

# Jim Jarmusch's *Paterson*: A tribute to American cities and poetry

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*Written and directed by Jim Jarmusch*

American independent filmmaker Jim Jarmusch (*Coffee and Cigarettes*, *Down by Law*) has a new film, *Paterson*, set in Paterson, New Jersey, some 30 miles west of New York City. It follows the daily routine of a bus driver with the same name as the city, who is also a poet.

Jarmusch's film is divided into seven parts, for the different days of the week. Each day Paterson (Adam Driver) wakes up, chats with his girlfriend, Laura (Golshifteh Farahani), writes poetry before work and drives his bus. After work, he walks his dog and drinks a beer at the local bar, chatting with the bartender, Doc (Barry Shabaka Henley). Paterson is able to write captivating notes on everyday objects, their relationship to people and the emotional ties between people and things.

In dealing with the film, one should probably distinguish between Jarmusch's intentions, which seem generally decent and intriguing in this case, and the results, which are ultimately weak.

One of the principal influences on the making of the film is the remarkable American poet William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), who lived in the New Jersey city and wrote an epic poem, *Paterson*, published in five books, 1946 to 1958, in which the fate of Paterson is identified with the fate of an individual man. The poet's aim was to mirror "the resemblance between the mind of modern man and the city." Williams was originally inspired by James Joyce's *Ulysses* and its treatment of Dublin. He was also responding negatively to T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*.

Williams' poems, as well as those of Ron Padgett of the "New York School" of poetry, figure prominently in Jarmusch's film.

Paterson is a city with a rich social and cultural

history. It was a center of silk production and the site of a legendary mass strike in 1913, led by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), involving thousands of primarily immigrant workers (many of them Italian) and some important socialist figures, including Big Bill Haywood, Carlo Tresca, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and John Reed.

Jarmusch pays homage to aspects of the city's history in his own, idiosyncratic manner. We see photos of poet Allen Ginsberg (who grew up in Paterson), comedian Lou Costello (who was born there) and oral polio vaccine developer Albert Sabin (who attended high school in the city). In a cameo performance, Kara Hayward and Jared Gilman (from Wes Anderson's *Moonlight Kingdom*) carry on a bus conversation about Gaetano Bresci, an Italian anarchist who lived in Paterson.

Jarmusch's desire to inspire people to observe reality and to write is admirable. But it inevitably raises questions. Poet Frank O'Hara's conception—set out in his mock-manifesto, "Personism" (1959)—that one should never write to an audience, but as if one were writing a note or letter to a friend, lies at the heart of the movie.

O'Hara's emphasis on intimacy and spontaneity had a certain value in its time, but even then it was a limited viewpoint. In any event, poets like Williams and O'Hara (also a member of the New York School and a curator at the Museum of Modern Art) were well-versed in the history of literature and art, they weren't simply writing off the cuff. Jarmusch seems to want the viewer to believe that important poetry can be more or less effortlessly jotted down by virtually anyone, even a 10-year-old girl. If the process is so simple, why have Paterson recite other poets' works and not Jarmusch's own?

The undeniable strength of *Paterson* lies in its depiction of the city streets in a genuine portrait of unstaged reality. The contingency of everyday life is conveyed through focusing on details, such as passengers' shoes and faces, accidental meetings, fragments of overheard conversation, the beauty of light falling on a woman's skin when asleep. When Paterson (the driver) takes us on a ride, we get to know Paterson (the city) while passing by its shops and restaurants, its speeding cars and its ethnically diverse crowds.

Unfortunately, the self-consciously mundane character of *Paterson* exhausts itself pretty quickly. The uneventfulness makes us yearn for something to happen. However, when the boredom is finally dispelled by an unexpected event, the occurrence is trivial (the bus breaking down). The frightened cries of the old ladies leaving the bus in the middle of town like traumatized victims of a major catastrophe, although amusing, create the impression that Jarmusch is making fun of people. The "drama" of a toy-gun shooting also turns into parody. There is a smug side to Jarmusch that he still finds hard to resist.

His *Paterson* eventually reveals its fairy-tale nature. The real Paterson is severely depressed. A quarter of the city's single adults live below the federal government's derisory poverty level. A recent report notes, "A shrinking manufacturing base within Passaic County, which employed many low-skilled workers, has caused disproportionately high unemployment numbers among adult residents in the area. The result is that many families have to rely on public entitlements to meet their basic needs."

This harsh present-day reality, registered in fits and starts by Jarmusch, clashes with the imagery associated with mid-20th century poetry. The movie pays nostalgic tribute to the past glory of the American industrial centers in those few decades when it was possible for the average worker to dream of owning a house and living a more or less stable existence.

*Paterson* does not possess a cellphone or computer, carries an old metal lunch box with him to work and writes with a pen. The innocence of his character seems identified with the rejection of modern technology. Likewise, the child-like naïveté of the other characters is less than convincing, as though they are being viewed through a telescope by a New York hipster.

These situations are not real. Paterson and his unemployed girlfriend can afford to live in a detached home on a bus driver's salary without much worry about their finances. The couple is happy for no obvious reason—they never argue, their conversations are lukewarm and superficial. Paterson is a tolerant saint who writes wonderful poetry, but suffers from self-doubt. His charming yet ditzy girlfriend is bad at everything, but totally uncritical of herself, unable to read hints about her awful cooking, terrible singing and even more terrible decorating skills. Local gang members are friendly and the biggest problems workers face are broken hearts. This is condescending and not very helpful.

To a certain extent, Jarmusch knows better. He told an interviewer recently, "I'm very anti-war and anti-American-policy and policies around the world that are war-like and murderous and just stupid. But I'm not against someone being a soldier. ... I think it's important to not be against people in the military. It's the people who tell them what to do that should be f----- held for war crimes." Where is that anger here?

Jarmusch's overly intuitive approach to filmmaking is inadequate for the purpose of treating modern life. He ignores the important currents—which his own images point to!—and focuses instead, for example, on pairs and twins, on Cheerios that resemble the pattern in the curtains, on a black-and-white color scheme. *Paterson* ends up drowning in arbitrary details intended to form some sort of imagined, quasi-Buddhist harmony.

The film has a comedic lightness at certain moments, but Jarmusch self-indulgently relies too heavily here (as he has in the past) on the charm of his characters and his mannered cinematic borrowings. Failing to build on its promising imagery and compose a *genuinely* poetic and insightful diary, which would require social and historical analysis, *Paterson* is ultimately unrealistic and unfulfilling.



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