Document Citation

Title	**Movies : Independents' day**
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Source	*California Magazine*
Date	1984 Nov
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	65-66
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The brother from another planet, Sayles, John, 1984

Movies

By Kenneth Turan

INDEPENDENTS' DAY

Cheers for Stranger than Paradise *and* Brother from Another Planet

HEY, DON'T GET me wrong, I love Hollywood and I love its films. Not for nothing has mainstream American product, with its gee-whiz stars, glossy cinematography and technical expertise, been the envy of the entire cinematic world for generations past. But the more one looks at what Hollywood produces, the more noticeable becomes the absence of one irreplaceable quality, and that is originality.

The problem is not, as might be expected, the lack of creative minds in the business: it is quite the opposite, a surplus of creativity, or at least a surplus of minds that consider themselves so blessed and are determined to prove that point over a given film's soon-to-be-dead body. By the time the 32 layers of studio executives, the teams of rewrite men, the concerned producer and the farsighted director are finished with what was once an original idea that excited someone, that first spark has long since been snuffed out and that first creator gone to cry in his or her beer.

There is an increasingly popular way out of that trap, a glimpse of a better world, and that is the independently financed and distributed film. Made cheaply but made well, these films are allowed to have their own pace and their own concerns: they can be as quirky and idiosyncratic as their creators please because, as Alan Rudolph said at a recent showing of his *Choose Me,* "when you make a film for $800,000, everyone doesn't have to like it." When these films are as striking as Jim Jarmusch's **Stranger than Paradise** and John Sayles's **The Brother from Another Planet,** we get not mass-produced sensations as bland as processed cheese but the distinctive tang that comes only from the promptings of an unfettered, individualistic imagination.

Though it lasts but 90 minutes and was shot in grainy black and white on partially donated (by director Wim Wenders) film stock, there is something awesome about *Stranger than Paradise.* An avant-garde comedy that connects with rather than alienates its audience, it is breathtakingly adventurous and wildly funny, with a calmly crazed style that is all the more astonishing because it doesn't seem to owe anything to anyone who came before.

As exciting as this film is, and despite its winning the Camera D'Or for best first feature at Cannes this year, one of *Paradise*'s many paradoxes is that it doesn't even sound very cinematic. There are few close-ups or long shots, the camera rarely moves, and the entire picture is broken up, via extensive use of blank film, into dozens of discrete episodes, lasting from a few seconds to several minutes.

Yet from the very first scene, in which a young woman stands on a hill overlooking an airport and slowly walks off to the left as a plane equally slowly taxis off to the right, it is obvious that writer-director Jarmusch is not only in complete control of every frame but that he is that rare director with an instinctive feel for the medium. Seeing *Stranger than Paradise* reminds us that what makes film so intoxicating is that it is a kind of magic, that at rare moments words, sound and image can still coalesce in a way that is as inexplicable as it is involving.

That young woman is sixteen-year-old Eva (Eszter Balint), a visitor from Hungary who is forced to spend ten days with her cousin Willie (John Lurie), a horse-race degenerate a decade out of the old country. *Paradise*'s first segment, "The New World," introduces this pair, plus Willie's sweet pal and fellow lowlife Eddie (Richard Edson); the second part, "One Year Later," follows the trio to exotic Cleveland, home of irascible Aunt Lotte (Cecillia Stark); while the third, "Paradise," takes our gang to the really exotic shores of Florida.

Though the locale changes, each segment offers a similar vision of America viewed from the wrong end of the telescope, and in none of them do Eva, Willie and Eddie do much more than simply hang out. But action or no, we can't keep our eyes off these alienated hipsters on parade. Whether watching TV, cheating at cards or standing and shivering on the shores of Lake Erie, such a mangy and disreputable crew has rarely been so charming and so funny; in fact, the more enigmatic and unknowable these characters get, the more their allure grows. Much of the film's secret is in its use of pauses and intonation: everything is done totally deadpan, wringing surprising mirth from the most diffident words. Eva, for instance, is always playing, much to Willie's disgust, a tape of Screamin' Jay Hawkins singing "I Put a Spell on You," and when he tells her to stop, she shuts him up with an absolutely no-pausing-for-breath tirade on the order of "it's Screamin' Jay Hawkins and he's a wild man so bug off" that will bring down any house worth being in.

Like many independent features, *Paradise* was very much a group effort. Jarmusch helped with the editing, star Lurie wrote the music, cinematographer Tom DiCillo and producer Sara Driver played bit parts. And, after making the first third, everyone had to wait more than a year until enough money could be raised to complete the project. Jarmusch's intentions and technique are so delicate that the film consciously defeats any attempt to pin it down via words, but that doesn't stop the finished product from putting a spell on you the likes of which even Screamin' Jay would envy.

If *The Brother from Another Planet*—also about America as viewed from *way* out of town—lacks *Stranger than Paradise*'s corrosive precision, it does possess the kind of amusingly shaggy qualities we have come to expect from John Sayles as a writer-director. Though as different from his previous films (*The Return of the Secaucus Seven, Lianna, Baby, It's You*) as they are from each other, *Brother* does share the recognizably Saylesian trait of a tiny budget ($200,000 in this case) and a loose, unfettered, hit-and-miss creativity that takes things as they come and provides a pleasant sense of casualness. What I've done is not the end of the world, Sayles is implying,

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it's just an idea I had; I'll be having lots more.

The notion for *Brother* came to Sayles, he claims, in a series of dreams. A black alien from outer space flees to earth from interplanetary slavery and ends up in Harlem where, after passing muster at a local bar ("The man is deaf, the man is crazy, or the man is a wino," says a regular), he becomes accepted as yet another eccentric addition to the neighborhood. While the brother tries to get used to the ghetto, displaying a magic touch invaluable in fixing machines, he must also cope with a pair of bounty hunters from his old planet who are determined to round him up and head on out.

What we have here in essence is a shrewd, satiric *Splash* Comes to Harlem, in which the brother's lack of knowledge about the world becomes a device for Sayles to amusingly detail his views on everything in the current American scene from video games to race relations. Since the brother can understand but not speak, everyone he meets interprets his actions strictly according to their own preconceptions; his use of a thumbs-up sign as an answer to the inevitable question of where he's from, for instance, leads to an increasingly funny series of mistaken conclusions.

Playing the brother is Joe Morton, from the daytime soap *Another World,* and it is Morton's ability to parlay a wide-eyed look and timid manner into a convincingly otherworldly persona that keeps *Brother* viable as well as surprisingly poignant. Sayles, who also has a riotous cameo as one of a matched pair of zombielike extraterrestrial Keystone Kops, is especially adept at using his imagination where more mainstream directors simply pile on the dollars. As a change of pace, that option is as refreshing as they come.