

MEDITATIONS ON A POSTMODERN AGE:
THE FILMS OF JIM JARMUSCH

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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Akron, Ohio-born filmmaker Jim Jarmusch first aspired to be a writer and poet, which prompted him to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree in Literature at Columbia University. After spending a semester in France, he decided to stay for a year and was markedly influenced by European cinema. Jarmusch then decided to pursue filmmaking and was accepted to film school at New York University in 1976. While at NYU, he completed his first feature-length film *Permanent Vacation*, followed by the internationally successful *Stranger Than Paradise*. For *Stranger Than Paradise*, Jarmusch received the highly regarded Camera d'Or prize in 1984 from France's Cannes film festival. *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), followed by *Down by Law* (1986), *Mystery Train* (1989), *Night on Earth* (1991), *Dead Man* (1995), and *Ghost Dog* (1999) earned him a distinguished reputation across the world.

Jarmusch's films pose questions about a postmodern, capitalist, and global society without offering answers. In so doing, his films open doors to a number of intriguing issues. In *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault asserts that the orders which dictate a

given culture's codes are empirical and arbitrary (54). By deconstructing our social norms, Jim Jarmusch creates a body of work that is subversive, even if some themes are not always politically explicit. Film critic bell hooks describes a scene from one of Jarmusch's films that deconstructs racial codes and challenges the expectations of the audience:

In Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train*...the young Japanese couple arrive in the train station in Memphis only to encounter what appears to be a homeless black man, a drifter, but who turns to them and speaks Japanese...This filmic moment challenges our perceptions of blackness by engaging in a process of defamiliarization. (99)

Narrative devices such as characterization, however, are only one way in which Jarmusch deconstructs social stereotypes. The formal characteristics of Jarmusch's films also challenge a viewer's expectations. The rate at which images are presented, for example, makes a difference as to how we process those images. Influenced by music videos and TV commercials, the movie industry has capitalized on the current formalistic trend of changing shots very quickly. It is common for a montage of shots to last only a few seconds, not long enough for the mind to process each image before it changes two or

three more times. Jarmusch chooses slower-paced, sequence shots¹ in order to contradict current cinematic trends. He says, “if you tried to get an IPM breakdown for my films, it would be, like, four—four images per minute” (McGuigan 99). The meditative effect of pauses, blackouts, and silences in his films forces the audience to reflect on the images they are watching.

In the following chapters, I will analyze the ways in which Jim Jarmusch’s films pose socio-political questions without supplying definitive answers. In the first chapter, I will discuss his influences, especially the philosophical and socio-political ideals of the film movements that he is most associated with. Aside from analyzing the films directly, I will draw on interviews, articles, and books written about his influences. The second chapter is centered on literary references and their connection to themes associated with America, industrialization, capitalism, marginalized characters, and cultural archetypes. In the last chapter, I will analyze Jarmusch’s individual style and the elements that are widely regarded as the most important themes in his work, namely, his treatment of cultural stereotyping, issues of communication and alienation, and the significance of silences and emptiness. Drawing predominantly on socio-political, psychoanalytic, and post-structural scholarship, I will explain the symbolic importance of particular cinematic

¹ Shots that tend to last for a long time.

choices and how those choices deconstruct social codes and pose questions concerning the values of a postmodern age without prescribing definitive answers.

CHAPTER 1

THE ETIOLOGY OF JIM JARMUSCH'S CINEMATIC STYLE

In an article on Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, *Cahiers du Cinéma* critic Luc Moullet says that "a film is not written or shot during the six months or so allotted to it, but during the thirty years which precede its conception" (Hiller 41). To fully appreciate Jim Jarmusch's body of work, it is necessary to see it in relation to works of the filmmakers and film movements that came before it. The French New Wave, the Italian Neorealists, Japanese, and American films all play a significant part in the development of Jim Jarmusch as an international auteur. His movies, *Stranger Than Paradise*, *Down by Law*, *Mystery Train*, *Night on Earth*, *Dead Man*, and *Ghost Dog*, can best be described as black comedies, genre parodies, collages of various film styles and influences, as well as serious social commentaries.

Jarmusch deliberately distances his films from major cinematic trends and movements, describing his movies as a collage of European and Japanese film styles as

well as American pop culture. Jarmusch calls his 1984 film *Stranger Than Paradise* “a semi-neorealist black-comedy in the style of an imaginary Eastern-European film director obsessed with Ozu and familiar with the 1950’s American television show *The Honeymooners*” (*Jim Jarmusch Interviews* vii). In an interview, he admits that it was a priority in writing the script for *Stranger Than Paradise* that it would not be lumped into a category, defined by one particular film movement. Jarmusch reveals that he consciously distanced his work from the prominent film movement the New Wave:

Our first criterion was not to be like other New York films that are being shown in Europe and being called New Wave.... We wanted characters not associated with any kind of...scene. (Jacobson 14)

Philosophically, however, his style coincides with this movement, especially the French New Wave directors. In fact, he was introduced to many American directors through the French New Wave, or Nouvelle Vague:

For me and a lot of filmmakers of our generation, much of our awareness of the American cinema came, in a strange circular way, through the Nouvelle Vague. I would read what Rivette or Godard or Truffaut or Rohmer wrote about Howard Hawks, for example. I knew Godard’s films before I knew Sam Fuller’s. (Sante 148)

Cinematic techniques associated with the Nouvelle Vague and adopted by Jarmusch include episodic and elliptical narrative, improvisation, freedom of camera movement, and location shooting.

The Nouvelle Vague: Europe and Its Politics

The Nouvelle Vague and the critical journal associated with it, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, experienced major changes during the late 1960's and early 70's. In May 1968, Parisian university students armed with their knowledge of Marx, Foucault, and Lacan went into the streets to protest the French political system, which they found to be imperialist and corrupt. The students were joined by factory workers who continued their fight against bourgeois, capitalist values. This leftist movement affected all intellectual spheres in France, including the film critics, analysts, and auteurs who wrote for *Cahiers*:

The *Cahiers* project in the later 1970's very much continues and extends the political and theoretical positions elaborated in the post-1968 period, in particular questions around the place of the spectator, from the psychoanalytic work of Lacan, and questions around politics and history arising out of the work of Michel Foucault. (Hiller 356)

It is no surprise that one would find traces of post-1968 political sentiment in Jarmusch's work. Psychoanalytical, political, and historical film analysis in *Cahiers* during and after 1968 eventually made its way into the hands of young aspiring filmmakers like Jarmusch, who admits that he was an avid reader of *Cahiers* as a young student in Paris during the 1970's.

Given the political climate in Paris at the time, it is evident that the post-1968 period of *Cahiers* would be a time when French film critics would begin rejecting Hollywood auteurs who made big-budget, highly marketable films. During this period, *Cahiers* began turning toward more marginal American filmmakers like John Cassavetes (*Shadows, Faces, A Woman Under the Influence*). In the early years of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, however, the Nouvelle Vague had embraced big budget films in Hollywood. Well-known Hollywood directors first inspired the term "auteur." In the early years, the Nouvelle Vague "claimed that in the works of certain directors—certain *auteurs* (authors)—artistry existed in the American cinema" (Bordwell and Thompson 465). It was the goal of the Nouvelle Vague at this time to include movies in a larger category of artistic works. Godard once stated that "film auteurs, thanks to us, have finally entered the history of art" (Bordwell and Thompson 465). An "auteur," as defined by *Cahiers*, "stamps his or her personality on genre and studio products, transcending the constraints of Hollywood's standardized system" (Bordwell and Thompson 465). Examples of

Hollywood auteurs revered by the Nouvelle Vague were Hawks, Hitchcock, Lang, Ford, Fuller, DeMille, and Sternberg (Hiller 15).

Despite the praises of certain Hollywood directors, Godard and Truffaut made films that look nothing like the polished, tightly structured movies of Hitchcock or Ford. The Nouvelle Vague paid homage to Hollywood, while deconstructing its styles and values in order to create something new. Jarmusch's work is more similar to that of the French auteurs than to that of Hollywood filmmakers. Film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum once called Jarmusch "a sort of stepson of the French New Wave" (*Dead Man* 57). One of the ways the Nouvelle Vague accomplished an innovative style was by turning the polished look of Hollywood on its head, filming sequences that incorporate a realist style or *cinéma vérité* and juxtaposing them to parodies of Hollywood conventions, like the musical sequences in Godard's *Pierrot le fou* and *Band of Outsiders*.

Cinéma vérité is a style of filmmaking that seems more authentic and intimate because films shot in this style tend to include seemingly inconsequential details:

[Films shot in *cinéma vérité*] frequently convey an intimate snapshot quality. Generally, the story materials are loosely organized and include many details that don't necessarily forward the plot but are offered for their own sake, to heighten the sense of authenticity. (Giannetti 5)

Jarmusch heightens the sense of authenticity in his films by including minor details at the expense of action sequences or highly dramatic scenes. In fact, most of his movies have only a minimal plot, and are constructed out of nothing but small, seemingly insignificant moments. In *Down by Law*, for instance, three characters share a jail cell. A good portion of the film is constructed of moments with no dialogue, when the cellmates are playing cards, pacing, and passing time. We never see the details of the biggest turning-point in the film, however, which is the escape. The convicts leave the cell, accompanied by a guard, on their way to the prison yard for exercise. In the next scene we see them running through the woods, the sound of search hounds behind them. The audience has no idea how the characters escaped and the plan is never revealed. Jarmusch comments on this omission, explaining that he is more interested in inconsequential moments than in the major turning points in a film's plot:

I'm always more interested in small, ordinary things, and that's why I guess I have a tendency to write the kind of scenes which would be left out in a more conventional or transparent style. I'm more interested in a conversation between people playing cards than if they are carefully planning an escape from jail. (Von Bagh and Kaurismäki

75)

This style of filmmaking coincides with Louis Giannetti's definition of Realism: "Rather than focusing on extraordinary events, Realism tends to emphasize the basic experiences of life. It is a style that excels in making us feel the humanity of others" (5). In a letter to director John Cassavetes, Jarmusch writes, "What your films illuminate most poignantly is that celluloid is one thing and beauty, strangeness, and complexity of experience is another" (Charity vii-viii). Commenting on his own film *Stranger Than Paradise*, Jarmusch says that he deliberately set out to create a film where the audience would be more engaged in the characters than in the plot:

The narrative is very minimal. If you stop the film at any point and ask the audience what was going to happen next, they would have no idea...they would be more concerned with the characters and what's happening to them.

(Jacobson18)

By minimizing plot, Jarmusch focuses on the characters and their "basic experiences." It is a style that not only creates an atmosphere of realism, but, as Giannetti says, it "excels in making us feel the humanity of others" (5). A tendency to focus on the humanity of the characters is typical of the Nouvelle Vague and the Neorealists. Nouvelle Vague director Jean Luc Godard is associated with this style of filmmaking and is probably Jarmusch's most significant influence.

Jean Luc Godard: Intertextuality,
Cinematic Rules, and the Illusory Aspects of Film

In *The Director's Vision: A Concise Guide to the Art of 250 Great Filmmakers*,

Geoff Andrew says, "The New Wave's *enfant terrible*" (as Godard is called) "explored his love of Hollywood" through the following stylistic choices:

Inventive pastiche, undermining genres through jump-cuts,
gags, digressions, direct-to-camera monologues, deliberate
amateurisms...references, homages and increasingly,
slogans marked by portentous punning word play. (83)

Titles before scenes, documentary-style cinematography, location shooting and digressions are all stylistic choices that Jarmusch shares with Jean Luc Godard. The most apparent similarities between the two, however, are their references to other works of art and tendencies to break with cinematic convention. Godard often alludes to movies, literature, and other filmmakers in his movies. In *Breathless*, for instance, the central character Michel mimics the idiosyncrasies of Humphrey Bogart. American director Sam Fuller makes an appearance in *Pierrot le fou*, and in *Vivre sa vie* Godard quotes the classic European epic *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. Those in the audience who are able to appreciate the references are reminded over and over of the invisible hand behind the camera. These inside jokes often have no, or at best loose, connections with the stories themselves and momentarily break the suspension of disbelief. Jarmusch draws attention

to himself as auteur as well by alluding to literature and film. In *Down by Law*, for instance, there are several references to Walt Whitman, there are allusions to the poet William Blake in *Dead Man*, and the name “Chaucer” is printed on a street sign in *Mystery Train*. When asked about the Chaucer reference, Jarmusch commented, “We had that sign made...the form of the film is a little bit from the Canterbury Tales” (Rosenbaum, “A Gun Up...” 127). As a linguistic inside joke, a Japanese tourist in *Mystery Train* says the name Chaucer with a Japanese accent, unknowingly pronouncing the poet’s name as it would have been said during his lifetime (Conrad 44). As a reference to Godard in *Down by Law*, a character says, “It is a sad and beautiful world.” The statement is nearly identical to one made in Godard’s *Pierrot le Fou*: “Life may be sad, but it is always beautiful.” References like these are rarely noticed, but when they are, a tension is created between a realistic cinematographic style and the obvious hand of the director. In Godard’s films, as in those of Jim Jarmusch, the intertextuality says more about the auteur than about the story.

Godard’s unconventional stylistic choices, such as violating the 180° rule² and deliberately including jump-cuts³ remind the audience that they are observing a work of fiction and not people engaged in real-life situations. In *Band of Outsiders*, Godard

² The 180° rule states that the camera should stay on one side of the action (Bordwell Thompson 480).

³ Jump-cuts appear to break up a single shot. Figures on screen seem to change instantly while the background stays constant, or the background changes while figures stay the same (Bordwell and Thompson 479).

disrupts what seems like a realistic conversation between three people with a moment of silence that breaks with cinematic convention. The characters agree to not talk for one minute. Godard cuts all sound in the film for the full minute, leaving the audience sitting in complete silence. In *Mystery Train*, Jarmusch deliberately violates the 180° rule for the same reason as Godard, drawing attention to the discontinuity in the sequence. In the scene, a couple walks toward a hotel and in the next shot they appear to have turned around and started walking in the other direction: “We break the rule, cross the line, and see them from the other side as they walk toward the hotel. Then we cut to inside the hotel, a kind of establishing shot of the lobby” (McGuigan 102).

David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson affirm that the “discontinuities” in Godard’s *Breathless* “create a self-conscious narration that makes the viewer aware of its stylistic choices,” thereby drawing attention to the filmmaker or auteur (404). Jarmusch, like Godard, also enjoys breaking well established cinematic rules. Jarmusch once said, “Forget the rest of the rule book. If a character walks out of frame to the left, who says that in the next shot, he has to enter the frame from the right?” (McGuigan 101).

Drawing attention to oneself as a filmmaker by violating cinematic rules and alluding to other works of fiction functions to deconstruct the usual goal of a film, which is to convince the audience, for as long as possible, that they are watching real people engaged in actual events. The documentary style of filmmaking often used by Godard and Jarmusch plays on an audience’s associations with that genre. When a film shot in this

style also draws attention to itself as a work of fiction, the fantasy is disrupted and the illusory aspects of the film are revealed.

The Nouvelle Vague adopted stylistic conventions such as minimal plot and the inclusion of small, seemingly insignificant details from the Italian Neorealists of the 1940's and 50's (Bordwell and Thompson 465). Jarmusch, who once said, "I have a theme and a kind of mood and the characters but not a plotline that runs straight through" (Jacobson 13) also borrows from Neorealism.

The Neorealists: Ideology and Ambiguity

The Neorealists "tended to loosen up narrative relations" (Bordwell and Thompson 463). Like the Neorealists, Jarmusch rejects classic narrative devices and focuses more on the complexity of every-day events. The characters in Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* are depicted doing such mundane activities as vacuuming and watching television. In *Down by Law*, there is a lengthy shot of three characters playing cards and not saying a word. Scenes like these are ways for counter-culture filmmakers to subvert established rules of drama and the cinema. Ideologically, the films of the Neorealists, Jarmusch, Godard and much of the Nouvelle Vague share a critical approach to capitalism. Jarmusch says that he reacts against capitalist values, specifically American, by centering his films on ordinary people and every-day events:

America is about objectifying everything and making it marketable, about greed and profit. I react against that by making films about displaced or marginal characters and the seemingly inconsequential little things they do. (Sante 207)

The form of social criticism employed by the Neorealists is complicated by the disjointed style of its films and a tendency toward ambiguity:

Although the causes of characters' actions are usually seen as concretely economic and political (poverty, unemployment, exploitation), the effects are often fragmentary and inconclusive. (Bordwell and Thompson 464)

According to Bordwell and Thompson, "The ambiguity of Neorealist films is...a product of narration that refuses to yield an omniscient knowledge of events, as if acknowledging that the totality of reality is simply unknowable" (464). James Monaco delivers a description of Godard's films that is similar to the philosophy of the Neorealists:

Godard's films require participation, trained as we have been to expect instant gratification from our cinematic commodities, we have too little preparation for appreciating the kind of open dialectic which forms Godard's

films...They form questions, they don't draw conclusions.

(101-2)

Jarmusch's films also tend to lack definitive conclusions. He once said, "I think the only films, or works of expression in any form, that are politically effective are those that ask questions and that cause the audience to ask questions" (Sante 207). He goes on to state that "whenever I watch a film—even if I almost completely agree with its political aims—I will still lose my interest as soon as I notice that the conclusions are self-evident" (Eue and Stukenbrock 5).

Jarmusch's films, like those of the Neorealists, are ambiguous. They suggest that the contemplation of life and its details is more effective than a prescriptive worldview, or the belief that a single ideology will effectively alleviate social and political ills in and of itself. The philosophy behind Jim Jarmusch's style and that of the Neorealists focuses more individuals than the community as a whole by encouraging audiences to come up with their own conclusions. This emphasis on an individual's relation to society is concurrent with other themes in his work. For instance, those elements that he inherited from Japanese filmmakers like Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu.

Japanese Cinema: Experiments in Structure
and Themes Associated with Communication and Spirituality

Instead of building a story around classic examples of plot structure, Jarmusch often employs other structural techniques. *Mystery Train*, for instance, is constructed out of three distinct stories, which are sutured together by sound motifs (a voice on a radio and a gun shot). In the tradition of Godard, each story is preceded by a title, printed against a black screen. The recurring motifs in the narratives cue the spectator that he or she is watching different stories occurring at the same time. *Night on Earth*, Jarmusch's fourth film, is also constructed out of different stories held together by a recurring motif. As in *Mystery Train*, the stories all occur at exactly the same time. In this case, the viewer is made aware that the narratives happen simultaneously not by sound, but by visual cues. Before each separate narrative, there is a shot of five clocks on a wall. The name of a different city is printed under each clock to show the time and place of the subsequent story. The audience watches as time regresses—the hands of the clocks actually move backwards to reset for the beginning of each new narrative. Instead of a traditional plot structure, with exposition, rising/falling action, and resolution, Jarmusch deconstructs time in *Mystery Train* and *Night on Earth*, employing visual and sound motifs to link together separate narratives.

These experiments in structure are heavily influenced by Japanese cinema as well as the Italian Neorealists. The structure of *Mystery Train* was probably inspired most by

Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950)⁴ is a narrative with an unusual temporality. A single story is told three different times from three points of view. Like *Mystery Train*, the three narratives happen simultaneously.

The static camera, silences, and low-angle shots in Jarmusch's films were probably inspired in part by Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu. Louis Giannetti writes that "quiet composition is...typical of all but Ozu's early films: the low-positioned camera rarely moved from its medium-shot contemplation of faces and figures" (161). Ozu avoids manipulative camera angles by placing his camera "four-feet from the floor...[because] he believed that value judgements are implied through the use of angles" (Giannetti 15). This style of cinematography is less manipulative because all characters are shot from the same angle. Ozu also avoids shooting from above, because it causes the audience to look down on the characters. Ozu "treated his characters as equals; his approach discourages us from viewing them either condescendingly or sentimentally" (Giannetti 15).

The camera in *Stranger Than Paradise* is almost always either lower than the characters or at eye-level. Often a character's head will move out of the shot if they stand or walk too close to the camera. For instance, the shot at the beginning of *Stranger Than Paradise* shows Eva, a Hungarian immigrant, first arriving in New York. The camera is

⁴ As another allusion, the book *Rashomon* (on which the film is based) appears in Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: the Way of the Samurai*.

very low. At one point she walks toward the camera and disappears from the scene. All the scenes inside a small New York apartment are also shot from a low angle. In *Mystery Train*, there is a long scene that Jarmusch calls the “Ozu scene.” It is a medium shot, with the camera low to the floor, seemingly contemplating the faces of a Japanese couple (Mitzuko and Jun) that are having a conversation:

We call this the Ozu shot...the camera shows Mitzuko standing in the bathroom doorway, then cuts back to the first shot of Jun. Mitzuko comes into the frame and sits next to him [Jun], and a charming scene is played out...in one long take. (McGuigan 103)

As in the films of Ozu, Jarmusch’s compositions are carefully planned. In *The Director’s Vision: A Concise Guide to the Art of 250 Great Filmmakers*, Geoff Andrew writes that Jarmusch’s compositions “are uncluttered, often static and oddly formal, stressing the solitude of characters seemingly obsessed with self-definition” (104). The “solitude of characters” in Jarmusch’s films is also an element that he shares with Ozu. Most characters in Ozu’s films are unable to relate to each other very well, and usually cannot express what they want to say until it is too late. Ozu’s films, such as *Tokyo Story* and *Record of a Tenement Gentleman*, deal with characters from different generations who cannot express their feelings to each other. When an old woman grudgingly agrees to take care of an orphan in *Record of a Tenement Gentleman*, she spends most of the

film trying to find another home for him. It is not until he is gone that she realizes she cares for the child and has treated him badly. In *Tokyo Story*, an elderly couple go to Tokyo to visit their adult children. The children, however, are too involved in their own lives to spend much time with their parents. When the couple returns to their home, the mother dies. The children realize that they have missed a valuable opportunity to spend time with their mother or have a meaningful conversation with her. There is a similar theme in Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise*. Referring to the film, Jarmusch says, "I think the subject of *Stranger Than Paradise* is people who are about to leave each other, and as soon as the other person has left, they know what they would have wanted to say, but then it is too late" (Von Bagh and Kaurismäki 76). In *Stranger Than Paradise*, a first-generation Hungarian immigrant named Willie does not want his Hungarian cousin Eva to stay with him in his New York apartment. Once Eva has moved to Cleveland, however, he obviously misses her. One year later, Willie and friend Eddie drive to Ohio to visit her, but once they arrive, the three have nothing to say to each other. Like characters in Ozu's films, the three main characters in *Stranger Than Paradise* cannot express what they would really like to say to each other.

As in Ozu's films, sex is absent in Jarmusch's early movies (*Stranger Than Paradise* and *Down by Law*). Film analyst Sylvie Pierre views the lack of sex, in part, as a symptom of repression:

The lack of serious attention to sex and politics, and prankish humor, and the low-angle shooting style in Ozu's cinema as symptoms of arrested development; his obsession with perpetual games and...a displacement of eroticism. (Freiberg 182)

Sexual desire is also suppressed in most of Jarmusch's films. The lack of sex leaves room for more abstract representations of desire, like a character's longing to keep moving from one destination to another. With the exception of his last film, all of Jim Jarmusch's movies are about people traveling. The destinations are seldom clear; characters are driven by a desire for something that can never fully be attained. In *Stranger Than Paradise*, Willie and Eddie's arrival in Cleveland is anticlimactic, leaving them to create a new symbol on which to focus their desire. Willie, Eddie, and Eva conceive of a destination that is the antithesis of everything they have known in Hungary, New York, or Ohio. They decide to drive to tropical Florida. When they reach their destination, however, they are once again disappointed. Shot in black and white, the Florida landscape, with its grayish sky, looks remarkably similar to the snow-covered fields of Ohio. After they reach their destination, they immediately conceive of a new one. The cycle repeats itself several times. These ever-changing destinations are examples of Lacan's *objet petit a*, which "can never be attained, which is really the cause of desire rather than that towards which desire tends...The drives do not seek to attain the *objet petit a*, but rather circle round it" (Evans 125). The *objet petit a* is generally

associated with sexual desire; however, since sex has been eliminated from *Stranger Than Paradise*, this desire manifests itself, metaphorically, in alternate forms.

Violence, like sex, is also absent in Jarmusch's early movies and manifests itself in abstract ways. Jarmusch claims that he deliberately excluded sex and violence in the early films in order to focus on spirituality:

I want to point out that I have very consciously kept violence and sex, and anything else that is used for the sake of sensation, out of the film. Not because I don't like that in films, but because I want people to pay more attention to the spiritual realm. (Eue and Stukenbrock 4)

Ozu, like Jarmusch, was interested in spirituality. Not necessarily spirituality in an ecclesiastical or religious sense, but more of a spirituality that relates to sacred matters (those things entitled to reverence and respect). Paul Shrader argues that Ozu's films capture a sense of spirituality in Japanese Zen Buddhist culture, and therefore finds the slow pace and silences to be "transcendental":

[Ozu documents] with extreme precision, banal, everyday rituals; introduce disparities and disjunctions which disturb the equilibrium; and finally transcend rather than resolve the disturbances through aesthetic strategies that are

imbued with spiritual, religious, and philosophical
meaning. (Freiberg 179)

Shrader says that in Ozu's films, "the transcendence is achieved through his use of 'codas,' a montage of still-life shots that partake of the spirit of Zen" (Freiberg 179).

Borrowing Ozu's meditative style, Jarmusch also creates a kind of Zen-like aesthetic, but spirituality in Jarmusch's films is not entirely similar to its representation in Ozu's work.

In Jarmusch's movies, for instance, spirituality (as it relates to characters) is quite different from Ozu's films. Jarmusch's characters often find something sacred outside their own cultural environment. For instance, the Native American in *Dead Man* finds spirituality in the poetry of the nineteenth-century English poet William Blake. The white American in the film, on the contrary, finds something sacred in Native American culture. In *Ghost Dog*, the central figure, an African American man who grew up poor on the streets of a large American city, discovers spirituality in the Japanese text, *Hagakure: Book of the Samurai*. Eva, a Hungarian immigrant in *Stranger Than Paradise*, discovers it in the songs of American musician Screaming J. Hawkings and Japanese tourists in *Mystery Train* revere American pop culture icons. Characters in Jarmusch's films seem to resist the pervading ideologies or belief systems of their own cultures in order to find meaning through the discovery of other cultures and foreign ideas. His films are not about spirituality as prescribed by a dominant ideology, but instead present spirituality as something to seek out and discover. In this sense,

Jarmusch's version of spirituality is different from Ozu's, whose films reflect a Zen Buddhist tradition linked to his Japanese culture. In Jarmusch's films, on the other hand, characters choose for themselves how they will give meaning to their lives and their deaths through the discovery of other cultures and ideas. It is Jarmusch's interest in other cultures and ideas that has shaped the depiction of America often presented in his films. It is a view of America that reflects international sympathies and the influence of foreign opinions about the United States. Jarmusch shares this international sentiment with American director Nicholas Ray, who Jarmusch was an assistant to while studying at New York University.

Nicholas Ray:
America Through Foreign Eyes

Jarmusch's depictions of America are conflicted. He seems to have an appreciation for a particular American spirit of individualism and the multiplicity of cultures that make up America. At the same time, his body of work reflects a distrust of capitalist values. The American director to whom Jarmusch gives the most credit as an influence is Nicholas Ray. Like Jarmusch, Ray's films both criticize and celebrate aspects of American culture. For instance, both directors make films about marginalized characters that provide an unconventional view of America. Jarmusch comments that "Nick Ray's films are always about outsiders" (Von Bagh and Kaurismäki 79), which is

the description Jarmusch usually gives of his own films. Referring to the central characters in *Stranger Than Paradise*, Jarmusch says, “all three of them are really outsiders. The view we get of America from all of them is very much outside of the expected one” (Jacobson 15).

Jarmusch acknowledges that Ray had an enormous impact on him both professionally and personally—especially his attitude about Hollywood:

I admire the way he managed to walk on a very thin edge:
making big budget films in Hollywood on the one hand and
bringing something subversive into each one of them on the
other hand. (Eue and Stukenbrock 10)

Nick Ray’s *Johnny Guitar* (1954) is an example of a subversive Hollywood movie.

Although a Western, the film is quite unconventional. According to Martin Scorsese, it “criticized the witch hunts of the McCarthy era” and reverses traditional depictions of men and women in the Western genre (Ray). Vienna, the female lead in the film, owns a bar that she built with her own money. She also wears pants and defiantly stands up to an angry mob of townspeople who hope to close down her establishment. The hero, on the other hand, is a “pacified, feminized male who has given up his gun for a guitar” (Bell-Metereau 92).

Ray is an American director who, like Jarmusch, has been appreciated more by European than American audiences and is one of the American filmmakers most revered

in *Cahiers du Cinéma*. In a foreword to Ray's *Johnny Guitar* available on Republic Pictures home video, director Martin Scorsese describes how the film was received in Europe as opposed to the United States. The film was not popular in America because it deviated from the traditional Western. In Europe, however,

taken out of its American context, they saw a totally different picture. They saw it for what it was, an intense, unconventional, stylized picture full of ambiguities and subtext that rendered it extremely modern. (Ray)

It is no surprise, therefore that Jarmusch would have been influenced by Ray's form of social satire. In Jarmusch's deconstruction of the Western entitled *Dead Man*, the male and female roles, as well as the roles of colonists and indigenous people, are juxtaposed to that of earlier depictions. Because of this, it is also not surprising that Jarmusch's Western, like *Johnny Guitar*, was unpopular with mass audiences in America (Rosenbaum, *Dead Man* 18). It is always a gamble whenever a director attempts to satirize and criticize a popular view of history, culture, or politics. In the case of *Dead Man*, Jarmusch "offers one of the ugliest portrayals of white American capitalism to be found in American movies" (Rosenbaum *Dead Man* 18). Conceivably, many Americans would be defensive about such a portrayal.

Like Ray, Jarmusch fits the *Cahiers du Cinéma* description of an auteur, because the ideas expressed in his films are also "essentially ideas about the world" (Dudley

Andrew 120). The wide range of filmmakers and film movements that have influenced Jarmusch (the Nouvelle Vague, the Italian Neorealists, Kurosawa, Ozu, and Nicholas Ray) have contributed elements related to politics, narrative structure, spirituality, philosophy, and cinematographic technique depicted in his films. The inclusion of such a multicultural and multigenerational set of cinematic influences reflects the director's international and historical sensibilities. Literary influences also convey Jarmusch's interest in history and multiculturalism and are linked to similar themes of politics, narrative structure, spirituality, and philosophy.

CHAPTER 2

LITERARY INFLUENCE FROM CHAUCER TO WHITMAN

In addition to cinematic influences, literature plays an important role in the creation of Jarmusch's individual style. References to authors and literary works are recurrent throughout his body of work. For example, Walt Whitman is mentioned in *Down by Law*, Chaucer in *Mystery Train*, and William Blake in *Dead Man*. Jarmusch credits the Japanese samurai text the *Hagakure: Book of the Samurai* by Yamamoto Tsunetomo and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* for inspiring *Ghost Dog*. Literature had significant impact on him as a child. In an interview, Jarmusch says, "It wasn't until I was in my mid-teens that I started thinking about theology, and it was literature that led me there" (Mckenna 4). Allusions to literature in the films of Jim Jarmusch contribute to major themes explored in his works, especially America, capitalism, industrialization, spirituality, marginalized characters, and cultural archetypes. In *Down by Law*, many of these themes are linked to the poetry of Walt Whitman, especially motifs associated with America, capitalist values, and marginalized characters.

Defining America:
Walt Whitman and *Down by Law*

Trapped in a jail cell with two Americans, a somewhat naïve Italian immigrant has a conversation (with himself). He says, “Do you like Walt Whitman? Yes, I like Walt Whitman very much: *Leaves of Grass*.” The Italian’s knowledge of the United States appears to come mainly from books and movies. There is an on-running joke in the film that his two American cellmates know less about American culture than he does, at least in certain aspects of American culture like its classic movies, writers, and poets. It takes an outsider, the film displays, to change the perspective one has of his or her own culture. In the case of *Down by Law*, the Italian’s perception of events is often quite different from that of the two Americans. They see only three walls and a set of iron bars in the Louisiana State Prison, but, fed on Hollywood prison movies, the Italian sees an opportunity for escape. In the Louisiana wilderness, the three convicts find a rundown shack. The Italian perceives it as hopeful possibility for refuge that results, quite unexpectedly, in the discovery of an Italian-owned restaurant in the middle of the Louisiana bayou. Colin Lawlor says that the foreigner in *Down by Law* “could be seen in essence a character of hope—someone who manages to find security in a world of obvious disparity” (2). Although Jarmusch’s plot twists are so unlikely as to border on the absurd, an atmosphere of hopefulness pervades in the film. Something pleasantly unexpected, it seems to say, lies behind every corner; all one needs do is continue hoping

and searching. The film's reference to *Leaves of Grass* is in fact quite appropriate given the common themes in both works: America (its attributes and shortcomings), marginalized characters, and an atmosphere of hopefulness.

Before pursuing filmmaking, Jarmusch studied poetry at Columbia University. In fact, the director compares his style of filmmaking to poetry. Commenting on his directorial career he says: "I consider myself a minor poet who writes fairly small poems" (Sante 148). In "Preface to the 1855 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*," Whitman gives a list of virtues that one must possess in order to live as a poet:

Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give
 alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and
 crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate
 tyrants...have patience and indulgence toward the people.

(2128)

Many of the characteristics that Whitman assigns to poets are shared by Jarmusch's characters. "Riches" are not an option for most of them, who typically own little or nothing. In *Ghost Dog*, the protagonist murders two hunters who boast that they have just killed a black bear. The white hunters, in black face, defend their actions, stating, "you don't see many of these black fuckers around here anymore, so when you have a clear shot of one, you take it." The scene, seeping in irony and symbolism, depicts Ghost Dog avenging a history of violence. He is not only defending nature against man, he is

reacting against a history of slavery, lynching, and black crow laws. Ghost Dog's final comment to the men, "some cultures consider bears equal to men," has a double meaning when the bear's symbolism is taken into account. In the past, humans have made arbitrary rules concerning what was appropriate behavior toward nature and other humans. Whereas some cultures would consider a bear equal to themselves, others, like that of the young United States, did not even see other humans as their equals.

In a sense, Ghost Dog asserts both a love of animals and a hatred of tyrants when he shoots the men in this scene. Both are qualities valued in Whitman's "Leaves of Grass." Whitman, however, only dictates that one should "hate," he never says anything about "killing" tyrants. Ghost Dog's actions are certainly more extreme. But whereas Whitman's statements seem as though they should be taken literally, the scene in *Ghost Dog* is symbolic. Ghost Dog's retaliation symbolizes the killing off of a once brutally oppressive regime that privileged white over black Americans.

Whitman says, "stand up for the stupid and crazy" and "have patience and indulgence toward the people" (2128). Characters in Jarmusch's films are "stupid" and "crazy" in the sense that they do not fit into society. In *Dead Man*, an urbanized accountant from Cleveland is completely out of place in the Western wilderness. His companion, a Native American named Nobody⁵, was outcast from his tribe because they

⁵ May be an allusion to Homer's *The Odyssey*. Odysseus escapes from the Cyclops by telling him, "my name is Nobody." It may also be a reference to Blake's poem "To Nobodaddy."

assumed his tales about the “white man’s” civilization were lies. Ghost Dog is also out-of-place, living the life of a samurai in a large American city. Jarmusch’s depictions of displaced characters are sympathetic, however. The views of outsiders are more insightful, because they see what the others cannot. In *Night on Earth*, a taxi driver (an African immigrant living in Paris) gives a ride to two African men who have conned a French ambassador out of some of money. The men tease the driver. He is from the Ivory Coast (an Ivorian), which is a pun in French meaning, “cannot see a thing” (Il voit rien). The African businessmen try to belittle the driver, reminding him that he is African and not French. The driver orders the men out of the cab, and later picks up a blind woman. Preoccupied with the conversation he just had with the businessmen, the driver asks the blind woman, “What color am I?” She responds, stating, “for me the world of color doesn’t mean anything...I feel colors.” Like the businessmen in the beginning, the driver now feels a sense of superiority. He reminds the blind woman that she is different by pointing out that her handicap makes it impossible for her to perform certain tasks like driving a car. The driver is fascinated with the woman partly because her blindness erases what he considers to be his handicap—his color. Because she is blind, she possesses an insight that extends beyond what the driver can comprehend. She proves that she is quite capable of mastering difficult situations, and although she may not be able to see, she tells the driver that she has felt things he never will.

In a broader sense, the “stupid” and “crazy” refers to those who are deemed different by society, but difference is largely a matter of perception. In Jarmusch’s films, the ostracism of characters gives them wisdom. The cab driver perceives his handicap to be his African heritage. As the businessmen said in the beginning, he “cannot see a thing.” Unlike the blind woman, he does not see how his difference is a virtue.

Whitman says, “The greatest poet does not moralize or make applications of morals” (2129). In a sense, however, Whitman is moralizing when he dictates that one should love nature and hate riches. Jarmusch also prescribes right and wrong forms of behavior in *Dead Man* when he condemns the treatment of European Americans toward Native Americans in scenes where a missionary sells infected blankets to Indians and pioneers shoot buffalo from train windows. What saves Jarmusch’s films from coming across heavy-handed is their ambiguity. Unexpected things happen and narratives tend to end with questions. Passive characters murder in *Dead Man*, heroes die in *Ghost Dog*, and friends part in *Stranger Than Paradise*, which ends with the question, “Is there a paradise on earth? (or, at least, in America?).” Judging from the film, the answer is probably “no,” but it ends with all three characters wandering in transit toward some other destination. The question is left unanswered. The characters found no paradise during the course of the film, but it may still be waiting around the corner. *Ghost Dog*, in addition, ends with the unanswered question, “Does gender or occupation determine violent behavior?” Ghost Dog and his nemesis, the head of the Mafia, are parts of a

society that has precipitated their life of violence. When they die, their roles are passed on to two girls: the Mafioso's daughter and Ghost Dog's protégé (a girl with a passion for reading). While sliding on a pair of dark sunglasses, the Mafioso's daughter instructs the driver of her car to leave the scene of Ghost Dog's death. Sitting under a sink in her mother's kitchen, the young girl who may soon take Ghost Dog's place, reads from the *Hagakure* (a Japanese samurai code of conduct that she has inherited from Ghost Dog). She will soon become a woman and may, like the daughter of the Mafia boss, inherit the role of her predecessor. The movie is ambiguous in indicating whether this inheritance is a good thing. There is a scene where a female cop stops two Mafia gangsters on the road. The men contemplate whether or not they should shoot her, because she is a woman. One of them finally does, proclaiming, "They want to be equal. I just made her equal." The film seems to suggest that women should not try to fill male roles in the way they have traditionally been held by men, because men (within the context of the film) have been the perpetrators of violence. Once again, however, the film is ambiguous. One could certainly argue the opposite: that the film suggests that gender makes no difference. Nevertheless, the conclusion is open-ended: will Ghost Dog's protégé carry out acts of violence as her predecessor had, or will she choose a different path? It ends before a conclusion is drawn.

As discussed in chapter one of this thesis, Jarmusch's films are essentially minimalist. Formally, they are quite simple, lacking elaborate editing or effects. In the

“Preface to Leaves of Grass,” Whitman writes, “Nothing is better than simplicity” (2129). Simplicity of form is the foundation of both Jarmusch’s and Whitman’s styles. Formally, Whitman wrote in a free-verse poetic style that was relatively new for his time. Beginning with the Romantics in England, namely Wordsworth and Coleridge, poets wanted to invent a style that was free of aristocratic conventions. They were creating art for a new generation. The dawn of the Industrial Revolution prompted the growth of a middle class in Europe. Aristocratic values were declining. Jarmusch’s aesthetic style, like the Romantics, intends to subvert convention, although he refuses to label his work “rebellious”:

It wasn’t in our minds to be rebellious or anything formally. It was just to do something we thought was interesting and get away from this kind of horrible TV editing and language of TV and Spielberg-type editing.

(Stark 52)

Whitman subverted the conventions of his era by writing free verse poetry in spoken language. Jarmusch’s films are subversive because, stylistically, they are quite unlike commercial films. The slowness, minimal dialogue, and tendency toward formalism in his films put them in opposition to current cinematic trends:

[Jarmusch's] interest in formalism—which makes him unlikely ever to join the Hollywood mainstream—is

balanced by subtle wit, the warmth he clearly feels for his characters, and a bemused, intelligent interest in the unfamiliar backroads of America. (104)

The “formalism” Andrew refers to has to do with the “sparing dialogue, generally minimalist performances and a preference for long takes” in Jarmusch’s films (104).

Concerning America, Whitman writes that its most significant attribute is its “common people”:

Other states indicate themselves in their deputies...but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors...but always most in the common people. (2124)

Like Whitman’s poetry, Jarmusch’s films are about “the common people” in the sense that his characters are neither rich nor famous. As in the case of Willie and Eddie in *Stranger Than Paradise*, characters often either have no occupation or none is mentioned. Those who work have jobs that range from pimps and gamblers to cab drivers and ice cream venders. In *Seconds Magazine*, Thomas Colbath and Steven Blush say that Jim Jarmusch’s films are about working class characters and their effort to survive in a world that does not value their chosen or inherited lifestyles:

Jarmusch's films are about the struggle to survive in a world that doesn't allow interest in those who don't have elaborate educations and high-end pedigrees. It examines the day-to-day exigencies of those who live hand-to-mouth, either by circumstance or by the choice to reject the conventions of contemporary economic and social standards. (1)

In a statement about America, Jarmusch says that one of the most positive attributes is the ordinary people one meets “just out on the road somewhere,” but not in American politics or attitudes in general:

I love America as a country itself and the landscapes and, for the most part, people that I meet just out on the road somewhere. But as far as the government and the recent attitudes of the American public, I find them appalling.

(Belsito 42)

Ambition is one of those American qualities that Jarmusch terms “appalling” (Belsito 35). His characters are passive, living on the fringes of society, and have no apparent interest in monetary success or upward social mobility. Jarmusch's films possess many of the qualities praised in Whitman's poetry, especially an interest in “the common people,” ordinary events, and a rejection of money and power as objects of desire. As

Jarmusch puts it, “I’m interested in stories that are about people that are outside of things...that are not obsessed with ambition or climbing to the top” (Belsito 35).

Jarmusch's critical view of America is carried over into his third film *Mystery Train*. Also focussed on working-class characters, *Mystery Train* addresses other themes associated with America, including racism and popular culture.

A Pop Culture Pilgrimage: Chaucer and *Mystery Train*

The first of three sequences in *Mystery Train* (called “Far from Yokohama”) is about a Japanese couple who visit Memphis as a present-day pilgrimage to historical locations associated with American rock and roll legends. While walking past a road sign called “Chaucer Street,” one tourist says the name with a Japanese accent, inadvertently pronouncing Chaucer’s name as it would have been in his lifetime (Conrad 44). References to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* are present throughout *Mystery Train*. For example, religious iconography (like Chaucer’s shrine of Saint Thomas a Becket) appears in the form of Elvis paintings, money is exchanged for tales when an Italian sojourner pays a hustler for his story about a mysterious encounter with Elvis’ ghost, and a pilgrimage is undertaken by Japanese pop-culture worshipers, whose icons are modern examples of the Christian saints hailed by Chaucer’s travelers. Peter Conrad says that “for Jarmusch...the whole world has become an extension of America, colonized by the

icons of pop” (41). Although this is true, Jarmusch’s depiction is satirical. In an interview, he describes his intention for making icons of popular culture today’s sacred objects:

You imagine America in the future, when people from the East or wherever visit our culture after the decline of the American empire...all they’ll really have to visit will be homes of rock’n roll stars and movie stars. (Sante 148)

Peter Conrad argues in *To Be Continued: Four Stories and Their Survival* that *Mystery Train* is ultimately a postmodern interpretation of Chaucer’s medieval poem. Conrad contrasts Jarmusch’s film with modernist interpretations of Chaucer’s tale. According to Conrad, Jarmusch’s film falls neatly into the category of postmodern art, because his characters “drift affectlessly impelled by the overload of images which is the fatigued plight of post-modernism” (41), unlike modernist versions of Chaucer’s Tale (Eliot’s *The Wasteland* and Michael Powell’s film *A Canterbury Tale*), which encompass a “fraught sense that the end is near, and the end compels a return to beginnings” (38). Conrad says, “The mood of post-modernism is less stricken. It reviews a world of babbling languages and transitory, deracinated populations...but it refuses to be dismayed” (39). In light of Conrad’s argument, Jarmusch’s film is postmodern in that it offers little explanation about a character’s situation or past. The second sequence in the film, titled “A Ghost,” centers on an Italian widow who sojourns in Memphis before

returning her dead husband to Italy. If the Italian woman is intended as a modern Wife of Bath, she has only minimal similarities to Chaucer's dynamic and verbose widow.

Jarmusch's character says very little, probably because she speaks so little English. The film, regardless, never explains what her husband died of or why she is in the United States. Furthermore, as Conrad states, the film doesn't encourage much speculation on the subject, because, frankly, the widow seems to care so little herself. Characters move in and out of each other's lives without forming relationships:

characters cross each other's paths, but minimalism declines to organize show-downs between them or to involve them in relationships. Nor does the film have an interest in their previous history: it is useless to speculate on what the Italian woman's husband died of, since she herself cares only minimally. (40-41)

Although Conrad is correct in defining *Mystery Train* as minimalist, his insistence that it is altogether postmodern and therefore "affectless" and "flippant" (39) disregards the more serious themes addressed in the film. While describing a scene where a working-class English immigrant shoots a liquor store worker, Conrad emphasizes the "pointlessness" of the shooting: "A drunken wastrel from the north of England...runs amok when his girlfriend leaves him, [and] pointlessly shoots the owner of a liquor store" (40). The "wastrel from the north of England" is an outsider who chooses to live and

work in an all-black neighborhood in Memphis. Most of the men in a bar (where the clientele is entirely black) merely tolerate him. The bar, ironically called “Shades,” is emblematic of social segregation, which is still common throughout most of the South. In fact, the only “shade” of skin color in the bar (with the exception of the Englishman) is black. It is fairly obvious that the Englishman could have chosen a different part of town to frequent and would probably have been more welcome there. Unlike his American counterparts, however, he does not conform to social stereotypes. His white, American brother-in-law shies away from the bar. While entering with an African American companion, he says, “I think maybe I should wait in the truck. This isn’t really a familiar neighborhood for me.” His African-American friend Will irately responds, “Come on, Charlie, they let white people in there.”

The Englishman’s feelings of devotion toward his fellow factory workers precipitates his shooting of a liquor-store worker who insults his African American friend. The liquor-store worker tells the Englishman, “Niggas, man, you gotta watch ‘em every second.” Although the cliché of the heroic white man defending African Americans in films like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Glory*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*, comes to mind in this scene, in Jarmusch’s film the cliché is intentionally ironic. The Englishman is at most a sympathetic character and at least an antihero. Rather than changing the social situation in his community or for his friend, he merely involves the only two people willing to come to his defense in a crime they had nothing to do with. At

one point, the Englishman sobers up from his night of heavy drinking and admits regretting having shot the liquor store worker. Later, his African American friend sobers up as well and reveals how alienated he feels, despite the company of his white counterparts. Comparing his situation to the television program “Lost in Space,” he says, “That’s how I feel hang’n out with you two snowflakes—lost in space.” The Englishman replies, “Don’t start that racist shit with us...we didn’t choose to be white.” Jarmusch’s characters are complex, embodying often-conflicting opinions about their place in society. They resist racial stereotyping, depicting the complicated nature of race relations.

In the following scene, the three men take refuge from the police in the same hotel where the two previous episodes of the film have taken place. Several times their conversation turns to issues of race, and once conflates into mild bickering. The Englishman initiates the topic of race, pointing out that, despite the fact that the hotel is in a black neighborhood with black employees, all of the paintings are of Elvis: “It’s a black hotel, black neighborhood, black dudes working the door, why don’t they have a picture of Otis Redding or Martin Luther King?” His African American friend responds, “Because this is a white-owned hotel. They just got the brothers working here.” The theme of white exploitation of African Americans permeates the film. Jarmusch points out hypocritical aspects of Memphis’ cultural history through the inclusion of the original version of a popular Elvis song. Memphis, a city with a rhythm and blues musical

history, is best known for its white rock and roll star Elvis. “Mystery Train” (also the title of the movie) was originally composed by black blues singer Junior Parker (Conrad 44), who has long since been forgotten. Today Parker’s song is remembered in Elvis’s rendition, but in Jarmusch’s film, Parker’s version is the last thing the audience hears. *Mystery Train* comes to a close with Junior Parker’s haunting original version of the song—a deliberate contrast from Elvis’ faster rendition in the film’s opening.

In his analysis of *Mystery Train*, Peter Conrad says that Jarmusch’s “modern minimalist version” of the Canterbury Tales both contradicts and compliments Chaucer’s text. It is contradictory in that the film is atheistic, jumbled, and internationalized. Yet, as Conrad points out, it retains Chaucer’s lack of closure. Conrad describes how the last scene in *Mystery Train* concludes the film abruptly, yet effectively. It begins with the fast pace of a moving train and ends with the train pulling away slowly from the station. In addition, the film opens with Elvis’ lively version of the song *Mystery Train* and ends with the slower, more lugubrious version by the song’s composer Junior Parker (44):

Chaucer sends his characters on a journey which is
discontinued only because it is so endlessly continuous.

Jarmusch, after his pilgrims go their separate ways, calls an
unexpected halt... The train has for the moment run out of
steam, without arriving anywhere. The end, as Chaucer
wished, can once more be banished to the future. (44-45)

Jarmusch's film ends with three fugitives running from the police. The Japanese couple is back on the train headed for another rock and roll Mecca, and the Italian woman runs for her plane to Rome. The image turns to black, leaving the stories with no or moral, quiet unlike the tales of Chaucer's travelers. As Conrad contends, *Mystery Train* retains the spirit of openness, which Chaucer's Tale tends toward in its "endlessly continuous" journey. Like *The Canterbury Tales*, *Mystery Train* is a social satire, but without a moralistic ending.

Westward Industrial Expansion:
William Blake and *Dead Man*

Jarmusch's fifth film, *Dead Man*, is a modern Western that is far from typical of the genre. It can best be described as a deconstruction of the traditional Western, turning every John Ford cliché on its head from location and rhythm to characterization and dialogue. Jarmusch questions and criticizes symbols that have become standard in America's mythmaking, including a view of man's conquering and exploitation of land as progress, Native Americans as obstacles of nature, a hero who overcomes obstacles through violence, and a depiction of women as useful adjuncts to men either through their services as prostitutes or by roles as pioneer wives. Director Peter Bogdanovich describes the Western genre as a symbol of nineteenth century western expansion:

The guy with the white hat riding into town is almost a metaphor for the taming of America, a kind of propaganda for the American way of life—you know, get rid of the Indians, get rid of the bad man and get the American Dream going. (Norman 253)

Jarmusch's film contradicts this image of the Western, as David Laky argues, by creating a "rather bleak look into American society, Jarmusch's landscape is one of a rather hostile America. Jarmusch does not show the magnificence of America" (6).

Many of the clichés associated with the Western originated in the writings of cultural historian Fredric Jackson Turner. *The Frontier in American Culture* is a collection of essays that examines how stereotypes of the Western originated. White says that Turner, the first renowned scholar of the American frontier, created an image of the West that "quickly emerged as an incarnation repeated in thousands of high schools and college classrooms and text books" (12). It is Turner's depiction of the West, therefore, that has, until only recently, been America's premier image. It is an image that privileges the view of pioneers over Native Americans and depicts the civilizing of unsettled lands as progress. Turner tended to view conflict with American Indians as a necessary evil in the overall taming of the frontier:

[Turner] recognized conflict with the Indians, but for him it was merely part of a much larger conflict with wilderness

that engulfed settlers in a primitive world and necessitated the pioneers' initial regression and subsequent recapitulation of the stages of civilization. Conquest was not studied, 'it carried no burden of guilt.' (Grassman 19)

The hero in Jarmusch's film does not go west in an effort to civilize the wilderness; he goes in search of an office job in a steelworks company. Instead of conquering the land, as most Western heroes, the land conquers. Unskilled in finding food in the wilderness, he nearly starves after wandering for days in the forest. Unlike the classic Western image, the white man neither kills nor saves the native; rather the native attempts to save him, and after failing, helps the hero accept death by aiding his passage into the "spirit world." The film's attitude towards death may be the most unconventional aspect. Jonathan Rosenbaum writes that Jarmusch's depictions of death are quite unlike those found in Hollywood films (157). He describes how Jarmusch's death scenes are uncomfortable for viewers who have grown accustomed to violence in movies:

Every time someone fires a gun at someone else in this film, the gesture is awkward, unheroic, pathetic, it's an act that leaves a mess and is deprived of any pretense at existential purity, creating a sense of embarrassment and overall discomfort in the viewer. (*Dead Man* 37)

Dead Man marks a turning point in Jarmusch's career, where he begins addressing issues of violence, death, and racial injustice more seriously. The racial injustice depicted in the film is the American government's deliberate genocide of thousands of Native American Indians. Spirituality and death, furthermore, are depicted in ways atypical of the Western genre.

Jarmusch manipulates viewer expectations when a Native American named Nobody, who has been living in the wilderness, begins describing his childhood. The spectator learns that he was kidnapped from his tribe and educated in England. Throughout the film, he repeats lines like, "The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn from the crow," and "Drive your cart and plow over the bones of the dead." Those in the audience who are familiar with the poetry William Blake notice that the metaphors are not adopted from Nobody's Native American culture, but are actually lines from Blake's poetry. The Native American in *Dead Man* represents American Indian people, culture, and values that were almost completely destroyed because of the United States' western expansion. The character named William Blake in the film is an anti-archetype of the Western hero, symbolizing modern, post-industrial-age man. He is passive, complacent, uneasy in nature, and utterly unprepared to deal with his own death.

During an interview, film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum tells Jarmusch, "A subjective impression I had when I first saw *Dead Man* at Cannes is that it's your first political film. The view of America is a lot darker than in your previous films" (161).

Jarmusch responds, “Unlike my other films, the story invited me to have a lot of other themes that exist peripherally: violence, guns, American history, a sense of place, spirituality, William Blake and poetry” (Rosenbaum 161). The image of nineteenth-century America is highly subjective in *Dead Man*. In many of Jarmusch’s films, especially the later ones, violence is depicted favorably when it is directed toward those who support America’s brutal, racially undemocratic history. Susanne Maier argues that in *Dead Man* Jarmusch supports violence, but in a way that is unlike other Western films:

Even though [the hero] subverts the conventions of the genre, he remains true to the ethics of the classic Western hero by taking his revenge on the true Philistines. As an agent of (poetic) justice, he comes to punish the white savages for their sins against America’s indigenous people.

(Maier 9)

Maier affirms that the most corrupt character in *Dead Man* is the missionary, who represents the ultimate in cynicism and hypocrisy in relation to attitudes toward Native Americans: “The film’s ultimate Philistine is the trading post missionary whom Blake and Nobody come across toward the end of the film. The missionary represents a cynical version of Puritan dogma” (Maier 9). Right and wrong exist in *Dead Man*, but not in the way they have been classically defined by the Western. The vision of America that

Fredric Jackson Turner established a century before is turned on its head as Jarmusch attempts to establish a new version of American history.

The protagonist in Jarmusch's *Dead Man* is named after the English poet William Blake. Jarmusch's film and the poetry of William Blake portray a common view of industrialization. Susanne M. Maier states in "Stranger in a Strange Land" that the poems of William Blake "speak of the detrimental effects of both the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism" (8). Among the negative effects of industrialization in America were the deliberate killing of buffalo, the main source of food for many American Indians, in order to expand the railroads (and a deliberate attempt on the part of the US government to exterminate the Indians); the construction of cities that permanently altered land that had been relatively unchanged until the introduction of Europeans; and the introduction of guns. In the opening scene of *Dead Man*, the central character is on a train from Cleveland to a Western town aptly named "Machine." Upon sighting a herd of buffalo, the passengers on the train poke rifles out of the windows and open fire. Maier says that in *Dead Man* the pioneers are the true villains:

It is not the Indian who is presented as the villain but the white man. As the Representative Man of Western Civilization, he is the true barbarian, ravaging virgin soil for riches and depriving the Indians of their hunting grounds by killing off buffalo for sport. (Maier 3)

When Blake arrives in the town, he is dropped into a foreboding and aggressive place, decadent in its progress:

The film's paradigmatic Western polis, which goes by the telling name of 'Machine,' is dominated by symbols of death. Its muddy streets show a surreal array of heaped-up animal skulls and skins, newly-carved coffins, bleating cattle, snorting horses, and the grinding cogwheel machinery of Dickinson's Metalworks. (4)

Dickinson, the film's antagonist, symbolizes capitalism and patriarchy (Maier 4).

Ruling over a steelworks company, Dickinson inadvertently rules the town where he lives: "The cigar-smoking Dickinson, whose office is adorned with a huge portrait of himself and similarly a huge stuffed grizzly, embodies the spirit of capitalism" (Maier 4). Jarmusch's industrial city signifies the decadence of urbanization. The black smoke that billows from the "Dickinson" factory and the faces of the town's inhabitants are reminiscent of a Charles Dickens novel or William Blake's London: "I wonder thro' each charter'd street / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow, / And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe." (Blake, "London" 1-4).

Jarmusch's image of the West opposes that which is usually depicted in American recorded history and mythology. To Jarmusch, like Blake, industrialization is the evil of modern society. Both Jarmusch and Blake offer no progressive answer to the detrimental

effects of industrialization and capitalism, but rather remind us of those things, which these institutions destroyed. Michael Ferber says in *The Social Vision of Blake* that if Blake were to support a revolution against capitalism, it would not emphasize a new progressive ideology:

Blake reminds us that an anti-capitalist revolution should not try to march more efficiently into the future only to complete capitalism's task, but should restore, in part, what capitalism has obliterated. (52)

Jarmusch merges Blake's prophecy of capitalism's effects and a hindsight view of capitalism's employment in America's history. As Blake had done nearly two hundred years before through the use of contrasting images, Jarmusch delivers a poignant socio-political message that neither preaches nor condescends:

[Blake's] poetry, like Jarmusch's film, is characterized by the poignant use of contrasting images. In Jarmusch's film, Blake's poetry symbolizes a possible union between the visible and the invisible, between life and death, between what is known and what may forever remain unknown.

(Maier 9)

Like themes of capitalism and industrialization, *Dead Man* and Blake's poetry share issues of identity. Character roles, usually clearly defined in the Western genre,

become mixed and inverted in Jarmusch's film. The hero, for instance, has a brief love affair with a retired prostitute named Thel, who is based on a character from William Blake's "The Book of Thel." Blake's Thel struggles with her life's purpose: "because I fade away, / And all shall say, 'Without a use this shining woman liv'd, / Or did she only live to be at death the food of worms?'" (Blake, "The Book of Thel" 14-16). Jarmusch's Thel is a complex character, who, like Blake's Thel, struggles with questions of existence and identity. Brian Wilkie argues in *Blake's Thel and Oothoon* that Blake's character is overly concerned with her role. The good that is within her is more important than the good she will serve (63). Like Blake's Thel, Jarmusch's character struggles with her identity. She gives up prostitution in order to make a living selling paper flowers in the street. Her decision to change her vocation and is combated by at least one of the town's inhabitants who proclaims, "We liked you better when you was a whore." Thel, nevertheless, pursues a creative interest that is personally fulfilling, if not lucrative.

Jarmusch's depiction of Native Americans is, like his depiction of women, unconventional for the genre. When asked about creating the character Nobody, Jarmusch says that he wanted to make him more complex than typical representation of American Indians in film:

I just wanted to make an Indian character who wasn't either

A) the savage that must be eliminated, the force of nature

that's blocking the way of industrial progress, or B) the

noble innocent that knows all...I wanted him to be a
 complicated human being. (Rosenbaum, "A Gun Up..."
 163)

The Native American in this film is complicated on many levels. Nobody represents American Indians who embody aspects of their Native American heritage as well as elements of European culture. He also unites nature and spirituality through his beliefs. The idea that the natural and spiritual worlds are linked is also shared by Blake (Ferber 86). From the point of view of Nobody and Blake, therefore, it is both the spiritual and the natural worlds that are industrialization's victims.

The recurrent theme of spirituality that Jarmusch explores through the inclusion of Blakian references in *Dead Man*, is major theme in his most-recent film *Ghost Dog: the Way of the Samurai*.

Eastern and Western Cultural Archetypes:
Don Quixote, the *Hagakure* and *Ghost Dog*

In a *Sight and Sound* article, Shawn Levy describes Jarmusch's characters as "displaced people in upturned film genres" (22). The upturned film genres in *Ghost Dog: the Way of the Samurai* are gangster and samurai movies, and the displaced person is the protagonist, who is a hybrid of cultural archetypes from Europe and Japan. When asked how he created *Ghost Dog*, Jarmusch says that he wanted to develop a character who encapsulated the warrior and spiritual aspects of Japanese samurai with the anachronistic

and displaced qualities of Don Quixote (Campion 197). Don Quixote is anachronistic and displaced in that the knightly codes he lives by are found in Romantic books, based on a generation which precedes his. Ghost Dog, also anachronistic, lives by a code that has long been filed away as cultural history. The samurai text, which he religiously follows, was a code employed by Japanese warriors more than a century before. Like Quixote, Ghost Dog's dogmatic following of the text is completely out of context with his surroundings.

Ghost Dog is an African American man living in a large American city, who performs odd jobs for a member of the Mafia (a man he is indebted to for saving his life). The men communicate through passenger pigeons, which Ghost Dog raises in cages on the roof of his inner-city apartment. Like a comic-book hero, Ghost Dog cannot be contacted directly. As if by an innate sense of necessity, he arrives at the moment he is needed and vanishes when in danger. In many ways Ghost Dog is a caricature. Like Peter Conrad's description of characters in *Mystery Train*, Ghost Dog lacks a personal history. We know nearly nothing of his past or how he came to be a samurai, but his character is built in other ways, namely, his devout following of a samurai code and the relationships he forms during the film.

According to Spanish philosopher and Cervantian critic Miguel De Unamuno, some qualities that Don Quixote embodies are "faith in oneself, faith in one's illusions, and the faith one inspires in other people" (Ziolkowski 174). Don Quixote and Ghost

Dog both share a religious devotion to a code presented to them through books. Don Quixote inspires his companion Sancho to follow him in his knightly exploits. Ghost Dog also inspires by befriending a Haitian immigrant who comes to his rescue at the end of the film. Although the two men do not speak the same language, they find a common bond and understanding that transcends language. In the last scene of the film, the Haitian man tries to save Ghost Dog's life. In a scene like a Western shoot out, Ghost Dog and a member of the Italian Mafia point guns at each other. The Haitian tries to tell the other man that Ghost Dog's gun is not loaded, but his efforts are futile. The man does not understand and consequently kills Ghost Dog. Like Sancho's relationship with Quixote, the Haitian wants to protect Ghost Dog. His devotion stems from their mutual respect and friendship.

According to Eric Zolkowski, Don Quixote "wanted to make those men, whose moneyed hearts could only see the material kingdom of riches, confess that there is a spiritual kingdom of faith" (176). Ghost Dog's world, consisting of underprivileged immigrants; bitter, alcohol-guzzling teenagers; and a deteriorating Mafia, is cynical indeed, arguably more so than Quixote's seventeenth-century Spain. Nevertheless, Ghost Dog believes in the strict dogma of a forgotten culture. His devotion to the Japanese text *Hagakure: Book of the Samurai* by Yamamoto Tsunetomo can best be described as religious. Ghost Dog is completely faithful to the doctrine, even to the point of self-sacrifice.

Ghost Dog's lifestyle is based on survival in a brutal world. The ending foreshadows the beginning of a new generation where the children of immigrants find their identity as Americans and women take on roles formerly held by men. The last scene, of Ghost Dog's death, however, is hardly hopeful that the new generation will be better. The last word, given to the *Hagakure*, emerges when the last scene fades to black. Despite the brutality of the previous scene, the excerpt tells us "to make the best out of every generation":

It is said that what is called 'the spirit of an age' is something to which one cannot return. That this spirit gradually dissipates is due to the world's coming to an end. For this reason although one would like to change today's world back to the spirit of one hundred years or more ago, it cannot be done. Thus it is important to make the best out of every generation. (Jarmusch, *Ghost Dog*)

As typical of Jarmusch, the ending is partly ironic. Because of his samurai lifestyle, Ghost Dog dies trying to return to "the spirit of one hundred years or more ago," initiating the question, "Did Ghost Dog fail to understand or live up to the very code he lived by?" As in all of Jarmusch's films, the ending is ambiguous. It concludes with a question rather than a definitive answer.

Allusions to “Leaves of Grass,” *The Canterbury Tales*, William Blake, *Don Quixote*, and *Hagakure: Book of the Samurai*, like cinematic references, reflect the director’s diverse interests. The references also put Jarmusch’s films in a historical and international context. The themes that interested Whitman, Cervantes, Blake, and Tsunetomo can be found in Jarmusch’s films. They are themes that have transcended their particular culture and era, contributing to the collage of elements that make up Jim Jarmusch’s distinctive style and subvert the convention of traditional Hollywood films.

CHAPTER 3

JIM JARMUSCH AS AN AUTEUR: PHILOSOPHY AND TECHNIQUE

Jim Jarmusch's films can be broken down into three major categories. The first category, composed of *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Down by Law*, borrows considerably from Nouvelle Vague director Jean-Luc Godard and Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu. They are black comedies with chronological narratives. Shot in black and white, they have very little camera movement. The second category includes *Mystery Train* and *Night on Earth*. They are filmed in color, but are still comedies with very little camera movement. The most significant difference between these films and the earlier ones is that these consist of more than one narrative, which occur simultaneously. The director begins experimenting with chronology and narrative structure in his films. He also introduces themes of racism and social injustice. The last category, including *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog*, breaks away somewhat from Ozu's stationary-camera style. Both narratives are structured chronologically and the themes are more explicitly political than his earlier films. Despite the many changes that transpire during Jarmusch's two-decade

career, however, there are some elements that endure throughout his body of work.

These include the deconstruction of social and cinematic stereotypes; themes associated with communication and alienation; and the formalistic use of silences and blackouts.

Cultural Relativism: Enforcing and Deconstructing Cultural Codes

In *Reel to Real: race, sex, and class at the movies*, bell hooks writes that a scene in *Mystery Train* where an African American man speaks Japanese. She argues that the scene is a deliberate deconstruction of social stereotypes, drawing attention to racial imaging that is usually taken for granted in movies:

I am...moved by that moment in Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* when the young Japanese couple arrive in the train station in Memphis only to encounter what appears to be a homeless black man, a drifter, but who turn to them and speaks in Japanese. The interaction takes only a moment, but it deconstructs and expresses so much. (99)

In all of Jarmusch's films, stereotypes are deconstructed, showing the arbitrary categorization that has traditionally and still alters perceptions of race, class, gender, and nationality. In *Mystery Train*, for example, a black bell hop is dressed in a uniform that looks like it walked off of the set of *Grand Hotel* (1932). Until, and well into, the 1950's,

African Americans were rarely depicted as anything other than shoe shiners, bell hops, maids, doormen, or bus boys. The bell hop's uniform in *Mystery Train* is intentionally ironic. Unlike depictions of African Americans in early American films, Jarmusch's character is multidimensional. For instance, we see him examining his appearance and expressing dissatisfaction with the uniform's silly round hat.

In *Stranger Than Paradise*, a woman asserts her individuality by refusing to conform to gender-typing. Eva, a Hungarian immigrant, dresses in baggy, black pants; over-sized shirts; and tennis shoes, but her American cousin Willie would like her to dress more feminine. He buys Eva a dress, insisting that she will look more American. In order to appease him, she puts on the dress over her regular clothes, but in the next scene we see her standing on a street corner next to a trash can. She takes off the dress and throws it away.

There are, in fact, dozens of examples of deconstructed stereotypes in Jarmusch's films: women in Westerns heroically jump in front of bullets to save men, Italian gangsters listen to rap, and villainous bounty hunters sleep with teddy bears. Jarmusch's deconstruction of cultural and genre stereotypes challenge those images that are often taken for granted by movie audiences, but these images are not limited to human categorization. In *Stranger Than Paradise*, for instance, Jarmusch manipulates viewer expectations pertaining to place. There is a kind of joke in the film that a Hungarian immigrant has come to the United States expecting things to look quite different. On the

contrary, her surroundings in Cleveland, Ohio, resemble the cold, bleak, industrial landscape one might usually associate with Hungary. Jarmusch explains why he chose an industrial setting for the film, stating, “In America we have a certain image...of what life is supposed to be like in Central Europe, and I wanted to reverse that, and apply it to America” (Belsito 35). In *Stranger Than Paradise*, there is another scene that deconstructs images pertaining to place. The three main characters, Eva, Willie, and Eddie, drive to Florida, hoping to find a resort paradise, but when they arrive it looks pretty much like every other state they have visited. Jarmusch describes his intentions for the scene: “Florida, which is supposed to be this retirement paradise, is just a different vegetation and a slightly different landscape from Cleveland” (Jacobson 20).

Although Jarmusch deconstructs certain clichés, his films clearly enforce others. In *Stranger Than Paradise*, *Mystery Train*, and *Ghost Dog*, he depicts America’s unflattering image of a television-obsessed society. Several times in both *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Ghost Dog* characters are shown staring blankly at a TV, and in *Mystery Train*, every character, except the Italian, comments that their hotel room has no television. There are other stereotypes as well. For instance, in *Mystery Train* Jarmusch does not attempt to dispel the South’s racist reputation, and in *Stranger Than Paradise* he does not wish to present the Midwest as anything but an industrial wasteland. Negative images such as these are more than likely intended to show the side of America often left out of in Hollywood films. Furthermore, there is the sense that, even though these

images may be negative, the director is critical, not condescending. While describing the industrial shots of Cleveland, Jarmusch says, "I grew up in Akron and the Midwest has a very industrial kind of landscape which somehow is personally important to me. I don't know why. There's something sad and beautiful about it" (Belsito 35). Jarmusch's depiction of Memphis in *Mystery Train* is sympathetic as well. Although the film clearly focuses on racism in the city, it also shows a cross-section of international and multidimensional characters.

Jarmusch's choice to either deconstruct or enforce social stereotypes depends largely on his worldview, which is often condemning of industrialization, capitalism, and racism. He asserts a political stance, by undermining expectations, a method that is effective because it avoids "hitting one over the head" with an overt political message. What also saves his films from coming across as overly didactic are the complexity of his characters and what Geoff Andrew says is "the warmth he clearly feels for his characters" (104).

Language Barriers: Communication and Alienation

The inability of characters to understand each other is probably the most important theme in all of Jarmusch's work. Characters, for the most part, remain isolated despite bouts of human interaction. In *Down by Law*, for example, an Italian man is wandering the streets of New Orleans, collecting English idioms that he has acquired by

talking and listening to random people. At one point, he approaches another character who is sitting alone at an empty gas station. The Italian man reads from his list, “It is a sad and beautiful world.” The quote encapsulates the mood of the scene and the film as a whole. The director himself says that the inability to communicate or fully understand others, especially those who speak another language, is a profound issue for him: “The problems of language are...the most sad and beautiful thing. That we think of things in different ways because the structures of our language are different” (Von Bagh and Kaurismäki 79). In all of Jarmusch’s films, there is a mingling of characters from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Sometimes they form friendships or share meaningful moments, but mostly they do not understand each other—complicity between them seems almost, but never fully attainable. Colin Lawlor says that, in *Stranger Than Paradise*, “the general sense of desolation and disillusion that permeates the film as well as the characters’ inability to sufficiently articulate themselves in the midst of media-saturated culture” (1). Jarmusch says that problems of language “make this planet so beautiful and strange.” He states that is because of the problems with language that prescribed ideologies have essentially failed when applied on a social level:

Certain ideological solutions which have been introduced throughout history, like that of Marx and Engels, can never actually work. They only work theoretically, in a way, on a

global scale, but we can never break free of that tribal feeling we have. (Von Bagh and Kaurismäki 79)

That “tribal feeling we have,” as Jarmusch puts it, inhibits there ever being a synthesis of human understanding. Humans are inevitably split from themselves and the rest of humanity. As Lacan observed, infants become alienated from the world the moment they realize that they are cut from the mother. This severing is linked to the child’s comprehension of signs. At the moment that an object has a signifier, the infant perceives that object to be split from himself or herself. It is at this moment that alienation and subjectivity occurs. Alienation is essential to subjectivity (Evans 9):

For Lacan, alienation is not an accident that befalls the subject. The subject is fundamentally split, alienated from himself, and there is no escape from this division, no possibility of ‘wholeness’ or synthesis. (Evans 9)

In a Freudian sense, this splitting refers to the “splitting of the ego” that enables the subject from completely knowing herself. There is no possibility of “a fully present self-conscious” because the subject’s acceptance and disavowal of reality are in constant opposition (Evans 192). In *Ecrits*, Lacan describes how this splitting of the ego manifests itself in language. Since signifier is divided from signified, there can never be wholeness in speech. Because humans are speaking beings, their conscious is inevitably split (Lacan 269).

In Jarmusch's films, alienation manifests itself in the moments when characters are displaced and forced to see themselves in a new and unfamiliar context. The word "stranger" in *Stranger Than Paradise* captures not only the way in which the film's various settings are strange, but also how characters are strangers to themselves and others. When Eva and Willie meet in the beginning, they are literally strangers, but even once they have gotten to know each other, there is a sense that they still do not understand each other. Willie buys Eva a dress that she politely refuses. She has not worn a dress since she has known Eddie and she makes it clear to him that she does not want it, but he insists. It is evident that he does not understand her. Even though they grow to like each other and mostly seem to enjoy each other's company (they are excited to see each other again later in the film), they never fully know each other.

For the most part, Jarmusch's characters are strangers. Family members, close friends, and people in relationships are rarely the center of a story. Even when the narrative features a couple or a group of friends, there tends to be an emphasis on the ways in which the characters are isolated from each other rather than how they are connected. In *Mystery Train*, for instance, a Japanese couple is traveling the United States. Their conversations generally center on which rock and roll stars they prefer or what America looks like in comparison to their home, Yokohama, Japan. Jun prefers Carl Perkins to Elvis, but his girlfriend Mitzuko disagrees. One evening, while staring at a statue of Elvis, the two have a disagreement. Jun says, "You know, Memphis does look

like Yokohama. Just more space. If you took away sixty percent of the buildings in Yokohama, it would look like this.” Mitzuko replies, “This doesn’t look anything like Yokohama! This is America, and the city of Elvis.” Later, Jun and Mitzuko are sitting in their hotel room. Mitzuko thinks that Jun is unhappy because he never smiles. In an attempt to cheer him up, she makes silly faces and performs an odd stunt where she flicks a lighter on with her toes. Jun remains stiff and seemingly unamused. Finally Mitzuko asks, “Are you happy now?” to which Jun replies, “I was happy before.” Mitzuko’s misreading of Jun’s expression is symptomatic of the ways in which signs are ultimately unreliable. Since signifiers have no definite signified, communication is always a subjective matter, and according to Lacan, subjectivity is by definition alienating. Because we are alienated, we make assumptions about other objects and subjects. Lacan appropriately calls these other objects/subjects the “Other.” “Other” is capitalized to differentiate it from another type of “other,” one that is the object of the subject’s projection, but is actually a reflection of the subject’s own ego (Evans 132-133). The big “Other,” on the contrary, is that which “cannot be assimilated through identification” (Evans 133). As discussed earlier, the child forms a subjective view of the world when she first perceives the mother as something split from herself. The mother, therefore, is the first “Other” (Evans 133).

In terms of the cinema, “other” refers to the image on the screen and the subject is the individual in the audience. Sometime the “other” is capitalized and sometimes it is

not, depending on whether or not the subject identifies with the characters on screen. The relationship between subject and object in this context is not particular to the cinema, but has existed as long as people have watched each other in a voyeuristic fashion.

Voyeurism, a major element in cinematic excitement, can be manipulated by a director in order to enhance viewer interest.

Camera Technique and the Art of Voyeurism

Jarmusch manipulates viewer excitement through the censorship of voyeuristic desire in *Stranger Than Paradise*. While filming *Stranger Than Paradise*, Jarmusch noted that he needed to use a static, almost motionless camera (Eue and Stukenbrock 7):

A moving camera forces the eyes of the viewer to move along with the image, it imprisons your gaze. But my film has nothing to do with such arbitrary movements—it's about observing, about watching the hero in almost voyeuristic fashion. (Eue and Stukenbrock 7)

The “voyeuristic fashion” Jarmusch describes is evident in scenes that are typical of Jarmusch’s films, where all characters are present in the frame and there are no close ups or overtly manipulative angles. In these scenes, like the ones in *Stranger Than Paradise* where Willie, Eddie, and Eva are eating together, all of the characters are shown together—talking, sitting, or watching television. Often, there is minimal dialogue and

action. One has the feeling of peering in on these characters, who are sitting unaware in their living room. In recent years, the webcam has prompted a culture of men and women, mostly women, who allow twenty-four-hour, live filming of their homes. At any given moment, several people from all over the world are watching as these people eat, bathe, make love, brush their teeth, watch TV, sleep, etc. Although Jarmusch's film precedes the webcam and its subculture by nearly two decades, cinematic technique in *Stranger Than Paradise* seems to mimic the concept. There is an intrinsic pleasure associated with voyeurism that Jarmusch captures and manipulates in the film.

In *The Imaginary Signifier*, Christian Metz describes the importance of voyeurism in film and its connection to fetish and frame. He says that part of the excitement of the cinema is in censorship, which can come in many forms including that which is not explicitly seen on screen. Excitation comes from censorship in film, regardless of the form:

Whether the form is static (framing) or dynamic (camera movement), the principle is the same; the point is to gamble simultaneously on the excitation of desire and its nonfulfillment (which is its opposite and yet favours it).

(77)

In Jarmusch's films "visual excitation and its non-fulfillment" are explicit in the "blackouts" in between scenes. The audience's expectations are heightened as they are

robbed of the scene. Often, the audience can hear what is happening, but the absence of the image is in fact more exciting than image itself. Metz compares this form of cinematic excitation to a strip-tease:

The way the cinema, with its wandering framings... finds the means to reveal space has something to do with a kind of permanent undressing, a generalized strip-tease, a less direct but more perfected strip-tease, since it also makes it possible to dress space again, to remove from view what it has previously shown. (77)

Hitchcock popularized the use of extreme close-ups as a means of limiting the amount of action visible to the audience. An example of what Metz calls a cinematic “strip-tease” can be found in Hitchcock’s famous shot from *Psycho* when a woman is stabbed to death, but all the audience sees is the terrified expression of her eye. Unlike Hitchcock, Jarmusch does not manipulate the audience’s voyeuristic desire by limiting the on-screen image. The “strip tease” effect is still present, however, in the form of fades and blackouts.

Although manipulative, Jarmusch’s style is different from Hitchcock’s use of close-ups because Jarmusch’s style allows the audience time to reflect on the images they have been watching. The fades to black are almost meditative. The silences and spaces

enhance suspense, but they also give viewers time to contemplate and speculate on the images.

The Semiotics of Emptiness

Absence, therefore, is a major theme in all of Jarmusch's films and is signified by empty spaces and silences. Silence functions the way it does in life, allowing an opportunity for reflection. Jarmusch says, "The pauses to me are more important, really, than the words. Often the calm moment when people aren't saying anything is much more important than the dialogue. Because...it's true in life" (Shapiro 60). Silences in Jarmusch's films convey a realism that is absent in many Hollywood films.

Conversations in reality are filled with silent moments that often signify more than words themselves. In *Stranger Than Paradise*, as in many of Jarmusch's films, absence signifies something that is desired, but cannot be named. Jarmusch describes a scene in the film where one character wants to say something to another, but doesn't. The audience picks up on the moment and notices the tension between the two characters. Even though nothing is explicitly said, communication occurs between them.

Communication also occurs between the images on the screen and the audience:

My favorite part in *Stranger Than Paradise* is that ending of the first part, where the two guys sit in the room drinking beer. You know that Eddie wants to say something to

Willie about the fact that Eva has left, you can sense it, but he doesn't say anything—and I think this sense that he wants to say something is stronger than if he had. (Von Bagh and Kaurismäki 76)

Moments of silence convey meaning on many levels. An unarticulated desire is a repressed desire. Among most of Jarmusch's characters, repressed desire provides the necessary tension to propel a slow, meandering dialog. In *Night on Earth*, for instance, a cab driver and his blind passenger have a conversation filled with silences that last up to a minute. The driver's attraction to his passenger is evident more in the pauses between words than what is actually said. The way he looks at her and his general body language convey what is hidden in words.

Moments of complete darkness that separate a film's scenes and sections is characteristic of Jim Jarmusch's style. In *Cahier du Cinéma*, Nicolas Saada says that in *Dead Man*, "the fades to black between the sequences are conceived as breathing spaces...that play on blackness allows the film to develop in a singular fashion, like in poetry when you break up a line or stanza" (Maier 6). According to Jarmusch, the blackouts indicate the passing of time (Belsito 35) and, like silences, they give the audience time to contemplate the scene:

[The blackouts] give the film a measured breath and give the audience a moment to think, to digest the scene that

they have just been watching...it also means that the audience is robbed of the picture for a moment which is related to the theme of the film, that something is taken away. (Von Bagh and Kaurismäki 76)

In addition to giving the audience time to think, the blackouts relate to the film's theme of absence. Absence, according to Jacques Lacan is no different than any other object in the symbolic order. Even blackness and silence signifies something:

Because of the mutual implication of absence and presence in the symbolic order, absence can be said to have an equally positive existence in the symbolic as presence. This is what allows Lacan to say that 'the nothing' is in itself an object. (Evans 1)

Absence sharing an "equally positive existence" with presence is in the spirit of Eastern philosophy. The Chinese symbol for opposites that fit together to make a whole (yin and yang) is the basis for most Asian philosophic thought. Dark and light, good and bad, absence and presence depend on each other to make a whole. In *Ghost Dog*, Jarmusch chooses a quotation from the *Hagakure* to demonstrate this idea:

Our bodies are given life from the midst of nothingness.
Existing where there is nothing is the meaning of the phrase, 'Form is emptiness.' That all things are provided

for by nothingness is the meaning of the phrase, 'Emptiness is form.' One should not think that these are two separate things. (Jarmusch, *Ghost Dog*)

Eastern philosophic thought is present in Jarmusch's films, not only in quotes from the *Hagakure*, but also in Jarmusch's distinctive cinematic style. The black spaces and silences are an integral part of the product as a whole. Deconstructing those images one takes for granted in film, social stereotypes for instance, is also in the spirit of Eastern thought. Like the tenets of Zen Buddhism, this form of deconstruction attempts to "open a gap between experience and the reification of it in words and symbols" (Anderson 214).

Jarmusch's cinematic technique and the philosophic concepts expressed in his films act to converge otherwise foreign ideas. Eastern and Western philosophy merge to show the similarities between seemingly unrelated cultures and to juxtapose those ideas with ones of more restricted ideologies and beliefs. In other words, contrasting beliefs that focus outward on bodies of doctrine (as in doctrinal religions or prescriptive ideologies) and those that focus inward on "the transformation of personal consciousness" (Anderson 217). In addition, the style of Jarmusch's films encourage thoughtful interpretation of images through silences and fades to black that act as a kind of pause for meditation. It encourages audiences to take an active role—contemplating the film rather than passively taking in the information that is presented to them.

CONCLUSION

Jarmusch's movies reflect a psychological contemplation of the present age. The complex arrangement of random, scattered, and often contradictory elements reflect a postmodern sentiment with all its multiplicity and diversity. What gives Jim Jarmusch's films meaning is the way he brings various subjects together. His movies function like a collage of elements that seem disconnected at first glance, but noticeably relate upon further observation. In order to begin a discussion about Jarmusch's films, one needs to include a wide range of subjects: cinema and cinematic technique, literature, America and American history, Europe and European politics, Japan, pop culture, the media, world politics, and psychology to name only a few. While analyzing the films in this thesis, I employed multiple methods (post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and socio-politics) because they do, in fact, relate. Post-structural analysis depends on the psychoanalytic works of Freud and Lacan as much as the social analysis of Marx and Foucault. Film critic and theorist Christian Metz contends that post-structural and sociological scholarship are invariably connected because symbolism originates in a social context:

“In cinematic studies as in others, semiology (or semiologies) cannot replace the various disciplines that discuss the social fact itself (the source of symbolism)” (18).

Nietzsche says, “It is the powerful who made the names of things into law” (363).

To subvert the “names of things” through deconstruction is to question their value and authority. “The powerful” is any institution that has the ability to manipulate the masses. As it applies today, “the powerful” refers to a network of corporations that regulate and produce the images and messages the public receives through television, radio, movies, commercials, magazines, billboards, and the news. By undermining the mass media’s depictions of culture, history, death, human relationships, and capitalist values, Jarmusch challenges representations laid down by the powerful. By subverting the style of the mass media, through a slower exchange of images and minimal narratives, Jarmusch juxtaposes the form that audiences have grown accustomed to in film. Jarmusch’s particular ideological project, however, does not attempt to change the system. He refuses to subscribe to a single political agenda, because, as he says, “anything you do that is very specifically against the government is used for their own purposes...I don’t have much faith in specific ideological propaganda” (Belsito 43). According to film theorist Dudley Andrew, even cinematic masterpieces that challenge political institutions only help those institutions profit in the long run:

The art cinema troubles the system from within; and, like
capitalist order which spawned it, the movies thrive on

adversity, struggle, and disturbance; they thrive on
disenchanted and rebellious artists. The shocks and
tremors art creates are easily folded back into its
invigorated, always dominant, body. (121)

Rather than trying to affect the system as a whole, Jarmusch focuses on the individual's freedom to reject the "truths" of the dominant political structure, knowing that "these orders are not the only possible ones or the best ones" (Foucault 381). For Jarmusch, ideology is not, "blatantly presented, it's something that hopefully changes the way people think about their own lifestyles or their own values" (Belsito 43).

APPENDIX

In an interview with film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, Jarmusch says that he does not believe in the concept of an “auteur” because making a film is always a collaborative effort (*Dead Man* 80). Many critics have noted that Jarmusch owes much to cinematographer Robby Müller, who shot all of Jarmusch’s films except *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Night on Earth*, and a degree of credit should also be given to the actors, who often develop and improvise much of the dialogue in Jarmusch’s films. What is missing in the collaborative effort of one of Jarmusch’s movies is corporate bureaucracy. Producers and studio executives have no say in a film’s final product. Jarmusch writes all the scripts and oversees the editing of all his movies. He is rare indeed for being one of the few, if only, working directors who owns the final prints of all his films (Rosenbaum *Dead Man* 15). If the term “auteur” were to apply to any director, it would have to be Jim Jarmusch, because every decision in the process of creating a film is overseen by him alone.

The reason why it is important to define Jarmusch using terms like “auteur” is to distinguish him from the majority of other filmmakers who create studio products for

commercial purposes rather than works of art that question and critically address societal issues. According to Jonathan Rosenbaum, Jarmusch is different from hired Hollywood directors, in part, because there is clear progression of concepts throughout his body of work:

One of the easiest ways to distinguish between Hollywood employees (current or prospective) and those with more creative freedom is to look for logical and consistent developments from one film to the next—a clear line of concerns that runs beyond fads and market developments.

(Dead Man 15)

Jim Jarmusch, however, is only one of a handful of American directors who are making films that are openly critical of capitalism, materialism, and consumerism. Michael Moore (*Roger and Me*, *The Big One*) and Noam Chomsky (*Manufacturing Consent*) are examples of nonfiction filmmakers. Hal Hartley is an American director who, like Jarmusch, makes fiction films that criticize capitalist values and also confront issues of communication and human relationships. Richard Linklater (*Slackers*, *Waking Life*) is an independent filmmaker who, like Jarmusch, is concerned with issues of spirituality and postmodernity. Hal Hartley, Richard Linklater, and Jim Jarmusch all employ a minimalist style that is a subculture trend in both film and music. Musical groups like

Tortoise, Spiritualized, My Bloody Valentine, and Pavement are part of a wave of minimalist musicians that, like Jarmusch, Linklater and Hartley, reject pop-culture trends that emphasize commercialism. The soundtrack for Hartley's films feature many of these artist, including My Bloody Valentine and Pavement. Minimalist trends in music and film are inspired by minimalism in painting and literature, but generally do not aspire to be defined as "high art." Most importantly, filmmakers like Jarmusch and Hartley, as well as musicians like Tortoise and Spiritualized want to undermine the values of commercial film and music that is established in the fast-paced, over-produced, commercial styles of MTV, hip hop, dance, and Stephen Spielberg.

Jim Jarmusch is part of a larger movement against commercialization, and has inspired many others who wish to do the same. Bryan Jonestown Massacre, a counter-culture rock band who has established a following among college students, have a picture of Jarmusch on one of their album covers. Independent filmmakers have also alluded to Jarmusch's films and have looked to him as an influence. Spike Lee credits him as an early role model in John Pierson's book *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes* (65), and Wes Anderson's first film *Bottle Rocket* (1995), depicts three friends who skip town after robbing a bookstore. The episode mirrors *Stranger Than Paradise* when Willie and Eddie leave New York for Cleveland after getting caught cheating at a card game. In *Bottle Rocket*, the leader of three thieves seems to address the camera directly as he slides

on a pair of dark sunglasses and makes a statement that appears to be nothing less than a direct reference to *Stranger Than Paradise*: “On the run from Johnny Law” and it “ain’t no trip to Cleveland.”

Although a still somewhat obscure filmmaker in America, Jarmusch has developed an expanding audience overseas. A series of short films that he directed called “Coffee and Cigarettes” is rarely shown in the US except in the occasional art house theater, but are shown seen from time to time on French and German television. Five books have been written on Jarmusch; all but one are written or edited by Europeans. *Dead Man* by Jonathan Rosenbaum, however, was published by the British Film Institute and Indiana University Press.

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