Lost in Paradise: The Cinema of Jim Jarmusch

Fiona A. Villella

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Whilst studying poetry at Columbia University in the early to mid 1970s, Jim Jarmusch took a sojourn to Paris where he discovered world art cinema at the Cinémathèque Française – Shohei Imamura, Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, Robert Bresson, Carl Dreyer, Samuel Fuller, Jacques Rivette and so on. In the various interviews with Jarmusch – at present no book-length biography or critical study of his oeuvre has been published in English – this experience in Paris is described as formative in that it ultimately led to him becoming a filmmaker. [1] In fact, in hindsight this experience can be regarded as crucial in two ways: it enabled an appreciation of cinema as a formal medium, and it placed Jarmusch outside his “home” culture.

Both aspects have since come to define what is distinct and unique about Jarmusch’s filmmaking – the emphasis on rhythm, structure and minimalism, the poetic arrangement of characters and events; and an outsider, critical relation to American culture and ideologies, an investment in foreign cultures and the very notion of “reality” or “truth” as unstable entities, changing depending on what perspective they’re viewed from. His seven films to date comprise a unique body of work in contemporary American cinema. Doing away with conventional storytelling forms and values, they reveal an intuitive and instinctive sensibility as well as, in the later films, a poignant longing for a truer, innocent and pure understanding of the world.

Jarmusch continues to be one of the very few true auteurs in contemporary American cinema, since he controls every aspect of his filmmaking, and presents audiences with the gift of innovative, sensitive and at times radical filmmaking. This essay offers a survey of his career to date, analysing each of the works in turn.

Existential Wandering: Permanent Vacation (US 1980)

As a debut, Permanent Vacation offers an extremely revealing microcosm of the themes and storytelling techniques that will define Jarmusch’s cinema over the next twenty years. Made whilst he was studying film at New York University, it subsequently played in Europe where it gained some attention. However, it remains to this day largely unseen. Despite its occasional weaknesses, Permanent Vacation has an accomplished experimental sensibility and a very distinct world view.

The narrative centres on a young male, Allie Parker (Chris Parker), a permanent drifter. It is revealed through his voice-over that he has in fact chosen this kind of life and that it is not simply a case of a lack of direction – an important distinction, which brings into focus the central theme of Permanent Vacation of adopting an alternative, even transgressive position in society. Allie rejects traditional social values, like materialism, ambition and family, and chooses instead to live an honest existence. He fully understands and confronts the harsh truth of isolation and aloneness that most people deny. This attitude might be interpreted as overly bleak and solipsistic, especially when it manifests itself in Allie ignoring his girlfriend, Leila (Leila Gastil), and her attempts at connecting with him. However, as the film unfolds, we see that Allie is interested in the world around him but, rather than engaging with it via conventional modes, maintains an observational regard. He becomes a floating being, unattached to anyone or anything, similar to the angels in Wim Wender’s Wings of Desire (West Germany/France 1987) who, in the first half of the that film, observe and help where they can but remain cut off. In fact, the theme of a spiritual messenger who strives to enlighten the world around him or her, most often through poetry and literature, is a recurring motif in Jarmusch’s oeuvre. It is possible to see the alternative position represented by Allie as a projection of Jarmusch’s own personal values.

Conventionally speaking, not much happens in Permanent Vacation; the notion of a plot or storyline is subverted. Narrative events are accidental and random, essentially forming a series of set pieces that trace “a day in the life of a permanent tourist”. Like all of Jarmusch’s films, Permanent Vacation is held together by a rhythmic quality (via the score, cutting and composition) and a unique approach to narrative in which random characters and motifs throughout resonate with each other and suggest “meanings” or themes. In other words, Jarmusch never forcefully constructs a story but rather allows the viewer to string together implied associations and construct their own meanings. In Permanent Vacation the notion of an existential “way” or vision is slowly revealed to be the central theme through the coalescing of various motifs (John Lurie’s sax playing character and his rendition of “Somewhere over the Rainbow”, the black man in the cinema foyer’s story about an avant-garde sax player, the references to Nicholas Ray). This oblique, associative connection between narrative information, character and cultural texts, and the metaphors they evoke, will become characteristic of Jarmusch’s oeuvre as a whole.

Permanent Vacation is also about the world that Allie sees and its post-apocalyptic condition. The act of walking through a strange and unfamiliar place will be replayed constantly throughout Jarmusch’s films. Walking establishes a distinction between the individual and the world around him or her. Almost every character Allie meets is “crazy”
Jarmusch's ironic commentary on contemporary America, and his own unique filmmaking style, become better defined. It is also the beginning of a trilogy continuing with Down by Law (US 1987) and Mystery Train (US/Japan 1989) that explores extensively the themes of foreign perspectives on America, and the relations between people and place.

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Spectacular nothingness: Stranger Than Paradise (US/WGer 1984)

If you stop the film at any point and ask the audience what was going to happen next, they would have no idea. They wouldn't really be thinking about it, but would be more concerned with the characters and what's happening to them.

-- Jim Jarmusch [3]

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Stranger Than Paradise single-handedly established Jarmusch's reputation as a smart, innovative director. It earned him the Golden Leopard at the 1984 Locarno Film Festival and the Camera D'or from Cannes in 1984. Its extraordinary success and impact upon audiences both at the time of its release and even today is ironic, since it seems inversely proportionate to its extreme narrative minimalism. As one commentator observed: "The most fascinating aspect of Stranger Than Paradise is indeed the fact that it communicates so much with so little." [4]. And another, more recently: "populated almost entirely by non-actors and first-time actors, sketchy in its narrative, frightfully deadpan in its jokes, it was the sort of movie that changed the way other movies looked..." [5]. Its appeal derives from a combination of elements: an unconventional, highly formal approach to narrative; a play with audience expectations of narrative and performance; and strong character acting. Jarmusch successfully documents the life and attitudes of a pair of bohemian characters Willy (John Lurie) and Eddie (Richard Edson); the entrance of a new element into their world, a younger woman from Hungary (Eva played by Ezster Balint); the strange trio that they form; and their journey across the American landscape.

The anti-narrative approach is evident in a present-tense quality, reducing the story to a series of single moments marked by the duration of time, in which the characters' physical traits and mannerisms define who they are and how they relate to the world around them. Hence, each scene enables us to observe funny and odd encounters between characters, as well as individual quirks and idiosyncrasies (such as Aunt Lottie's regional Hungarian accent and classic one-liners: "I am zee win-n-er" and "You son-of-a-bitch"). The reliance on character acting, the type of performance that privileges the material presence of the actor (traits of body, speech and manner) is another characteristic of Jarmusch's cinema, plainly evident in his technique of writing roles for specific actors.

Many moments comprise two or more characters in a confined space (such as a car or apartment) either engaging in inconsequential chitchat or remaining silent. For example, rather than cutting straight to Willy's and Eddie's arrival in Cleveland, Jarmusch stays with them whilst they ride in the car, capturing their idle conversation, antics, sudden revelations (such as Eddie's "I never knew you were from Hungary" and Willy's reply, "I'm as American as you are") and occasional silence. The film is a string of "in between" moments, where nothing in particular happens and where any attempt by the characters to make something happen is ultimately thwarted

Despite the naturalism that fills every moment, Jarmusch's guiding hand is apparent on many levels: in the rhythmic structure created by the separation of each scene with moments of black leader (fusing simultaneously the duration and contemplation), and the theme of alienation and disillusionment that permeates proceedings without ever being directly articulated. This theme is present in the extended silences between characters, the pauses between scenes, the rundown locale of New York and the monotonous quality of the American landscape in general. At certain times, it is articulated by an authorial perspective taken on the characters and their situation, for example, the plaintive orchestral score that marks Eva's arrival into America (the score functioning in this regard similarly to Neil Young's score in Dead Man (US/Germany/Japan 1995), like a "commentary" on the action, according to Rosenbaum [6].)

Character, narrative and form are all informed by the same sense of vacuity. The inexpressive, undesiring, and inarticulate nature of the characters (Willy can hardly remember a joke, the incompleteness of its recounting becomes the point itself) precludes the possibility of a strong, driving narrative. The plot is a series of random, accidental events that can change the direction of its course at any moment. Jarmusch undermines any fruitful culmination of the attempted road journey, concluding at the point where the characters' moments, where nothing in particular happens and where any attempt by the characters to make something happen is ultimately thwarted.

The unconventional narrative again facilitates a critique of America, the two impulses inseparable. The film, without ever explicitly stating it, is more about the state of America then anything else, with the three characters its eternally alienated inhabitants. It plays with dominant myths of America as a promised land (and in this regard it reverses the stereotype of Eastern Europe as a bleak land of misery and factory workers) and the road journey as a cathartic experience. Notably, it is the foreign character who begins the narrative of exploring America and who makes it a possibility for the culturally isolated and solipsistic Willy and Eddie.
**Bending the Rules: Down by Law**

*Down by Law* continues the theme of two Americans and a foreigner wandering through an American landscape. In contrast to *Stranger*’s visual and music sparseness, *Down by Law* shows more cluttered landscapes (shabby New Orleans, mud-filled Louisiana) and has a playful score (by John Lurie and Tom Waits). Cinematographer, Robby Müller will be given another opportunity to explore the American landscape to greater poetic effect in *Dead Man*.

If *Stranger Than Paradise* sought to seal off any ultimate cathartic experience between the characters and their relation to the landscape *Down by Law* suggests a similar project, though in this case the result is somewhat contrived and forced. Unlike *Stranger*’s energy and freshness, due mainly to the performances and their balance with other elements of mise en scène and overall narrative progression, in *Down by Law* there is an overemphasis on narrative structure as the source of meaning over rhythms and tensions internal to the scenes. The film floats across various genres and styles (slapstick comedy, noir, prison escape, road journey) without settling into any one of them. Its characters and situations resemble signposts, their presence in the overall story practically functional. [7] It will not be until *Night on Earth* that Jarmusch’s literary approach will be realised less through architectural means (the arrangement and combination of multiple, parallel narratives) and more through affective results where there is greater resonance in character and story.

In *Down by Law*, two Americans, Zac (Tom Waits) and Jack (John Lurie), and an Italian, Bob (Roberto Benigni), find themselves together in an enclosed space. Although this space changes empirically—from prison cell to outdoor swamp—it essentially remains the same. The film’s question is thus abstract: what happens when two Americans and a foreigner are locked in a confined space? Who possesses the vision to see a way out? What are the cultural differences in play? Such abstraction is evident in Jarmusch’s breezy looking over of plot and back-stories (the way Bob suddenly appears in the narrative, his mysterious “homicide”, and the trio’s escape from prison).

As in *Stranger Than Paradise*, the feeling of circling the same terrain is thrown into relief by an unreal, fantastic, chance discovery. The three come across a diner named “Luigi’s Tin Top”, located amongst forest and swamp, in which an Italian woman, Nicoletta (Nicoletta Braschi), lives. Bob instantly falls in love with her and remains with her forever. This is like the notion of war in *Permanent Vacation*—mythic and somewhat surreal. Zac and Jack then walk away down separate paths toward their respective destinies. The image of a fork in the road that closes the film is symmetrical with the crosscutting and eventual merging of Zac and Jack that occurs at the beginning. Such storytelling symmetry will resurface in *Dead Man*.

It is again the foreigner who symbolically opens up the narrow world of the American characters, and has the privilege of greater insight. Not only does Bob discover the escape route that leads Zac and Jack out of the prison, his continued references to great American poets (Walt Whitman and Robert Frost) contrast with Zac’s and Jack’s complete non-interest in this area. The poetry recites resonates with the film’s narrative structure. For example, Bob quotes the following phrase from Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”, which begins by describing the film’s closing shot and is overall a meditation on the mode of life one adopts (a theme raised by *Permanent Vacation*):

> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference.

It is not a big stretch to see the “one less travelled by” as encapsulating the perennially foreign, alternative perspective that haunts Jarmusch’s cinema (and his own career path). Unlike the path travelled by Zac and Jack, Bob’s path (non-American, optimistic, altruistic) is the one that “has made all the difference”, most evident in the fact that he finds his fairytale book ending.[8] Jarmusch attributes the transcendent perspective of being able to see the past, present and future (on the narrative level and in terms of America’s cultural past) to his foreign characters, and in this gesture powerfully suggests that vision in American culture and society lies with those traditionally considered non-American—and that contemporary America is a land devoid of spirituality or any sign of richness.

**Elvis in the World: Mystery Train**

*Mystery Train* concludes the trilogy of a collective of foreigners and Americans travelling through an American landscape. More like *Stranger* and less like *Down by Law*, however, *Mystery Train*’s narrative has a subtle, affective aspect relating to human relationships and the kinds of bonds that form in transitory moments. The three stories that comprise *Mystery Train* are all based on foreign characters moving through roughly the same space and temporality in Memphis—two Japanese tourists, an Italian woman stranded there overnight and an English rocker who seems to have adopted Memphis as his home. Jarmusch explores these separate yet intertwined stories through an overall episodic structure and playful approach to narrative.

The very gesture of inserting foreign characters in an American landscape and viewing this world from their perspective is itself (as Rosenbaum argues) radical since, by default, it addresses the audience in non-exclusive terms, that is, as not exclusively white Americans. [9] In *Mystery Train* we see the different meanings Memphis accrues depending on perspective. More so than previously, Jarmusch places greater emphasis on his characters’ relations with others (young lovers, female-female and male-male friendships) so that *Mystery Train* becomes both about the encounter between people and the objectification of culture.

Jarmusch’s particular sensibility—what Rosenbaum identifies as being “more a poet than a prose writer”[10]—means that his films work through impressions rather than the information. On one level, *Mystery Train* works according to an informational narrative model—several key details such as a passing train, Elvis Presley’s “Blue Moon” on the early morning radio, and a gunshot beat each narrative as parallel. But since Jarmusch’s project is abstract—the idea of looking at the same thing from different perspectives—these details don’t necessarily lead to a greater story picture or dramatic arc but further emphasise the impressionistic effect. For example, the wide shot of Jun (Masatoshi Nagase) and Hitzuko (Youki Kudoh) wandering through the streets of Memphis is later echoed by a similar shot of Luisa (Nicoletta Braschi) walking through the same streets. Each narrative is filled with details that define the flavour and nature of place, for example, the fast-talking tourist guide at Sun Studios, the empty Memphis streets, the rundown Arcade hotel, the black club that Johnny (Joe Strummer) hangs out at, the sombre score throughout the film. Furthermore, the narrative is played out almost entirely through character rather than plot, where ‘personality’ is crucial (hence, the cameos by Screamin’ Jay Hawkins and Joe Strummer). In addition, the structure of parallel narratives itself gives rise to what Murray Smith terms “architectural pleasure”, a form of spectatorial pleasure derived from the poetic and ironic echo between recurring details:

> …the successive revelation of the same action witnessed from different viewpoints creates a kind of formal fascination, heightening our sense of the way the various lines of action interweave with one another. By placing the temporally parallel sequences in succession, their parallel existence, is paradoxically, underlined. [11]

The culture that is objective in *Mystery Train* is America’s mythical south and its legacy of rock’n’roll and blues. As in *Stranger Than Paradise* a melancholy hovers, evoked subtly through measured rhythms and plaintive score but never directly dramatised. If Elvis Presley represents the American Dream and Memphis the place of trail-blazing American music, then—true to Jarmusch’s deadpan, laconic view—both exist today in a shadowy, ghostly form. Rather, as the first episode (“Far from Yokohoma”) testifies, the legacy of 50s America lives on in the way its meanings are appropriated, suggesting that culture lives on intangibly—never in the place where it was born, always in the act...
Lightning vision: 

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The third Coffee and Cigarettes – somewhere in California (US 1993) features two laconic, deadpan Americans (Tom Waits and Iggy Pop) discussing the real difficulty in quitting cigarettes especially during coffee drinking – a topic that echoes Jarmusch’s own sentiments as articulated in Wane Wang’s Blue in the face (US 1995).

Apparent in the series is Jarmusch’s ability for sharp cultural observation – he tunes right in to the icons of contemporary urban culture, coffee and cigarettes, tools not only for the longing and release of desire but also important accessories in points of contact and social interaction. With equal insight, he hilariously plays on the addictive nature of these social tools. Although they may be made off the cuff, these shorts are very Jarmuschian in their emphasis on different cultural perspectives and the myriad, minute ways that such perspectives play out against each other, low-budget style, formal clarity and eccentric characters. They also exemplify the way he is able to achieve resonance in the smallest exchange between characters, whether it takes the form of extended silence, biting sarcasm or unspoken respect.

Global warming:

Night on Earth

With his fifth feature, Jarmusch continues his architectural approach to storytelling by replaying the same story (an encounter between a taxi driver and passenger) in different parts of the globe (L.A., New York, Paris, Rome, Helsinki). Once again, his openness toward cultural difference and his working outside the dichotomy of us and them is matched by a narrative construction that emphasises simultaneity and the idea that there is no one single experience or perspective. The abstract nature of Night on Earth (1992) becomes apparent as the recurring template keeps on getting filtered through new details and nuances. However, as in Down by Law, the concept ultimately outweighs the mise en scene and the film’s progression becomes somewhat mechanical.

Its charm lies in the performances. “Character as personality” is more present here then in any other Jarmusch film, and detail is paramount. It exemplifies Jarmusch’s approach to writing characters based on specific actors, and then generating a story from the nature of their distinctive peculiarities. Jarmusch’s casting – from Cassavetes star Gena Rowlands to Kaurismäki regular Matti Pellonpää – puts into play a series of homages, cross-references and associations. As J. Hoberman puts it, “each actor in Jarmusch’s splendidly eccentric cast is some sort of text” [12] They bring to the film their own baggage that works ironically in relation to other aspects.

One of the delights of the first, L.A.-based episode, concerning the encounter between a high-flying casting agent and a woman taxi driver, is the casting of Rowlands and Winona Ryder in roles that are slightly at odds with either their traditional character roles or real-life associations made with them. Ryder’s highlyscruffy, tomboyish cab driver who refuses Rowlands’ offer to star in a major film because “things are working out” for her as a cab driver and potential mechanic not only plays ironically with each actor as signifying texts but also with the mainstream logic that everyone wants fame and glamour. The casting of Roberto Benigni is another example of the way Jarmusch works with the uniqueness of each actor to enrich the film’s performance-driven set pieces. Benigni single-handedly dominates the entire episode in which he appears through his boisterous, ever-expansive and energetic performance.

Part of the richness and pleasure of Night on Earth derives from the rich detail in each character’s performance – from Giancarlo Esposito’s wildly hysterical Yo-Yo to Béatrice Dalé’s monstrous, slightly narky blind woman to Pellonpää’s heavy, sullen yet finely controlled performance. In fact, Hoberman sees the proliferation of details in Night on Earth combined with the static driver-passenger relationship as leading to a strange sort of morphing and transmuting in the film – “one immigrant driver melting into another as Rosie Perez mutates into Béatrice Dalé, Benigni’s confession segues into Pellonpää’s”. So what drives Night on Earth is the tension and the myriad associations evoked in this continuing sequence of repeating, slightly varied, narratives.

Once again, Jarmusch focuses on miniature, transient exchanges between eccentric characters to comment on themes as diverse as stardom and independence in Hollywood, the melting pot of New York, preconceptions of disability, and morality. Overall, the film exists somewhere between seriousness in its juxtaposing of such a diverse array of slices of reality and the mental engine one senses beneath the surface; and light-heartedness, as it coasts from one entertaining detail to the next. Ultimately, it will come to signify the end of a phase in Jarmusch’s career and what Rosenbaum calls his “honeymoon with the American press” [13].

The Shorts: Coffee and Cigarettes

Since the start of his career, Jarmusch has intermittently dabbled in short filmmaking. He has so far made five shorts in total, all variations on a similar theme encapsulated by their title, Coffee and Cigarettes. Only three of these have been screened publicly. All three feature two or more people at a café or bar drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. Minimal, and classic in design, they are enormously funny and characteristically Jarmuschian. In an interview, Jarmusch mused: “…they’re almost like cartoons to me.” [14] Like Gus Van Sant, Jarmusch seeks from short filmmaking a sense of liberation: “it’s a relief from making a feature film where everything has to be more carefully mapped out. So I

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[15] His intention is to continue adding to the Coffee and Cigarettes series and ultimately compiling them as a sort of “feature”.

The first Coffee and Cigarettes (US 1986), made around the time of Down by Law, is set in Italy and stars Steven Wright and Roberto Benigni. Seated at a small table in some generic decaying environment, both are extremely high-wired, muttering nonsensical and random sentences – a result, it seems, of the lethal combination of espresso coffee and non-stop cigarettes. Jarmusch plays on their cultural differences, a monotone, deadpan American contrasted with an exuberant Italian, and the fact that they often don’t understand each other.

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Lightning vision: Dead Man
As commentators noted at the time of its release, Dead Man was radically different in its tone and force than anything Jarmusch had made before. His previous films were, overall, fairly slight tales from the fringes, entertaining and illuminating in an oddball way but finally little more. In contrast, Dead Man works on another level altogether, and Rosenbaum’s book-length study is exceptional in coming to grips with its complexity. Dead Man extends the unconventional view of America and character-based, poetic approach to storytelling to a new level, setting up its own universe within which to play out a scathing critique of American ideologies. Notably, Jarmusch is able to strike at the very heart of these ideologies via the form of the Western and its traditional representation of American history.

Motifs carried on from previous Jarmusch films include alternative cultural perspectives, the theme of outsiders, the attention to place or one’s cultural environment, deadpan humour and running jokes, and the anti-conventional approach to narrative. His directorial achievement lies not only in the film’s radical form but also in its shifts from absurdist humour and shocking violence to intense mysticism and serenity. Jarmusch intentionally constructed Dead Man so that on one level it is a simple story about the journey a young man, William Blake (Johnny Depp), takes after he is branded an outlaw; and his adoption by a benevolent Native American, Nobody (Gary Farmer), and the friendship that develops between the two as the latter guides the former to a spiritual death. However, on another level, Dead Man is a ferociously political, anti-American of (as Rosenbaum puts it) “millennial” proportions, filled with layers of meaning and resonance that only become fully felt after subsequent viewings.[16]

Traditional concepts like civilisation versus wilderness, industrial progress, and capitalism in general are rendered in a heightened, symbolic and nightmarish way. The entire film is imbued with a strange fable-like quality; characters, actions, images and sounds have an elemental quality and impact powerfully. The central journey is a strange meditation on the very meaning of existence and the rejection of the world as it is known for some higher, purer vision. But Jarmusch never plunges, even momentarily, into a New Age sentimentalism, (for example, the scene at the end of the film when Nobody has placed Blake into a canoe to return him to “the place from which he came”, to which Blake replies “Cleveland?”) but maintains a level of mystery throughout. Paradoxically, the film’s impact, and in particular its insight into contemporary America, is made more powerful by its mythical, fable-like quality.

Part of the force of Dead Man is due to the way that Jarmusch has created his own frame of reference in the film: the inexorable nature of the narrative (Blake’s destiny as a Dead Man foreshadowed by the haunting words of coal man [Crispin Glover]); the metaphysical quality that meanings and concepts assume (white man as destroyer of the land and its peoples; a Native American as a “spiritual messenger”; the spiritual, and by default anti-American, quality to which both the poetry of William Blake and Native American culture are linked).

On the formal level, there is a constant rhythm of scenes (the beginning and the end giving the narrative a distinct symmetry; individual scenes repeated from different character points of view) and refrains between scenes (for example, the use of fades out and black leader between scenes). Jarmusch takes just as much care in his portrayal of characters and cultures – white America is portrayed as a culture of depravity, death, and violence; whilst Native American culture is portrayed matter-of-factly, with absolute authenticity and attention to detail, (and not, significantly, in a glowing light). However, the evil work of the former and its attempted annihilation of the latter is seen and mentioned throughout (the infected blankets, the killing of buffalos, the burnt-out and rampaged Indian settlements, the entire Trading Post scene). Jarmusch radically revises the Western genre through the authenticity in his cultural representation of Native America and the constant theme of genocide that haunts the film.

Rosenbaum describes Dead Man as one way that the film can be seen as “the fulfillment of a cherished counterculture dream, the acid western”[17]. Some examples of its hallucinogenic portrayal of white America include the mind-boggling trio of possum skinners played by Iggy Pop, Bob Thorton and Jared Harris (in which concepts like family, Catholicism, and general human relationships are twisted and subverted to the extreme), the Dickinson industrial plant and its head, Mr Dickinson (Robert Mitchum), who addresses a stuffed but still menacing bear when he is actually imparting information to a trio of bounty hunters sitting at his desk. Perhaps the most soothing of these portrayals is the character of Cole Wilson (Lance Henriksen), both a cannibal (who ate his own parents no less) and a legendary killer. If white America is a cultural force propelled by capitalism and the pursuit of material gain at the cost of people’s lives then Cole is its ultimate, ugliest embodiment. Cole’s abhorrence of, and even intimidation by, anything even remotely spiritual in nature is blatantly evident in the shocking image where he crushes a marshal’s head under his foot because “it looks like a goddam religious icon”. The mythical status bestowed on certain characters is evident in a shot toward the end of the film where Nobody and Cole confront each other. This is the first time they’re in the same frame, and we view the scene from Blake’s point of view in wide shot, giving it a strange tableau feel.

Throughout, there is a distinct separation between white America and Native America to the extent that one could say they exist in separate epistemological and metaphysical realms. Whenever the two cross, it is a terrifying, otherworldly moment marked by the shock of a lightning bolt, or a clash of two visions. The way that Nobody and Cole shoot at each other and then simultaneously fall to the ground suggests a cancelling out of the two cultures (one devouring, the other spiritual) that simply cannot live together or acknowledge each other. The scene reinforces the notion that purity and vision lies elsewhere, certainly not among the land of the living, but elsewhere in some instinctual and sensuous realm beyond representation.

On one level, Dead Man is a deeply felt and genuine homage to an ancient culture with its traditions, tribes, value-systems and beliefs, so brutally and mindlessly annihilated. With great acuity, Jarmusch bases the film upon a fleeting moment in America’s history when these two disparate cultures lived side by side (though with ongoing hostility):

What was more fascinating to me is that these cultures coexisted only so briefly, and then the industrialised one eliminated the aboriginal culture. Those specific Northwest tribes existed for thousands of years and then they were wiped out in much less than a hundred years. [18]

In Dead Man, this fleeting moment is shot through with immense gravity and poignancy, haunted as it is by the theme of genocide. As Rosenbaum states:

If America (…) is haunted by the genocide that preceded over its conquest, one thing that makesDead Man a haunted film is a sense of this enormity crawling around its edges, informing every moment and every gesture, without ever quite taking centre stage [19].

The second major level of the film is its gesture toward the only remaining source of truth and hope within an already corrupted world: an existential, counter-cultural position critical of established truths (institutional religion, capitalism, industrialisation, imperialism), pursuing and constructing an alternative universe. Jarmusch enacts this radical position on the level of form itself: more than ever, he eschews conventional plot logic and a transparency in meaning for opacity, symbolism and metaphor (the journeying hero of the narrative as Dead Man; the conventional icons of the Western disturbingly refigured; the profound preoccupation with death and associated themes of violence and industrialisation; the gesture of “passing through the mirror”). Both aspects are what made Dead Man at the time of its release, according to Rosenbaum, a “litmus test” for white viewers.

The relationship between Nobody and Blake is at the centre of the narrative and its emotional anchor. Although their communication seems to be at complete odds (like the [white] viewer, Blake mistakes Nobody’s reciting of William Blake’s poetry as “Indian malarkey” that he can’t understand and Nobody sees Blake as an incarnation of the poet himself), they become genuinely attached as riding and life companions. Jarmusch has stated that he wrote the part of William Blake with Depp in mind because of his passive quality as an actor. Morphing from nerdy accountant to lone survivor in the American wilderness, from faint-hearted and fumbling with a gun to alert and ruthless, Depp's
success in mapping this transformation is extraordinary. The transformation takes place in relation to Nobody, who becomes another source of identity since he partly becomes what Nobody envisions him as: a reincarnated Blake writing his poetry with blood.

Jarmusch beckons the audience to suspend its quest for rationality and the impulse to have everything fully explained and, instead, follow the line of imagination: to feel instinctively and intuitively the dread of Neil Young’s cut-throat electric guitar score; the inexorable rhythm of the opening sequence; the mystery of Nobody and his role as a “spiritual messenger”; the sense of a primal journey Blake is taking; the strange beauty of a bare tree or Blake’s act of lying next to a slain reindeer; the intensely threatening presence of Glover. The height of the film’s abstract, purely cinematic tendency is Blake’s walk through the Makah settlement and the hallucinatory nature which the images and the score assume as Blake borders on unconsciousness. At one point, a close-up of Blake’s semi-conscious, falling gaze gives way to an array of faces swimming before his glazed eyes that he can barely register.

Why is this is an especially powerful moment? Is it the anthropological weight of these faces that have never been recorded before, pinning their gaze on another who appears strange and different? Is it the exchange of looks between a dying white man and a group of Native Americans (where such an exchange of looks defines a lot of Jarmusch’s cinema) – two historically and culturally separate and opposite entities, here placed before each other? Although answers fail us, we cannot deny the film’s force or truth.

The Musical: Year of the Horse (US 1997)

Following on from their collaboration in Dead Man, Jarmusch made a music documentary on Neil Young and his band Crazy Horse’s “Broken Arrow” tour. Year of the Horse is Jarmusch’s only feature-length music-based film though he has made many music video clips during the ’80s and ’90s for artists ranging from Tom Waits and Talking Heads to Crazy Horse.

Year of the Horse is a modest exploration of the Crazy Horse band, its music and history. A distinct melancholy hovers, as Jarmusch juxtaposes footage from the ’60s to the ’80s with footage from the present-day. As Tom Ryan notes, “Everywhere a sense of mortality reigns over the band’s movements.” Apart from various present-day interviews with the band members and also most memorably, Young’s father, extended sections of the documentary are given over to Crazy Horse’s live performance. In these sequences of continued performance, time and space is magically suspended and surrendered to the rhythms and emotions of the music.

Year of the Horse is a Jarmusch film in other ways – it is low-budget, “proudly” (as the credits declare) filmed on Super 8, Hi-8 and 16mm, without virtuoso shooting, composition or editing. Yet it is still affecting and assured. As Ryan says: “Year of the Horse definitively demonstrates, to anyone who’s still interested, that quality is a question of vision rather than budget[21] – a statement that could apply to all of Jarmusch’s films. Another quality that makes it distinctly Jarmusch is the global geographic spread, tracing the band’s tour through Lyon, Glasgow, Frankfurt, London and “somewhere in Europe.” The exuberant German-speaking fan who introduces the documentary emphasises cross-cultural appropriation and foreign points of view.

Throughout the interviews, it becomes evident that the band’s long history together, involving the entire gamut of life experience, has resulted in deep, rock solid bonds. This collective likeness and understanding is expressed in their powerful ability to create music as a group entity – music that is deeply felt, transcendent and poignant. Jarmusch understands this, and by allowing the music to speak for itself rather than imposing his own style or interpretation upon it, his own values become evident – not only his deep respect for music and belief in its spiritual quality, but also his anti-commercialism and anti-sensationalism.

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Throughout the interviews, band member Poncho harps on the fact that it is impossible for Jarmusch to be able to capture the full meaning of the band Crazy Horse – its years of shared experience – in a mere documentary. But, rather than grandizing the band as a hype phenomenon, Jarmusch emphasises its skill and achievement honestly and modestly. Crazy Horse is depicted as a locus of raw, emotional power and its synergy, enabling it to reach boundless emotional heights on stage. Jarmusch emphasises their organic quality, their immersion in the pure act of making and playing music. This is another example of the humanist strain in Jarmusch’s cinema – a real appreciation and respect for bonds and relationships held together by a pursuit that is tied to art and to an expression through art which can be transcendental, enlightening or empowering. It is an inherently utopian vision.

Reading is believing: Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai

What Dead Man and Ghost Dog signal in Jarmusch’s career is not only a more politicised vision of contemporary America but one predicated on poetry – both as a narrative motif, figured as visionary and empowering; and formally, in the way that both films progress according to a poetic logic[22].

In Ghost Dog, as in Dead Man, central themes and preoccupations take shape gradually and obliquely. Seeingly tangential narrative events are strung together, and the film overall shifts between various narratives and styles (the hitman-mob narrative, which is pastiche-like; Ghost Dog’s friendship with Pearline (Camille Winbush), which is realist; Ghost Dog’s interior world, especially as expressed in the literary references to Hagakure, heightened and subjective). Although Ghost Dog and Dead Man work very differently in terms of their narrative arcs (one is a road/existential journey whilst the other examines the repercussions of a single event in a hitman’s life) both are infused with a sense of pathos and tragedy. This sense is tied to the loss of an understanding of the world predicated on poetry and an appreciation of culture. This nexus of poetry, history and a metaphysical understanding of the world is aligned in both films with a traditionally marginalised constituent of America (Native America in Dead Man, Afro-America in Ghost Dog), and thus both films subvert aspects of white America (more vehemently so in Dead Man).

Jarmusch holds Ghost Dog together via a subtle form of symbolic resonance, rhyme and intuitive connection between events, and an overall hypnotic, affective style that seems to express the grace and profundity of Ghost Dog’s mind-body unity. Some examples of symbolic resonance: the image of a bear lying dead on a highway later echoes the image of Ghost Dog, sprawled on the road, gunshot and dead; the connection between the two made explicit by the redneck’s comment “ain’t too many of these big black fuckers left”[22]; the combat suit worn by these rednecks later seen worn by a black man in the neighbourhood whom Ghost Dog crosses paths with; Ghost Dog’s ominous crossing of paths with this black man; and the circulation of the Rashomon text and the enactment of the notion of seeing the same thing from multiple perspectives; and the centrality of literature in the film.

The gravity attributed to certain events – for example, the act of Ghost Dog silently driving through and observing the streets of his neighbourhood or the exchange between Ghost Dog and a man dressed in combat attire in the street, rendered in slow-motion – bestows upon them a distinct symbolism. In both examples, Jarmusch achieves a highly sensual match between the score and the image, so that the emotional gravity of scenes is inextricable from the score’s rhythms (which range from hip-hop and Eastern motifs to reggae and jazz).

The film’s sensuous rhythms, beats, opiate sense of time, obliqueness and general surrealism gently underscore the theme of black America. Related to this is the ethos of appropriation, a DJ form of sampling that has been identified by Rosenbaum. (23) Forms of music like rap, hip-hop, reggae and dub emerged from black subcultures at various moments in history and are characterised by methods of assemblage. Ghost Dog dramatises this theme both formally (in its editing style, such as the use of lap dissolves and sequences, and its textual references to books and music) and in its thematic resonance, with a sense of the pan-African tradition and its mythologies of kitsch.
Observer

“Stranger in Paradise” by Jane Shapiro,

Endnotes

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However, unlike Le Samouraï and Branded to Kill, which are primarily suspense-driven, the hitman-mob narrative in Ghost Dog is essentially a reference to an archetypal genre deployed to ironic effect by Jarmusch (especially when the characters themselves refer to “the final shoot-out scene”). In fact, these small-time, Italo-American gangsters are an amusing bunch of aging, over-weight caricatures behind in their rent, operating out of a small room at the back of a Chinese restaurant, dithering in their decision-making.

Jarmusch has them forever watching cartoons, since this echoes their hollowness – although they look like gangsters they lack any real sense of purpose – and emphasises the senseless nature of criminal violence. In terms of cultural appropriation, unlike the solemn text of Hakagure that Ghost Dog imbibes, the mobsters remain trapped within the world of pop cartoons. Ultimately, they are not a threat to Ghost Dog who already knows their every move and thought. He is threatened only by his self-imposed allegiance to his master, Louie (John Tormey).

Jarmusch hints at the politicisation of the black neighbourhood: the decaying, deserted streets that Ghost Dog solemnly regards; the redneck bear-hunters he comes across (the only other white characters besides the mobsters who he converses with); the flashback to a violent situation between Ghost Dog and young white men, which is apparently race-based; and the allegorical meaning of Raymond (Issach de Bankolé), Ghost Dog and Pearline’s uniform agreement that chocolate is their favourite flavour, with Raymond adding: “Even if vanilla is the most popular flavour in the world, the fact is chocolate is still the best”. In true Jarmuschian style, mise en scène and story in Ghost Dog are not constructed so as to be definite but, rather, always suggestive and in flux, to the extent that we are invited to superimpose our own narratives to provide histories and explanations. For example, Ghost Dog’s strict adherence to the samurai code as both a form of defence and a philosophy of life could be seen as his response to the racial beating that occurred several years earlier; equipped with such a philosophy of life and defence techniques he naturally assumes a superior position in relation to the troubled world around him.

The materiality of text haunts Ghost Dog. This is made explicit in the sequence which reveals an enormous ship built by a Spanish man on a rooftop, its contradictory nature (ship out of water) offering the object as a text. Many details are shaped to this end: the trio of rappers dressed in brilliant red who salute him; an old man with shopping bags who suddenly morphs into a dexterous kung-fu fighter; the rappers in the park; and the spareness of the environment generally except for discrete objects (a little girl in the park, a dog, a flying bird, street rappers).

Jarmusch handles the theme of empowerment through cultural appropriation with great subtlety and poignancy. In both Dead Man and Ghost Dog, eighteenth century poetry provides a metaphysical understanding of the world. And in both films, the characters who are the vessels for such poetry, are also spiritual messengers. In Ghost Dog, it is to Pearline that Ghost Dog imparts such knowledge. Their conversations in the park are disarming in their directness and simplicity. And their likeness is suggested subtly – they both carry briefcases, both enjoy books, both agree on which story from Hagakure is the best. The theme of transmutation is embodied in Ghost Dog’s status as an omnipresent, omniscient character, in terms of his relation to the natural world and the affinity he shares with birds, a dog, a bear. It is as though all these objects of nature exist on the same plane, each a transmuted form of the other.

The ultimate act of transference/transmutation between them comes when Ghost Dog gives Pearline the Hagakure text before succumbing to his death. In the closing sequence of Pearline reading the book, she sits on the kitchen floor, her mother’s legs shuffling around her as she gently requests her daughter to read elsewhere. Looking to the light, Pearline sees an image of Ghost Dog sitting at the park bench, his spiritual form finally realised. The scene closes with a quote from Hagakure read out by Pearline that the “end is important in all things”. In this sequence, the small, everyday moment is touched by something transcendental.

In defining its characters in terms of the cultural styles, traditions and habits they align themselves with, Ghost Dog suggests both that identities in the modern world are always defined in relation to cultural objects and commodities (with all sorts of radical configurations possible) and, more profoundly, that such objects and commodities can be visionary and empowering.

In many ways, Ghost Dog is a companion piece to Dead Man (Rosenbaum informs us that Jarmusch’s original title for the latter film was Ghost Dog [24]). Both treat their central subjects and journeys with gravity, and deploy ancient poetry in a particular way. And the death of Ghost Dog works as a moment of tragic pathos similar to William Blake’s exit aboard the canoe. Both films explore a metaphysical quest beyond the worldly realm (as Ghost Dog says before dying: “I’ve seen everything I needed to see”), signalling the newfound seriousness that characterises Jarmusch’s current work. Unlike his previous work, Jarmusch now approaches his themes within an accomplished formal mode that brilliantly eschews rational logic, transparent meaning and conventional concepts and structures of meaning, for the sake of a sensuous and surreal form of knowing and experience. Jarmusch continues to boldly usher us into unknown

Endnotes

[1] Between 1998 to the present, five books have been published on Jim Jarmusch, only one of which is in English, the remaining four being in French, Polish, Italian and German. For interviews which make reference to Jarmusch’s Paris experience, see: “Home and away” by Peter Keough in Sight and Sound, vol. 2 issue 1 (August 1992), 8-9; “Stranger in Paradise” by Jane Shapiro, The Village Voice 31 (1986), 16-19; “Jim Jarmusch interviewed by Geoff Andrew”, The Guardian Observer,http://www.filminlimited.co.uk/Guardian_NFT/Interview/0,4479,110607,00.html, [Monday November 15, 1999]
[6] Rosenbaum, Dead Man, 44.
[8] For a philosophical reading of the film, which shows how its “project” resembles the philosophy of Wittgenstein, see Ludwig Hertzberg, “Preamble/Introduction”
Although Jim Jarmusch is one of the most important and critically acclaimed American filmmakers of the past decades, his work has largely been ignored by scholars. Consequently, my analysis of Stranger than Paradise (1984), Dead Man (1995), and Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai (1999) stands out as one of very few comparative studies of his films. Furthermore, the research that does exist fails to recognize Jarmusch’s consistent occupation with American sociopolitical concerns. The strategies and approaches Jarmusch employs in conveying his views are largely postmodern. Through various strategies of interruption, emphasis on intertextualism, and rejection of the Grand Narrative, his films seek to expose myth, not necessarily as false, but as deceptive.