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► **To cite this version:**

David Roche. (De)constructing "America": the Case of Emir Kusturica's Arizona Dream (1993). European journal of American studies, 2010, 5 (4), <http://ejas.revues.org/8653>. 10.4000/ejas.8653 . hal-00535850

HAL Id: hal-00535850

<https://hal.science/hal-00535850>

Submitted on 13 Nov 2010

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European journal of American studies



Special issue on Film

Document 2

(De)constructing "America": the Case of Emir Kusturica's *Arizona Dream* (1993)

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Abstract

By means of an analysis of Kusturica's only film about America, *Arizona Dream*, this article argues that while the United States offers a vision of a united society founded on diversity, it also represses, altering in the process both society and the landscape. National unity is consequently a dream – a dream the film suggests that has often been dreamed up by un-Americans. Filtered through Kusturica's own perceptions of America – and his position on the Balkan War (1991-2001) – the film seems to suggest sadness at the loss of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural perspective. Through its representations of geography and ethnic diversity, and its dense network of filmic citations, what *Arizona Dream* ultimately offers is consequently a European auteur's view of the United States rather than a systematic deconstruction of the "imagined community" of "America."

Index terms

Keywords : Arizona Dream, Alaska, Eskimos, Inuit, New York, Geography, Ethnic diversity,

Film citation, Metafiction, Balkan War, American Dream

Names : Emir Kusturica, Sergio Leone, Wim Wenders, Lars von Trier, David Atkins, Sébastien Rongier, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Martin Scorsese, Jerry Lewis, Johnny Depp, Brian McHale, Sylvester Stallone, Robert De Niro, Bert Lahr, Alfred Hitchcock

Full text

- 1 I have chosen *Arizona Dream* as an example in order to analyze not only a European director's vision of the U.S., but rather his take on the *act of representing* it. Although Kusturica is clearly one of most important film-makers working today, the film has received little critical attention and is almost unknown in the U.S. where it was released in only a handful of theaters and had "a fairly cold reception."¹ What differentiates *Arizona Dream* from other recent European films that deal with the U.S.—Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984), Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas* (1984), Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000)—is that it is Kusturica's only film to do so and its very existence is a matter of contingency, directly linked, as it is, to the director's personal experience. Kusturica would never have made it had he not taught at Columbia where he met David Atkins, a student, who provided him with the basic storyline.² The argument I will be defending and that *Arizona Dream* will serve to illustrate is that, unlike Hollywood films which have often dealt with foreign countries while ignoring their cultural specificities,³ a film like *Arizona Dream* does, in effect, deliver a political and cultural analysis of the U.S., but it does so all the while *underlining* its own un-Americanness through the very elements meant to represent Americanness, thus *undermining* its own authority to deliver such an analysis.
- 2 The film's title points at its incapacity to capture the wholeness of the American dream by limiting it to the state where most of the story takes place, emphasizing, then, the narrowness of its scope, or rather, the personal dimension of a film dedicated to the memory of Kusturica's father [0:20]—this could be opposed to the sheer scope of *Underground* (1995), which starts during World War II and ends during the Balkan wars (1941-1992). *Arizona Dream* is by no means an attempt to appropriate American culture, and even less to make an American film, and the U.S. it represents is clearly a construct based on an American storyline *and* a European's vision of the U.S. I will examine three aspects that will be shown to represent America in its diversity—geography, race and cinema—in order to examine how the film constructs an "America" it analyzes and criticizes while simultaneously deconstructing its very artificiality as a cultural and aesthetic construct, using strategies which are characteristic of postmodern aesthetics.

Plurality of locations: how a multi-regionalist backdrop structures the film

- 3 The diegesis takes place in three locations, Alaska, New York City, and Arizona, with most of the film taking place in Arizona, and the film was shot on location.⁴ Not only was it important for Kusturica to represent a "diversity of extreme locations,"⁵ but the choice of locations has several implications concerning the film's structure: an effect of symmetry produced by the north/south and east/west binaries; an impression of totality

conveyed by the triangle the three locations form on the map of North America; and a Chinese Box structure, with the opening and closing Alaska scenes, that is somewhat paradoxical.

4 To start with, if Alaska is where Axel's Inuit dream takes place, and thus if the narrative appears to be framed by the dream of the Inuits and what appears to be a dream of Leo and Axel as Inuits, the film's title indicates that Arizona is also a dream place, which suggests that the main part of the diegesis may in fact be a dream—in any case, Axel certainly first sees Arizona in a dream [14:00]. Alaska could, then, be a dream inside a dream—Axel also dreams of Alaska while in Arizona [62:30]. There remains, then, the possibility that the film's only diegetic reality would be the New York scenes. Indeed, Axel wakes up in New York *after* the Alaska dream and is shown falling asleep in a tunnel *before* finding himself *already* transported to Arizona. Travelling appears to be synonymous with dreaming in this film. Only the balloon [4:40, 128:45] and the flying halibut [62:40] (which are from the start related by contiguity) travel, connecting Alaska to New York, Alaska to Arizona, and dream to reality. Elaine's plane, on the other hand, cannot allow her to go to Alaska because it is "too cold," she says [103:30], and Paul's Cadillac appears to have magically teletransported itself from one location to another.

5 In other words, all three locations are clearly cut off from each other, are shown to be not linked except by elements of the montage, notably the film score. Yet, the possibility that Axel dreams all of the Arizona scenes seems to be invalidated by the voice-overs at the beginning and at the end of the film, as both mention Axel's mother's saying "Good morning, Columbus" [6:50, 127:00], a phrase which refers both to Axel's and the country's origin, thus attributing the same degree of reality to the New York scenes as to the Arizona scenes. Nevertheless, what is clear from this ambiguity on the "reality" of the diegetic reality being shown, at least as far as the locations are concerned, is that the America represented in *Arizona Dream* is clearly presented as a dream of America and not as a socially realistic America. This explains why the three Americas are only connected through dreams: the *wholeness* of the American experience will be represented as a dream. The nation's identity, and hence unity, is, in effect, to be the American dream, i.e., the dream of that nation.

6 The film attempts to map the whole country by representing the diversity of the American landscape through symmetry: the north-eastern megalopolis and the small south-western "Mainstreet America" town; the Alaskan ice desert and the Arizona desert. Each location is introduced thanks to an opening shot that is somewhat iconic: the postcard shot of the igloo [0:15] is synonymous with Alaska and Eskimos, while a park surrounded by skyscrapers [6:00] clearly designates Central Park and by extension New York. The desert with Leo and the Cadillacs [14:00], however, is not iconic of Arizona *per se*; in fact, it is only later, when Leo says: "Axel, do you realize my father had the first Cadillac dealership in Arizona in 1914?" [20:00] that these images will retrospectively signify Arizona. In other words, these elements require the discursive *label* "Arizona" to *become iconic* of Arizona in the context of the film. It is only the film's title that leads the spectator to guess at the identity of this place. On the other hand, what could clearly be designated as a sign of Arizona-ness, the Saguaro cactus—the Arizona State flower is the Saguaro cactus blossom⁶—is quite literally displaced, first, from the desert to Leo Sweet's garden [16:30]—we never see any cacti in the landscapes apart from the Saguaro the halibut flies past in what appears to be Axel's second dream [63:00]—and inside his house in the form of a green neon sign and his car dealership as a mosaic on the wall

[19:30, 31:30]. Because it has been symbolically uprooted and displaced from its natural desert habitat to a Cadillac dealer's artificial suburban garden, the Saguaro represents by metonymy Leo Sweet's financial power, which enables him to rearrange the country's topography, to civilize nature. At a metafictional level, this displacement also points out how kitsch and artificial is the film's representation of Arizona, Kusturica thinking "of America as kitsch" and Americans as "the champions of kitsch."⁷ Saguaros serve as stage props at the Tucson Manhattan club where the talent show takes place [79:00], which reinforces the idea that they serve to represent a mock-Arizona-ness as the scene was shot in New York.⁸

7 The film, however, quickly steers away from the iconic. In the opening Alaska scene, the postcard shot of the igloo gives way to close shots of the igloo's window, long shots of the father and of the expanses of snow [0:25]. In the New York scenes, the city is immediately identifiable thanks to Central Park, but the shots do not offer postcard clichés of the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Tower and the Twin Towers, which are merely glimpsed in the background [6:15]. Even the opening shot of the New York scene is hardly iconic, rising from a low-angle view of Central Park and the skyscrapers to follow the balloon [6:00]. The balloon quickly leads the camera off to the banks of the Hudson river so that Axel's New York is seen as a borderline *locus* between land and water, New York and New Jersey, island and mainland. When Paul and Axel go out for a night on the town, the close-ups of the characters' faces keep the spectator from seeing New York: the street is shown zipping by a mere three times and a bus is filmed in fast-motion as if to emphasize how fleeting this glimpse of New York is [12:45].⁹ The city's sights are not shown but named by Paul: "Stop yelling! We're on Broadway. Show a little respect to the—to the artists here!" [13:00]

8 Likewise, in Arizona, the film goes from a frontal shot of Leo Sweet's house [14:50], which is reminiscent of a Norman Rockwell painting or a Tim Burton film, to shots of the Cadillac dealership with its revolving outdoor display [25:10] and of the town's Main Street [25:55] that are integrated into the narrative, to an oblique shot of Elaine's and Grace's lone house where clear signs of the American pastoral, e.g. the mallard windmill mailbox [106:05] and the old black pick-up [36:25], are more discreet, usually in the background or on the side of establishing shots. In other words, the film leads away from explicit *locoi* of Americanness to borderline areas that are types of neutral spaces where the characters are marginalized and surrounded by fewer *topois* of Americanness—in New York, Axel wakes up to the sound of Goran Gregovic's music and to news of the Balkan war [6:20]. The narrowing down of the social representation is, then, a consequence of the narrowing-down in the treatment of location with characters evolving in a more neutral landscape. It is thus clear from the film's treatment of place that the multitude of regions is just a surface for the film's main concerns, although a structuring surface nonetheless.

9 Alaska's not belonging to the U.S. mainland and its explicit association with the Inuits makes it into a *locus* of otherness in the film. This is hardly exclusive for, diegetically speaking, New York certainly represents a space of otherness in Axel's eyes, as it is the place where he went to in order to escape life in Arizona: "Four days after the funeral I caught a train to New York City." [23:30] However, something should be added about the choice of Arizona as a counterpoint to Alaska instead of, say, Texas or Utah. Indeed, if Arizona is meant to represent Continental America and Alaska an addition, they are respectively the 48th (1912) and 49th (1958) states of the U.S.A. Both have in common

the fact that they were purchased, the lower part of Arizona in 1853 from Mexico after the Mexican War, Alaska in 1867 from the Russian Empire.

10 Historically, Arizona is linked to otherness and dreams—it was discovered by Spanish conquistadors looking for the legendary Seven Cities of Cibola in 1540 — more specifically then, to an American dream that *pre-existed* the U.S. and that was the dream of people who were not, then, Americans and who have now come to represent otherness. Like Alaska, derived from a Yupik word meaning “great land” and thus expressive of the American dream, the very name Arizona is marked by otherness, as it is believed to be of Aztec origin. The choice of these locations, then, suggests a political reading of the U.S. as a land purchased by “real” Americans which, I will now argue, also informs the treatment of ethnic diversity.

American identity/ethnic diversity: the film's political subtext, or how the U.S. uses then represses the other

11 If the film constructs a surface of American plurality geographically speaking, the same cannot be said of the country's ethnic diversity—Dina Iordanova even says that it “sidesteps issues of class or other social inequality.”¹⁰ The main characters are all white and most of the secondary characters are not of a racial minority. The African American man in the movie theater [29:45] and the African American at the amateur talent show [82:45] merely blend in with the rest of the audience. Kusturica certainly did not intend to make race a central issue in his representation of the U.S. Yet the choice of framing the film with an Inuit dream-sequence is nevertheless symbolic and indicates that race may, however, constitute a side or marginalized issue. For the eskimos of Axel's dream living on the Bering Sea clearly recall the potential founder population that is believed to have crossed the Bering land bridge and peopled the American continent.¹¹ (Axel's dream is, by the way, also a dream of origins,¹² portraying a child with his parents and his grandmother who mysteriously disappears [1:05], marking a break in the continuity of the generational chain between the child and his ancestors.)

12 The film explicitly refers to the idea that America was founded by the other when Axel relates in voice-over a phrase his mother often used: “‘Good morning, Columbus.’ Those were my mother's eternal words, reminding me that America was already discovered and that day-dreaming was a long way from life's truths.” [6:50] Not only does this refer to the allegedly Italian explorer who discovered the continent, and thus to the country's European origin, but Axel's reading suggests that it relates the country's *official* history to “daydreaming” and its already being populated by the Native Americans to “truth.” The phrase clearly puts the American speaker in the position of the Native American greeting the European explorer. This phrase, which Axel says again in voice-over at the end of the film before the last Alaska scene, reinforces the frame provided by the Alaska scenes, but also underlines that Axel's trek from New York back to his native Arizona has enabled him to come to an understanding: “And for the first time in my life, I realized like Columbus I had to live in a world of cheap cologne. And I wasn't sure any discovery in America was possible anymore.” [127:05] The impossibility of discovery, of invention - e.g. the airplane was already invented - is finally a form of self-discovery that is quite

simply the impossibility of fulfilling one's dreams, including the American dream. Axel's mother's simple phrase suggests, then, that the U.S. is a nation which has constructed itself not only *on* but also *as* a dream by rejecting the truth and the reality of otherness.

13 Throughout the film, the background presence of these various figures of otherness points at the part played by the other as a founder or as an active participant in the construction of the U.S. For instance, the second figure of otherness to appear in the film is the Asian tailor hired by Leo. Because he lives in Arizona and not, say, New York, the tailor evokes the role the Chinese played in the development of the West, working on the transcontinental railroad or as cleaners in frontier towns where they were relegated to the sidelines;¹³ the first policies meant to control and limit immigration in the 1880s were, in fact, taken in response to the growing anti-Chinese sentiment.¹⁴ Significantly, the tailor's identity as an American is underlined when Leo calls him by his first name in order to give him more work: "Uh, Larry, we have to make an appointment for Axel tomorrow for a fitting." [16:15] Yet, whether Leo is working on his marriage toast or talking to Axel, the latter completely ignores this hired hand while requiring his presence. This obviously produces humor, as Leo's constantly moving around as the tailor attempts to follow him and do his job leads to the inevitable when Leo's jacket sleeve gets torn off [15:55], or later when Leo orders Larry to stop talking when the tailor says he's actually "counting." [17:25] This functions as a reminder that the Chinese tailor is in fact working for Leo and that he cannot *work for* him and *not exist* at the same time, which was in a way what was asked of the Chinese workers in frontier towns.¹⁵

14 The Mexican band which plays for Elaine's birthday is treated in a similar manner, this time by Paul. After complaining about how disappointed he feels at no longer singing "Besa me" with the others [118:45], Paul tells the band to "stop," invoking his work as an excuse—"I gotta tomorrow. Hey, I work. Time is money." [119:30] This disregard recalls his behaviour toward them earlier on when he told them to stop speaking Spanish—"That is Mexico. This is America, we speak English. Speak English." [98:35] Paul's attitude is significant because he is ready to accept the elements of a foreign culture he appreciates,¹⁶ the song, but he refuses to communicate with them; or rather, he accepts them for their music so long as it is needed, but not for themselves. The Mexican band functions like the gypsy bands in Kusturica's other films, giving a diegetic origin to the film score. But it must also be related to the job of Axel's father as "a border guard who spent most of his life trying to keep people from crossing lines." [22:45] The Super-8 film Leo and Axel watch shows Axel's father at work looking for tracks while his son looks on [22:50]. In the Super-8 film's previous scene, however, Axel's father and mother were shown looking on with worry as a "witch doctor" Leo had "brought back" from Mexico attempted to cure Axel's "weird" earache the American doctors "couldn't help" him with [22:30]. I see this anecdotal story as an allegory of the U.S.'s selective utilitarian immigration policy, rejecting the needy but warmly welcoming those the nation needs, a situation Kusturica found himself in as he was hired to teach film at Columbia, a willing victim of the American brain drain. That it is Leo who imported the Mexican witch suggests that, unlike Axel's father, who applies government laws, Leo, the capitalist, is willing to cross borders when it suits him, e.g. to employ foreign labor.¹⁷

15 The last figure of otherness, and perhaps the least obvious, is Leo's fiancée, Millie. Even though she seems to speak with an American accent and has an English name, Leo calls this young and beautiful woman he explicitly sees as a symbol of his "success" [19:55] "[his] Polish cupcake" [19:40]. The food metaphor explicitly points at the vampiric

relationship Leo has with Millie, who is Axel's age, hence old enough to be his daughter, using her in the exact same manner as he accuses Elaine of using Axel [59:25]. Indeed, her being "Polish" also evokes the word "Polack," a disparaging term to designate Polish immigrants or people of Polish descent. Although nothing in Millie's behaviour or speech indicates her otherness, she is discursively *constructed* as a desirable other by Leo *before* she is shown singing in front of her mirror not in Polish but in Russian [19:45], thus as a reflection which *deconstructs* the identity Leo imposed on her. Furthermore, his calling her "Polish" evokes at a metafictional level the origin of the actress who plays Millie. One of the leading super-models of the 1980s, chosen as one of the most beautiful people in the world by *People* magazine in 1990, Paulina Porizkova was born in Czechoslovakia and grew up in Sweden. Leo's condensing Millie's nationality in the generic "Polish" is, then, further deconstructed by the actress's multi-cultural origin. That it is her Eastern-Europeanness which is ignored reflects, again, Kusturica's own situation.

A cinematographic palimpsest: how film citation structures the narrative and the narration, produces tone and delivers a metafictional reading¹⁸

¹⁶ If *Arizona Dream* asserts that it is by no means posing as an American film, nor even pretending to give an authentic representation of the U.S., the dream America the film constructs is clearly associated with the Hollywood dream factory that produces and propagates representations of America. I will focus only on the instances of film citation, a reference to a film which, according to Sébastien Rongier, can be clearly identified thanks to a frame.¹⁹ These instances all display films that impressed Kusturica as a film student in Prague.²⁰ They are all related to the character of Paul Leger who dreams of becoming a famous movie star, wears "all black" [46:10] and has taken on a New York accent to sound like Pacino, De Niro and Sylvester Stallone (as Rocky) [11:40]. The second time Paul appears on screen, he is shown staring back at a picture of Arnold Schwarzenegger in James Cameron's *Terminator 2* (1991) on the side of an arcade video game [8:50]. This reference to a Hollywood blockbuster starring an Austrian-American actor, who had been Mister Universe five times before trying his luck in the U.S., confirms the film's take on American immigration policy as underlined above. Paul and the terminator's looking back at each other has a comic effect, produced by the discrepancy of placing on par a "real" person and the picture of a fictitious character. But the scene also constructs Paul as a paradigmatic American consumer of American films, suggesting that the cyborg, a machine with a human appearance, is in fact the American consumer's reflection. However, if Paul and Schwarzenegger are both wearing sunglasses and sullen expressions, it is only retrospectively - that is to say, after the subsequent conversation where we learn that Paul's New York accent is contrived, and more clearly after the *Raging Bull* scene - that the spectator can understand that Paul was, in fact, trying to imitate the terminator's expression.

¹⁷ At the small movie theater which is replaying Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980), Paul makes the young lady he is seducing believe that he's "a major star in Europe."

[27:50] In so doing, Paul is ironically appropriating a cliché that Jerry Lewis himself incarnated as Americans used to make fun of the French by saying that only the French like Jerry Lewis, something Lewis played on in his last film "Cracking Up" (1983). Paul directly mentions another member of the cast when he forbids the girl to touch his face, saying that great actors do not tolerate such behaviour, and citing Brando, Pacino, De Niro and Johnny Depp, while Axel in the background looks on [28:30]! This scene has, then, the opposite effect of the *Terminator 2* scene, directly reminding the spectator of the characters' artificiality by impossibly dissociating the actor from the character he plays and who is filmed in the very same shot, while Paul seems to ignore that both Axel and Johnny Depp is/are sitting behind him observing Paul's tactics with the girl. That Johnny Depp/Axel doesn't even blink at this remark paradoxically strengthens Axel's "reality" as a character, especially since Depp plays the part of the spectator as Axel watches his friend Paul's performance first as a seducer, then as an imitator on stage. Not only does the metafictional impact of this remark playfully underline the film's artificiality and status as fiction²¹ — it is similar to the type of literary strategies described by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction*²²—but it also reinforces the idea that Paul is a typical American consumer of American films who fails to distinguish between the characters and the actors in the films he loves, e.g. between Rocky and Sylvester Stallone.

18 When Paul steps up onto the stage, he further disrupts the logic of acting by attempting to portray two characters, Jake La Motta (De Niro) and his brother Joey (Pesci), so that he finds himself forced to choose one role over the other when he waits before saying: "You fucked my wife?" [29:40] Paul's performance appears comical to Axel and the girls [29:25], disruptive to the rest of the diegetic audience [29:45], and the discrepancy between Paul's seriousness and the various reactions produces humour. The scene underlines the fact that Paul's imitation is just this, an imitation, and an imperfect one at that. His voice and those in the soundtrack compete and never really overlap; although Paul knows the lines by heart, he is never perfectly on cue. Moreover, Paul does not change his position on stage depending on which character is speaking. Paul's performance recalls audience participation during replays of Jim Sharman's *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), but it also recalls the technique used in place of dubbing or subtitles in some Eastern European countries such as Poland, where a narrator is added in voice-over over the original soundtrack to sum up the dialogue. The scene Paul chooses to play out is his "favorite" [29:00] because the "You fuck my wife?" line, like the "Are you talking to me?" line in *Taxi Driver* (1976), is metonymically associated with De Niro at his best (he won Oscars for both films), Paul literally constructing himself as a "great actor" through imitation. But the scene, which shows Jake accusing his brother of betraying him with his wife, also heralds Axel's resentment *vis-à-vis* Paul in the subsequent scene when Axel is jealous of Paul and repeats the question: "Why was the door locked?" [36:00] Paul's facing Jack/De Niro and not Joey/Pesci suggests that Axel is the jealous character — and, extra-filmically, perhaps, that Johnny Depp is the real star! This instance of film citation also structures the narration as the changes of scenes in *Raging Bull* serve to identify the ellipses in the narrative—the *Arizona Dream* scene lasts less than four minutes [26:25-30:00] when approximately nine minutes of *Raging Bull* have gone by [75:30-84:40].

19 The *Godfather Part II* scene [120:10] obviously recalls the *Raging Bull* scene. Both films are paradigms of the American dream. Both involve actors Paul has repeatedly nominated among the greatest. Both depict an argument between two brothers, Michael

Corleone accusing his brother Fredo of betraying him. Both represent Italian-American characters played by Italian-American actors in films by Italian American directors, suggesting that the representation of Americanness is heavily steeped in Europeanness.²³ Both have Paul attempting to play two parts simultaneously and emphasize his incapacity to do so perfectly. There are, however, some notable differences. Although the *Godfather* citation uses similar ingredients, in the end, it does not produce humor but contributes, rather, to the pathos of the scene. Indeed, Paul has been abandoned by the others and he does not steal the show as he does at the movie theater; this scene is edited parallel to two other scenes — Grace readying herself for her suicide and Axel, no doubt, confessing his love to Elaine — so that Paul is soon no longer in the spotlight. The reference to *The Godfather* films, with their famous final scenes in parallel editing is, then, also formal, this instance of film citation also serving the narration as it links the three parallel scenes in time [120:15-122:40]—the soundtrack can be heard in each scene. Another difference is that, if in *Raging Bull* the two brothers become reconciled, in *The Godfather Part II* Michael Corleone deliberately lies to Fredo, whom he will shortly have assassinated. While I related the *Raging Bull* scene to Axel's and Paul's relationship, I believe this scene is meant to be related to Elaine and Grace. The *Godfather* scene in which Michael, the stronger brother, is about to eliminate the weaker brother, recalls Axel's remark that he is caught between two women and that it is not a "fight of good and evil, but between weaker and stronger" [64:35]. However, this does not enable us to determine which of the two women is stronger: Grace may be the one who puts herself to death, yet she does so presumably in order to fulfill her dream of "liv[ing] forever" [116:50] and she is presented from the start as being in the financially stronger position [31:20]. The reference to the *Godfather* may, in this respect, be meant to point at how fragile the reconciliation between mother and daughter is and that the only way to preserve it is by having one die. Significantly, the survivor, Elaine, will not reappear in the film, as if, in the end, she could not be separated from her daughter.²⁴

20 Grace had already stolen the show by attempting to commit suicide in an earlier scene. At the dinner table, Paul, who has up to now deliberately ignored the fuss caused by Grace's and Elaine's argument, gets up and starts playing the part of the Cowardly Lion from *The Wizard of Oz*, but his voice is drowned out by the other characters, principally Grace [43:20]. As in the final scene, Paul is separated from the other characters, this time thanks to the shots which exclude him — Paul is shown acting alone in close-up while Axel moves back and forth between the two women—when earlier in the same scene the shots excluded Grace [38:25]. This shift indicates that he will remain a secondary character throughout the film — he will disappear in the subsequent scenes so that Axel will be left without a rival [47:50] — while his failure to captivate his audience in the only scene where he spontaneously "improvises" also suggests that his acting career will not be successful, something the deleted scene seems to confirm [3:35]. For this time, Paul does not imitate a famous actor but plays the part of a character who is more well-known than the actor who portrayed him — Bert Lahr, who was a New York theater and vaudeville actor, never got a real career going because his acting was deemed too overdone — which is the opposite of the above examples where the actor's persona (De Niro, Pacino) gets the better of his part. Moreover, as this is not an instance of "citation" as defined above but of a character citing a film, Paul's performance cannot be compared to the original and it is even difficult, on a first viewing, to perceive the reference in the midst of the chaos. Anyhow, Paul's performance contributes to building up the chaos and humor of

the scene, but also the tone. Indeed, the Cowardly Lion's lamentation as played by Bert Lahr is productive of *bathos*—"the result of an unsuccessful attempt to reach a sublime or elevated tone (pathos), which only leads to the commonplace, ridiculous or laughable."²⁵ *Pathos* is what the quiet performances of Pacino and Cazale in *The Godfather Part II* aim at. The tone of these references contributes, then, to the spectator's not taking Grace's attempt at suicide seriously in the first scene, but more seriously in the second.

21 The Tucson amateur night scene in which Paul imitates the plane scene from *North by Northwest* also produces a form of *bathos*. Again, the reference is an American film heavily steeped in Europeanness, although the nationality of the director and the lead actor has not kept them from being assimilated by the Hollywood industry and becoming Hollywood icons.²⁶ Again, Paul imitates a character in a scene which resonates with the diegesis through the airplane motif. The film has raised the spectator's expectations concerning this scene by having Paul mention it twice, first to the girls in the movie theater when he twice invites them to his "gigantic performance" [27:40, 61:20], so the spectator is very much aware that Paul sees it as his chance to be in the spotlight. Of course, these expectations are immediately thwarted as the "performance" turns out to be nothing more than a local amateur night, not even an "audition" [60:45], with a jury composed of people who are clearly not Hollywood casting agents, including an elderly man with a cowboy hat who sleeps through Paul's performance [81:15]. Much of the humor is produced by just this: the discrepancy between how seriously Paul takes himself and how small the stakes really are. Indeed, cocky Paul, so sure of himself when he was trying to impress the girls at the movie theater, is visibly nervous before his performance, while the lights which are directed at him lend his face a sickly pallor [79:25]. He even gets the actor's name mixed up with the director's when he presents the scene to the audience: "The famous scene in which Alfred — the famous scene in which Cary Grant is being chased by a crop-dusting plane." [80:05] But humor is also produced because Paul's source material is ill-suited considering his aim to prove he was "born to act." [79:50] Indeed, the scene is impossible to perform seriously without the context, notably the plane and the cornfield. Their necessity is made all the more noticeable because of the sound of the plane [80:50] and the four potted cornstalks Paul uses as props. Paul is even forced to abandon not only his part but also his function as an actor in order to take on that of set designer when he moves the cornstalks around [81:50]. The inserted scenes from Hitchcock's film [80:55-82:25] serve, then, not only to underline the differences between the original performance and Paul's, but also to remind the real spectator of the cinematographic quality of the original piece which makes Paul's endeavor impossible. One understands why Paul made the slip in the first place: not only is Alfred Hitchcock one of the rare directors to have star status to equal an actor's, but the scene is not so much an actor's scene as a director's. The same can be said of the scene in *Arizona Dream*, for it is, in effect, the editing which enables the spectator to compare Paul's performance to the original, the diegetic audience not having access to the original scenes — significantly, the only shots where we hear the film's soundtrack, notably the plane, are those which show Paul, not the audience. Once again, this instance of film citation is also formal, the duration of the *North by Northwest* scene [68:45-71:55] enabling us to locate the *Arizona Dream* [80:20-82:30] scene in time. Paul's reaction in the end, when the hostess tries to cut his performance short [82:05], shows how seriously he is taking all this, and it is these discrepancies — Paul's seriousness/the audience's reaction, the

seriousness of the original scene/the ridiculousness of Paul's performance — which is productive of *bathos*, to the point that the ridiculousness of Paul's performance completely neutralizes the tension of the original scene.

22 Paul is given a second chance to stand in the spotlight when Elaine literally makes the *North by Northwest* scene come to life for him by pursuing him with her plane [109:05]. At first, Paul seems to want to take up the challenge to perform the scene for "real," so that Axel tells him to stop bothering Elaine [100:00]. It is only as he is running that we realize he is no longer performing: he makes comments on the scene — "This isn't happening." [100:05], "I hate this film" [100:35] — and even addresses his diegetic audience when he tells Axel: "Can't you see I'm having a fucking nightmare, here, for Christ's sakes?" [100:00] Paul thus turns down the opportunity to play this part in real life, so that, this time, it is Paul's *not* wanting to perform but being forced to incarnate the role anyway that makes the scene particularly comical. What this scene seems to suggest is quite simply that the dreams Hollywood produces are not meant to be desirable as a potential reality; they are desirable *as* dreams, as fiction. Hence, the discrepancy between the original dream-film and its real-life imitation which these scenes repeatedly underline.

Conclusion

23 Studying the treatment of the geography, the ethnic diversity and the instances of film citation has shown that, however trivial the representation of the U.S. it gives may be, *Arizona Dream* does, in fact, deliver a political critique of the U.S. as a nation that is founded on the paradox that it ignores otherness while feeding on the other thanks to its financial power, in other words that its unity is founded on the diversity it proclaims in its motto "E Pluribus Unum" but also represses, directed by a capitalist and utilitarian ideology that leads to the displacement of people and the alteration of the landscape. The nation's identity, and hence unity, is, in effect, a dream, the American dream, the dream of that nation. Of course, what limits this point of view is also what authorizes it, America being, the film seems to suggest, not an American dream, nor even a European dream, but a dream dreamed up by the un-American. The film acknowledges how hackneyed this critique is and, in typical postmodern fashion, repeatedly asserts the artificiality of this representation, an aesthetic construct based on another construct: the nation's cultural representation. Nevertheless, the film quickly moves away from this attempt at representing "America," just as it shifts from the central and iconic to the borderline. The "America" it represents is also a cinematographic patchwork of references to Hollywood films that confirms the political critique, but more importantly that enables Kusturica to construct his own "American" film, the references relating dynamically to the diegesis, the aesthetics and the politics of the film, notably participating in the production of a shift in tone from the comic to the tragic, from bathos to pathos. Finally, the representation of "America" serves to construct a European auteur's personal film entitled *Arizona Dream* more than *Arizona Dream* is actually meant to de-construct "America." Taking into account Kusturica's position toward the Balkan war (1991-2001), which had already started during the shooting of the film, it is also possible to see in the film's critique of certain aspects of the U.S. Kusturica's own nostalgia for the ideal of an identity-founded-in-"multi-culturalism"-and-"diversity" that Yugoslavia represented in

his eyes as an "imagined community."²⁷ That Kusturica's own mother used to say "Good morning, Columbus," words attributed to Axel's mother in the film, certainly invites this reading.²⁸ For Axel's cutting the radio when the Balkan war is being talked about on the radio may suggest that Kusturica's American film has repressed this element, with the likely possibility that it may return elsewhere in a different, perhaps more "American," form.

Notes

1 Dina Iordanova, *Emir Kusturica* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 75.

2 Ibid., 70.

3 When responding to attacks concerning *Dancer in the Dark* and *Dogville* (2003), Lars von Trier said in *The Guardian* (Monday, 12 January 2004: "I daresay I know more about America from various media than the Americans did about Morocco when they made *Casablanca*. They never went there either. Humphrey Bogart never set foot in the town." See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2004/jan/12/1>.

4 Iordanova, *Kusturica*, 70.

5 Ibid., 73.

6 The information concerning Arizona and Alaska comes from the website Infoplease (for Arizona: <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0108181.html>; for Alaska: <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0108178.html>). I wanted to stress how trivial are the "American" elements used in *Arizona Dream*, the prime example being the Cadillac as the paradigm of the "big American car."

7 Iordanova, *Kusturica*, 99.

8 This is what Emmanuelle Sterpin says in the DVD supplement "Entretien avec Emmanuelle Sterpin and Johnny Depp."

9 The scene is filmed in blue light and the sounds of the city are merged into the music, contributing to the artificiality of the scene.

10 Iordanova, *Kusturica*, 164.

11 Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov and Oscar Handlin, eds., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 336-37.

12 This dream, which according to Dina Iordanova (146) is meant to be a reference to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), can also be said to refer to the beginnings of cinema.

13 This is something Kusturica may have noticed watching Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), a film Iordanova suggests (*Kusturica*, 144) was much admired by Kusturica himself, and in which the Chinese work in the shadows of Wobblers's dry cleaning operation.

14 Thernstrom et al., *Harvard Encyclopedia*, 219-20.

15 That Leo is played by Jerry Lewis, himself a figure of otherness as a Jew, is productive of irony. Note that both their names start with an L.

16 A clear instance of cultural appropriation is the *piñata* the characters swing at until it bursts open for Elaine's birthday. [106:45] Although it is a Mexican practice which has been imported into the U.S. and which is believed to come from the Aztecs, the *piñata* in *Arizona Dream* is in the shape of a cowboy, a stereotypical sign of Americanness. I believe this marks it as another example of the American practise of importing, appropriating and assimilating foreign traditions and Americanizing them, a practise Jean-Loup Bourget also associates with the way Hollywood functions. See Jean-Loup Bourget, *Hollywood, la norme et la marge* (Paris: Nathan Université, 1999), 213-14.

17 Leo himself is characteristically a borderline character, between childhood and adulthood, according to Axel. [21:10]

18 There are also some significant, though maybe less obvious literary references. The film "was inspired by Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*" (Iordanova, *Kusturica*, 70). The Alaska dream is a re-writing and a condensation of Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and "To Build a Fire," the dogs slipping through the ice (Spitz in the novel) [1:20] while another dog (Buck) saves his master [3:05] recalling the novel, the eskimo trying to avoid frostbite by warming himself beside a fire [2:05] in the short story. Sleeping in a pick-up truck next to a river like a "bum," which is what Leo will later call him [24:35], Axel is reminiscent of an orphan bum who is also associated with a river, Mark Twain's Huck Finn. These references, like the many film references, suggest that Kusturica's dream of America was already constructed *before* going to the U.S. in 1988 thanks to the popular representations provided by literature and cinema he had taken in as a child and a teenager. It is also notable that the literary references are associated with childhood, while the only references to a film for children are *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and Ken Hughes's musical *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (1968) with the title "Doll on a Music Box."

19 Sébastien Rongier, *De L'Ironie : Enjeux critiques pour la modernité* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007), 146. *Arizona Dream* contains many references to American films which are less explicit and sometimes clearly parodic. The woman bar-tender in New York's name is Blanche [11:15], like the heroine in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), starring Brando, another actor whom Paul admires; the dinner scene [36:25] may be a reference to slapstick comedy; Paul calls Elaine "psycho," a reference to Hitchcock's film [57:35]; the roulette scene with Axel and Grace [74:55] clearly recalls the famous roulette scene in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978); the shot of the deserted town at night with tumbleweeds wheeling across the street [126:50] recall typical Hollywood representations of the west. The use of lightning and thunder is typical of horror films, but not necessarily American; note that they are always simultaneous, meaning that the storm is always centered on Elaine's and Grace's house [107:00]. References also occur through casting: Faye Dunaway plays the very type of sexy neurotic woman she was famous for playing in the 1960s and 70s, e.g. in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), while in several scenes Jerry Lewis's persona seems to take over Leo Sweet, e.g. after introducing Millie to Axel [19:05] and in the Super-8 film [21:20].

20 Iordanova, *Kusturica*, 27.

21 Iordanova sees "self-reflexive narration: continuous referencing to the constructed nature of narratives and to the fictional nature of film itself" (*Kusturica*, 162) as a typically postmodern aspect of Kusturica's films.

22 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 84-86.

23 Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* is another famous film Kusturica no doubt saw as a young man, directed by an American-Italian of the same generation as Coppola and Scorsese and which illustrates the U.S.'s relationship to the other through the example of several Russian Americans who go to Vietnam.

24 Likewise, *The Deer Hunter* reference has Grace in the part of Michael (De Niro), hence of the stronger character, Axel in that of Nick (the Christopher Walken character) who will lose touch with reality, become alienated from himself and ultimately die.

25 Françoise Grellet, *A Handbook of Literary Terms* (Paris: Hachette, 1996), 169.

26 It is also significant that Paul's imitation is this time a pantomime because, unlike most of the actors he admires and imitates who are Italian-American New Yorkers, much like Vincent Gallo himself who is originally from Buffalo, New York, Cary Grant is English and has a Mid-Atlantic accent.

27 Iordanova, *Kusturica*, 170.

28 *Ibid.*, 10.

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David Roche, « (De)constructing "America": the Case of Emir Kusturica's *Arizona Dream* (1993) », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Special issue on Film, document 2, Online since 12 November 2010, connection on 13 November 2010. URL : <http://ejas.revues.org/8653>

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