

**Otto, Eliot and Aliens:  
Interpreting Youth in Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* and Alex Cox's *Repo Man*\***

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American cinema of the 1980s has an overall reputation of being politically retrograde, projecting a sense of newly found national pride, infused with heavy doses of rediscovered masculine power. This reputation rests most notably on the iconic figure of Sylvester Stallone, whose characters of Rambo or Rocky personified the prevailing conservative attitudes of the decade: muscular men capable of extraordinary deeds, superbly violent in the service of the "right" cause. Likewise, feature films set at home reminded viewers that the true values were to be found within the sphere of the traditional nuclear family. The erotic thriller *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), for instance, graphically visualized the dangers lurking behind seemingly innocent affairs with self-confident and independent career women. In the realm of the science fiction genre Robert Zemeckis offered cinemagoers *Back to the Future* (1985). Capitalizing on the reliable power of nostalgia, this family fantasy was another popular feature that the decade's 'conservative' film production came to be remembered by.

However, the body of films made in America in the eighties (or at any decade in any society) was never as monolithic as it might seem from a distance that allows one to notice only the most spectacular blockbusters. Not only was the mainstream production more varied, the eighties also saw a striking proliferation of independent films that would focus on characters who were brainier, more complex, and much more marginal, whose worlds would be created by means of a much more idiosyncratic film language. Many independent films made at the time thus challenged both the dominant values of Reagan's America and called into question some of the basic assumptions about the practice of moviemaking in the United States. Ensemble pieces such as John Sayles' 1980 film *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* provided an off-beat, yet not insignificant alternative to the traditional depictions of male heroism, family life, friendship or political commitment. And in 1983 a seemingly eventless, statically shot, black-and-white feature about the life of three unimportant young people lost in the not so spectacular space of the American "promised land", Jim Jarmush's seminal film *Stranger than Paradise*, inaugurated a whole wave of impressive independent films. The crest of this remarkable wave broke in the second half of the 1990s, but its impact can be felt until now.

Focusing on two representative texts of one particular genre, the science fiction film, I offer a contrastive look at the representation of youth in two seminal American films of the 1980s, Steven Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Universal Pictures, 1982) and Alex Cox's independent classic *Repo Man* (Gorilla Filmworks, 1984).<sup>1</sup> While the former film adopts the

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<sup>1</sup> While Cox is an Englishman, the film was produced in the United States and is set in and around Los Angeles where it was also shot. Except for the Dutch cinematographer Robby Müller, most of the actors and crew are

perspective of its adolescent hero to highlight the crisis of the nuclear middle-class family caused by the sexual revolution, the vantage point of the young would-be repo man Otto enables Cox to wage an anarchic attack on a plethora of issues: a profound sense of alienation within the family and at the workplace, the superficial nature of contemporary consumer society, televangelism and traditional religion, the role of the popular press and other media, various conspiracy theories, and – most of all – Hollywood with its feel-good film narratives such as *E.T.* or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Steven Spielberg, 1977). While Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* in many respects embraces the widely accepted values and aesthetic preferences of mainstream, middle-class America, Alex Cox's *Repo Man* debunks them with refreshing vigor. This comparative case study thus suggests that American filmmaking during the Reagan years was much more varied than generally assumed, particularly if one takes into account the differences between mainstream and independent film productions. It aims to correct the general understanding of American eighties' cinema as traditionally conservative, driven solely by the box-office ideology of the blockbuster. Using the example of Alex Cox's debut feature film, it draws attention to the original production of idiosyncratic filmmakers and various smaller independent companies which "became an enduring part of the eighties film culture, offering alternative styles and visions to the more traditional product handled by the majors".<sup>2</sup>

The focus on the film construction of the young is regarded as particularly important here, since children or adolescents in contemporary Western societies typically represent the center around which the life of the family, i.e. the basic social unit, is organized. Questions concerning the responsibility for the children's material-well being, education, and upbringing are deeply political within this social framework. The observation of the distribution of duties with regard to the child has the potential of yielding valuable insights into dominant gender roles and the distribution of power within the family and society at large. (The same goes for the examination of the attitudes and behavior patterns that are likely to be adopted by young individuals.)

Just as in actual life, children's characters in films are important. A careful scrutiny of the cinematic representation of family life, and the underlying values the filmmakers attempt to communicate to their audiences, has a high informative potential, even though children or adolescents do not necessarily play the main part in a given narrative. Their presence often allows the lead characters to sort out their moral dilemmas (for example between one's desire and sense of responsibility), reassess their life priorities (such as between one's professional ambition and parental duties) or to reclaim their own sense of humanity (for instance by means of a courageous act or personal sacrifice). Despite their seemingly private nature such representations are also deeply political.

1.

During most periods of film history aliens metaphorically expressed the menacing other, danger from without (or sometimes from within), depending on the respective

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American. This satire on American culture was bought and distributed by Universal Pictures. The film can thus be safely proclaimed an American production.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Prince, *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 117.

historical and political context. Aliens of various inclinations and shapes were interpreted as metaphors of nuclear anxiety, the depersonalization of modern mass society, the conformism of Soviet Union or suburban America. They were identified with Cold War paranoia; they were regarded as manifestations of human destructive nature, symbolic expressions of the monstrous feminine; they were seen as metaphors of aids and other diseases; they were portrayed as merciless tools at the hands of cynical corporations.

At a certain time in the eighties a number of film aliens became more tolerable, even nice. The alien from John Carpenter's *Starman* (1984) took the body of a very handsome person with a pleasing demeanour and the stranded botanist E.T., while not exactly material for a beauty contest, but was certainly cute. Likewise in the realm of independent filmmaking the 1980s saw the arrival of intergalactic visitors of a distinctly non-threatening nature. John Sayles' indie classic *Brother from Another Planet* (1984), for instance, used the figure of a runaway slave who was mute, likeable and kind. Films such as these represented a welcome change after several generations of bloodthirsty 'things from another world' and emotionless menacing body-snatchers.

In *The Films of the Eighties*, William J. Palmer establishes a connection between the positive development in the alien film image and Reagan administration's change of rhetorical stance toward the Soviet Union. According to him, the eighties saw a marked shift in US government rhetoric from antagonism and suspicion to friendship and negotiation.<sup>3</sup> Speaking specifically about *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, he points out that "one of the most charming and visionary metaphoric films of the eighties [...] metaphorically dramatized the need for understanding and the eventual thaw in relations between these two wary nations. *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* actually served as a metaphoric template for films later in the decade that portrayed Russians attempting to understand and adapt to the American way of life".<sup>4</sup>

To attribute the improved Hollywood image of aliens solely to the changed rhetoric of the Reagan government that somehow came under the spell of the charismatic Mr. Gorbachev is, of course, naïve. Neither do movie-makers wait for the latest communiqué from the White House or the State Department, nor is Palmer's chronology entirely convincing. Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, featuring visitors that were quite cooperative and kind, even predates Reagan's era by three years. Moreover, *E.T.* appeared relatively early in his presidency, when Reagan's rhetoric was much less conciliatory. (The general tendency to accept the other, or at least consider its right to exist, is ascertainable already in American culture and politics of the seventies as a consequence of the various movements and upheavals of the sixties.) Thus the tolerance of the eighties – as exemplified by many films mentioned by Palmer – is but a continuation of developments started earlier, not just the result of the government rhetoric at that particular historical moment. Nonetheless Palmer is still correct in pointing out the importance of the political thaw that was gathering momentum in the bygone times of *glasnost* and *perestroika*. It was at the same time that Sting sang his song about the Russians loving their children, too. The wind of change was clearly in the air and the more perceptible people in the Western World realized

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<sup>3</sup> Palmer, William J., *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1993), 207.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

that, indeed, we all “share the same biology regardless of ideology”. Hand in hand with the expanded tolerance for the other of and empathy for the other within American society came the increased understanding across the main political divide of the Cold War. The group of sci-fi films then could be plausibly read as the metaphoric expression of the seemingly simple realization that “aliens are us”.

2.

The newly found cinematic tolerance, of course, had its limits, at least in the world of American mainstream filmmaking. Taking Spielberg’s vastly successful 1982 film *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* as an example, the embrace of the other was not so radical, after all. The alien castaway does not compete with American Earthlings for dwindling resources; neither does he subvert their most central assumptions about their reality and their role in it. He does not use his superior powers to dominate the household; instead he manifests his intelligence quite modestly by assembling a makeshift transmitter from a trashed radio and a broken umbrella. He is alone and remains satisfied in the closet among toys and stuffed animals that look just like him. He does not appear to have any sexual needs and the only mischief he is capable of is plundering the refrigerator and dropping a couple of empty beer cans across the kitchen floor. His ambition is not to stay forever but to return home as soon as possible. The non-threatening nature of E.T.’s otherness has not gone unnoticed:

This, it seems to me, is what makes the film (for all its charm, for all the sincerity) in the last resort irredeemably smug: a nation that was founded on the denial of Otherness now – after radical feminism, after gay liberation, after black militancy – complacently produces a film in which Otherness is something we can all love and cuddle and cry over, without unduly disturbing the nuclear family and the American Way of Life. E.T. is one of us; he just looks a bit funny.<sup>5</sup>

Robin Wood criticizes precisely those aspects of the film that make it so appealing for mainstream audiences. Is it not healthy to suspend one’s disbelief and enter the magic land of fantasy for a moment? Do not audiences generally appreciate skillfully narrated stories about small boys longing for understanding and love, which they find in the end? Is it not comforting to realize that children are essentially good? Is it not moving to witness the resurrection of the wasted alien body through the big love of a small Earthling and witness his ascension to heaven in the closing moment of the film? Spielberg capitalizes on the viewer’s desire to return to the unproblematic world of childhood; he asks them to identify with his young and innocent hero and takes them on a visually stunning joyride into the land of adventure and happy endings. Radical feminism, gay liberation and black militancy are precisely the issues one does NOT want to worry about when the lights go off in the theater. And the values of the American way of life must be upheld, such is the logic of commercial cinema.

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<sup>5</sup> Robin Wood *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1986), 180.

Among Spielberg's numerous gifts as a filmmaker is the ability to smooth over seemingly irreconcilable positions and package them in an appealing narrative devoid of any major contradictions. Take for instance the sleight of hand with which he reconciles the film's central structural oppositions concerning its attitude toward science and technology. Until late in the film the application of scientific methods and standard safety procedures by the government, associated with the world of adults, is coded in distinctly negative terms and contributes to some of the most memorable images of the film: the anonymous man with the keys, leading his men in their attempt to capture the scared, helpless, animal-like extra-terrestrial; the headless teacher instructing the children how to poison the frogs prior to their dissection; the men in the spacesuit invading the warm domestic space of Eliot's household; the quarantine imposed on the family, encompassing their house in a gigantic plastic cover. Against this impersonal, heartless use of technology Spielberg and his screenwriter Melissa Mathison posit the values of feeling, empathy, magic and wonder, associated with the characters of children: Eliot and his schoolmates freeing the frogs; the rescue squad of young BMX bikers, flying through the dusk, bringing E.T. to the meeting point with the spaceship. If any technology is allowed to play a positive role at all, it is on the most basic, simple level: the BMX bike as a preferred means of transportation, the trashy transmitter put together from an old umbrella, record player, circular saw blade, an empty can, a coat hanger, a fork and a broken down toy radio. In fact the only harmless aspects of technology seem to be toy-like instruments or toys, just as it is only the children who can be trusted and who believe in E.T.'s magic. Yet at the end of the film, after all the hunting by headless, impersonal scientists, agents and spacemen is over, the viewers finally get to see the face of the man with the keys. And who do they discover? A person capable of empathy, a person who, like Eliot, is a dreamer and believes in E.T.'s magic! Someone who has been wishing for an extra-terrestrial visit ever since he was a child! Do we recognize that image? Of course, this is Eliot as a grown up! If the man with keys initially signified the world of reason, power and a technocratic, perhaps even military approach to the magic of E.T.'s appearance, at the moment of E.T.'s departure he displays the requisite amount of wonder...

With the non-threatening, likeable otherness safely removed to the heavenly sphere the only thing that remains to be done is to restore the incomplete family. After a separation or divorce, we are told, Eliot's father no longer lives with the family, for he has moved to "Mexico with Sally". Throughout the film the life of the family is thus portrayed as slightly chaotic, Eliot's mother is stressed and struggling, trying to negotiate the various demands of her job, household and children's upbringing. Likewise Eliot's search for and emotional attachment to E.T. is intimately related to his father's absence. The extraterrestrial thus not only functions as Eliot's friend and alter-ego, for a brief moment he becomes his father figure. What is needed, however, is a more permanent replacement! Spielberg does not go as far as to openly show this process, yet there are some subtle hints indicating that the suddenly humanized scientist with keys might be the one: a sideways glance in the direction of Eliot's attractive mother during the partaking ceremony, his hand touching briefly her shoulder as she sinks to her knees with awe... In this way, it seems, the crisis of the nuclear family could be overcome, if not at once, then certainly in the future.

The appeal of the film is further enhanced by its status as Christian parable. Even though Spielberg, a Jewish-American filmmaker, denies the intentional deployment of the central Christian myth, the similarity of E.T.'s resurrection and ascent to heaven to that of

Jesus can hardly be missed. This is not to question the filmmaker's sincerity concerning this matter. Rather, this is to point out that the filmmaker is, perhaps unconsciously, tapping into the reservoir of myths, themes and images that will positively affect the mainstream viewers: when the magic finger lights up and Eliot and E.T. embrace for the last time, most middle-class viewers cannot help being moved...

3.

The story of Alex Cox's independent feature *Repo Man* centers on the young impulsive character of Otto, who loses a supermarket job and through coincidence (an important word in the movie) winds up as an employee of a firm specializing in the repossessing of leased automobiles whose owners have failed to make payments in time. There Otto's education begins. Mentored by his senior colleagues Bud, Miller and Lite (sic!), Otto goes through a series of adventures and trials, most of which end in minor disasters. While Lite teaches him some practical skills, Bud and Miller instruct him on a more general level. Thus he learns Bud's 'repo code' – that repo man, by definition, gets into tense situations while this is precisely what ordinary people tend to avoid. Bud represents the vulgar materialism, superficiality and intolerance of the aspiring common man. The character of Miller, on the other hand, suggests that wisdom may be found in the most unexpected of places. Miller is the ultimate loser who does not even know how to drive a car. Being in charge of the simplest tasks in the company (such as burning the garbage found in repossessed cars), he stands apart from the mainstream ideals of performance, efficiency, prosperity and dreams of success. At times he becomes a bearer of almost oriental wisdom. "I do my best thinking on the bus", he says. "I don't wanna know how [to drive]. I don't wanna learn, see? The more you drive, the less intelligent you are." True life values, we are led to believe, are elsewhere.

The narrative strand of Otto's education as a repo man is complemented and in the end supplanted by an overall quest for a very special car, the 1964 Chevy Malibu. This mysterious vehicle, driven by a radiation sick nuclear scientist, is not valued because of its vintage make but because of the contents of its trunk. It contains a glowing deadly cargo of what is believed to be three dead aliens smuggled out from an air force base. This automobile becomes the object of everyone's desire. It is searched for by the authorities and their various secret agencies, by a group of UFO hunters and conspiracy theorists, and a rival repo group for there is a 20.000 dollar price tag attached to it. For a while the Chevy also gets into the possession of a trio of punks who rob convenience stores and pharmacies and who cross paths with Otto and his colleagues with striking regularity.

Most of the parties involved get their turn at this prized vehicle's wheel, however, no one is worthy of keeping it. The rival repo men – the Rodriguez brothers – and the punks lose it through theft, the scientist dies of radiation sickness while driving it, and Bud is gunned down by the government agents. In the climactic scene of the film, it is the people's philosopher Miller who is allowed to enter and stay. Comfortably seated in the by now glowing car he beckons Otto to join him. Then the vehicle lifts off. Zipping back and forth across the L.A. skyline it gathers speed until with an intergalactic jump it heads for outer space...

The two filmmakers construct very disparate versions of character types, landscape, lifestyles, and values. Compared with the main character of Spielberg's film, Otto is older

and despite some mishaps during his training, not so vulnerable. Involvement in the movie launched the career of Emilio Estevez as a promising teenage star; his appeal in the film is certainly much less universal: his character is rude, he does not shy away from morally questionable repossessing methods (such as scaring a woman driver with a dead rat), uses dirty language and engages in casual pre-marital sex. His angry attitude is certainly not the material for the traditionally conservative Middle America to root for, fear for or cry over. Similarly, his friends are much less the helpful, intelligent, and innocent kids from the suburbs; they are not bright, nor emphatic, not even physically attractive.

The vastly disparate settings might just belong to entirely different planets. If Spielberg's film is set in the cozy and safe world of the American suburb, Cox's disjointed narrative is set against the backdrop of the concrete desert of the less fashionable parts of Los Angeles with its gas stations, dirty workshop yards and the huge channels of the local storm drain system. While Eliot's family is incomplete, it is not beyond repair; Otto's family, on the other hand, is complete, yet it is presented as entirely dysfunctional. Otto's parents are portrayed as brainwashed, dazed individuals basically ignoring the needs of their son. Having heeded a pledge drive by a televangelist, for instance, they spend all the money that they put aside for Otto's education on Bibles for El Salvador.<sup>6</sup> American religion is debunked wholesale. Its various manifestations are presented as manipulative or downright ridiculous. The "blasphemous" nature of the film is further underlined during the final scene in the repo yard when the figures of a minister, a priest and a rabbi are collectively denied access to the glowing car that is about to transport the chosen individuals to another dimension or salvation... Cox also attacks the American "religions" like scientology, in the film referred to as diuretics. "Diuretics is not just a belief. It's a way of life", says one of the characters.

Throughout the film Cox uses only products with uniformly bland white and blue labels with generic names, such as cereal, soda, beans, liquor, etc. This decision might be understood as Cox's critique of and resistance to product placement in movies, but its real import is deeper: the proverbial freedom of the American consumer to choose from a wide variety of products is presented as mere illusion, a matter of signification rather than substance.

Nothing is truly sacred in the world of Alex Cox's movie. The film that boasts an original punk soundtrack featuring Iggy Pop, Suicidal Tendencies, Black Flag and Circle Jerks – thus obviously catering to the cultural tastes of this particular subculture – pokes fun at punk values, lifestyles and intelligence. Speaking about this issue, the filmmaker says:

Even the punk culture in the film is really bogus. Otto instantly goes from being a rebellious anarchic, anti-establishment punk to being an enforcer for the General Motors Acceptance Corporation. He looks exactly the same in both cultures [...]. The other punks, Duke, Debbi and Archie are just a loathsome bunch of liquor store hold-up artists sniffing butyl nitrate. Then there is the Circle Jerks, a former hard-core group, who have become an awful lounge band like you'd find in some terrible club in Las Vegas. The point of that is that youth culture is bogus, too. It's merely a means for people to make money.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The destination of the Bible donation speaks volumes about the ironic approach of the filmmaker: at the time of the making of the film *El Salvador* was suffering from a protracted and bloody civil war. A Bible donation was probably not the most desperately needed item under these circumstances.

<sup>7</sup> Cox quoted Steven Paul Davies, *Alex Cox, Film Anarchist* (London: BT Batsford, 2000), 40.

Even more importantly, Cox questions their authenticity as a genuinely underclass movement. Speaking about Otto, the filmmaker adds: “Like all those Valley punks, he’s a middle class kid from a ‘nice’ home who listens to all this hardcore angry music. He’s angry without really knowing why”.<sup>8</sup>

To deliver his anarchic message, Cox also employs radically different cinematic means. The film is not only confusing in terms of its disjointed, hectic and episodic plot; Cox takes the unusual liberty of mixing various widely disparate genres – sci-fi, film-noir; urban drama, black comedy, subculture movie, teenage flick. Such uncertain genre identity, which subverts the audience’s expectations, can be particularly challenging for uninitiated mainstream viewers.

The following is a list of the most obvious differences between the two films:

|                   | <b>E.T.</b>  | <b>RM</b>   |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Setting           | Middle-class, suburban<br>Small town, clean, pools<br>Forest nearby,<br>The whole color spectrum<br>Plants and pets<br>Garbage in the can<br>No homelessness, no poverty | Working-class, underclass<br>Urban sprawl, dirty, dry<br>Desert, concrete city,<br>Gray and yellow, neon blue<br>No plants, no pets<br>Garbage everywhere<br>Homelessness and poverty |
| Heroe(s)          | Eliot, the children, E.T.<br>(E.T. is toy-like, infantilized)  | Otto & Miller<br>(a young adult and a grown up)   |
| Value             | Love, family<br>Critique of the world of grown-ups<br>and science based solely on reason<br>devoid of feeling and compassion   | Detachment<br>Freedom from materialism<br>Critique of society, its various<br>institutions, materialism, media,<br>superficiality, social exclusion and<br>subcultures                |
| Family            | Incomplete, lacking father<br>Mother not quite in charge<br>Father figure – E.T.<br>The good scientist as a potential<br>replacement                                     | Complete, lacking communication   |
| Friends, partners | Children, middle class, intelligent,<br>helpful, empathic and innocent   | Low class, not smart;<br>Social outsiders<br>Sometimes violent  |
| Work              | None (home setting)<br>Mother always in a hurry or gone  | Work setting<br>Repetitive (supermarket)<br>Dangerous (repossessing company)  |

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 40.



|                     |   |   |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Leisure             | Halloween (a children's event, innocent)  | Miller's Birthday (drinks, seductions, adult entertainment)   |
| Alien(s)            | Visible, communicating, cute<br>Pursued by the government   | Invisible, deadly<br>Used by the government & when smuggled out, pursued (conspiracy theories)  |
| Religion            | Upheld & used positively<br>Christian myth, E.T. as a savior of the family & good values<br>Motif of E.T.'s resurrection<br>E.T.'s healing finger | Debunked; "blasphemous film"<br>"Diuretics" as a critique of scientology<br>Televangelism as brainwashing: "Bibles to El Salvador"<br>Minister, priest and rabbi are not allowed to enter the car |
| Class               | Middle class  | Working class<br>Underclass<br>Subcultures  |
| Race                | An all white community, a "token black schoolmate" in Eliot's class   | Racially mixed repo team<br>Homeless blacks in the streets<br>Bud's racism & intolerance  |
| TV                  | Tom and Jerry (violent)<br>Sesame Street (beneficial)<br>Romance (inspiring)  | Televangelism (manipulative; viewers in a trance)   |
| Cinematic allusions | <i>Star Wars</i> – Yoda at Halloween<br><i>Star Trek</i> – "Can't you just beam him up?" "But this is reality"                                    | A range of film allusions:<br><i>Kiss Me Deadly</i><br><i>Close Encounters of the Third Kind</i> ;<br><i>E.T.</i><br>Blaxploitation films;<br>Action films;<br>Liberal "message films"            |
| Genre               | Clear generic status  | Strong genre overlaps: sci-fi, film-noir; urban drama; black comedy; youth subculture movie   |

|                     |   |   |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Special effects     | Expensive, aesthetically pleasing   | Cheap, unconvincing, aesthetically "flawed"   |
| Fatalities          | Nobody dies, not even a frog during the school experiment   | Several people die (this is not taken seriously)  |
| Body                | Clean & self contained, no bodily fluids except tears   | Bloody, characters throwing up, sweating, dead bodies burned in the middle of the street by government agents |
| Sexuality           | Asexual   | Otto & his girlfriend Leila engage in casual sex; repo men's blonde wives try to seduce Otto                  |
| Tone                | Serious, sentimental<br>Clichés used seriously  | Ironic<br>Clichés used ironically   |
| Symbols             | Wilted geraniums bloom as an expression of E.T.'s resurrection;<br>The man's keys as an expression of power | Car freshening trees<br>The names of other repo men: Bud, Miller and Lite                                     |
| Music               | Classical, string; high culture   | Punk, subculture  |
| Consumer goods      | Brand names   | Generic Names   |
| Narrative structure | Logical, Traditional structure  | Disjointed, episodic, crazy,<br>Based on coincidence  |

Running down the list relating to *E.T.*, there is very little that would subvert any commonsensical notions that the proverbial "Middle America" is likely to entertain about itself. No traditional values or assumptions – read mainstream, middle-class, and white – are

disrupted; on the contrary, they are confirmed wholesale. The vehicle carrying such reassuring images of oneself – the film itself – in its use of cinematic language mirrors such comforting messages: the classical film music, the unequivocal use of symbols, and the familiar look of the world. Even the principal conflict of the film (between the young and the old (empathy and feeling vs. reason and technology) is magically resolved during E.T.'s final resurrection.

The clearly postmodern text of *Repo Man*, with its embrace of the aesthetics of the margin, with its disjointed, illogical narrative, relentless pace, with its conscious embrace of the schlocky, kitschy aspects of American reality does not offer such clear messages. It is precisely the messages disseminated by creators of well-intentioned "message movies" that get their share of fun: "I know a life of crime led me to this sorry fate. And yet, I blame society. Society made me what I am," says Otto's punk friend Duke before expiring in the main character's arms. If there is one serious message to be recovered from this unorthodox mix, after all, it is the fact that in a society pervaded by the mass produced electronic image there is hardly any way out of a circle of the banal recycling of overused images, motifs and clichés. Using inexpensive, technically flawed special effects and various obvious film allusions the creators of *Repo Man* do not try to disguise the films constructed nature; on the contrary, they display it with pride. Their obvious purpose is to entertain the marginal, subcultural viewer at the expense of the pompous, serious narratives and taste of the mainstream.

And yet, despite all the joyful postmodern clowning, underneath a deeply disturbing picture can be discerned. It is a picture of a society in crisis, whose dominant attitudes are superficiality and greed, where the destitute are separated from the car driving classes as though they lived on another planet. It is a picture of a culture where people lack genuine choice between the products they use, but what is worse, they also lack concern for the other. It is a culture dominated by the power of the electronic image where religious leaders on TV turn their viewers into stupefied unthinking zombies. But obviously, things cannot be so bad. There is also wisdom there (although it survives only on the margins). And surely there is humor.

Like many other independent films of the eighties, Alex Cox's feature functioned as a viable alternative to those more mainstream films embracing traditional Hollywood aesthetics. By destabilizing narrative conventions and subverting standard genre expectations the film provided viewers with an opportunity to gain a certain degree of critical distance; by focusing on marginal characters inhabiting less than picturesque urban spaces it potentially sensitized them to real social problems. At the same time Alex Cox never succumbed to the tendency to mentor or preach. Taking into consideration these observations, I would consider *Repo Man* an unjustly overlooked film that deserves its place not only in the tradition of the American science fiction film or among the various cult classics, but also in the canon of American cinema at large.