

CASE STUDY: DIRECTOR-AS-AUTHOR: THE SAD AND BEAUTIFUL WORLD OF JIM JARMUSCH

Paul Watson

I do it my way or I don't do it. It helps me in negotiating to know that I will walk away if I don't have control... I decide how the film is cut, how long it is, what music is used, who is cast. I make films by hand.

(Jim Jarmusch 1996)

The dominant view of authorship interprets film as the creative expression of a single individual, usually held to be the director. And although film theory has struggled long and hard to debunk this proposition as a whimsical romantic myth, it survives as the key marker of film style, an index of the value of films, and a commercial strategy for marketing cinema. Ironically, however, the grounds on which the idea of director-as-author is often attacked and the reason it lives on are both rooted in an analysis of the relationship between individual creative agency and the imperatives of a commercially driven film industry organised around the division of labour into multiple specialised roles. As such, while on the one hand the attribution of singular authorship is refuted by claiming that what is seen and heard in a film is *ipso facto* the product of the activities of more than one person, on the other hand levelling-down those diverse activities to the same creative plane, or simply ignoring them altogether, neither accounts for the creative agency of individuals nor the ways in which the specificities of their labour relates to the significant artistic features of a film. In other words, film theory has tended to turn the observation that individual creative aims are often frustrated, dissipated or simply thwarted by the commercial pressures of filmmaking into a theoretical principle of necessary contradiction between individual expression and collaboration.

Certainly, attributing authorship to any one individual in many mainstream films may be an empty exercise. Yet if we grant that collective production will limit individual expression in some respects then we should also grant that it can extend it in others. Which is to say, collaborative work and the particular dynamics of group work can facilitate individual creativity as well as prohibit it. Thus, it is one thing to say that a director is usually merely one figure in a highly complex productive process of filmmaking, but quite another to then insist that authorship can never be meaningfully attributed to the director. For even granting that, on a standard case, films have multiple authors or no discernible author at all does not foreclose the possibility that in other cases a film or groups of films might usefully be analysed in terms of the creative agency of their director.

So while on a general theoretical level there may be a number of potential authors involved in the creative process of film production – screenwriters, cinematographers, actors, editors, visual effects supervisors, and so on – sometimes a director's role within that process warrants the assertion that he or she can meaningfully be understood as the film's author. Such an assertion, however, need not imply that the director has authored each and every aspect of what we see and hear, nor that he or she is the only creative agency detectable within the film. Rather it is to assert the more modest idea that investigation of the director-as-author in certain cases can yield critical rewards in the sense of *enriching our understanding of those films and our experience of them*. In other words, the theoretical question of whether the notion of authorship in cinema is plausible *per se* is different from the piecemeal approach which asks how individual agency relates to film style. In this latter, more paired-down conception, authorship emerges not as a theoretical principle, but as a *matter of degree*, established on a case-by-case basis on the evidence of practice.

Jim Jarmusch

It is just such a piecemeal approach to film authorship which allows us to explore Jim Jarmusch as a particularly persuasive case for the director-as-author. More specifically, the stylistic and expressive

significance of his films can be usefully explained through an analysis which interrogates the interrelations between aesthetics and his individual agency. Within this context, it is possible to trace Jarmusch's authorship on three overlapping levels: *working practice*; *thematic concerns*; and *stylistic concerns*.

Working Practice

The favoured method for deciding whether or not a director is an auteur centres around an analysis of the evidence presented in the film text itself. Often referred to as a 'thematic analysis', the critic looks for a set of consistent themes that run across a series of films. However, this process tends to exclude from the analysis extra-textual and pre-textual practices which both prefigure and bear upon what is ultimately seen and heard in a film. Indeed, consideration of the context of 'working practice' is especially important given the complex economic and contractual culture of the contemporary agent-led film industry in which ideas are pitched, scripts bid for and then rewritten many times, stars signed with script approval and final cut rights written into the deal, and films are reworked in light of its test screenings. Indeed, it is precisely the elaborate commercial drama of contemporary film production that simultaneously makes the notion of director-as-author unlikely in most cases, but compelling in the case of Jarmusch. For not only does Jarmusch write and direct all his feature films, work closely with his cinematographer and editor, play a central role in casting the principal characters, and choose the main locations, but he takes the lead in raising the money for his projects, usually from independent and European investors. His first feature, *Permanent Vacation* (1982), cost \$10 000, was shot in ten days and was financed from his scholarship fund, and while the budgets have since gotten progressively bigger with each of his subsequent six features they are still financed entirely independent of the major studios. In this respect, Jarmusch believes that genuine creative independence is contingent on financial independence: "I object strongly to businessmen telling me how to make a film. The business side is there to serve the film. I don't make films so that business can exist" (in Arrington 1990). Moreover, Jarmusch is virtually unique amongst contemporary filmmakers in that he owns the negatives to all his films.

The notions of *financial independence* and *ownership* are significant precisely insofar as they prefigure any attempt to establish the authorial credentials of a director on the evidence of his or her films. In other words, it is only possible to meaningfully demonstrate consistencies of theme or style across a range of textual instances after it is first established that the pre-textual working practices that frame production permit the director to exercise his or her creative agency.

Analysis of working practice, however, is not merely a question of finance. It also points us towards the notion of *creative process*. Again, consideration of Jarmusch's working practice is revealing. Most films begin as a story, a set of events that will happen during the course of a film, which can be pitched to studios for development. Instead of this narrative centred process, however, Jarmusch's creative process is character centred. He says that his films develop organically in the sense that the process "starts from a basic perception, sometimes not even accurate, of a person, an actor, a quality of that personality, and I want to grow a character on it" (in Keogh 2001: 128). Given this, Jarmusch writes characters for specific performers – both professional and non-professional actors. For instance, the titular character of *Ghost Dog* as well as his best friend, Raymond, were specifically written for Forest Whitaker and Isaach De Bankolé respectively, while the parts played by Youki Kudoh, Joe Strummer and Sreamin' Jay Hawkins in *Mystery Train* (1989) were developed explicitly around their particular personality traits. Moreover, all of the principal roles in *Down by Law* (1986) and *Night on Earth* (1991) were written specifically for the actors who played them. It is in this respect, then, that story is suggested by, emerges from, and is played out through character.

Of course, this character centred creative process not only necessitates but *implies* collaboration, not least in the form of strong character acting. Yet it is significant that Jarmusch's collaborations with other creative personnel have been remarkably consistent across his seven fiction features. Tom DiCillo shot Jarmusch's first two films, *Permanent Vacation* and *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), while Robby Muller has worked as cinematographer on *Down By Law*, *Mystery Train*, *Dead Man* (1995) and *Ghost Dog*; Melody London worked as editor on *Stranger than Paradise* and *Down By Law* with Jay Rabinowitz editing all Jarmusch's subsequent films; and performers such as Tom Waits, John Lurie, Gary Farmer, Roberto Benigni and Isaach De Bankolé are regular contributors to either, sometimes both the cast and the musical score. Specifically in terms of his collaboration with actors, Jarmusch sees improvisation and rehearsal as central to his own creative practice:

We do a lot of improvisation in the rehearsal process; in fact we rehearse a lot of scenes that are not in the film, but are the characters in character. They are scenes I play around with and *out of that I get a lot of new ideas....* To me, the essence of each scene is what is important, not the exact dialogue. I like to find dialogue that I and the actors like, but there is an infinite number of ways of expressing something, *so long as the idea remains the same* (*my italics*, in Keogh, 2001: 127-8).

Collaboration, here, is not opposed to individual expression but implicated in it. In other words, collaboration is not the unstoppable corporate force which tramples over individual agency, but rather a key part of the very *procedural creative processes* that mark Jarmusch's authorship.

Thematic Concerns

As noted above, one of the preferred methods for discussing the authorial credentials of a director is to demonstrate consistencies of theme or a coherent 'worldview' across a significant body of his or her work. A thematic analysis of the director-as-author, therefore, interprets film as the personal statement of its director inasmuch as his or her personality is inscribed into, and is recognisable through, consistent thematic and/or stylistic preoccupations across a range of films. In other words, the idea that director is the controlling creative artist behind a film is indexed to the degree to which it can be established that he or she is successful in articulating a unified personal vision from one film to the next by imposing his or her signature on thematic and/or stylistic composition.

Applying such a thematic analysis to Jarmusch's body of films reveals both a dominant and a recessive set of thematic concerns.

Dominant Jarmuschian Themes

The following set of thematic preoccupations are dominant in Jarmusch's work in the sense that they variously surface in all of his seven narrative feature films, prevailing especially in the six films since *Permanent Vacation*.

- **Cultural disorientations:** The idea that Jarmusch's characters are culturally disorientated – either in their own culture, by their own culture or by/in an unfamiliar culture – is a constant theme of his work. The motif of 'a stranger travelling through an unfamiliar landscape' is played out across a number of films, while *Stranger than Paradise*, *Down by Law*, *Mystery Train*, and *Night on Earth* literally transpose a foreign character into an American context. Jarmusch's most recent two films, *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* recast the theme of disorientation by explicitly positioning American characters as outsiders in their own land. In exploring both the similarities and differences between cultures through the seemingly incongruous identities of his characters, their interactions, as well as their relationship to unfamiliar physical environments, Jarmusch not

only juxtaposes non-western with western ideas, modern thought with ancient thought, but also represents American culture as fundamentally heterogeneous and hybrid.

- **Immigrant-eye-view:** Both literally and figuratively, Jarmusch's films present immigrant visions of America. Although this is most explicit in the films in which a foreigner travels to America – Willie's Hungarian cousin, Eva, in *Stranger than Paradise*; Jack and Zak's cell mate, Bob, in *Down By Law*; the Japanese tourists, Jun and Mitsuko, in *Mystery Train*; and the New York cabdriver, Helmut, in the American segment of *Night on Earth* (fig 4.1) – both *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* implicitly construct their lead characters as immigrants in their own culture. Moreover, an analysis of Jarmusch's thematic preoccupations in terms of both 'cultural disorientation' and 'immigrant perspectives' is consistent with Jarmusch's own conception of American culture. He argues that "to make a film about America, it seems to me logical to have at least one perspective that's transplanted here from some other culture, because ours is a collection of transplanted influences" (in Holmes, 1986). And, of course, the focus on immigrant characters both complements and extends the more general theme of culture in the sense that it allows us to see America through non-western eyes as well as dramatising the more abstract theme identified by Rosenbaum of "looking at the same thing in different ways – or looking at different things the same way" (2000: 13)
- **Language and Communication:** While on the one hand the notion of culture is often de-centred in Jarmusch's films, particularly through presenting it from a range of 'immigrant' perspectives, on the other hand his characters often exhibit a humanist ability to communicate in spite of their cultural differences, often even in spite of being unable to understand each other's language. Indeed, the idea that language is the primary medium of communication and understanding is often undermined as characters develop and sustain relationships on other levels, understanding each other without necessarily knowing that they do. Dispossessed of a common language, and usually a common culture as well, Jarmusch's characters communicate with, and understand one another by recognising their points of convergence and similarity, that is, precisely by discovering their shared humanity. If this idea of non-linguistic communication is at its most comic in the exchanges between *Ghost Dog* and his best friend, Raymond, in which they often say the same thing without being aware that they have done so, then it finds its most profound and complex articulation in the beautiful misunderstandings between Blake (who is mistaken for William Blake the poet) and Nobody (who speaks four different languages during the film) in *Dead Man* (fig 4.2). For although Blake at one point declares that he "has not understood one single word" that Nobody had spoken since he'd met him, the significance of their relationship resides not in their inability to communicate in language but rather in the spiritual connection forged between them. Moreover, in not providing subtitles for the dialogue delivered in the native American languages Cree, Makah and Blackfoot as well as including a running joke about tobacco that is culturally specific to those native cultures, the audience is implicated in Jarmusch's thematic exploration of the nature and limits of communication.

Recessive Jarmuschian Themes

In addition to the four dominant themes outlined above, we can also identify a range of secondary or recessive thematic consistencies in Jarmusch's films which both accompany and complement many of those principal concerns.

- **Poetry of the ordinary and insignificant:** Jarmusch has said that he is interested in the things that are normally taken out of movies, the 'blank time' between what is normally deemed to be the significant narrative events. The way Jarmusch handles the jailbreak in *Down by Law* is exemplary of this anti-suspenseful approach to narrative. The first mention of escape comes as

Bob half-whispers the idea to his cell mates at the close of one scene. The next scene begins by showing the three characters fleeing across open ground. In this way, instead of suspense, action, and plotting Jarmusch's films deal in the insignificant or mundane aspects of daily life played out through an attention to the minutiae of character.

- **Chance encounters:** The reduced narratives of Jarmusch's films are all driven by the coincidental or serendipitous encounter between his misfit characters (the transitory meetings of passengers and drivers in *Night on Earth*; the random encounter of inmates in *Down by Law*; the coincidental relationship between rescuer and rescued in *Dean Man* and *Ghost Dog*). Moreover, it is in these moments of coincidence/fate that what on the surface appear to be life's insignificances (a visit to an Aunt; staying in the same hotel; a taxi ride; a job interview; a trip to the local shop) turn out to have life altering consequences.
- **Urbanism:** There is strong focus on the relationship between the physical urban environment, in particular the squalor and beauty of the American city, and identity. Indeed, we are often given a tour through the American landscape in the form of extended tracking shots precisely in order that we can register its 'personality'. As such, the notion of urbanism is squarely entwined with the more primary theme of cultural disorientation.

Stylistic Concerns

There is a certain justice in appreciating Jarmusch's films as a statement of his ambition "exist somewhere in between the American mainstream and the individualized European style" (in Cohen 1999). For while his unconventional stories of social outsiders, happenstance, and cultural alienation often evoke conventional American narratives precisely as the mythical counterpoint for their own irony, the visual style and narrative form in which those stories are presented is characteristic of certain European and Japanese traditions of filmmaking.

Out of this general observation we can distinguish the following stylistic concerns prevalent in Jarmusch's films.

- **Character driven narrative:** Plot is stripped away in Jarmusch's films with events emerging from the distinctive personality traits of the characters and the nature of their interactions. For instance, without the performances in *Night on Earth* all that remains is four uneventful taxi journeys, while in *Dead Man*, what is a principal convention of the western film – a shooting – is reduced to a mere pretext for Blake and Nobody's spiritual journey. Moreover, the idea that each character *is* the film's story chimes with Jarmusch's reduced visual style – long takes and minimal use of point-of-view shots or close-ups – in the sense that shot-duration and technique are put in the service of observing character behaviour within a specific physical environment. In these respects, then, Jarmusch's creative process of writing for specific characters becomes reflected at the level of film form.
- **Episodic structure:** This character-centred approach to filmmaking also permeates the structure of Jarmusch's films. Instead of a coherent narrative strain, the films proceed thematically through either their own internal thematic logic (*Stranger than Paradise*, *Dead Man*); or by imposing an episodic structure (*Down by Law*, *Ghost Dog*); or by unifying the film's story with its structure through the theme of synchronicity (*Night on Earth*, *Mystery Train*). Either way, Jarmusch's films resist narrative linearity in favour of a segmented structure. In other words, his films tend to be organised around a series of interdependent short episodes linked thematically and/or by character. This is most obvious in the films that explore synchronicity at a formal and thematic level (*Mystery*, *Night on Earth*), but is characteristic of all his films. Indeed, Jarmusch

often marks the transition between these segments by fading into and out of black. While this technique is particularly evident in *Stranger than Paradise* and *Down by Law*, the black spaces that punctuate *Dead Man's* scenes not only give the film its organic rhythm, but chime with Blake's own sporadic drift in and out of consciousness.

- **Tracking-Shots** In all of Jarmusch's films the screen is given over to a tour of the physical environment which the characters pass through. Indeed, the extended tracking-shot usually through the cityscape is, like his use fades, one of Jarmusch's most consistent visual tics and activates the notion of environment not merely as a backdrop to the story but rather as a 'character' in its own right with its own distinctive personality and meanings.

The notion of the director-as-author remains, and will continue to remain a troubling paradox at the level of theory. However, it is one thing to admit that individual authorship in cinema is problematic, but quite another to then leave consideration of individual creative agency out of our analyses. Indeed, an understanding of creative agency is no less crucial to film analysis than to literary analysis. So while we may wish to dismiss the idea that Jim Jarmusch is the sole author of his films, it nevertheless remains the case that describing his films *as if he is* their author through analysis of his working practice, thematic and stylistic concerns adds to both our understanding and pleasure of those films.

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