

Jim Jarmusch's *The Dead Don't Die*: Not awake in his own particular way

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Written and directed by Jim Jarmusch

The Dead Don't Die is the latest movie by American independent filmmaker Jim Jarmusch. Jarmusch is known for a series of off-beat films with an anti-establishment coloring, including *Down by Law* (1986), *Mystery Train* (1989), *Dead Man* (1995), *Broken Flowers* (2005) and *Paterson* (2016). He has also done numerous music videos or documentaries about musicians and groups, such as Talking Heads, Tom Waits, Neil Young and The Stooges.

The new film proceeds along some of the same idiosyncratic lines. It's both a quasi-comic horror film and at the same time clearly a comment on what Jarmusch perceives to be the state of the nation.

The movie is set in small-town Centerville, "A Real Nice Place." Three cops, the pokerfaced chief (Bill Murray), Officer Ronnie (Adam Driver)—who has an "affinity for Mexicans"—and the whiny Officer Mindy (Chloé Sevigny) patrol a main street that includes a diner, motel and hardware store. Town residents feature the angry Farmer Miller (Steve Buscemi), who wears a cap sporting the phrase, "Make America White Again," African-American hardware storeowner Hank (Danny Glover) and diner waitress Fern (Eszter Balint), along with a number of young people being held in a juvenile detention center.

The dull hamlet also has an oddball undertaker, Zelda (Tilda Swinton), a Scot with a shock of flowing white hair. Garbed in a kimono, she wields a samurai sword and meditates before a giant statue of Buddha in the mortuary's back room—she is also the film's principal scene-stealer.

As daytime and nighttime become confused, a television news announcer (Rosie Perez) reports that "polar fracking" has tilted the earth's rotation and created "toxic lunar vibrations." The dead start rising from their graves—as the film's production notes explain—"craving the very things that preoccupied them" in life. Iggy Pop and Sara Driver are the male and female "Coffee Zombie," respectively, while Carol Kane is the "Chardonnay zombie." Ultimately, the Earth is engulfed by a "full-on zombie apocalypse."

Chopping off its head is the only way to dispatch a zombie, and Zelda, before she is called away by a "higher power," skillfully brandishes her sword against the reanimated.

Meanwhile Hermit Bob (Tom Waits), a bearded dropout, who has shunned society and its trappings, gazes on wisely, untouched by the Earth's apparent revenge on its despoilers.

The Dead Don't Die has certain legitimate concerns, primarily ecological destruction. In interviews, Jarmusch speaks of a "malignant" and "broken operating system," a time of society's "endgame," and a "collapsing social order." In *Rolling Stone*, the filmmaker makes an interesting comment: "Look, we just celebrated Earth Day, and no one was talking about ... it was all Trump and [former FBI director and special counsel Robert] Mueller, which, in my opinion, is total bullshit. It's been a distraction, intentionally. I get angry that people I know and love are obsessed with the Trump Show. We're in the sixth mass extinction now, who gives a f--- about the Russians?"

However, as is too often the case at present, sincere ecological anxiety goes hand in hand with a vague but definite misanthropy, as though the population had any control over or was to blame for the activities of the vast corporate interests devastating the planet. The problem, according to this outlook, is popular apathy and indifference. Jarmusch has deliberately created a collection of lethargic and uninformed characters living in "Centerville USA," who are only separated from the undead by a few degrees.

"We're all attached to things in the material world and we're all zombies in one form or another—it's not a huge stretch that we would yearn for those exact same things if we were re-animated," says Carter Logan, Jarmusch's longtime producer. One is tempted to respond: speak for yourself. Actress Swinton sums it up: "Pretty much all of humanity's zombiedom is here. We have cell phone zombies, fashion zombies, every kind of zombie imaginable. There are so many different ways of not being awake in our current climate—for Jim it's like shooting fish in a barrel."

In fact, the first stanza of the film's theme song, "The Dead Don't Die" by country singer-songwriter Sturgill Simpson, who plays "Guitar Zombie" in the movie, reinforces one of the film's major premises, that the American population is only getting what it deserves.

Oh, the dead don't die

Any more than you or I ...

*They walk around sometimes
Never payin' any mind
To the silly lives we lead
Or the reaping we've all sown*

Having created a collection of mostly somnolent and conformist characters, however, Jarmusch is hard-pressed to make them truly interesting and engaging. The deadpan, understated manner wears thin. The aesthetic result is a relatively lifeless critique of lifelessness. The director hasn't brought sufficient urgency or commitment to the project. Frankly, the zombie genre itself hardly seems innovative or promising at this point. According to the film's production notes, "no less than 55 zombie-related movies or TV shows were released in 2014 alone."

Jarmusch's orientation to the "left" of the Democratic Party comes as no surprise in the context of what he sees as a Trump-infested landscape further cluttered up with the "distasteful" Joe Biden. "I like some things about Elizabeth Warren. I, of course, like Bernie Sanders. I like what's his name, the governor of Washington State who's the only really environmentally conscious one [Jay Inslee]. And, of course, I like AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez]; she's too young. But I'm trying to stay away from it right now because the Joe Biden thing makes me deeply depressed" (from an interview with *Vulture*). These are not ideas likely to produce rich, complicated art.

To Jarmusch's credit, it should be noted that in August 2016, he tweeted "My respect to Chelsea Manning for her true courage and integrity—now being abused by the US government. Free Chelsea!"

Throughout his career Jarmusch has striven to make films about "what goes on in the margins of life," as one commentator put it. His approach has been vaguely improvisational, building up stories around characters or themes that interest him, especially eccentric or counter-cultural ones. He clearly values non-conformism and individualism. The filmmaker has worked under generally unfavorable artistic and political conditions. He began his career in the 1980s, during the Reagan administration, and continued to pursue it in the period following the end of the USSR and the supposed end of everything progressive. He seems to identify opposition with a dislike of official culture and propaganda. This has its value, but it also has real limitations clearly expressed in *The Dead Don't Die*.

Jarmusch told an interviewer, "Rather than finding a story that I want to tell and then adding the details, I collect the details and then try to construct a puzzle of story. I have a theme and a kind of mood and the characters but not a plotline that runs straight through."

The last 35 years have been complicated and often traumatic. Jarmusch's films certainly register America's economic decline. With good reason. The writer-director was born in Akron, Ohio, once the rubber capital of the world. The city's

four leading companies (Goodyear, Firestone, B.F. Goodrich, and U.S. Rubber, later known as Uniroyal) once made 80 percent of all the tires in the US. All that collapsed. The city lost some 35,000 manufacturing jobs between 1970 and 1990.

But Jarmusch, who has obvious talents, has not seriously examined contemporary American life. At the center of that neglect, as was mentioned above, is a lack of interest in what has been building up in the working class, the anger, the bitterness, the hostility toward the country's political and economic institutions, in all its contradictoriness. A cap with "Make America White Again" inscribed on it is impressionistic and only skims the surface. There are racists in the US, but the US is not a racist country. America is a seething country.

Jarmusch has been too content to float with a certain stream of non-committal hipsterism to be sensitive to some of the more decisive processes. And this seriously weakens his filmmaking. *Paterson* was a more promising effort, but here too, in the end, he retreated into somewhat easy "quirkiness."

He has a reputation as an "independent" filmmaker. And in so far as he has demonstrated an amused skepticism toward official American life and morals, has not thrown in his lot with Hollywood, has never directed a superhero movie (and doesn't appear likely to direct one), has eschewed the worst sort of cheap, disoriented—but marketable—violence associated with Quentin Tarantino or Martin Scorsese, the reputation is relatively deserved. Numerous performers aspire to work with him, in some cases for less than their usual salaries.

However, artistic "independence," ultimately, has to mean something more than merely avoiding the worst, most destructive traps set by the film industry and dominant culture. To work out a *genuinely* independent-critical stance toward the existing order, which would also mean separating oneself out from the "cool" and lazy artistic milieu in certain big cities—that, unfortunately, has been beyond Jarmusch's grasp. He has not asked enough of himself.



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