

RESEARCH PAPER

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TRAVELLING WITHOUT MOVING IN POSTMODERNIST (ROAD) MOVIES BY JIM JARMUSCH

UDK 791.2.01(73)

791.633Jarmusch, J.

Jim Jarmusch is today considered to be among the most prominent and highly revered of independent American film directors. He is well known for incorporating experimental music into his films, for his deadpan humor, and for his fondness for lone characters from the margins. Another prominent feature of his films is the adroit blending of the high and the low and the incorporation of elements of genre film, while simultaneously bending and twisting their boundaries and skewing their conventions. One genre in particular stands out in his oeuvre—that of the road film or road movie—and he has returned to it at several points in his career. Through the analysis of four of his films—*Stranger than Paradise* (1984), *Dead Man* (1995), *Ghost Dog* (1999) and *Broken Flowers* (2005)—this paper will, therefore, focus primarily on the notion of genre film, particularly the road movie genre and the ways in which Jarmusch establishes a postmodernist dialogue with its conventions in order to create a new, meaningful whole.

Key words: Jim Jarmusch, postmodernist film, road movie, genre film

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INTRODUCTION

Jim Jarmusch, today considered to be one of the most prominent and highly revered independent American film directors, has over the course of his 35-year career, also gained a reputation as a fiercely creative and original indie filmmaker, and one who brings a “European art-cinema sensibility” (Thompson and Bordwell 2002: 697) to the mix. Jarmusch is known for incorporating experimental or drone music into his films; for scenes that exhibit prolonged dramatic pauses, often with comic effect; for his tongue-in-cheek humor; for his fondness for lone characters, be they immigrants,

spies, tourists or samurai; and for capturing experiences from the margins. Another prominent feature of his films is their adroit blending of the high and the low, whether he is incorporating English Romantic poetry into the iconography of the western, combining snippets from old cartoons with the elegance of ancient oriental martial arts, or inserting lines of Walt Whitman’s poetry into a slapstick prison scene. As Juan A. Suárez remarks,

his work implicitly rejects the elitism of some modalities of high modernism and fuses the experimental modernist repertoire with street styles – punk, new wave, club culture, and hip hop – with the purpose of giving the vanguard social impact and reach and the popular further critical awareness and sophistication. (Suárez 2007: 3)

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Additional prominent characteristics of Jarmusch’s opus are his propensity for creating self-referential genre films, and for bending and twisting the boundaries of different genres, skewing their conventions. His films include a western, a vampire movie, a prison break movie, a spy movie and a martial arts/gangster movie. On the surface, this reads like the filmography of any decent Hollywood blockbuster director, yet Jarmusch always finds a way to turn these genres inside out, lending them a completely new meaning. One genre in particular stands out in his oeuvre—that of the road film or road movie—and he has returned to it at several points in his career. Therefore, through the analysis of four of his films—*Stranger than Paradise* (1984), *Dead Man* (1995), *Ghost Dog* (1999) and *Broken Flowers* (2005)—this paper will focus primarily on the notion of genre film, particularly the road movie genre (one of the most popular and widespread genres in American film) and the ways in which Jarmusch establishes a postmodernist dialogue with its principles to create a new, meaningful whole.

THE ROAD MOVIE

Suárez maintains that, as the classical studio system was on the decline in the late 1960s, Hollywood began incorporating traits of European art film, the 1960s American avant-garde, and the counterculture, creating “a number of commercial titles with self-conscious art touches made by highly cineliterate auteurs” (Suárez 2007: 46). Often referred to as the American counterpart of the French New Wave, the New American Cinema was a “movement of feature-length, low-budget narrative films that ran against the grain of

commercial filmmaking" (Suárez 2007: 40). David Laderman argues that the road movie emerged as a distinct genre from this trend, owing to its antigrege sensibilities and the appearance of a countercultural unrest, which "infused the cinematic act of driving with a politically rebellious spirit" best exemplified in early road films *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969) (Laderman 2002: 3–4). He also states that Jack Kerouac's watershed novel *On the Road* (1955) can be taken as the "master narrative" for the road movie, and expands on Janis P. Stout's claim that "[t]he very birth and adolescence of America seems crucially founded upon the notion of the journey, which thus becomes an essential feature of American cultural identity" (qtd. in Laderman 2002: 7). Although travelling and the road were often present in traditional genres, the road narrative is distinguishable from other journeys because of the social commentary it foregrounds. By setting "the liberation of the road against the oppression of hegemonic norms, road movies project American Western mythology onto the landscape traversed and bound by the nation's highways" (Cohan and Hark 1997: 1). The road movie's primary impetus is rebellion against the constraints of society, as the genre "celebrates subversion as a literal venturing outside of society" (Laderman 2002: 2). Thus, the road movie can be said to feature an escape *from* civilization or *towards* adventure, or a quest for answers and a more meaningful existence. It also emphasizes the activity of traveling, fetishizing the vehicle itself as well as the freedom and individualism it offers. The landscape, with its vistas of emptiness and seductive horizons, and the interstate highway system, figure equally prominently. Hence, "[f]reedom becomes rediscovered as movement across open space" (Laderman 2002: 15).

During the mid-1980s, the last stages of New American Cinema coincided with the rise of a new generation of independent filmmakers, such as David Lynch, Spike Lee, Steven Soderbergh and Jim Jarmusch. These directors drew their inspiration from the 1960s American underground and European art cinema, especially the French New Wave. Therefore, Suárez argues that the two periods are linked thematically, since many 1980s indies rework 1960s titles: "Jarmusch's neo-Beat noir comedies *Stranger than Paradise* and *Down by Law* are reminiscent of New American Cinema titles such as *Guns of the Trees* and *Hallelujah the Hills*" (Suárez 2007: 41).

After its relative decline in popularity by the mid-1970s, this 1980s revival of the road movie genre came with a new energy, fueled by the postmodern sensibilities of the time. David Laderman remarks that the genre's initial phase may be rooted in late-1960s countercultural modernism, but that its "generic flowering reflects the advent of postmodern culture at

large” (Laderman 2002: 133). The postmodern road movie, however, is self-conscious of its generic conventions and subverts them through ironic and stylized exaggerations of sex, violence and toughness, while “the visionary rebellion and existential roaming become saturated with a ludic irony and tongue-in-cheek posturing” (Laderman 2002: 135).

POSTMODERN FEATURES OF JARMUSCH’S FILMS

Madan Sarup summarizes the stylistic traits of postmodernism as being marked by an erasure of boundaries between life and art, between high and popular culture, by stylistic eclecticism, parody, pastiche, irony, playful reflexivity, self-referentiality, artifice, randomness, and absolute fragmentation (Sarup 1993: 132). Theo L. D’haen lists the features that are “generally regarded as marking postmodernism: self-reflexiveness, metafiction, eclecticism, redundancy, multiplicity, discontinuity, intertextuality, parody, the dissolution of character and narrative instance, the erasure of boundaries, and the destabilization of the reader” (D’haen 2005: 192–193).¹

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Most of these stylistic features can be found in Jim Jarmusch’s films, including the aforementioned conflation of high and low cultural elements, and the use of deadpan and black humor with absurdist effects, used to destabilize established film genres and challenge the viewer. His films are replete with quotations from other films and references to different arts; they are self-conscious about film history, and highly eclectic, frequently moving the focus away from narrative tension and de-dramatizing the action. For example, in *Down by Law* (1986), the prison break sequence, which would be the film’s most dramatic action scene, becomes irrelevant and is omitted from the screen entirely. Jarmusch’s films also tend towards fragmentation, with a disregard for classical narrative cinema, instead offering an episodic structure and seemingly random events and characters that serve to obscure rather than explain the storyline, as in *Mystery Train* (1989) or *The Limits of Control* (2009). Even though these practices can, to an extent, be traced back to 1960s European art cinema (see Bordwell

¹ D’haen is cited here for his bold summary of a series of aspects of postmodernism, which are discussed in seminal book-length studies by Ihab Hassan, David Lodge, Brian McHale, Linda Hutcheon, Alan Wilder and others.

1979) or the New Hollywood films, John Hill argues that, in postmodern cultural production, Frederic Jameson's notion of pastiche becomes the dominant (Hill 1998: 101). Pastiche, according to Jameson, is "like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language," and he labels it as a blank, humorless parody leading to depthlessness and triviality (Jameson 1991: 17). As Jameson maintains, while the use of parody implies a critical stance towards that which is quoted and parodied, pastiche is nothing more than "the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (Jameson 1991: 17). Alternatively, Linda Hutcheon claims that what distinguishes postmodern parody from nostalgia is the use of irony, and that the "parodic reprise of the past of art is not nostalgic; it is always critical" (Hutcheon 1989: 89). She maintains that "through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (Hutcheon 1989: 89). She sees the strength of postmodern parody and pastiche in challenging and dismantling the spectator's expectations of style, genre and narrative and in its "potentially positive oppositional and contestatory nature" (Hutcheon 1989: 109).

Jarmusch makes abundant use of parody and pastiche both in content and genre structure, and couples this with bricolage, a technique described by Derrida (after Lévi-Strauss) as "borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage" (Derrida 1993: 231). In this process, Slethaug maintains, "textual references may be mere allusions to characters, situations, ideas, and styles and these fleeting allusions or citations provide keys to the new artistic production" (Slethaug 2014: 193). What Derrida finds important in his reading of Lévi-Strauss is "the stated abandonment of all reference to a *center*, to a *subject*, to a privileged *reference*, to an origin, or to an absolute *archia*". (Derrida 1993: 236) Although Jarmusch's use of these devices is best seen in his most layered films, *Dead Man* (1995) and *Ghost Dog* (1999), Gérard Genette's notion of palimpsest is also important to this analysis, and is explained as overwriting new material on existing texts, by which "a new function is superimposed upon and interwoven with an older structure, and the dissonance between these two concurrent elements imparts its flavor to the resulting whole" (Genette 1997: 398). As Gordon Slethaug notes on the dialogic nature of this device, palimpsest has come to stand for "a current text that hides or obscures other texts or one that contains the muted inscriptions of antecedents in order to engage this dialogue"

(Slethaug 2014: 192). This can occur in a single instance, while dialogic palimpsest refers to at least two inscriptions on the same surface (Slethaug 2014: 192). According to Slethaug, "palimpsest is an overwriting that rewrites and plays with one or more originals in a destabilizing manner to inaugurate new import" (Slethaug 2014: 192). Therefore, he notes, the use of pastiche, bricolage and palimpsest "where the many originals are cobbled together, overwritten, and exposed, becomes a particularly fruitful way to go against the dominance of origin and liberate the freeplay of textuality and meaning" (Slethaug 2014: 29).

JARMUSCH'S ROAD MOVIES

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Throughout his filmography, Jarmusch exhibits a tendency to incorporate elements of the road movie genre, placing emphasis on driving, traveling and movement in most of his films. In *Down by Law*, the protagonists literally escape from prison, society's corrective institution, only to get lost in the complete wilderness of the bayou, not only to escape justice, but also to find answers to existential questions. *The Limits of Control* emphasizes the notion of traveling, while also featuring a series of episodes in which the protagonist encounters individuals who provide pieces of a puzzle that leads to knowledge. Travel, cultural exploration and individualism are similarly highlighted in *Mystery Train*. Although these films borrow structurally and thematically from the road movie genre, the four films that are the focus of this analysis (which belong to different periods of Jarmusch's filmmaking career) are more concrete examples of it, even though they treat the genre in demonstrably different ways.

Stranger than Paradise (1984), Jarmusch's second feature film and the first in a series of his films concerned with travel and movement, is a postmodern road movie obsessed with its own image construction. It centers on Willie, an ill-humored Hungarian immigrant living in New York, Eve, his newly arrived cousin from Budapest, and his easygoing friend Eddie. The film is structurally divided into three distinct chapters; the first, *The New World*, opens with Eve watching planes land and take off as she arrives, while her voiceover recounts her stay in New York. In the second, entitled *A Year Later*, the boys drive to Cleveland to visit Eve, who is staying there with her aunt, and in the third, *Paradise*, Willie and Eddie decide to go to Florida, so they pick up Eve and all three of them go together.

In this minimalist road film, both trips are prompted by boredom and a desire for fulfillment or excitement: before the boys set off, Willie says "I just want to get out of here and see something different for a few days," while Eve has a need to go somewhere warmer than Cleveland, and escape her dead-end job. In a manner reminiscent of 1960s European art cinema, the characters are aloof, incommunicative, and generally shown as inactive and stagnating, with dialogue that is sparse, clipped and reduced to a basic exchange of information. The same procedure is employed on the conventions of the genre, so instead of the three of them speeding excitedly through open spaces in search of the American Dream, their mobility and movement becomes as uneventful and flat as their everyday lives. During the first trip, Eddie remarks disappointedly that "everything looks just the same." The episode ends with a deflated anticlimax when they visit Lake Erie and, instead of a breathtaking vista, the lake is depicted as a blurry backdrop of whiteness to three figures in black, looking at nothing. Their stay in "paradise" is similarly stunted; while the boys go to the dog races Eva is left at the motel all day, reinforcing the film's theme of loafing around, being bored and waiting, throughout several extended shots. Suárez refers to this as "dead time" (Suarez 2007: 31). The posturing that Lederman mentions is exemplified by Willie and Eve's generally cool demeanor, and by the sunglasses Willie buys for the three of them, which they wear with exaggerated indifference.

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In terms of the landscape of the open road, on their trip to Florida the breathtaking natural environment has been replaced by a series of static, almost uncomfortably long shots separated by long pauses (achieved by the insertion of strips of black leather into the film strip). These shots frame in turn a gas station, a parking lot, a tourist sign and a motel, so static they almost look like photographs, "each documenting a distinctly banal non-place located somewhere along the interstate highway system" (Korola 2014: 21). The film also snubs the typical industrialist infatuation with the vehicle; the car in which they travel is borrowed, and they comment that if it breaks down they will simply leave it at the side of the road. They drive a lot, but only glimpses of the landscape can be seen passing by, since the camera is placed in the back seat for slightly lower-angle point-of-view shots. Such subjective shots, in turn, pull the spectator into the narrative, helping him or her identify with the characters and join them on this road to nowhere. During the second trip, the focus turns solely on the passengers in the car, who sit almost motionless and silent as they drive.

Similarly, the driving itself lacks the enthusiasm or enchantment of classic road movies such as *Easy Rider* (1969). Unlike the expansive

landscape and blazing desert of *Vanishing Point* (1971), *Stranger Than Paradise* hides more of the surroundings than it shows. However, akin to the tendencies exhibited by the emergent postmodern road movie (exemplified by Wim Wenders’s *Paris, Texas* [1984]), the film is infused with a sense of detachment, nonchalance and self-irony, or, as David Laderman remarks:

A distinctive “been there, done that” attitude prevails among the characters, who often literally or figuratively smirk at the road trip. Like everything else in the film, and like most postmodern road movies, *Stranger than Paradise* makes fun of the drive it nevertheless embarks upon. (Laderman 2002: 146)

Therefore, in an instance of intertextual pastiche, Jarmusch employs the structure of the classical road film. However, both the inner journeys of the characters in *Stranger than Paradise* and the physical road trips they take display movement that leads to the conclusion that things are the same everywhere, or that everywhere is equally empty, thus self-reflexively parodying the conventions of the genre.

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Dead Man is Jarmusch’s most popular and critically acclaimed work to date. It is also one of his most complex films, because of its layers of signification and the dialogue it enters into with other works of art, media and cultural traditions. However, because of the thematic framework of this paper, this analysis focuses mainly on the film’s generic hybridity, as it mixes the road film and revisionist westerns, performing a dialogic palimpsest of genres. In that respect, it constitutes a step forward in the exploration of the possibilities of the road movie.

At the center of *Dead Man* is William Blake, a young accountant from Cleveland traveling west by rail to assume a post in the frontier town of Machine, run and owned by a man called Dickinson. He arrives too late and the job has already been filled, so disappointed and broke, Blake wanders around town and meets a young flower seller in front of the saloon. They spend the night together but are interrupted by her ex-fiancé who, enraged, shoots at Blake but accidentally kills the girl, Thel, as she tries to shield Blake from the bullet. In the final act of this rapid exchange of bullets, Blake takes Thel’s gun and kills her ex-fiancé, Charlie. Mister Dickinson, incidentally Charlie’s father, seeks revenge for the death of his son, hiring three bounty hunters and issuing a public reward for Blake’s capture. The next day, William Blake is found by a Native American nicknamed Nobody, who tries to remove the bullet but is unsuccessful. From that moment Blake is, in fact, a dead man walking, a man caught between life and death, on his way from reality to the world of the spirits. Nobody, mistaking young

William Blake for the Romantic English poet, decides to help him get back to the spirit world. The film follows their journey further west, to a fortified Indian town where Blake is placed in a funerary canoe and sent out to sea.

Dead Man is ostensibly a road film with two journeys, marked by movement in opposite directions. The first journey represents a movement *towards*, depicting Blake’s arrival at the frontier. When he sets out on his long train ride, the other passengers are city folk, formally dressed and polite, but as the journey continues westward, the composition of his fellow-travelers changes each time he awakens from a nap; the city folk are replaced by rugged trappers, miners and pioneers, and the landscape seems ever more savage and barren. As Blake travels, the viewer observes the gradual falling away of the markers of western civilization, culminating in a scene in which all the travelers except Blake jump to the window and maniacally start shooting when they see a herd of buffalo. As he gets off the train and walks into town, he is greeted by the gruesome sight of toothless and ragged men and women on Machine’s muddy, chaotic and grubby main street.

The second segment of Blake’s journey, a flight *from*, details the time after his injury, as he progresses even further from places shaped by western civilization into the wilderness, seen through the western eye as uncharted territory. The film observes the conventions of the road movie as Blake and Nobody try to hurry along, keeping one step ahead of the bounty hunters and sheriffs who are after them. It also clearly defines both travelers as outsiders and outcasts from their previous lives, Blake because his parents have died, his fiancée has left him, he has no money or job, and he is a wanted man. Nobody is equally outcast from his tribe because he is of mixed blood, and because, as a boy, he was captured and taken to England. There he learned to read and mimic “the white man,” and since then has belonged neither to his native culture nor to the western one. As often happens in road movies, the protagonists soon find themselves entangled in acts of violence and crime, shooting their way westward, and, true to the genre, they both die at the end: Nobody succumbs in a final shootout with one of the bounty hunters, while Blake returns to the spirit world he supposedly came from.

It should come as no surprise that *Dead Man* combines elements of the road movie with those of the western, a film genre popular since the inception of Hollywood cinema and inextricably linked to the American cultural identity. Moreover, the road movie can be seen as a chronological continuation of the western, given that the former coalesced into a genre in the late 1960s, coinciding with the waning popularity of the western. The road movie also represents the western’s thematic evolution, since

the frontier usually featured in the western is replaced by the search for a different kind of frontier, located elsewhere. Shari Roberts traces this transmutation back to the appearance of *Easy Rider* (1969) and its tagline: "A man went looking for America but couldn't find it anywhere" (Roberts 1997: 51). *Easy Rider*'s two main characters Wyatt (Peter Fonda), who wears a helmet decorated with the American flag, and Billy (Dennis Hopper), dressed in a pioneer-style leather jacket, are both named after legendary western figures: Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid. As they ride across the vast landscape, though horses have been replaced by motorbikes, the characters seem to be looking for some sort of frontier, clearly echoing the western and highlighting the links between the genres. While in the western true American values are found on the frontier, in *Easy Rider* the protagonists search for this promise of personal freedom and spiritual fulfillment on the open road, but ultimately cannot find it. Thus, "the road stands in for the frontier" and the frontier myth evolves into the mystification of the open road as a repository of opportunity and freedom. Yet, where the western clearly places the possibility of the American Dream on the frontier, the road film displaces it into the unknown, allowing it only to be searched for, often with tragic consequences (Roberts 1997: 52).

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In *Dead Man*, Jarmusch alludes to this generic evolution through genre palimpsest, and amalgamates the conventions of both genres as he offers a road movie narrative structure but displaces it to a time before the road and the car were invented. Blake arrives at the frontier in search of a job, his version of the American Dream, yet he is forced to take to the road, or in his case, the woods, on horseback, because he becomes the typical outlaw of both the road movie and the western, fleeing from society. Laderman argues that the road movie "reinvents the Western's preindustrial iconography of slow-paced horse treks as motorized motion and speed" (Laderman 2002: 14), but in *Dead Man* this evolution is reversed. Thus, this generic double palimpsest at work throughout the film puts the two genres in dialogue, continually exposing both to new interpretations. Another striking feature pointing to the blurring of boundaries between different times and genres is the film's conspicuous musical score, composed and played by Neil Young. Its dissonant and raw electric guitar riffs seem anachronistic to the frontier setting, but it is "also larded with acoustic guitar, pump organ, and detuned piano suggesting a place and time more of the film's setting than of its making" (Jarmusch qtd. in Allan 2008: 261).

An additional shared feature of the western and the road movie is the predominance of violence and death. Whereas the road movie tends to portray

violence as a progressive gesture of liberation from society, Laderman argues that the genre’s more general suggestion is that to venture outside society “is to tread where the rules of the game no longer apply, and where the ominous, unpredictable violence of the wilderness prevails” (Ladernam 2002: 22). Discussing the western, Jane Tompkins remarks that “[t]o go west, [...] west of everything, is to die. Death is everywhere in this genre” (Tompkinson 1992: 24). Roberts maintains that, while in a traditional western violence is a test of masculinity and bravery, “in the Eastwood road film violence becomes hyper-real, ritualistic, a spectacle that alludes to the old codes of the Western in the pastiche of this postmodern genre” (Roberts 1997: 54). The violence in *Dead Man* is equally present, hyper-real and grotesque, gradually progressing as the film moves along, mirroring the confluence of the genres.

Death is likewise present in the film, from the opening inscription of Belgian poet Henri Michaux “*It is preferable not to travel with a dead man*”, to the bodies of trappers, sheriffs and bounty hunters left behind. In fact it looms, appearing as the vision of a skeleton on William Blake’s face as his state deteriorates on the way to actual death. The film’s ominous and penetrating soundtrack and black-and-white cinematography further amplify its gothic atmosphere, which Michael Atkinson echoes when describing the road movie genre:

road movies are cowed in lurking menace, spontaneous mayhem and dead-end fatalism, never more than few road stops away from abject lawlessness and haphazard bloodletting [...] road movies have always been songs of the doomed, warnings that once you enter the open hinterlands between cities, you’re on your own. (Atkinson: 16)

However, if the frontier in the western represents the battle between good and bad, just as it is the locus of opportunity and freedom, and the road movie then relocates this quest to the open road, *Dead Man* shatters both these visions. Jonathan Rosenbaum refers to this as confounding “much of our mythology about the western – reversing some of its philosophical presuppositions by associating a westward journey with death rather than rebirth, for example, and with pessimism rather than hope” (Rosenbaum 1996). Indeed, Jarmusch’s revisionist West is feral, filled with cannibalistic bounty hunters, mad trappers and vicious missionaries, at the very least dissolving any illusions about the noble aspect of the settlement process. Several critics, such as Jacquelin Kilpatrick and Juan A. Suárez, argue that Jarmusch uses violence and grimness with the intent to demythologize, subverting the ideal of the frontier (Suárez 2007: 104), thus calling it a

“post-” or “deconstructive western”. Neil Campbell notes that post-westerns increasingly present “the imperceptible wound of the past now made visible” in the present, as scars on the land and the consciousness. He continues:

These are troubled and troubling texts about the West viewed no longer as an ideal, prelapsarian community or a clear register of national identity or imperial desire, but rather as complex and awkward meanderings into a layered, scarred region, both geographical and psychical. (Campbell 2013: 15)

Indeed, the film tackles the brutality of the conquest of the West, the injustices suffered by native Indian tribes, the senseless destruction of nature for profit, and America’s misguided love of firearms in a way that deprives the frontier of almost any romanticism. Almost, because the ominousness of the frontier is offset by the relationship that develops between Nobody and Blake, and the kindness the Kwakiutl tribe affords the latter in organizing his send-off. Finally, if Blake’s evocation of the dead poet William Blake and his bleeding wound make him a dead man walking, and Nobody’s name indicates his metaphorical nonexistence, then both characters are in effect dead from the onset. This, in turn, produces ambiguity about their journey and its progress, or lack thereof, further destabilizing the conventions of the classical road movie as expounded by Laderman, and listed earlier. Furthermore, if classical road movies “incorporate in various ways the combination of the car, the road and the journey as a source of thrill and sensation and as an antidote to the ennui of the repressive culture” (Hammond 2006: 15), then *Dead Man* represents a postmodern road movie. It does this not only by almost completely disregarding these traits, but also by establishing a dialogue with the genre’s predecessor, the western, and blurring the boundaries between them through generic palimpsest.

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Dead Man and *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999) comprise the richly intertextual and multilayered phase of Jarmusch’s 1990s films. In *Ghost Dog* several genres coexist simultaneously, constantly intertwining and interacting, while helping to shape and motivate the film’s characters and plot. In addition to alluding to several genres, the film offers a plethora of references to other films, numerous works of literature, other media and cultural history at large, since, as Slethaug observes, this intertextual citation may enter a text via other specific texts, but it can also “arise from cultural coding in general” (Slethaug 2014: 192). Thus, Jarmusch, to use Lévi-Strauss’s term, becomes a *bricoleur*, using “whatever is at hand”, that is, “a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous” (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 17), citing heterogeneous fragments of different provenance.

Closely related to this is Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, on which critic Graham Allen expounds by saying that all utterances are *dialogic* and that "all language responds to previous utterances and to pre-existent patterns of meaning and evaluation, but also promotes and seeks to promote further responses" (qtd. in Slethaug 2014: 193). Allen further believes that "at the heart of Bakhtin's work is an argument that the dialogic, heteroglot aspects of language are essentially threatening to any unitary, authoritarian and hierarchical conception of society, art and life" (Allen 2000: 30). Therefore, each new work becomes "heteroglossic, containing within it our own voices as well as the voices of others" (Slethaug 2014: 193). Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog* is just such a heteroglossic performance of bricolage.

The film opens with an aerial shot of a suburban wasteland with industrial plants and warehouses, gradually descending to focus on pigeons nesting in a wooden rooftop structure. The red, hand-written, block lettering of the opening credits and the sound of languid but slightly ominous instrumental hip-hop (composed by RZA from the Wu-Tang Clan) immediately point to a hip-hop or gang film. The next scene depicts *Ghost Dog*, a black man with "gangsta" braids, but the film's generic prefiguration begins to shift as he is depicted reading a passage from *Hagakure*, an eighteenth-century practical and spiritual guide to the way of the samurai. The eponymous protagonist of *Ghost Dog* is a modern-day samurai, and the retainer of Italian mafia foot soldier Louie, owing to an event that took place ten years earlier when *Ghost Dog* was being beaten by hooligans and Louie saved his life. It is this event that has helped *Ghost Dog* make sense of his life, shaping his entire existence through his adoption of the lifestyle and beliefs of the ancient samurai culture. However, the two of them remember this event slightly differently, a point that echoes both Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashōmon* and Ryūsuke Akutagawa's short story collection of the same name, which served as the literary inspiration for Kurosawa's film. What is more, Akutagawa's short story collection *Rashōmon*, in turn inspired by a twelfth-century Japanese text, appears and circulates among several characters throughout the narrative, intensifying the film's dialogic and heteroglossic nature.

The samurai genre is further hinted at by references to Kurosawa's several samurai films, as well as Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* (1967), which features a lone assassin who wears white gloves during hits, lives in a run-down neighborhood and keeps a canary. *Ghost Dog* himself best epitomizes the ancient Japanese culture manifested in Jersey City by reading chapters from *Hagakure*, which are interspersed throughout the film as breaks from the narrative. At the same time, the chapters from *Hagakure*

inform and anticipate narrative developments in the calm and methodical execution of Ghost Dog's hits, the meditative way in which he cleans his weapons and handles his pigeons, and his strictly regulated, almost ritualistic, daily life. The nexus between the ancient and the modern is even detectable in Ghost Dog's smaller mannerisms. For instance, he inserts a disc into the CD player of the stolen cars he drives with a flick of the wrist that resembles throwing a shuriken, or twirls his gun so that it makes a whooshing sound before he stows it in its holster. Juan Suárez points out that these implications are much broader and, since the samurai class proliferated in times of internal division, "[t]he film renders the present in the light of feudal Japan—as an era of decay and disintegration [...]" (Suárez 2007: 134).

Ghost Dog's two worlds are further intertwined by the fact that he is a *black* samurai, reminiscent of the characters in 1970s Blaxploitation films. These films were usually set in black urban spaces, and depicted a single man fighting an evil white crime boss and his clan, while simultaneously containing plot themes addressing the black experience in America (Lawrence 2008: 20). In several of the, such as *Black Samurai* (1976), eastern martial arts films and the black experience intersected, just as martial arts later entered hip-hop, most notably in the case of the Wu-Tang Clan who amply sampled the 1978 kung fu film *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* on their album *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*. In addition, breakdancing, or b-boying, traditionally incorporates martial arts moves, all of which is evidence of the appeal of eastern cultural elements to the construction of the contemporary urban black identity. In the case of Ghost Dog, his dual, composite identity is best exemplified in the rooftop scene, in which, after meditating, the black samurai practices the Japanese art of sword fighting with the suburban industrial landscape in the background, to the sound of instrumental hip-hop. RZA's musical score, featuring instrumental hip-hop with hints of jazz, is one of the most intricate instances of bricolage in the film, given that hip-hop is itself a postmodern music genre par excellence². Since the first block party, organized by DJ Kool Herc in the Bronx in 1973, copying and pasting, borrowing and overlaying and using all the other postmodernist interventions has always been at the heart of hip-hop. By borrowing brazenly from funk, skillfully building on the tradition of jazz

² Several critics have expounded the idea that hip-hop is both a postmodern music genre and a postmodern cultural phenomenon. For more on this, see *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (1995) by Russell Potter, or *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (2004) by Imani Perry.

and incorporating early electronic sounds, while simultaneously quoting eastern martial arts films and comic book superheroes, hip-hop is essentially the embodiment of our postmodern condition.

Ghost Dog is a young man who belongs to the urban black street culture; he is part of the local lore and enjoys the respect of the members of several local gangs, who freestyle lyrics about him in the park. In addition, as Cynthia Fuchs remarks, his contemplation of death on a daily basis comes not only from instructions in *Hagakure*, but also from the experience of being a young black man living in a crime-ridden suburb (Fuchs 2000). In the context of *Ghost Dog* as a road movie, Katerina Korola observes that it is no coincidence that in the film cars, roads, and driving are given a prominent place, as they allow the protagonist “to assert his mastery over a built environment otherwise governed by capital” (Korola 2014: 22). As Ghost Dog hijacks expensive and stylish cars and then drives to his next hit, the long driving sequences function as his transformation from a black pedestrian to a man in a position of power. His samurai insistence on detachment and control is mirrored in the act of driving, in that it offers privacy, and the chance to exercise control over his world (Korola 2014: 22). In contrast to the classical or even postmodern road film, which both feature the open road, driving is here mostly limited to the post-industrialized suburban sprawl, of which automobility and the highway system are an integral part. Therefore, *Ghost Dog* transplants the basic tension of the road film between civilization and wilderness to the bleak postindustrial fringes of the city, again indicative of the postmodern condition, which is defined by Lyotard as the status of knowledge, “as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age” (Lyotard 1979: 3). Here, technological transformations have an impact on the very nature of knowledge, and it increasingly becomes an informational commodity (Lyotard 1979: 4–5).

Thanks to an unlucky accident, when Louie orders one of the mobsters to be killed, the don’s daughter witnesses Ghost Dog killing them, which means that, according to mafia code he too has to die. The samurai and his master’s culture are suddenly on warring sides, as Ghost Dog tries to reconcile his loyalty to his master until death with his own survival. The clash of these cultures, as well as their similarities, are exemplified by a hilarious mafia sit-down scene, in which the mobsters comment on all the rappers having names like Snoop Doggy Dog, Ice Cube or Q-Tip, like the “Indians” who call themselves Red Cloud, Running Bear or Black Elk. Yet, funnily enough, as Peter Bradshaw remarks, the Mafiosi exhibit the same tendencies with their names, like Sammy the Snake or Louie the

Fish (Bradsaw 2000). As critic Marco Lanzagorta notes, the mafia clan is, in turn, depicted as “completely decadent, contrasting strongly with the largely romantic and luxurious gangster world shown in films such as *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *The Untouchables* (Brian De Palma, 1987)” (Lanzagorta 2002). They are aged, largely incompetent and their presence on screen often functions as comic relief. What little remains of their authority is recognized in their tiny enclave in the city, but out in the countryside they get pulled over by the police just like ordinary citizens. Nonetheless, despite the fact that—in *Ghost Dog*’s words—they belong to different ancient tribes, which are now almost extinct, they must remain true to their belief systems, no matter how obsolete.

The final showdown is presaged not only by the first scene, in which *Ghost Dog* meditates on inevitable death in the way of the samurai, but also by the conventions of the genres that direct the characters’ fates: the loyal samurai cannot kill his master, although most gangster, gang and samurai films presuppose a final showdown scene. Furthermore, the journey the film implies is also an inner one—that of a samurai’s journey towards honor at all costs—and a metaphorical one, across different genres, texts, cultural artifacts and media. Ultimately, the genres inside which *Ghost Dog* operates are a blend, a constantly shifting amalgam of gangster, samurai, gang and road films. The film’s main protagonists and their respective genres are inextricably linked, informing and depending on each other for their construction.

In contrast to Jarmusch’s two prominent 1990s fiction films (*Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog*), *Broken Flowers* is much sparser in terms of quotations from, and references to other works of art, and its layering of meaning is derived from our shared (more visibly Western) cultural archive. In terms of its generic performance, Jarmusch revisits the road film trope, but also includes strands of mystery and romance (Suárez 2007: 141). While these generic strands coexist simultaneously, and all three skew their respective conventions, they do not serve to define the characters to the same extent as in *Dead Man* or *Ghost Dog*.

At the center of the narrative is Don Johnston, in the words of his current girlfriend, “an over-the-hill Don Juan”, who sits motionless and seemingly impassive, glued to the sofa and the television set, as she is about to leave him. Moments later, he receives a typewritten letter in red ink on pink stationery from an old girlfriend, telling him he has a 19-year-old son who has gone on a road trip and might be looking for him. This mysterious, unsigned letter with no return address prompts Don to take a road trip of

his own, in order to visit five of his ex-girlfriends and find out which one of them could be the mother of his possible son. His journey has a clear linear structure and consists of five episodes, each encounter bracketed by a sequence of flying or driving, and together they present a downward spiral. Starting with warm and welcoming Laura and her playful daughter Lolita, the encounters become progressively briefer and colder, with Don reaching the nadir of his trip when he visits the last girlfriend at the cemetery.

Broken Flowers is evidently a road film, as it satisfies the conventions of the genre by which the journey is a metaphor for the quest for knowledge or adventure, or a means to resolve an inner conflict. It also places emphasis on the act of driving, and focuses on the open road that leads into the unknown. However, it lacks the “glorified transience, fugitive/alternative lifestyle, cultural critique, visionary ambition and restless sensuality” that David Laderman deems crucial to the genre (Laderman 2002: 66). Don is not fleeing the oppressive constraints of his daily life, nor is he trying to find freedom on the road the way the protagonists of the iconic representatives of the genre do. In fact, he feels quite comfortable at home on his sofa and is a reluctant, unenthusiastic traveler, even an anti-traveler. On the eve of his trip, Don is depicted as simply sitting, or sleeping face down on his sofa, in a series of extended shots reminiscent of *Stranger than Paradise*, emphasizing duration and emptiness, the scene proceeding at the same pace as that of his pink roses, wilting in their vase. His friend and neighbor Winston is the one who insists he take the trip, and practically pushes him out of the house. Don calls him along the way, and complains about having to be on the road. The film lacks the sense of adventure and thrill the road is supposed to inspire, and it moves at a slow pace, with long shots of empty road on which nothing happens. Jarmusch even reduces the number of passengers from the usual two or three to one, the lone traveler, or as Don remarks “a stalker in a Taurus”. Finally, when he returns from the trip, there is no release, no epiphany: only a middle-aged man left standing alone at an empty suburban crossroads.

If *Broken Flowers* is viewed as a mystery or detective film, the conventions are nonetheless skewed, because no knowledge, either existential or practical, is gained: Don does not find out if any of the girlfriends are the mother of his hypothetical son, nor does he definitively know that the boy whom he meets is in fact his son. Furthermore, if language and dialogue are usually the primary sources of information, here they reveal almost nothing about the characters: the exchanges are cryptic or mismatched, and protagonists withhold or suppress any real participation. This exemplifies Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of the *différend*, “a case of conflict between (at least) two parties that

cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments" (Lyotard 1988: xi). If applied to communication, this signifies an instance in which meaning cannot be derived from pronounced utterances, or rather in which phrases can carry meaning and yet be indeterminate (1988: 71). Thus the primary sources of information are their surroundings and the things they own that hint at their class, education, interests and way of life, but provide no resolution to the central mystery. As Gordon Slethaug notes, it is indicative that, at its onset, the film references Nabokov's *Lolita* and its two cinematic adaptations through the character of Laura's precocious daughter Lolita, because "these citations, creating a multiple palimpsest, simultaneously push the audience toward and guard against constructing meaning" (Slethaug 2014: 196). By inserting such an obvious quotation, Jarmusch prompts the audience to start connecting the dots, yet also sends it on a wild goose chase because, as Slethaug remarks using Roland Barthes' term, the film constantly undermines the "myth of filiation" (2014: 197). Graham Allen explains that Barthes criticizes the myth of filiation as "the idea that the meaning *comes from* and is, metaphorically at least, the *property of* the individual authorial consciousness" (Allen 2000: 74), and that texts should acknowledge "the benefits of fragmentation, decenteredness, and the freeplay of signification" (Slethaug 2014: 198). The investigation in *Broken Flowers* is triggered by the mysterious pink letter that Don's sleuth-like neighbor Winston studies in detail, but from which he is unable to extract any information, instead instructing Don to look for "clues" and pink things during the trip. As expected, the clues Don finds are overabundant and the color pink pops up everywhere, leading to "referential mania", yet these seeming "signs" lead nowhere, stubbornly undermining the myth of filiation. Moreover, "pinkness" as a signifier produces so many signifieds that taking all of them into account results in such an overwhelming semantic field that it may signify everything and, consequently, nothing. It is no coincidence, then, that the film's central storyline revolves around a man's search for a hypothetical son and a son's search for his father, yet both searches result equally in the cul-de-sac of certainty.

This film is not a true romance, because it explores a series of five long-past romances and one that will soon end if nothing changes, because, as Cynthia Fuchs notes, "Don is more a vacancy than an emotional center". Suárez summarizes succinctly:

Broken Flowers mixes ingredients from the road movie, the romantic comedy, and the detective story, but in a typical Jarmusch fashion, it is a peculiar distillation of these genres. It lacks the speed and outlaw chic of the road

film, explores the afterlife of the romantic couple rather than its formation – as the romantic comedy tends to do – and, a failed detection narrative, it is unable or unwilling to resolve its main enigma. (Suárez 2007: 141)

CONCLUSION

It is evident that Jarmusch employs the thematic and structural devices of cinematic genres and genre film in many of his works, yet he does so in unconventional ways. Regarding the films analyzed here, *Stranger than Paradise* represents a minimalist and lackadaisical postmodern road movie, while *Dead Man* is a generic palimpsest that blends the western and the road movie in equal measure. In *Ghost Dog*, the bricolage of conventions from martial arts and gangster films plays a vital role in the construction of the characters' motivations and of the characters themselves. Since they belong to different cultures, it seems as if they are rooted in different cinematic genres, and vice versa. Finally, *Broken Flowers* revisits the initial minimalism of *Stranger than Paradise*, yet with an added comical, absurdist and romantic note. Jarmusch's approach to genre film and culture at large is both anachronistic and transversal, fusing all the sources of inspiration he can find. Most importantly, with each new film, Jarmusch demonstrates that, despite being set in their ways, genres can be used to aid the dialogue of signification, and genre film can serve as a starting point for creating layered, multifaceted narratives, in which the high and the low intermingle and flourish.

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