

The "Jarmusch touch"

Ghost Dog, written and directed by Jim Jarmusch

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1 April 2000

Ghost Dog is about a black contract killer (Forest Whitaker), living alone on a rooftop in a poverty-stricken neighborhood, who runs afoul of a Mafia chieftain and his gang and has to do them in in an effort to save his own life. Matters are complicated by the killer's adherence to the samurai code and his self-willed vassalage to one of the crime gang's lieutenants. Much of the film is taken up with nighttime shots of Ghost Dog driving stolen cars through city streets, listening to music on CD players.

This is the latest work written and directed by Jim Jarmusch, American independent filmmaker. Jarmusch has been responsible for *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), *Down by Law* (1986), *Mystery Train* (1989), *Night on Earth* (1991) and *Dead Man* (1995), among other films. *Ghost Dog* has been widely praised.

Jarmusch has always struck me as one of those extremely self-conscious directors, far more concerned with establishing his status in the film world than in contributing to an understanding of modern life.

The "Jarmusch touch" largely involves presenting various forms of eccentric behavior in unlikely settings and adopting a superior attitude toward the resultant goings-on. The spectator is invited to share in the amusement—up to a point. It will be found that the director and his entourage are somehow always one step ahead.

Eccentric behavior in unlikely settings: in *Ghost Dog*, for example, a Mafia boss admires rap music and sings along with it. The gangsters hang around a shabby social club and are apparently doing so poorly that they're behind in the rent. Ghost Dog and Louie, his "master," communicate by carrier pigeon. The crime boss's daughter, reading an English translation of *Rashomon*, chats imperturbably with her boyfriend's killer ("You can have it," she says of her book, "I'm

finished with it"). The stone-faced crime boss himself watches cartoons on television. While gang members converse on the sidewalk, an irate young boy drops household objects on them from an apartment window. Ghost Dog's "best friend" is a French-speaking Haitian ice cream vendor with whom he can't converse. A little girl he meets in the park carries a collection of books—*The Wind in the Willows*, *The Souls of Black Folk* and a lurid paperback, *Night Nurse*—in her lunch box. And so forth.

Jarmusch has looked at America through the eyes of a Hungarian (*Stranger Than Paradise*), an Italian (*Down by Law*) and a Japanese couple (*Mystery Train*). In *Ghost Dog*, several different "cultures" collide: samurai, modern urban, Mafia and more. In his own approach Jarmusch goes out of his way to reveal a variety of international and stylistic influences.

He manifests a certain warmth for those, like Ghost Dog, one senses that he feels to be his intellectual and moral equals. (Whitaker is a wonderful actor, who lends seriousness and humanity to any film he's in.) In fact, it's safe to assume that the lead character is the filmmaker's fantasized self-image: solitary, silently heroic, tragically doomed. The other figures, by and large, are caricatures or ciphers.

The film is so tilted in Ghost Dog's favor (and the director's) that the spectator may find it difficult to gain his or her bearings and ask the crude, simple questions. The various elements—narrative, images, music and overall "hipness"—are organized to discourage such considerations.

These are some of the issues that occur to me. The "hired killer" has become one of the most overused figures in American cinema (along with the "Mafia boss," incidentally). Putting aside, however, the matter of the cliched character of such a creation, why is one

obliged to find this sort of personality admirable in any way? As far as Jarmusch's supporters go, this isn't even a question. To the petty bourgeois critic or filmgoer, who has never met a hardened killer and never hopes to, the latter can stand for any number of things: rebel, freedom fighter, the id. In reality, the glorification of this sort of criminal response to social misery, insofar as it's taken seriously, only blinds people, deepens their confusion. It is an adaptation, conscious or not, to the current debased culture and its icons.

(I strongly suspect as well that this film, absurd as it seems, is in part Jarmusch's response to the popularity and prestige accumulated by Quentin Tarantino in the late 1990s. The debate as to which of these vastly overrated figures is the preeminent “independent filmmaker” in the US seems to me a disheartening and self-defeating enterprise.)

Ghost Dog murders people for money at the behest of a two-bit gangster. When he encounters two redneck hunters on a country road, who've just shot a black bear, it's not clear to me why we should grant him the moral high ground, as we're so clearly intended to. The latter scene is particularly arbitrary and poorly done, an example of the worst sort of pat and self-satisfied “political art.”

Jarmusch has never deigned to present a dramatic story in a coherent and committed fashion or create credible human relationships and he hasn't done so on this occasion. There is hardly any convincing or moving interaction between people in the entire work. The characters are not so much references to human beings and their difficulties as they are materializations of Jarmusch's outlook.

Impolite as it may be thought to do so, it seems important to point out that definite social conceptions suffuse *Ghost Dog*, conceptions which might be generally grouped under the heading of identity politics and “multiculturalism.” The hero is black. The other two attractive characters—the little girl and the ice cream vendor—are black. The gangsters, except perhaps for Louie, are numbskulls or thugs. The hunters are one-dimensional monsters. An Indian puts in an improbable appearance so as to be abused by a couple of the gang members: “Puerto Rican, Indian, nigger, same thing!” As with a Spike Lee, or a Jane Campion, it's clear to whom Jarmusch is speaking and to whom he's not.

Jarmusch apparently views the world as a clash of

cultures, dying or otherwise, tribes, ethnicities and their respective moral codes. He has, we're told, a “vision of multiplicity.” It's perhaps this double vision that blinds him to the things in front of his face. Isn't there something troubling about an artist transforming urban decay and its associated *suffering* into picturesque local color in front of which he can organize his conceits? Because poverty here is entirely taken for granted. There's no sense of outrage on the filmmaker's part about what he shows us in scene after scene. It's difficult to imagine anything more irresponsible than this.

And there is a considerable audience for this sort of smugness and cleverness, and a legion of critics to praise it. And intelligent people put Jarmusch's name and the names of serious, complicated filmmakers in the same sentence. Confusion, lack of perspective, social interest—all of that comes into play. And an elementary disagreement about what the great questions are.



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