

Lost in America: A Reagan-era comedy

by

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Abstract

Lost in America (1985) is a road movie comedy and like other movies of the genre, it understands that "roads are usually figures for something of the utmost importance--for example, 'self-discovery' or 'national identity'." (Morris, 2003, p.1) Albert Brooks' movie is often cited as being a "yuppie movie" (Young Upwardly-mobile Professional) as it satirizes a consumer-centric lifestyle whose genesis can be traced to the early 1980's but upon closer examination *Lost in America* is also a biting satire that explores deeper issues about the upper-middle class values of baby boomers and their quest for personal enrichment, rampant consumerism, commodity fetishism, and the conformity of fitting into the corporate structure. I will argue that Albert Brooks has created a comic masterpiece that captures the zeitgeist of the 1980s as it parallels the growing influence of yuppies and the long-lasting impact of Ronald Reagan's economic policies (Reaganomics) and its unintended consequences.

Keywords: road movie, yuppie comedy, Reaganomics comedy,

The Yuppie-era President

Ronald Reagan was a popular president, however, the influence that he and his policies wielded was inordinately greater than one might expect, particularly his economic policies. Ronald Reagan repudiated the long-held conservative ideal of fiscal conservatism; a government should not spend more than it takes in.

“Reaganomics” proposed that cutting taxes would ultimately generate more revenue for the government. Against a backdrop of Reagan’s deficit spending policies another repudiation began to take hold; baby boomers began to reject the hippie idealism of the 1960’s and pursue their own personal economic model. Millions of twenty- and thirty-somethings gravitated toward the security of corporate jobs and discovered that by delaying parenthood and/or marriage, they had high disposable incomes with relatively few responsibilities, giving birth to the Young Urban Professional (Yuppie).

Like Reagan, the “Me Generation’s” yuppies (Newsweek, 1984, n.p.), who emerged during Reagan’s first administration, also exercised an inordinate influence on cultural patterns of the 1980s and 1990s, “both through their own buying power and through their influence on a larger number of would-be yuppies.” (Beach, 2002, p.179)

Yuppies are emblematic of the times in which they lived; “Newsweek” claimed 1984 as “The Year of the Yuppie.” (1984) Two movies, *Big Chill* (1983) and *Bright Lights Big City* (1988, based on the 1984 bestseller) defined yuppiedom’s ethos: material possessions, career advancement, drugs, and so on, but they also put yuppies’ lives in context by contrasting their current lives with their idealistic pasts. A

kind of *transcendental acquisition* replaced the idealism of the 60's and its quest for a "higher truth".

The Yuppie lifestyle "mirrored the Reagan administration's deficit spending policies and hi-tech defense system acquisitions." (Palmer, 1995, p. 280 - 280) The "Reagan Revolution" is best remembered for two policies: huge increases in defense spending and slashing upper-income tax brackets. Reagan promoted the idea that the world was a scary place: this was the age of the Soviet Union as "The Evil Empire" and the so called "Star Wars" missile defense system. This was also a time when the tax burden shifted from the wealthy to the working class and the gap in income began to widen sharply. Profligate spending and an outlook of 'live well today for there may be no tomorrow' created a cultural climate that tended to borrow against the future to acquire what can be consumed today. These are the component parts of yuppie DNA.

The Baby-boomer Comedian

Albert Brooks' movies are examples of "comedian-comedy," Steve Seidman's term for a comedian who would leverage his or her stage persona and play that character on screen. (Krutnick, 1994, p. 7) The self-obsessed, narcissistic and neurotic character that appears on screen is one that Brooks began to develop on national TV shows such as "The Steve Allen Show," "The Dean Martin Show," "Merv Griffin," and so on, and on-stage before he began making offbeat films for "Saturday Night Live." His stand up act was a post-modern satire of show business whereby he would create characters that were inept: for example a talking mime, a ventriloquist who moved his lips and whose dummy's lips did not, and so on. Brooks' counter-culture approach was outside of the entertainment mainstream and what evolved was

a persona that “effectively refract(s) the contradictions, compromises, and neuroses of the Baby Boom generation with its overdeveloped sense of entitlement and unapologetic materialism.” (Smith, 1999, n.p.)

Getting Lost in America

Albert Brooks' *Lost in America*'s satire of yuppies “can be seen as a commentary on the economic excesses, social dislocations, and internally divided national psyche of the Reagan era.” (Beach, 2002, p. 180) Brooks' films have always had a sharp satiric focus as he held a mirror up to his fellow baby-boomers. *Lost in America* was generally lauded by critics for the aim it took and the “powerful seriocomic potential” the movie conveys (Simon 48, 1985, p. 48). Roger Ebert named *Lost in America* one of the top ten films of 1985 (Ebert1985a). Richard Schickel says that Brooks is a, “shrewd, deadpan observer of the secret life of middle-class Americans” (1985, p. 84) and *National Review* cited Brooks' “fine farcical frenzy, acute observation of everyday absurdities” (which) drew comparisons to the best work of Preston Sturges.” (Simon, 1985, p. 49)

In his book, “*Class, Language, and American Film Comedy*,” Christopher Beach discusses how yuppie comedies of this era (*Desperately Seeking Susan*, *After Hours*, and so on) are films of cultural dislocation, or “culture-clash comedy.” (2002, p. 1803) In these fish out of water tales a yuppie emerges from their protective and privileged cocoon only to come into conflict with marginalized or unsavory personalities. Beach believes that the best example of this type of “culture-clash comedy” is *Lost in America*. Thought of as “an inspired comedy”

(Maslin. 1985, n.p.) by some Christopher Beach thinks that a darker truth lurks; “It depicts a Reagan-era America divided between haves and have-nots, split between those who can afford to drive Mercedes automobiles with leather seats and those forced to take jobs as crossing-guards and fast-food servers.” (Beach, 2002, p. 189189)

Common to many road movies *Lost in America* contains a narrative that, “...witnesses the resulting destabilization of male subjectivity and masculine empowerment.” (Corrigan, 1991, p. 145), 135) David Howard works at “one of the largest advertising agencies on the West Coast” and after being passed over on a promotion to vice-president and instead transferred to New York he becomes apoplectic about his “lost years,” makes a stand, and is fired. Roger Ebert says, “He's taking a stand, all right, but it's a narcissistic one.” (1985b, n.p.) David, in a flash realizes that he's wasted his youth at the agency, and feels guilty about making “...fun of my friends who dropped out of college and went to ‘find themselves’.” The guilt that washes over him acts to cleanse the sins of his misplaced ideals. “Yuppie guilt is not an aftermath of yuppie values but a constitutive part of them.” (Feuer, 1995, p. 6060)

He discovers that the world he has created for himself, with all of its creature comforts, is suffocating him - and thus begins his journey to discover a lost-self. He's lost all right, but what he finds along the way – although his lack of self-awareness prevents him from recognizing it – is an America that are recipients of Reagan's “trickle down” economics. Minimum wage jobholders and

“schmucks who like Wayne Newton” constitute an America that David Howard is unfamiliar with and unable to relate to.

David’s mythologizing of *Easy Rider* (1969) is a perfect cultural milestone for baby boomers of a certain age; it captures the free-spirit essence and defines the very counter-culture that David Howard has turned his back on. By having David wanting to model his and Linda’s journey of discovery after a counter-culture icon we realize how absurd his dream of dropping out of society truly is. Substituting choppers with a 30-foot Winnebago we see that not only are David and Linda *not* members of the counter-culture the mainstream culture where they are ensconced is one they helped define. As an ad executive David aided and abetted the rampant consumerism that grew during the 1980’s and as a mid-level manager of a department store Linda acted as a co-conspirator. So it is no wonder David wants to drop out; as Tim Kasser summarizes, unhappiness and materialism are mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Advertising’s role is to “deliberately manufacture feelings of inadequacy, fragile self-worth, and so forth.” (Kasser, 2002, 27)

Lost in America is largely a movie about class distinction and the chasm that exists between the haves and the have-nots. David and Linda Howard (Julie Hagerty) live firmly in the “haves” camp and when they resettle in Prescott, Arizona they run head first into the reality of what is available for the “nots,” namely jobs that pay \$5.50 an hour or working at Der Wienerschnitzel. The mid-1980’s were not a good time to be a member of the working class, a time when wages were cut, social services slashed and income gaps widened. (Kellner &

Ryan, 1990, n.p) The sharp class distinctions that David sees however are not drawn along strict socio-economic lines, the division separates those who have dropped out and followed their dreams, and those who are trapped inside a world of an endless pursuit of materialism and increasing responsibility. This distinction is important because when David's dream of being promoted to vice-president crashes around him so do many of his other dreams, and the road he's been following he learns, "is the road to nowhere." Like *Easy Rider*, the blueprint that David Howard tries to follow, David's search for himself and an America where he can "touch Indians" is futile. Ironically, or perhaps inevitably, the Howards end up precisely where they began. After only two weeks on the road they "eat shit" and accept the transfer to New York. Yuppiedom and the road picture merge in a perfect nexus demonstrating a "Moebius strip of American capitalism [that] takes you right back where you started." (Morris, 2003, II)

This is where Brooks' satire brilliantly hits its mark. David Howard recognizes his failure, at least on some level, and abandons his journey to end up, maybe not where he wants to be but where circumstances have lead. In contrast proponents of Reaganomics continue to hail the policies as unquestionably sound despite evidence to the contrary. Economist Paul Krugman says, "For it did fail. The Reagan economy was a one-hit wonder." (2008, n.p.) Instead of realizing the futility and the folly of pursuing pipe dreams and hitting the reset button proponents of Reaganomics refuse to believe that "the Reagan era should have ended some time ago." (Newsweek - 2008)

SUMMARY

A parallelism exists between yuppies and Reagan and his acolytes; both groups eschewed their core beliefs and pursued a course correction of 180 degrees. The baby boomers compromised their ideals for money with the belief they could have it all: money, successful careers, and the trappings of comfort and luxury. In many ways this is true, yuppies are living their own version of the American dream, only with more *stuff*.

Reagan-ites however have thrown their fiscal conservative ideals aside and refuse to believe that things are not working as they envisioned. Government cannot take in less revenue, spend more, and not see repercussions, as evidenced by the growth in poverty rates and steep increase in the gap of wealth. (Commonweal, 1994), n.p.)

The values that David Howard seeks – which are devoid of creature comforts – are more terrifying than the ones he escaped. The principles that Reaganomics promotes and their unintended consequences are more onerous than they would like to believe. For both the reality is much worse than the dream.

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