

**The Comeback Corpse in Hollywood:
Mystery Train, *True Romance*,
and the Politics of Elvis in the '90s**

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"I just came to say . . . uh, I just want to say . . . what was it I came to say?"

—Elvis on Wink Martindale's *Dance Party*
television show, Memphis, 1957

He's back. Whether it's a gesture (leg twitch, crooked smile), a turn of phrase (thangyouverramuch), a visual cue (hairdo, sunglasses, jumpsuit, pink Cadillac), a sound track, or simply the dropped name: more than ever these days, Hollywood films seem eager to reference the King of Rock 'n' Roll. A good number of other films have gone beyond simple allusion to include an Elvis "character": the artist as young man (*Heartbreak Hotel*, 1988), as sneering sexist (*The Adventures of Ford Fairlane*, 1990), as impersonator (*Honeymoon in Vegas*, 1992, *My Fellow Americans*, 1996), as trailer park mutt (*Kalifornia*, 1993), as killer clone (*Wild at Heart*, 1990). Either way—Elvis citations or Elvis characters—it's clear that the singer, who made his last film a quarter century ago, remains more boffo than ever at the box office.

Two other recent films have proven to be more subtle vehicles for an examination of the Elvis legend: Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* (1989) and Tony Scott's *True Romance* (1993). Both films, in different ways and with different results, search through the commodified remains of Elvis for answers as to how we represent ourselves to ourselves and how we construct order from the illusive materials of the past. *Mystery Train* does this on the one hand through its dismissal of the modernist thematics usually attendant on narratives of urban realism (alienation, isolation, etc.), and on the other by its jokey resistance to the bleaker implications of being trapped in a prison house of Elvis images. Instead, the film uses the centering presence of Elvis to chronicle the attempts, often comic, of characters to address issues of history and self. *True Romance* is also saturated with Elvis, but the referential pyrotechnics here reveal a world of diminished affect and historical disconnection so complete as to be both abject and goofy.

Mystery Train is divided into three separately titled sections. Each section takes place more or less simultaneously (an afternoon, an evening, and briefly the following morning), and in the same Elvis-saturated downtown Memphis location. The first section, titled "Far from Yokohama," features a young Japanese couple arriving by train to pursue Elvis points of interest. Part Two, "A Ghost," involves an Italian woman stranded by airline connections who finds herself among people obsessed with Elvis. That night at the seedy Arcade Hotel (where the Japanese couple is also staying), the ghost of Elvis appears to her, sending her fleeing to the airport early the next morning. In the film's third section, "Lost in Space," three hapless thugs, led by Johnny, a Briton and an Elvis look-alike, rob a liquor store and then hide out, also in the Arcade Hotel.

The robbers' room, like all the others at the Arcade Hotel, sports the obligatory portrait of Elvis. Each of the characters in the film's three sections responds to the picture, but Johnny's reaction to its presence might well serve as an epigraph for the entire narrative. "Christ! There he is again!" he says as he walks into the shabby hotel room; "Why is he fuckin' everywhere!?" Johnny is right, of course, about omnipresent Elvis, but his frustration is what's instructive. It derives, the film seems to suggest, from the paradox at the commodified heart of Elvis's everywhere-ness. More is less: the more Elvis is replicated, the less he means. He arrests attention yet resists interpretation. Suspicions of this representational hall of mirrors seem to engender emotional confusion and fragmentation, ranging from angry impatience ("Why is he everywhere?!"), to panic and hallucination (Luisa, in the second part of *Mystery Train*), to strangely anaesthetized wandering (Jun and Mitzuko in Part 1). The characters in *Mystery Train* appear to be victims of some Baudrillardian end-game in which reality has been neutralized by the mass reproduction of simulacra, or, as recent Panic theorists would have it, Elvis has become a "cynical commodity" who has gradually "disappeared into his own promotional culture" (Kroker, Kroker, and Cook 95).

Coming as it does near the end of the film, Johnny's angry why-is-he-everywhere question also seems to provide a kind of summary fix on a postmodern culture whose language is dominated by categories of space rather than time. *Mystery Train* seems to offer us a strangely dehistoricized narrative peopled with characters who have little sense of temporal continuity or historical connection. They seem, that is, to suffer from what Jameson calls a "schizophrenic" centeredness in a heightened present (27). This sense of a dehistoricized culture adrift on its own cultural topography is foregrounded initially by the film's title and title song, both of which emphasize fixed movement through space. It is then

reinforced by the film's structure (three sections set in a simultaneous "present") and by the film's section titles, particularly the first and third ("Far from Yokohama," "Lost in Space"). In the film's second section, a ghostly Elvis appears as a kind of time traveler, sporting the gold lamé suit he wore only once, on his famous 1960 RCA album cover. But Elvis doesn't arrive to historicize the present so much as to announce his own spatial confusion. "Whoa! Where am I?" he asks as he first appears. Then, to the Italian woman's stunned "What are you doing here?" he stammers, "I don't rightly know myself . . . I musta got the wrong address or somethin'," and then fades away. Evidently Elvis is no better off than the people he self-consciously haunts. He, too, is lost in space.

A dehistoricized narrative in which characters, trapped in a heightened present tenseness, pursue free-floating signifiers across a depthless landscape: in many ways, *Mystery Train* would seem a dramatic confirmation of Jameson's dark analysis of the postmodern condition. Yet to see the film just in these terms is to miss the larger resonance of its discourse. *Mystery Train* doesn't ignore history at all. On the contrary, by using Elvis as the primary subject of parodic representation, the film consistently engages important issues of ideological construction: namely, how (or if) we connect with the past and how we formulate ourselves in the context of contemporary mass culture. That is, by examining the dynamics of representation, *Mystery Train* utilizes what Linda Hutcheon calls a "doubled discourse" which at once verifies and contests issues of historical knowledge and subject formation (116, 101-07).

Take, for example, those hotel room pictures which act as centering presences in each of the film's three sections. They are commercial knock-offs, to be sure—each a traditional "realistic" portrait (head and shoulders arrangement), traditionally framed and hung. Far from being merely a jokey recycling of Elvis souvenir kitsch, however, these portraits foreground the paradoxical politics of representation. As paratextual illustrations inserted into the film narrative, these paintings, by their serial presentation and by the roomers' wildly different reactions to them, reveal a present which is inescapably historical and a past which is highly contingent. The "realistic" portraits, in their own way, serve like Barthes's photographs, as "certificate[s] of presence" (87) attesting to a past (Elvis) that is now present, while at the same time acknowledging that this past is radically mediated by its subjective re-presentation.

Or representations, in this case, because the Elvis portraits are not quite duplicates. The portrait in Jun and Mitzuko's room is a young Elvis staring down at their bed. In Luisa's room in Part 2 is a young, spiritualized Elvis gazing upward this time (clearly, the intertexts here are those generic portraits of a beatific Christ); the Elvis in the robbers' room in

Part 3 is a smiling, sexy, Vegas-jumpsuit Elvis. The effect of these variant Elvi is to underscore difference and ex-centricity of subject. If Elvis cannot help us know history (the simpler '50s, the purity of that decade's countercultural movement embodied in James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis), neither can he help us know Elvis himself. Rebel rocker? Choir boy? Bloated lounge singer? He's all of these things—and less. The portrait variations of Elvis, that is, operate in a manner similar to Andy Warhol's series "paintings" of Marilyn Monroe, Coca Cola bottles, and, yes, Elvis. The more the images are mechanically replicated, the more they become devalued, drained of affect and historical significance. We're anaesthetized by their flatness, their willful superficiality, the effacement of human creativity in their mechanical reproduction. As a result, we're left merely to consider the cultural containers themselves and not what they contain. Whether on silk-screen or the wall of the Arcade Hotel, such multiplied "presences" only reveal a maddening absence.

Just how resistant to historicizing assembled representation can be is also seen, quite hilariously, in the episode in Part 1 involving Mitzuko's cherished scrapbook. She takes her boyfriend, Jun, through her collected pictures, trying to show him that Elvis is a dead ringer for an ancient Middle Eastern king, for Buddha, the Statue of Liberty—and Madonna. If Elvis is "everywhere," he also appears, at least to Mitzuko, to be every *thing*. Taken together, this scene with Mitzuko's scrapbook and those serial episodes in which characters engage Elvis representations reveal a narrative that is anything but dehistoricized. History is, in fact, being problematized in a manner that Hutcheon labels postmodern parody: an awareness of the inaccessibility of the past coupled with an urgency to deal with it in the present (95). It is precisely this paradox that Elvis dramatizes throughout *Mystery Train* by representing both the allure of a desired past and its elusiveness when pursued through textual representation.

There are also instances in which the film-as-narrative-form implicates itself in issues of representation (film is, after all, a series of re-presented images) and the recovery of the past. This complicity is seen most clearly through two devices: the appearance of an Elvis ghost in an otherwise realistic film, and, second, the use of recognizable singers and musicians as actors. In the largest sense, the sudden appearance of a spectral Elvis in Room 25 of the Arcade Hotel has the effect of turning on the house lights and announcing "It's only a movie!" His ghostly presence, that is, challenges the old modernist faith in the illusion of art to create "truths." This ghostly Elvis shatters narrative illusion, and, far from speaking truths about the 1950s, he merely announces

that he has no answers at all (“Ah don’t rightly know, ma’am”) and is, in fact, just plain lost. In the end, ghostly Elvis’s literal transparency becomes an ironic metaphor for the transparency of artistic convention in general and, more specifically, for the illusion of realism by which *Mystery Train* has proceeded to this point.

The use of recognizable entertainers as actors operates in a similarly self-reflexive way by questioning the traditional premise that, by means of agreed-upon artistic conventions, film is able to present or represent life (over against the more postmodern suspicion that such possibilities are themselves grand illusions). In *Mystery Train*, the issue is raised by celebrity-as-actor casting: Rufus “Walking the Dog” Thomas as a train station habitué; Screamin’ Jay Hawkins as hotel night clerk; Joe Strummer of the band the Clash as Johnny in “Lost in Space”; Tom Waits as the voice of the deejay in all three parts. The result, as Stuart Klawans has observed, is something akin to Brecht’s alienation effect, a phenomenon by which we are constantly aware that the people on the screen are not simply characters but celebrities as well (727). This doubleness of vision offers us two competing ways of reacting to *Mystery Train*: if we allow the celebrities to disappear into their characters, we grant the film the power to create and sustain narrative illusion. On the other hand, if they remain celebrities for us—and they do—we may decide that the film is, in fact, about Rufus Thomas, Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, Joe Strummer, et al., and that, as a result, *Mystery Train* is really a metafilm questioning its own conventions and practices. In this approach to the film, perhaps the ultimate joke is that yet another well known singer—Elvis—in a kind a vaudeville inversion of this celebrity phenomenon, makes his own guest/ghost appearance in a film in which his death has already accorded him cult status.

In the film’s final scene, we see a train (presumably the “mystery train”) pulling out of Central Station, Memphis. The closing soundtrack is once again the blues song “Mystery Train,” but this time it’s clearly not the Elvis version. Elvis aficionados will recognize (and those lacking aficion will discover in the credits) that the singer here is Junior Parker, who recorded the song three years before Elvis. Why the variation? As Greil Marcus has observed, Junior Parker’s “Mystery Train” is distinctly more tragic and fatalistic than young Elvis’s defiantly upbeat version (171-73). This darker tone, coupled with the film’s consistently bleak cinematics (awkward silences, shots suddenly empty of people, shots held long after the action is over) and a cast of characters who never once meet but merely suffer a sad, concurrent isolation, might invite a formalist take on the film as a comment on cultural obsession and social alienation. As we’ve seen, however, *Mystery Train*, in its own quirky and

comic way, consistently resists modernist strategies regarding form and stable thematics. A more useful way to approach the end of *Mystery Train* is to view it as summarizing a number of postmodern issues consistently addressed throughout the film, including the politics of representation and the struggle to engage and to recover the cultural past. Seen in this light, superimposing Junior Parker's "Mystery Train" atop Elvis's version foregrounds musically what the competing portraits of Elvis have done visually throughout the film: to problematize our access to history by means of mediating texts—in the cases of both portrait and song here, overlapping and contiguous texts. The layering of song versions also addresses the question, raised earlier with the multiple Elvis portraits, of the relationship of the replicated image to issues of cultural value/devaluation: does the altered re-presentation of the song enhance its cultural value or diminish it as, say, Andy Warhol's silk-screen repetitions compromise value in their proliferated subject matter? Why is Elvis's version of "Mystery Train" privileged over Junior Parker's?

Finally, the reappearance of "Mystery Train" at the end of the film raises questions, once again, about formal aesthetic practice. This closing self-reflexivity is most obvious in the fact that the song and the film share the same name. Earlier, we noticed the self-reflexive impulse in the film's willful disruption of genre (the appearance of a walking, talking Elvis ghost in a realistic film) and the metacinematic questioning of character creation (using recognizable entertainers as film characters). Here, at the end, the song helps to address the issue of narrativity. That is, changing the singer of the same song (from Elvis at the beginning to a black blues singer at the end) purposely skews—or decenters—the narrative "frame" of the film, and, by so doing, questions the stability, the imposed symmetry and neatness, of much traditional narrative in film and other art forms as well.

Certainly it's worth reminding ourselves that *Mystery Train* is a humorous film (it's found, after all, in the comedy section of your local video store). But it's also worth noticing that its comedy, deriving from the distinctly postmodern strategies of narrative disjunction, destabilized representation, and parody, is both critical of and complicitous with difficult issues of history and ideology.

Another, more recent Elvis film is *True Romance* (1993), directed by Tony Scott with screenplay by Quentin Tarantino. Clearly influenced—down to the female voice-over and the theme music—by Terence Malick's classic 1973 road movie *Badlands*, *True Romance* features two distinctly unglamorous characters, Clarence Worley and Alabama Whitman (played by Christian Slater and Patricia Arquette) who inadvertently end up with a suitcase full of Detroit Mafia cocaine and head

out to L.A. to sell it and live happily ever after. Surviving a bloody shoot-out among L.A. cops, Detroit hit men, and greedy movie industry drug buyers, Clarence and Alabama flee with their drug cache to Mexico. As the film closes (fast forward a year or so), we see them rich and happy on a beach in Mexico, playing with their new baby—Elvis—as the sun sets gauzily in the Pacific.

Like *Mystery Train*, *True Romance* is set primarily in seedy urban wastelands amazingly littered with Elvis souvenir trash. Like *Mystery Train*, too, *True Romance* is framed by opening and closing Elvis scenes and features visits by dead Elvis. Beyond the Elvis kitsch, the Elvis obsessives, and the Elvis ghost cameos, however, the films are very different. In *Mystery Train*, the presence of Elvis allows the narrative to open outward to a consideration of the politics of representation and the accessibility of the past. The characters' reactions to omnipresent Elvis (in hotel portraits and public statuary, at Sun Studio, in spectral visitations, etc.) are both weirdly comic and instructive as to the difficulty—and continuing urgency—of recovering a highly mediated past. *True Romance* is a darker matter. Beneath its tacky romance, its violence and hip comedy, the film remains a closed loop of pop intertextuality signaling, primarily through Elvis, that the image is empty and that historicity has left the building.

As in *Mystery Train*, *True Romance* finds Elvis everywhere. Here, however, he's not adored so much as ignored. The characters in *True Romance* wade through the commodified Elvis kitsch, they drive his look-alike cars, they even wear his metonymic remains (the T-shirts, the Vegas sunglasses, the diamond-studded horseshoe rings, the loud clothes, the poufy hairdos); but except for Clarence Worley—and Alabama, once in a spacey while—no one reacts to or even acknowledges Elvis's "presence." Unlike the characters in *Mystery Train* who at least dimly or dimwittedly seek Elvis answers (Why is he everywhere? Who is he? Who is he like?), their counterparts in *True Romance*, busy and happy living the already made plots they've stumbled on, either pay lip service to a film simulacrum of Elvis (Clarence and Alabama) or, more typically, demonstrate that *they just don't care*. Less than twenty years after his death, Elvis has apparently proliferated himself into invisibility, or, as Baudrillard would have it, Elvis has achieved the contemporary "sublime" by dramatizing the magic of his own disappearance (184).

It's a disappearance initiated in the film's opening scene with Clarence's conflation of film and fact, of real Elvis and "reel" Elvis. Clarence (Slater) is sitting in a seedy neighborhood bar in Detroit talking to a local hooker. He's carrying on about Elvis, particularly the Elvis in

Jailhouse Rock (1957) showing on the TV in the bar. "I've watched that hillbilly," he says intensely, "and I want to be him so bad. . . ." "I ain't no fag," he assures the hooker, "but Elvis was prettier than most women." The real object of desire here is not historical Elvis, but a "watched" celluloid re-presentation—either actor Elvis or the character he's playing. The result is behavior conditioned by intertextual obsession; Clarence will "be" Jailhouse-renegade-Elvis throughout—or at least until another, more compelling text presents itself. And one does, almost immediately: the road movie. Threatened in Detroit, Clarence and Alabama follow the highway and the road movie plot out to L.A. On their first day hiding out in a seedy Sunset Strip motel, Clarence drives out for burgers in his Elvis-like Caddy convertible, chirping to himself, "And now we return to *Bullitt*, already in progress." The movie in Clarence's head has turned Elvis into Steve McQueen, and *Jailhouse Rock* into an on-the-lam meta road movie. But we knew this was coming all along because the opening musical soundtrack and female voice-over was straight out of *Badlands*.

True Romance supplies still another prefab genre for Clarence and Alabama to map in their behavior. The film's title, of course, refers to those countless toothpaste-lettered novels devoted to clichéd matters of the heart. Such mass market romance offers the film narrative and the characters a formula which is merrily spun out from Alabama's treacly voice-over at the beginning to the closing sunset on the beach in Mexico, complete with another dreamy voice-over, as they enjoy their new lives, their new wealth, and baby Elvis. Bad-boy Elvis musicals, road movies, drug store romance: we're not finished yet. The final major genre appropriated by *True Romance* is the superhero comic strip. Clarence works, after all, at "Heroes for Sale," a comic book and music store where he takes Alabama on their first date. "Like to see what *Spiderman* Number One looks like?" he asks eagerly. And we see the comic strip panels accumulate as the film progresses from the initial romance and looming danger, to the shoot'em-up showdown, to the final hairbreadth escape and the happily-ever-after ending. *Batman* (1989) mixed comic book with film noir with Wagnerian melodrama; *True Romance* joins comic book with road movie with pulp romance.

And presiding over this intertextual porridge, keeping all discursive plates spinning on their sticks, framing the metanarratives at start and finish, is the acknowledged master of appropriation himself—Elvis. He's everywhere in the commercial culture, and, as in *Mystery Train*, he even makes a guest/ghost appearance. After consummating his first-date love with Alabama, a candle-lit Elvis shrine beside the bed in his apartment, Clarence goes to the bathroom, where he encounters the King (played by

Val Kilmer). Unlike Luisa in *Mystery Train*, however, Clarence doesn't bat an eyelash at this ghost. The implication here, as well as later when Elvis reappears to him in a bathroom at the Beverly Ambassador Hotel in L.A., is that these two are old friends. The camera doesn't steadily frame Elvis, but we can see that he's an odd mix of different Elvis: he's wearing the gold lamé jacket of the early Elvis, but the high-tech sunglasses of the later Las Vegas Elvis. Attitude-wise, he's an Elvis we haven't seen before. When Clarence walks into the bathroom, Elvis is singing "Heartbreak Hotel" to himself. He already seems to know Clarence's problem: how to cut Alabama's business ties to her pimp and to retrieve her suitcase with belongings. The King's advice is as chilling as it is brief: "I'd kill [the pimp]. Shoot him in the face. Put him down like a dog, Clarence." Later, at the Beverly Ambassador Hotel, just before the final shoot-out over the suitcase full of drugs, Elvis reappears, in the men's room again, to give Clarence another shot of criminal courage. He even checks Clarence's gun for him. "What you're doin' is genuine," he assures Clarence, and then reminds his number one fan: "Clarence, ah like you—always have, always will."

Is this bathroom Elvis an authentic ghost or some psychic projection that only Clarence can see? It doesn't matter, finally; Clarence believes in Elvis enough to seek reassurance and counsel from him, and to commit murder at his prompting. In *Mystery Train*, a young, spectral Elvis came reluctantly to the Arcade Hotel from the late 1950s, bringing with him issues of historicity, cultural displacement, and, in his shimmering transparency, questions regarding subject formation and the suspension of disbelief in art. Bathroom Elvis in *True Romance* is neither transparent nor a time-traveler; he is merely corporeal, vagrant, and violent. He is apparently Clarence's beloved *Jailhouse Rock* Elvis minus a conscience. And because he seems as banal as the gangsters waiting outside the bathroom wearing his same hairdo, this Elvis discourages consideration of those issues raised by his predecessor. If the commercial overexposure of Elvis through souvenir trash (T-shirts, mugs, busts, rings, hairdos) ironically diminishes his mystery and authority, then the ordinariness of this bathroom ghost does the same thing.

Like his hero, Clarence manages a similar "disappearance" in the film. The cause here is not commercial overexposure, but a pop consciousness so hypermediated as to efface character. Clarence jogs happily through plots recycled from movies, pulp fiction, and comic books; he worships a celluloid Elvis image; and near the end of the film he agrees with Alabama that it might be fun to go to Europe because "I always wanted to see what TV in other countries looks like." Finally, one might argue that the larger narrative of *True Romance* also effects a

disappearance as it accumulates. The film's radical scavenging of existing plots (pulp romance, road movie, comic book) implicitly announces the absence of individualism and style in the old modernist sense and, as such, represents a kind of aesthetic self-annihilation. An ignored icon, an effaced protagonist, a plagiarized plot: in the end, and unlike *Mystery Train*, *True Romance* is so self-reflexive, so radically allusive that finally there's no *there* there.

Both *Mystery Train* and *True Romance* thematize the issue of historical representation using Elvis as a centering presence. In the Jim Jarmusch film, characters struggle, comically and poignantly, to engage the past and recover the historical subject (Elvis). In *True Romance*, the fight is pretty much over. Tony Scott's film and Quentin Tarantino's script acknowledge—and even celebrate with hip resignation—the insularity of the image, the unoriginality of narrative and the closed circuitry of postmodern consciousness.

The measure of the difference in the two films is centered in Elvis. *Mystery Train* Elvis remains in a state of constant refiguration, shape-shifting, teasing, promising. *True Romance* Elvis is fixed, crude, and threatening. Transformative Elvis, transgressive Elvis—together, these two films reveal that Elvis has somehow become the perfect vessel to contain our cultural contradictions and displaced desires. And he will not leave the building.

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