (2016), American economy has always required an expendable class of workers to feed its cancerous growth.

This shadow America represented by the poor, the downtrodden, the dispossessed and the homeless is at the center of Adriano Tedde’s book through three of the most representative artists that, in the 20th and 21st centuries, have dedicated their works to the darker sides of the land of the free: Tom Waits, Jim Jarmusch and Paul

Auster. Through the different media of music, cinema and literature, these authors have given voice to the US demimonde, contributing to a counter-epic of the margins consistently at odds with the triumphalist narrative of American exceptionalism. Drawing from a wide range of sources—spanning from the already mentioned Whitman’s *Vistas*, to Scott Sandage’s *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (2005)—for his critical framework, and engaging with the classic “Myth and Symbol” tradition of American Studies, Tedde weaves a tight intertextual conversation between Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, showing how their often harsh critique of the United States’ barren materialism is also informed by a utopian desire to envision a different America, a society “based on love and togetherness” (2).

In part one of his study, Tedde introduces and defines the core-concept of the book, what—referencing Michael Harrington’s eponymous, seminal book on poverty from 1962—he labels the “Other America”: “a nation that does not exclude the weak but aim[s] to generate a community [...] that evolves ‘from ‘I’ to ‘we’” (14). He then goes on to illustrate how Waits, Jarmusch, and Auster approach this humanity living on the fringes of mainstream society, the “losers, drifters and boozers” who populate the songs, films and novels Tedde dissects looking for common topics and themes. In doing so, he highlights a shared poetics “that pays attention to details and shows respect for those aspects of ordinary life mostly considered insignificant” (29).

In the second part of the book, this underworld, belittled but not at all insignificant, is explored vis-à-vis the magniloquent myth of the American Dream, the master narrative Waits, Auster, and Jarmusch confront and deconstruct through their oeuvres. Tedde breaks down this cumbersome and ubiquitous idea and isolates some of its basic constituents, its mythologems, tracing how the three authors approached them. The chapter presents a discussion on freedom, nature and regeneration, but maybe the most relevant aspect of the American Dream taken into consideration here, at least in relation to the main authors, is the myth of the road—still an untarnished symbol of American progress and optimism. Reconnecting the mythology of the road to its original roots through the classic works of James Truslow Adams—*The Epic of America* (1931)—and Frederick Jackson Turner—“The Significance of the Frontier in

American History” (1893)—and spotting their resurgence and rewritings in the authors’ “on-the-road” narratives, Tedde draws an anti-myth of the US westward expansion which he aptly calls the “Road to nothing.” The teleology of American exceptionalism is turned into a cul-de-sac, or maybe into a void of uncertainty in which the promises of progress are made null.

But again, in analyzing these stories of lives gone askew, the book makes it clear how Waits, Jarmusch, and Auster are no nihilists—quite the opposite, in fact. Part three, “The Democratic Hero,” illustrates how the failures and hardships of the Other America stand as a challenge to the wealth-obsessed national ethos and to the still solid popular belief that everyone is master of their own destiny. By focusing on American wastelands, street life and parables of downward mobility, these authors are working to close the almost metaphysical gap between the haves and the have-nots, questioning “the idea of the otherness of the poor and the existence of a so-called culture of poverty” (111), Tedde explains. Going back once again to the American Renaissance, this time through the philosophical austerity of Henry David Thoreau, the author creates some interesting intertextual connections between the revered thinker and works such as Auster’s *Leviathan* (1992), Jarmusch’s *Paterson* (2016) and Waits’ *Frank’s Wild Years* (1987), illustrating how living with “as little as humanly possible” is to be understood as a meaningful rebellion against the oppressive cult of US materialism. The simplicity sought by the maladjusted protagonists of these stories might be dictated by necessity in the first place, but it turns into a civil disobedience of sorts in the long run. “Simplicity,” writes Tedde, “eventually leads to the discovery of new or forgotten values that offer an alternative to consumerism” (132). Wealth and success, the weave of the American Dream, are rejected and critiqued through the *oeuvre* of Auster, Jarmusch and Waits, and, as Tedde eloquently shows, the attacks to the mainstream US way of life contained in these works, their *pars destruens*, are a first step towards the definition of a more creative stage, a *pars construens* that seeks to infiltrate the monolith of neoliberalism with a poetics able to instill doubts in its Panglossian rhetoric, and, more importantly, to envision, verbalize, and hopefully disseminate a different, better idea of what America, and this world writ large, should be.

Part four, “The Enemy of Conventional Society,” is especially preoccupied with textual and aural strategies used by Jarmusch, Auster, and Waits to mirror the state of permanent economic and existential crisis brought about by the Neoliberal age “from Ronald to Donald,” as Tedde writes. This section of the book describes how the dismal truth hidden below capitalism’s celebratory propaganda is exposed in all its ugliness in Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *Invisible* (2009) and *Leviathan* (1992); and Jarmusch’s “trilogy [...] of material deterioration” (150) comprising *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), *Down By Law* (1986) and *Mystery Train* (1989) among the others novels and films scrutinized by the author. The decay and injustices described by these works, writes Tedde, are “the product of a process of self-destruction that has a long history in America, as long as American history itself” (154). At the core of the novels and films here analyzed there is the refusal to fall in line with the dominant neoliberal paradigm, and impetus which is paired with the will to salvage the detritus produced by such a culture to recycle the material and metaphorical debris discharged by the contemporary modes of production. This is especially evident when it comes to Tom Waits, whom Tedde labels as a “junk collector” (158), and whose unorthodox instrumentation—gathered from rubble and scraps—demonstrates how what is discarded by Neoliberal America (objects, but also people, alternative ways of life, and political stances) can still be used to create art—maybe the quintessential defiance of a market economy centered upon disposable things and planned obsolescence.

And the meaning of an art stubbornly bent on depicting (and dignifying) everything contemporary America deems useless, unworthy or a failure is precisely the point of arrival of Tedde’s compelling analysis. The last chapter, titled “Art as resistance,” ties together all the threads unfolded throughout the book to reach a *summa* of the social and political value of Jarmusch, Auster and Waits’ art. As the author himself writes:

Weaving fictional stories that pay attention to the marginal realities of the American society, 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. (167)

Through the words of two radical, fundamental US writers of the 20th century like James Agee and Richard Wright (just a couple of Tedde's numerous and always effective intertextual connections), *Marginalisation and Utopia* ends by declaring that an artist worth of their name should be "a deadly enemy of society," and that any art worth its salt should show its audience "a new and strange way of life." Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch, and Tom Waits have consecrated their art and lives to this mission, and thanks to Adriano Tedde's engaging book, we can now gain a comprehensive understanding of these game-changing authors who, in all their differences, "have always talked [...] with one voice" (1).

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