



CONTEMPORARY FILM DIRECTORS

Jim Jarmusch

Juan A. Suárez

Jim Jarmusch |

Contemporary Film Directors

Edited by James Naremore

The Contemporary Film Directors series provides concise, well-written introductions to directors from around the world and from every level of the film industry. Its chief aims are to broaden our awareness of important artists, to give serious critical attention to their work, and to illustrate the variety and vitality of contemporary cinema. Contributors to the series include an array of internationally respected critics and academics. Each volume contains an incisive critical commentary, an informative interview with the director, and a detailed filmography.

*A list of books in the series appears
at the end of this book.*



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To David |

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Jim Jarmusch |

A Stranger Here Myself |

Jim Jarmusch stands in recent film history very much as one of his own characters: an endearing eccentric slightly at odds with his surroundings whose presence is at once self-effacing and subtly pervasive. His output has been relatively small—nine feature films and a handful of shorts produced since 1979—and yet he is one of the most influential filmmakers to emerge in the United States in the last three decades. His early films, *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) and *Down by Law* (1986), drew considerable attention to the independent cinema at a time when the high-concept, action-packed blockbuster was already the dominant Hollywood product. In contrast, Jarmusch followed on the steps of the art cinema of the 1960s and 1970s and made formally spare, slow-moving films concerned with intimacy, the exploration of character, and the reformulation of the classical narrative molds. Always working on the margins of the industry, he has managed to remain visible and to maintain a steady rhythm of production. His independence has set an example for many of his contemporaries as well as for a younger genera-

tion of independents. On different occasions, Spike Lee, Kevin Smith, and Gus Van Sant have acknowledged the catalytic role of *Stranger than Paradise* on their own careers. Jarmusch's minimalism, wry humor, and blank affect have also had an impact among recent directors such as Tom DiCillo (who photographed Jarmusch's first two films), Hal Hartley, Sofia Coppola, and Richard Linklater, and these qualities are also shared by the contemporary auteurs Aki Kaurismäki, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Tsai Ming-liang. Jarmusch has helped to demonstrate the viability of independent cinema and has decisively contributed to shaping one of its dominant styles.

Yet despite his influence and visibility, Jarmusch has been relatively neglected by scholars and academics. Most critical assessments of his work have taken the form of occasional reviews and essays, usually prompted by the films' premieres. Scholarly studies have been scarce and have most often appeared in languages other than English—Italian and German leading the way.¹ This is hardly surprising, since Jarmusch's work has always been better received in Europe and the Far East than in the United States. And it is also fitting: his films are largely about displacement, cross-cultural communication, and exile, he has often described himself as an estranged American, and he has come to rely increasingly on European and Japanese funding. Of the handful of books devoted to his work, only two have been published in English. One is a collection of interviews with the filmmaker edited by the Swedish scholar Ludvig Hetzberg; the other is Jonathan Rosenbaum's monograph on *Dead Man*. In addition, Jarmusch is given a prominent place in recent books on independent filmmaking by John Pierson, Geoff Andrew, Emanuel Levy, Geoff King, and Jim Hillier, and a discussion of his work as an example of oppositional cinema closes the latest edition of Robin Wood's *Hollywood, from Vietnam to Reagan*. More extensive treatments can be found in books by the Italian critic Umberto Mosca and by the Spanish critic Breixo Viejo and in the excellent collection of essays edited by Rolf Aurich and Stefan Reinecke. As a whole, this writing tends to be more descriptive than analytical; it perceptively characterizes Jarmusch's style, themes, and trajectory and studies most of his cinematic influences but does not map the connections between his films and the larger cultural context to which they belong.

This larger context is the modernism of the second half of the twen-

tieth century: a second wave of modernism and modernity, also called postmodernity to differentiate it from the earlier one, defined by the ubiquity of television, the beginnings of the cybernetic revolution, and the increasing importance of new social identities. It was a time of intense cultural revisionism, when hegemonic stories and worldviews were called into question, when minority perspectives erupted into public debate, and when the boundaries between high art and low culture turned progressively blurry, to the point of nearly complete disappearance. Many of these developments had antecedents in early twentieth-century modernism, but they gained speed and centrality in the years of the cold war and especially during the 1960s. Jarmusch is a late inheritor of this cultural climate. Like many of the most significant artists of his generation—such figures as Laurie Anderson, Brian Eno, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman—he appears engaged in a reevaluation of experimental culture in an era of increased corporate control over the public channels of expression, but also of considerable street-level agency and creativity. Responsive, like many of his contemporaries, to the expressiveness of popular culture, 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.

These contextual considerations, which will be fully developed in the pages that follow, are important to situate my own approach to authorship. In his classic formulation, Michel Foucault regards the figure of the author as a rhetorical tool to recover an individual from a body of texts and thus to impose the coherence of a creative personality over the dispersal and chaos of history. My own approach runs in the contrary direction. I will work to recover a plurality of forces, styles, and ideologies from Jarmusch's corpus and will thus open this corpus up to the play of historical contingency. In the pages that follow, Jarmusch's films will be inserted within a network of aesthetic influences that include minimalism, the New York pop vanguard of the late 1970s, punk, structural film, the postwar art cinemas, rock 'n' roll, Beat literature and art, classic street photography, Hollywood genre film, European surrealism, and hip-hop, among others. But these films will also be read against such

historical developments as the atomization of the counterculture, the rise of individualistic styles of popular consumption (in part prompted by home video and the Walkman), the development of the independent film industry, and the political conservatism of the times. By reading Jarmusch's work against its context, I do not mean to reduce the author to a mechanical symptom of the era, a sort of by-product of the culture's dialogue with itself. The creator does have a real, if limited, autonomy. In another influential formulation, Roland Barthes compares the author to a medieval scribe: a copyist, whose modern version would be the collage artist, endowed with a degree of freedom but always bound by the codes and possibilities of his or her own cultural horizon (Barthes, "Death" 51–52). The author is, to revert to Ferdinand de Saussure's terms, a form of *parole* in the language of history, a particular performance of the available cultural archive. In this respect, Jarmusch's texts will not be read as completely autonomous performances (that is, the emanation of a free-floating imagination) nor as passive reflections of the times but as selective actualizations of historically situated possibilities.

In addition to reading Jarmusch against his time, this book will explore what makes his films distinctive. In part, this is their ambiguous portrayal of human interaction as plagued by mistiming and miscommunication, cantankerousness and spite, but also containing moments of genuine care and mutuality. The positive moments are short-lived, however, and the feelings that give rise to them are seldom verbalized, so characters tend to remain enclosed in inexpressible loneliness. This does not make them necessarily tragic; they submit to their circumstances without putting up much resistance, and this passivity makes them by turns absurd, comic, and vulnerable, but, at the same time, curiously resilient. These characters are only partly known: their circumstances and motivations are incompletely rendered, so spectators may have the feeling of "dropping in on" them, to borrow Jarmusch's expression, without ever feeling in full command of their stories or completely understanding their lives (Hetzberg 199). In this way of remaining at a distance there is a degree of epistemological modesty: what can be known about the world and about others, these films suggest, is always a small portion of the total. Even more singular than characters and themes is the style of the films. Rather than present conflict-driven action, they are most often static, based on nondramatic situations. They work in a cumulative way, by

means of repetitions that signal small increments and subtle modulations within a given film, and even from film to film, since self-reference is common, and performers and even characters migrate across titles. The formal self-consciousness of the films fosters detachment, but their plots and atmospheric qualities encourage immersion in their fictional world. They are realistic and invested in quotidian detail but also rigorously stylized; they present a world that is immediately recognizable but also fantastic and intertextual, with characters and situations drawn from preexisting stories, films, and songs. But above all, they are intensely visual and aural. They run on timing, on peculiarities of behavior and circumstance, and on the actors' delivery and nuance. Much of what is enjoyable about them has to do with the performers' physiognomies, voices, and eccentric use of language. Jarmusch's work demands a type of criticism as attentive to totalities—character, plot, genre, and ideological statement—as to the fleeting effect of gags, gestures, and details; a criticism capable of adhering to the skin of the film—the temporal unfolding of the image—without losing sight of the more abstract issues that the texts involve.

Jarmusch's films have a political dimension that is important to unpack. They are illustrative of a postmodern politics that downplays the centrality of class and nation and highlights instead temporary social locations—it has been widely noted that they often focus on transients and immigrants—and tangential identifications that often go against the grain of birth-given nationality and ethnicity. They are centrally concerned with situations, actions, and locales that rarely find their way into conventional texts because they lack clear signification or obvious dramatic value. But in this lack of explicit value lies their interest: since they are neglected by dominant regimes of spectacle and narrative, they contain registers of behavior and affect that remain to be explored. In this respect, Jarmusch's films may be aligned with one of the main projects of twentieth-century experimental culture, a project at once aesthetic and political that consists in venturing into the margins of experience to enlarge the scope of representation and the available repertoire of concepts and sensibilities. Writing in the 1940s, the American novelist James Agee called this project an inquiry into "the unimagined existence"—pockets of meaning and emotion not yet represented in the cultural imaginary (Agee xiv–xv). Agee located these pockets of differ-

ence on the social and cultural margins—among tenant farmers, amateur and folk artists, children, and in isolated moments in Hollywood films. Jarmusch finds “the unimagined existence” in a subliminal level of the quotidian: in unstructured intervals crossed by impulses and actions that are detectable yet diffuse. It is this realm they seek to explore, respecting all forms of opacity and irreducibility in the process.

Akron/The Cinémathèque/Lightning over Water

If Jarmusch has often been regarded as the main exponent of independent cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, this is largely due to the success of his second feature, *Stranger than Paradise*. Its critical acceptance and visibility suggested that the independent cinema had finally made it. Finished in early 1984, *Stranger* was selected for competition at the Cannes Film Festival and won a Palm d’Or for best feature. A few months later, it was enthusiastically received at the New York Film Festival and was voted best movie of the year by the National Society of Film Critics. *Stranger than Paradise* was not the only independent U.S. production to be distinguished at Cannes during those years. John Hanson and Rob Nilsson’s *Northern Lights* and Robert Young’s *Alambrista!* (a.k.a. *The Illegal*) had also received awards in 1978 and 1979, respectively, but such recognition had not translated into wide distribution or substantial returns. It was different with Jarmusch’s film. In addition to being a hit among critics, it was a financial windfall of sorts. Made for about \$110,000 at a time when the average cost of a commercial feature was \$14 million, the film was picked up for distribution by the Samuel Goldwyn Company and ended up grossing \$2.4 million domestically. Its international run was even more successful. In Europe and Japan it had long runs in art houses and even prompted the enthusiasm of a consecrated figure like Akira Kurosawa, who praised the film’s editing and hypnotic pace. This success took everyone by surprise, Jarmusch included. A year after the premiere of the film, he still confessed his bewilderment: “I thought that formally and structurally the film would keep audiences at a distance and it would become a cult film in Europe and there’d be little interest in America” (Bugbee 47; see also Hetzberg 36).

There were good reasons to be surprised. Success had never entered Jarmusch’s calculations. He deliberately cultivated obscurity and aes-

thetic marginality, making films under minimal conditions with a reduced group of friends associated with the mixture of avant-garde, pop, performance art, and club culture that developed in downtown New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Suddenly, the exposure of *Stranger than Paradise* thrust him into the center of the “independent cinema,” a rather confusing, if convenient, label for one of the most characteristic developments in 1980s film culture. But what exactly was “independent cinema”? Who was Jarmusch? And how did the two converge?

Jarmusch was born in Akron, Ohio, in 1953, to a suburban, middle-class family.² The home of Goodyear and the capital of the rubber industry, Akron was an important industrial center. Jarmusch would later describe it as an ethnically homogeneous, fairly boring working-class city with little cultural stimulus, and yet there must have been pockets of resistance in the region. When Jarmusch was a child, nearby Cleveland was one of the main boxes of resonance for rock 'n' roll in the northeast thanks to the radio shows of DJ Alan Freed. During his youth, Jarmusch read voraciously and apprenticed with a commercial photographer. He absorbed some alternative culture from other kids—a friend's brother who was into Frank Zappa, the Beat writers, and underground comics—and from the Friday-night screenings at Akron's only art house, which combined soft porn, art films, and occasional underground shorts. By the time Jarmusch started making films in New York, however, the region had developed an underground scene. By the late 1970s Akron was one of the hubs of punk and new wave music, home to the indie label Clone Records and to a number of cult acts—the techno-bizarro Devo, the punk band the Cramps, and lesser-known bands like Rubber City Rebels, Dead Boys, and Teacher's Pet. Cleveland was the hometown of the band Pere Ubu and of another American independent, Harvey Pekar, the comic-book writer best known for his *American Splendor* series, made in collaboration with Robert Crumb and Gary Dumm. At the risk of reading too much into origins, it is suggestive that cars—the main outlet for Goodyear products—radio DJs, rock 'n' roll, and the deindustrialized Rust Belt would feature prominently in Jarmusch's films.

After high school, Jarmusch moved to Chicago to study journalism at Northwestern University but transferred to Columbia at the end of the first year. At Columbia, he studied English and American litera-

ture—the poet Kenneth Koch was one of his teachers—and tried his hand at writing, as he later put it, “short, structural narrative pieces, like short stories but very short and minimalized” (Hetzberg 23). He went to Paris during his senior year, initially for a semester, but ended up staying for ten months. He worked as a truck driver making deliveries for an art gallery and frequented the Cinémathèque. At this mythic venue he discovered the European and Japanese art cinema, the classic work of Americans such as Samuel Fuller and Douglas Sirk, together with Indian, African, and Middle-Eastern films. The Paris Cinémathèque was in many ways a film archive gone amok. At the time, it was still run by its founder, Henri Langlois, who had been a mentor to the *nouvelle vague* filmmakers and had shaped several generations of Parisian cinephiles. Langlois’s programs were completely eccentric. He frequently showed foreign films without subtitles, or in subtitles other than French, and he threw together, in any given evening, titles from completely different traditions, genres, and periods. This way of dislocating film history proved quite generative. As it had happened to the directors of the French New Wave twenty years earlier, Langlois’s anarchic programs awakened Jarmusch to the possibilities of the medium. They may account for the enormously varied influences on his work and may also explain the multigeneric quality of his films. One might easily draw a line connecting the evenings at the Cinémathèque to Jarmusch’s characterization of *Stranger than Paradise* as an amalgam of influences and styles: “a semi-neorealist black comedy in the style of an imaginary Eastern-European director obsessed with Ozu and familiar with the 1950s American show *The Honeyymooners*” (Hetzberg 21).

Back in New York, Jarmusch enrolled in New York University’s film studies program, under the direction of the former Hollywood director László Benedek. As he had no film experience, the work samples Jarmusch enclosed with his application consisted of some writing and a portfolio of photographs. At NYU he met Spike Lee, Tom DiCillo, and Sara Driver, fellow students who became long-term friends and collaborators. DiCillo photographed his first two films, and Driver, an interesting filmmaker in her own right, has participated in most of Jarmusch’s titles as an assistant director or line producer. *Broken Flowers* (2005), Jarmusch’s latest title, originated in an idea of hers. (DiCillo and Driver make brief on-screen appearances in Jarmusch’s films: DiCillo as an

airline agent in *Stranger than Paradise*; Driver as a nurse in *Permanent Vacation* [1980], as the ill-timed contact in *Stranger than Paradise*, and as an airport clerk in *Mystery Train* [1989]). Jarmusch has frequently collaborated with Driver on her films, as cinematographer in *You Are Not I* and *Sleepwalk* and as producer in *When Pigs Fly*. During his years as a student, Jarmusch made some shorts that he has subsequently disowned. One of them, *Cinesthesia*, was shown at a Museum of Modern Art program; another one, edited to a percussion piece by Henry Cowell, was included in the 1981 Times Square art show, a collective exhibition of young artists that took place in a former massage parlor. But the main work of this formative phase came about in 1979 during his last year at school. He was appointed student assistant to Nicholas Ray, who divided his time between New York University, where he taught workshops on actors' direction, and the legendary Actors' Studio. At this time, Ray was involved in a collaborative project with Wim Wenders, *Nick's Film/Lightning over Water* (1980), and he brought Jarmusch in as his personal assistant—as Wenders recalls, he was the only person Ray brought into the production. Shortly after finishing work on this film, Jarmusch started his first feature, *Permanent Vacation*. Taken together, his apprenticeship with Ray, *Lightning over Water*, and *Permanent Vacation* comprise the totality of Jarmusch's early influences: classical American cinema, European art film, and downtown experimental culture.

In good Wenders tradition, *Lightning over Water* is a film about the making of a film. It was undertaken on the heels of the success of Wenders's previous title, *The American Friend*, a stylized noir based on Patricia Highsmith's novel *Ripley's Game*. *Lightning* was made during a troubled period for Wenders and Ray. Wenders was having difficulty securing financing for *Hammett*, to be produced by the Coppola studio, and Ray was fighting cancer. Despite the obvious surface differences between *The American Friend* and *Lightning over Water*—one is a genre film, the other an experimental project—there are several continuities between them. One is the presence of Ray himself. In the earlier film he plays a painter who, in the last years of his life, starts forging his own work and placing it in the market through a sleazy middleman (played by Dennis Hopper). Similarly, *Lightning over Water* concerns a once-famous painter who, at the end of his life, tries to summarize his entire career to recapture some sense of achievement and self-worth. Ray

was supposed to co-script and to star in this last film, yet the supposed collaboration never went past the planning stage, as it was truncated by Ray's death. As it stands, the film is largely a documentary of the last months of Ray's life and portrays, with excruciating directness, his physical decline and his attempts to continue working despite failing health. Jarmusch's work took place behind the scenes, but he can be fleetingly seen in two shots. One belongs to the only dream sequence in the film and shows the entire crew, posed as if for a group picture. The other is one of many self-reflexive pans that slide from the fictional enactment in front of a rolling camera to the crew and technicians assembled behind. Jarmusch gazes on the shoot while sitting at a Moviola—"der Mann an der Moviola," Wenders described him years later in a reminiscence of the film.

For the Italian critic Umberto Mosca, *Lightning over Water* casts a long shadow over Jarmusch's subsequent work (13). Its main concerns—death, the fragility of existence, and the difficulty to make sense out of experience—recur in Jarmusch. Equally recurrent are some themes directly associated with Ray's cinema. Trained as a stage director in the Federal Theater Projects during the Depression, Ray was a man of deep-seated Left sympathies who never felt part of the Hollywood establishment. He could be considered a representative of a countercultural tradition within the industry. Most of his films are about characters that are out of step with their milieu—from the juvenile delinquents of *Knock on Any Door* to the estranged suburban teenagers of *Rebel without a Cause*. For the *Cahiers du cinema* critics during the 1950s, Ray's films became one of the touchstones of the auteur theory: while largely following the Hollywood norm, they were imprinted with the director's personal sensibility. Ray influenced the French New Wave directors—especially Godard—and later filmmakers like Wenders and Jarmusch himself. One can see echoes of Ray's worldview in Jarmusch's sympathy toward marginal characters—Jarmusch's, however, tend to lack the pathos that distinguished Ray's protagonists—and in his fondness for night scenes and nighttime. (Truffaut once called Ray "the poet of nightfall" [Andrew, *Nicholas* 9].) In addition, Jarmusch's films contain direct references to his former teacher: a poster of Ray's *The Savage Innocents* is visible in the foyer of a movie theater in a scene of *Permanent Vacation*, and the name of John Lurie's character in *Down*

by Law, Jack Romano, alludes to Nick Romano, one of the protagonists of *Knock on Any Door*.

Also influential on Jarmusch was the manner in which *Lightning over Water* was conceived and shot. It was a decidedly noncommercial work that sprang from the friendship between Wenders and Ray, not from a commercial assignment. It was made on a very low budget with a small crew that had participated in a number of Wenders projects, and it used available locations—Ray’s apartment was the main set—and a fairly sober style. In many ways, it was a collaborative work, like many of Jarmusch’s films would later be. The finished product retains the semblance of communal filmmaking, with some scenes devoted to discussions, between Ray and Wenders, as well as between them and some crew members, on particular aspects of the production.

Jarmusch’s first feature, *Permanent Vacation*, was started only a few days after Ray’s death in the summer of 1979. Like *Lightning over Water*, it used real locations and minimal equipment, and the crew and cast consisted of a tight group of friends—Sara Driver and Tom DeCillo, from NYU film studies; Eric Mitchell, active in the punk film scene; John Lurie, a musician, performer, and sometime filmmaker; and Chris Parker, the protagonist of the film. *Permanent Vacation* is largely a portrait of Parker, renamed Aloysius (“Allie”) Parker in the film, a sixteen-year-old drifter who was a familiar face in the East Village clubs at the time. He and Jarmusch had been friends for some time when the movie was made; Jarmusch wrote the scenario specifically for him. Some scenes were based on actual occurrences in Parker’s life, while others were invented. In this respect, *Permanent Vacation* evokes *Lightning over Water*, also a portrait film and a hybrid that combines fiction and documentary. And it also recalls the late 1950s and early 1960s films of John Cassavetes, Andy Warhol, Ron Rice, and Jack Smith, films that portrayed marginal characters in urban settings and that were largely conceived as vehicles for the idiosyncratic personalities and quirky performance styles of their friends and acquaintances.

Downtown Post-Pop

Despite these resonances from earlier underground filmmaking, the immediate context for *Permanent Vacation*, and for Jarmusch’s early

work, was the experimental culture that thrived in downtown New York during the mid-1970s and early 1980s. In these years, experimental art was still under the combined influence of pop, minimalism, and performance—the currents that had dominated the 1960s avant-garde. This influence persisted because many of the protagonists of the earlier decade were still active and influential, among them musicians like John Cage and LaMonte Young, dancers like Yvonne Rainer and Lucinda Childs, and visual artists like Nam June Paik and Andy Warhol (in a gentrified version of himself). Also operative were a number of artistic outlets, cooperatives, performance spaces, and night spots that had opened in previous years. In addition, the new art venues and collectives that would catalyze the experiments of the 1970s and 1980s (the Mercer Art Center, the Kitchen, Franklin Furnace, the Collective for Living Cinema, and numerous, often ephemeral, nightclubs and galleries) were direct emanations of the ideologies and artistic practices of the previous decade. Hence, as the critic Douglas Crimp has shown, the 1960s tendencies toward theatricality, site-specificity, performance, and mixed- and cross-media work carried over into the 1970s and 1980s and became widely adopted by young artists (Crimp 76–77). The same can be said of the tendency to fuse the avant-garde and popular culture. In this respect, the mid- and late 1970s and 1980s were as popist as the Warhol 1960s—they seemed a prolonged after-effect of the Factory's engagement with street vernaculars and the idiom of mass culture.

The influence of pop art was perceptible, for example, among young gallery artists like Jack Goldstein, Barbara Kruger, and Richard Prince, who frequently based their work on found images (most often drawn from advertisements) that they manipulated and repositioned. Others, like Cindy Sherman and Robert Longo, made their images look like fragments extracted from the stockpile of Hollywood fantasies. One of Sherman's early series was titled *Film Stills* and consisted of self-portraits in attire and scenarios directly evocative of classical genre films; and Longo's early installations, performances, and photographs were similarly allusive to commercial cinema. (It makes perfect sense that Longo, who started out making experimental art with a pop kick, would end up making *Johnny Mnemonic*, a commercial film with experimental touches based on William Gibson's homonymous short story.)

The pull toward the popular was just as widespread in experimental

music and film. In the early 1980s, avant-garde composers like Philip Glass, Terry Riley, and Steve Reich, representatives of post-Cageian minimalism, performed in rock clubs and recorded albums that had some following among the rock intelligentsia. The performance artist Laurie Anderson, a classically trained musician and former student of Sol LeWitt, dropped the gallery circuit for the world of the clubs; and Glenn Branca, a bruitist and concrete musician, put together a rock-guitar band and peddled his work alongside punk acts such as Suicide and the Voidoids.³ Simultaneously, experimental cinema was drifting from the austere conceptualism of structural film, focused largely on the material qualities of the medium, to a new concern with narrative and social context and an active engagement with the popular. Much of 1970s and 1980s experimental cinema consisted of feature-length narrative works intent on deconstructing storytelling conventions, on exploring the conceptual possibilities of the heterogeneous television format, or on appropriating commercial genres. If the structural films of Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, and Ernie Gehr—conceptual, static, devoid of storyline or character—were typical artifacts in the late 1960s and early 1970s, subsequent experimental cinema was more apt to be represented by the essayistic work of Yvonne Rainer, the genre spoofs of Manuel de Landa and downtown punk filmmakers, or by the autobiographical explorations of Michele Citron and Sue Friederich. These films were frequently influenced by feminism and semiotics and made explicit allusions to contemporary academic discourse: Rainer's first film, *The Lives of Performers*, is sprinkled with quotations from the theorist Leo Bersani and is informed by the contemporary revival of Bertolt Brecht's ideas in film studies; Manuel de Landa's *Raw Nerves* was subtitled "A Lacanian Thriller"; and a group of filmmakers who worked on reassembling preexisting footage claimed to practice "deconstructive" cinema. But they also drew on popular culture: *The Lives of Performers* presented itself as a melodrama, and de Landa, like the punks, made noirs, sci-fi fantasies, and thrillers. Even at their most forbiddingly modernist and academic, filmmakers like Rainer and Friederich provided some anchors for the spectators (character, a narrative of sorts, discursive development), and, when contrasted with the starkness of structural cinema, they seemed almost popular.

New fields like video and performance were equally drawn to the vernacular. Both developed in two main directions: one of them, infused

by minimalism and conceptual art, was connected to the gallery and art worlds, and a second one was closer to popular spectatorship. Experimental video was split into the minimalist work of conceptualists such as Bruce Naumann and Vito Acconci, on the one hand, and experimental television, on the other hand. Experimental television acted as the critical consciousness of broadcast television and always held the languages of the commercial media as its main source of reference. Some examples were the programs of Guerrilla Video, Deep Dish, and Paper Tiger TV. Paper Tiger's media dissections offered a mixture of Godard and Barthes in talk-show format. Performance art also developed a popular arm along its more serious gallery offshoot, and this pop arm was showcased mostly in bars and nightclubs and often labeled "artist cabaret." Performers like John Sex, Carmelita Tropicana, Holly Hughes, Joe Coleman, and Karen Finley created a maximalist aesthetic of emotional excess, delirious pop parody, and outrage—part Jack Smith and the Theater of the Ridiculous (via Ethyl Eichelberger and the Split Breeches) and part punk psychodrama.⁴

One of the privileged locations for these developments was the collective the Kitchen. Founded by Steina and Woody Vasulka in 1971 as a screening space and distribution outlet for video art, it soon opened its doors to performance art, dance, film, music, and literature (Morrison). Cultural hybridity and messy ascription had accompanied the Kitchen from its beginnings. It was first located in the Mercer Art Center; formerly the Broadway Central Hotel, the building was turned into a collection of boutiques, bars, and performance and art spaces in the early 1970s. One of these was the Kitchen, which was located in what had once been the hotel's cooking quarters. The Mercer quickly turned into a center of hip, as well as one of the seminal venues for advanced 1970s New York rock bands such as the New York Dolls and Patti Smith (Rockwell, "Sound" 419). The Kitchen changed location in 1973, due to the Mercer's impending ruin, and in its new home it widened its artistic scope to include art shows, dance, and music programs, and, soon after, it opened its doors to jazz and avant-garde rock—to experimental bands like Sonic Youth and DNA. In addition, some of the first downtown incursions of break dancing and rap took place there, in performances by the break-dance troupe Rock Steady Crew and DJ Afrika Bambaataa (Toop, *Rap* 132–33). The Kitchen also funded avant-garde television

projects like *Made for TV?* in which over forty artists fused the idiom of art video with mainstream television; Richard Ashley's seven-part *Private Lives*, an experimental musical drama cast in a soap-opera format; and Charles Atlas's dance videos. And it also gave many of the new gallery artists (like Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, David Salle, and Sherrie Levine) their first individual shows. The Kitchen made clear that most of what was vital in the experimental art of the 1970s and 1980s was centrally engaged with popular culture, to the extent that distinctions between high and low, avant-garde and mass art—which had never been entirely watertight to begin with—began to be completely irrelevant.

The different strands of downtown experimental art shared the desire to break away from the elitism and self-isolation of experimental culture and to incorporate the immediacy and reach of the popular. For young post-pop artists, many of whom had been born in the late 1940s and early 1950s—the years of the television boom—popular culture was an inescapable landscape. Its styles and motifs were a ready stock of references inextricably embedded in the personal and social imaginaries. The composer Garret List, who was one of the first music curators at the Kitchen, recalls how he came across the structuring principle of his aesthetic: “I remember, when I was just starting to compose seriously (eighteen years old, about), being in my car in Southern California, thinking about the beauty of the form of Beethoven's 7th Symphony, when I caught myself whistling an Elvis Presley song. . . . One of my goals became to try to make a kind of music in which you could hear the entire history of western culture, not in the form of a pastiche, but simultaneously in the sound itself” (List 24). This sort of ecumenism was the guiding principle in his tenure as music director at the Kitchen in the mid-1970s. But there was more in the pull toward the vernacular than simply acknowledging pop culture's pervasiveness. By this time, popular culture had accumulated a considerable history. It was a vast corpus where one could discern lines of influence, webs of connection and intertextuality, distinctive styles and careers; it lent itself to historical study and connoisseurship just as any of the “high” arts. Over those, it had the advantages of being free of the trappings of the academy and institutionalized culture and being widely shared, accessible, and of easy consumption. In addition, contemporary popular culture was far from simple. Many pop acts seemed to be actively assimilating the inheritance of the avant-garde. Much of popular

music, from disco to punk to rap, was adopting the modular structure and repetitive emphasis of minimalism as well as the use of electronic instruments—Moogs and other synthesizers—previously restricted to experimental music. Street cultures like punk and hip-hop were being defined at the time as forms of untutored modernism, based on radical juxtaposition and *detournement*. And a hybrid between art and commercial cinema that went by the label of independent cinema was growing into an important niche market.

Punk

Jarmusch was one of the many young artists with avant-garde credentials who sought to blur the boundaries between experimental and mass art. His entry into this downtown ferment took place through punk/new wave culture, a form of experimental pop that often intersected with post-pop, minimalism, and conceptual art in venues like the Kitchen. The punk/new wave scene that developed in downtown New York between the mid-1970s and early 1980s was initially driven by music: a Velvet Underground-inspired sound characterized by instrumental simplicity and songs that dwelled on urban anomie and the dark side of 1960s utopianism. Following in the tracks of the Velvets, the new downtown sound brought into rock an intellectual dimension through adult lyrics and connections to the art world. The musician Rhys Chatham has said of this period, “[T]he art world was embracing the new rock; it got to the point where it seemed that while half of the visual art world was going out every night to the rock clubs in New York, the other half was actually in the groups!” (Chatham 18). The main pioneers of this music scene were Patti Smith, a writer-turned-rock performer, and the drag-glam-proto-punk New York Dolls. Following in their tracks were the minimalist Ramones, the melodic Blondie, the ethereally elegant Television, the dark Suicide and the Voidoids, the high-kitsch B-52s (a southern import from Athens, Georgia), the coolly conceptual Laurie Anderson, and, the most successful of the lot, the Talking Heads. Less popular acts included jazz-rock bands like James Chance and the Contortions (who also doubled up as the jazz-funk review James White and the Blacks) and Lounge Lizards and punk bands like Marilyn and Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. While in the United Kingdom, punk and new wave music

were initially associated with working-class concerns and constituencies, in the United States they bore the seal of middle-class, college-educated kids, mostly from small-town and suburban backgrounds. Relocated into large cities like New York, they perceived urban life through a mixture of fascinated enchantment and cool irony—as both a landscape of irrepressible vitality and (to borrow a well-worn phrase) a storehouse of signs, at once vividly immediate and remote.

The punk scene developed a film arm represented by the work of Vivienne Dick, James Nares, Eric Mitchell, Amos Poe, and Scott and Beth B.⁵ They often described their work as a reaction against the dry formalism of structural cinema, which had discarded the avant-garde's engagement with character, narrative, and social marginality. Structural cinema played for punk filmmakers the role that prog rock played for punk musicians: it was the “established” aesthetic that served as a foil for their own efforts. In the same way that punk musicians rejected the complex instrumentation and studio effects of prog rock, their film counterparts rejected the use of the optical printer and the protracted planning typical of structural cinema. Instead, they used minor-gauge formats, the cheapest and most redolent of home-movie making—especially Super-8, which allowed for simultaneous sound recording—improvisation, and a sober production style. Against structuralism's rigor and intellectual credentials, the punks were self-taught: among them, only Beth and Scott B were art-school graduates, and Beth B had a background in video, yet, like the rest of the group, they still claimed to be learning as they went along. The frontal rejection of structuralism should not be taken too literally; filmmakers affiliated with punk, such as Bette Gordon and Jim Jarmusch, incorporated some structural gestures into their works, while others, like the Bs, used the cinematic apparatus as a means of sensorial assault (through noise and stroboscopic light) in order to engage spectators at a visceral level, just as the structuralists had done before them.

Punk filmmakers reintroduced “content” into experimental film and put it back in touch with popular sources. They pastiched film noir, thrillers, exploitation, and television serials in a deliberately inept manner. The Bs, whose name was also an homage to the B-movie, were particularly fixated on film noir (*The Offenders* was a Super-8 crime serial shown in nine weekly installments at Max's Kansas City) and Vivienne

Dick delved into exploitation in her *Liberty's Booty* (1980), an exploration of middle-class prostitution that anticipates Lizzy Borden's *Working Girls* (1986). They presented characters dominated by nearly autistic blankness and showed a constant concern with self-dramatization and violence. Violence was perhaps their overriding preoccupation. Vivienne Dick's *Beauty Becomes the Beast* and *She Had Her Gun All Ready*, for example, dwelled on the cruelty and sadism that plague relationships, while the films of Scott and Beth B (*The Offenders*, *Black Box*, and *Vortex*) highlighted the repressive nature of contemporary technocratic society and suggested a continuum between social and interpersonal violence. Violence was part of punk's stark idiom from the start, but it also had a topical dimension. In the post-1968 years, terrorism became a widespread form of radical protest, with the emergence of armed fringe groups in Italy, Germany, Spain, and the United States. But the concern with violence may also have had a local resonance. In the late 1970s, rising crime, a series of garbage strikes, and the constant threat of bankruptcy gave New York City an atmosphere of emergency that filtered into many of these films.

In style, theme, and self-conception, punk cinema seemed a rerun of the 1960s underground—itself a reaction against the artier modalities of the avant-garde cinema and equally fascinated with trash culture and rock 'n' roll. In fact, many punk filmmakers explicitly acknowledged their debt to the main exponents of this earlier aesthetic: Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol. Eric Mitchell once described his film *Kidnapped*, which had been inspired by Warhol's *Vinyl*, as “a 1960s underground film happening today.” Vivienne Dick collaborated with Jack Smith for a short time, and Smith appeared as a character (a disembodied voice screaming over the telephone into hapless Rene Ricard's ear) in Eric Mitchell's *Underground USA* and played a delirious psychoanalyst (Dr. Shrinklestein) in the Bs' *The Trap Door: Underground USA* was directly inspired by the Morrissey/Warhol films: it features the former superstar Jackie Curtis (who had appeared in *Flesh*), its subject is directly drawn from *Heat*, and it opens with a vintage Factory scenario: a lineup of dourly handsome hustlers waiting for a john.

While punk film was occasionally seen in the usual outlets for experimental film of the time—Anthology, Millennium, the Kitchen, and the Collective for Living Cinema—the favorite venues were downtown

clubs—places like Mudd, CBGB, Club 57, the Peppermint Lounge, Danceteria, and especially Max's Kansas City, a combination of art-world hangout, exhibition space, and music venue that had opened in the mid-1960s and served as a model for many of the others. The powerful sound systems of the nightclubs permitted loud amplification, capable of immersing audiences in the atmosphere of the films (B 202–4). These settings took away some of the solemnity that enveloped experimental cinema; they encouraged watching film (to borrow Walter Benjamin's term) in distraction, rather than in rapt concentration, and made viewing contiguous with listening to music, dancing, drinking, or socializing. At the same time, watching these titles in clubs enhanced the closeness of what was a fairly self-contained scene where there was considerable overlap between filmmakers, performers, and audiences. Many of the films were inspired by club culture or shot in clubs and were made and acted by regulars of the downtown nightlife, who were, again, the films' main audience.

There was a constant dialogue between downtown experimental film and punk/new wave music. The protagonists of the no-wave sound were among the main faces in punk cinema. Pat Place and Adele Bertei (both from the jazz-rock-punk outfit James Chance and the Contortions) appeared in Vivienne Dick's *She Had Her Gun All Ready* and Scott and Beth B's serial *The Offenders*, respectively. *The Offenders* also featured John Lurie, the leader of Lounge Lizards and a future Jarmusch star and collaborator; and Lurie impersonated Jack Smith's voice in *Underground USA*. Lydia Lunch, the singer of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, was the protagonist of Dick's *Beauty Becomes the Beast* and *She Had Her Gun All Ready* and was a staple presence in the Bs' films—most memorably in *Black Box* and *Vortex*. And Blondie's Debbie Harry starred in a number of Amos Poe's movies. Musicians did not only perform in these films; they were also active in production. The ex-Contortion James Nares directed the spoof-toga epic *Rome '78* and photographed Lurie's short *Men in Orbit*. In addition to directing, John Lurie composed music for some of these films, as did Chris Stein (Blondie's main songwriter), Arto Lindsay, and Richard Edson (who played drums in Sonic Youth and Konk and later appeared in *Stranger than Paradise*). If musicians were occasional filmmakers, filmmakers also dabbled in music. The Bs cut an EP with a dance version of the main theme of *Vortex*, which had some play in the clubs, and Vivienne Dick played keyboards with the

band Beirut Slump. What emerges from this picture is an extremely collaborative scene, where artists worked across different fields and banded together around no-budget projects intended primarily for an audience that belonged to their immediate milieu.

Jarmusch participated in this scene as a musician and filmmaker. He was the sound man for *Underground USA*, photographed by Tom DiCillo, and lent his offscreen voice to *Vortex*, the Bs' attempt to reach a wider audience outside the Lower Manhattan club circuit. In the early 1980s he alternated between film and music and was a member of the band Del Byzanteens, a minor new wave act whose only album came out in 1982; two of the band's songs were featured in the soundtrack of Wim Wenders's *Stand der Dinge* (Walter 154). Jarmusch's early films, all the way to *Mystery Train*, drew on the pool of talent associated with the downtown club/music/film scene, and, more recently, the closing segment of *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2004) features Bill Rice, a prominent performer in the films of the Bs. Pop music has always been central to his work as a source of images, an integral part of his atmospheres, or a structural principle of composition. The style of punk production has remained a constant in Jarmusch. Even after he graduated to larger crews and budgets, he has preferred to work with friends rather than with unknown performers and technicians, has avoided integration into mainstream filmmaking, has maintained an edge of improvisation and spontaneity, and has tended to conceive his works as collaborations, downplaying his role as absolute creator and presenting himself instead as coordinator of a number of sensibilities. ("I guess I just coordinate good people," he says in a telephone conversation with John Lurie included in the DVD version of *Down by Law*.) But punk has remained a structuring example in some other ways as well. Jarmusch's minimalist style, sympathy toward outsiders, ferocious wit, and rejection of pretension recalls some of the best qualities of punk, as do his characters' blankness and inexpressiveness.

Pretty Vacant

Jarmusch tried to dissociate *Permanent Vacation* (and, subsequently, *Stranger than Paradise*) from the punk scene but still acknowledged its influence on his work (Hetzberg 6, 202). He has credited the punk

disregard for professionalism and technical polish for giving him the courage to become a filmmaker, and he has often mentioned that Amos Poe's *The Foreigner*, one of the main titles in this trend, prompted him to attempt his first feature. In any case, *Permanent Vacation* had its genesis in an act of piracy in the spirit of the Sex Pistols' stealing David Bowie's loudspeakers to use them in their own gigs. Jarmusch financed his first film with grant money given to him by the Louis B. Mayer Foundation to pay for his tuition at New York University. He invested the approximately fifteen thousand dollars on the making of *Permanent Vacation*, which he shot on 16mm TV news stock bought under the counter from an acquaintance at a television studio. When Jarmusch defaulted on his tuition payment his registration was cancelled. He tried to present his film as a graduation project, but it was turned down because of its length. Jarmusch never enrolled again and left the school without a degree. He was eventually given an honorary one, years after NYU had begun citing him as an illustrious alumnus in promotional materials.

The film has some visual and thematic links with punk cinema: the backdrop of ruined tenements and empty lots, the intermittent appearance of violence and alienation, and the focus on outsiders. Allie, the protagonist, is an outsider. Like most characters in punk cinema, he is extremely laconic and rarely betrays much emotion. He is also rootless and defines himself as "a tourist on a permanent vacation." The phrase suggests that he lives his life as a traveler, always in motion, unable or unwilling to commit to any form of stability; at the same time, the term "vacation" also evokes the state of beaten-down anomie portrayed in the Sex Pistols' "Pretty Vacant" but without their anger or edgy sarcasm. Instead, Allie's emotional range oscillates between jaded annoyance and bemused acceptance of his circumstances; in this respect, he is a predecessor for Jarmusch's subsequent characters—largely passive figures who lack overarching motivations or clearly defined goals. Further connections to the downtown punk/new wave scene are the performers and crew: Lurie plays a street musician and composed part of the soundtrack; DiCillo photographed the film; and Mitchell appears as an aptly curt fence man.

At the same time, the film is much terser than most punk productions. Rather than a club film to be glanced at in distraction, it seems to solicit concentration. It is fairly structured and consistent in tone and

therefore departs from the more disjointed style of punk. Its confessional tone is also somewhat unusual among Jarmusch's young contemporaries. The whole film is a reminiscence narrated in the first-person by Allie's voiceover. He recounts his last days in New York before he decided to leave for Paris, from where the story is told. During this time he announces his intentions to his girlfriend (Leila Gastil), visits his mother (Ruth Bolton) at a psychiatric hospital, strikes a number of casual acquaintances, and steals a car. With the money he obtains from the sale of the car he buys a boat passage overseas. Despite its street allegiances, *Permanent Vacation* is quite an academic work that piles cinematic references from Nicholas Ray and Sergio Leone to François Truffaut's romantic individualism and Chantal Akerman's early structural films and shows an encyclopedic understanding of the protagonist's dissidence. A virtual compendium of subversion, Allie reads from Lautreamont, dances to bebop, invokes Charlie Parker, looks like a teen Chet Baker or Jack Kerouac, and is a graffiti artist—perhaps a bow to the emerging hip-hop culture. The movie's dreamlike quality and wry humor, seldom seen in no-wave cinema, are singularly Jarmusch's.

For all its documentary touches and its re-creation of downtown grit, *Permanent Vacation* is an early example of the slightly magical realism that Jarmusch developed in his later films. The film opens with shots of what looks like a busy commercial street filmed in slow motion. The conventional-looking crowd surges hypnotically; the slowed-down movement gives the scene a ghostly aura and introduces the oscillation between reality and unreality that traverses the entire film. In his first speech, Allie complains to his girlfriend: "I can't get any sleep in this town. . . . I have my dreams while I am awake." And in fact what follows seems an extended dream sequence. Objects and themes first mentioned in conversation or regarded as mere fantasies have a way of reappearing in "real," tangible form. Allie reads to his girlfriend from Lautreamont's *Maldoror* in an early scene, and Maldoror's delirium will come back through three deranged characters that dominate consecutive sequences: a shell-shocked war veteran (Richard Boes), whom Allie meets in the ruins of his childhood home (destroyed, he says, "by the Chinese during the war"); Allie's institutionalized mother, whom he visits in the hospital; and a demented Hispanic girl (Maria Duval) who recoils in panic when Allie tries to talk to her. In a later sequence, while

he dallies in the foyer of a movie theater, he strikes a conversation with a stranger (Frankie Faison) who tells him a rambling story about a sax player who commits suicide by jumping from the roof of a building in Paris and dies improvising on the melody of “Over the Rainbow.” In the following scene, Allie bumps into a sax player (John Lurie) in the middle of the street ad-libbing on this same musical theme, and the theme returns as nondiegetic music, played over the last shot of the film and the closing credits. Early in the film, Allie tells the war veteran about his dream of “a two-tone car” with “lots of chromium, like a bubble car . . . or a gangster car . . . lit up like a bomb” (in synchrony with this word, an explosion goes off in the soundtrack and makes the soldier cringe). Later on, upon waking up on a rooftop, Allie sees a car exactly like this materialize, as a shimmering mirage, in the street down below. Eventually, the dream-car becomes a real one—the one he steals from two giddy uptown girls apparently slumming in his neighborhood. After selling it, he’s bound for Paris—the city of Maldoror but also the setting of the story of the suicidal sax player and the land “over the rainbow” where he will try to remake his life. In all these examples, the film works like a fantasy space where the real and unreal blend into each other, and where elements first encountered as signs (in conversation, stories, and dreams) have a way of turning into things. This transit from the sign to the thing recurs in later titles. The characters in *Down by Law* manage to escape prison by putting into practice a plan they had seen in a film; in *Ghost Dog* (1999), books, songs, and cartoons foreshadow with uncanny exactitude many of the turns of the plot; and in *Broken Flowers*, a letter about a son in search of his father and an old film seen on television generate the main sequence of events.

The dreamlike quality of *Permanent Vacation* is highlighted by Allie’s flat, trancelike delivery and by the film’s peculiar soundtrack. It is largely composed of Javanese gamelan music electronically treated and slowed-down by Jarmusch and occasionally mixed in with Lurie’s sax improvisations. The hollow peal of gamelan suggests the “creeping eeriness” that, by Allie’s confession, affects his interactions with others and prompts him to leave them behind and move on. But this sonic ambience imports a number of stories that remain part of the film’s unconscious. In its original form, as it was played and conceived in Thailand and Java, gamelan music is primarily ritualistic; played for hours, even days, on

end, it puts musicians and listeners in a trance. It constitutes an ongoing flow without accents, identifiable melody or structure, or beginning or end. It is an unbound aural landscape which solicits a form of listening different from the structure-oriented focus demanded by western traditional music. Here one listens instead for atmosphere and for the subtle microtonal shifts, much richer and more nuanced than those allowed by the standard western scale. Javanese gamelan has decisively shaped musical modernism. It entered its gene pool through Claude Debussy (Toop, *Ocean* 21–22). Reportedly, Debussy’s exposure to it at the Universal Exposition of 1889 provoked him to drop the last of his Wagnerian allegiances in favor of less-structured forms full of unresolved chords and unconventional counterpoints. Since then, gamelan has led a subterranean life in contemporary experimental music. It resurfaced in the work of the Canadian-American composer Colin McPhee, who had been stationed in Indonesia during World War II, and, perhaps more famously, in the U.S. experimental musician Henry Cowell. Cowell tried to imitate the Javanese *bedaya* tonalities by playing inside the piano, rubbing metal and wood against the strings. In the late 1940s, he taught folk, nonwestern, and contemporary music at the New School for Social Research in New York, where John Cage was his teaching assistant. Cage’s compositions for prepared piano were influenced by Cowell’s percussion works (one of them found its way into an early short by Jarmusch) and by his way of modifying the piano, which in turn had been influenced by gamelan (Toop, *Exotica* 85–93, 192). Through Cage, this sound has spread widely across the experimental music community; one can discern it in composers such as Lou Harrison, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Olivier Messaien, Wendy Carlos, and Don Cherry, among others (Toop, *Ocean* 14).

Jarmusch’s use of gamelan brings part of this musical history into the film and further complicates its cultural genealogy. Gamelan, with its roundabout evocations of Cage, Reich, and Riley and its nonnarrative drift, makes sense as a minimalist gesture and reveals Jarmusch’s indebtedness to this aesthetic. While he emerged from the punk scene, his films show typically minimalist self-restraint and formal control. They are deliberately underplotted. Dramatic events take place off-camera, while much of what happens on camera could be described as “empty” moments during which characters bide their time or mull over what

to say or do next. The emphasis on duration is a constant in Jarmusch; in his early work, he favors long takes that show the development of an action instead of synthesizing it by means of analytical editing. The camera frequently stays on characters after all is said and done and on locations after characters walk out of the frame. This way of featuring space, time, and gesture in themselves, not as bearers of a story, can be directly related to minimalist film and performance—from Warhol’s “wallpaper” films of the 1960s, to the structural film of the late 1960s and 1970s, to the new dance of Yvonne Reiner, Trisha Brown, and Steve Paxton, who often based their choreographies on the repetition of quotidian gestures such as walking, running, or sitting.

The style of *Permanent Vacation* shows marks of this allegiance to minimalism, as do many of Jarmusch’s later films. An early scene, for example, shows Allie dancing to a bop track (Earl Bostic’s “Up There in Orbit”) while his estranged girlfriend Leila smokes a cigarette and looks out the window (figure 1). Most of the scene consists of a long



Figure 1. Chris Parker and Leila Gastil. *Permanent Vacation*. © 1980 Cinesthesia, Inc.

static take: it starts with Allie leaning against the wall; he then turns on the record player, starts responding to the music, then kicks off his shoes and launches into all-out boogying until the music is finally over and he collapses on a mattress on the floor. The image is sustained well after it has communicated Allie's exuberance and solipsism—he seems to have forgotten that his girlfriend, whom he has not seen for days, is in the room. In other moments, extended lateral tracking shots show Allie traversing the streets of the city. These frequent, lengthy framings cannot be justified by strict narrative functionality; they suggest a fascination with the character's movement, with the changing background, and with the camera's ability to capture both. The frame takes on a life of its own and seems to call attention to itself, much as it does in structural cinema, the filmic counterpart of minimalism. As Paul Arthur has suggested, this may be because structural cinema remained a structuring influence on experimental filmmakers—even among those who claimed to reject it—well past its heyday in the early 1970s. In fact, the popular-oriented, feature-length avant-garde and the cinema of structure are not polar opposites but dialectically intertwined. According to Arthur, one could actually read the evolution of experimental film in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s as an attempt to reintroduce character and social reference into the depopulated, institutional architectures explored by the structuralists (Arthur 81–83).

Jarmusch's early films corroborate Arthur's insight. An early sequence of *Permanent Vacation* shows empty streets in the warehouse and industrial districts of downtown New York (figure 2); halfway through the sequence, Allie makes his appearance, a lone walker crossing the frame. Some critics have mentioned that this sequence resembles the first shot of Wenders's *Lightning over Water*, which shows the filmmaker getting out of a cab on a deserted street corner in Soho in the early morning. But even more than Wenders's work, this opening recalls the downtown lofts and streets that appear in Michael Snow's and Ernie Gehr's early films (in *Wavelength* or *Reverberation*, for example) and, perhaps more directly, in Chantal Akerman's *News from Home*, a structural work made in New York in 1976. *News from Home* is a nonnarrative piece entirely made up of takes of city streets and subway stations. In the soundtrack, a French-accented female voice reads letters addressed to her daughter, who happens to be in New York making films. The mother makes solicitous



Figure 2. *Permanent Vacation*.
Frame enlargement.

recommendations and inquiries, sends regards from family and neighbors, details intimate family affairs, and insistently wonders when her daughter will return home. There are important similarities between *News from Home* and *Permanent Vacation*. They open and close with nearly identical shots—both start in deserted downtown and end with a view of Lower Manhattan filmed from a moving ship; they use offscreen voices as mediators; highlight a slightly eerie, vacated quality in the city; make selective use of slow motion; and they are quite minimal in their approach, preferring long takes and sequence shots to conventional decoupage. Even the offscreen voices in both films share a mixture of flatness and unconcern, as if seeking to distance the spectator from the film. Putting it crassly, one could say that *Permanent Vacation* is *News from Home* plus a story, as if Jarmusch's film had fleshed out one of the many possible narratives that are hinted at but never pursued by Akerman. By extension, Jarmusch's later work sought to repopulate the empty spaces of structural cinema with a downtown street sensibility, with stories of outsiders, and with stylized narratives that subtly blend the real and the unreal.

Permanent Vacation earned some recognition in Europe when it received the best picture award at the Mannheim Film Festival in 1980. (Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* had won the same award in 1967.) It was later selected for the young filmmakers section of the Berlin Film Festival in February 1981. Simultaneously, the prestigious German magazine *Filmkritik* published what amounted to a Jarmusch special, with a review of the film, a long interview with the filmmaker, features on Wenders and Ray—both on Jarmusch's orbit—and a production still of Chris Parker on the cover. The German television channel WDR purchased broadcast rights. A year later, the four hundredth issue of *Cahiers du cinéma*, guest-edited by Wenders, greeted Jarmusch as a new promise and published, in French translation, the treatment of his work in progress *Garden of Divorce*, which was never filmed. But despite such recognition, *Permanent Vacation* was never commercially released. These circumstances set the pattern of Jarmusch's future career: reliance on festival exposure, recognition in Europe against relative indifference at home, and critical success seldom accompanied by substantial box office.

Stranger than Paradise

It took Jarmusch nearly four years to complete a new movie, which came about through coincidence and the support of a network of friends. *Stranger than Paradise* was made in two phases. The first thirty minutes ("The New World") were conceived as a self-contained short and shot on the approximately forty-five minutes of unexposed film stock left over from the production of Wenders's *The State of Things* and given to him by Grey City Films, Wenders's production company. The black leader spliced in between scenes was another gift, this time from Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet, whom Jarmusch had met in the festival circuit. Grey City also covered lab costs, but in exchange, its head, Chris Sievernich, kept the negative and retained rights over the finished film. When the stock ran out—an uncanny echo of *The State of Things*—Jarmusch stopped production and spent about a year trying to raise money to complete the film, showing it in clubs in New York City and presenting it in festivals. (It received a special award at the Rotterdam Film Festival in 1982.) Eventually, the German channel

ZDF and the Munich businessman Otto Grokenberger decided to fund the feature version, but first Jarmusch had to clear rights with Grey City. A loan from Paul Bartel, whom he had met at the Hof Film Festival in Germany, and who was then enjoying some success with *Eating Raoul*, allowed him to buy back his film.

Stranger than Paradise develops some of the themes of *Permanent Vacation*, as it also concerns uprooted characters, alienation, and travel. Its protagonists are Willie (John Lurie), a surly Hungarian immigrant who has become thoroughly Americanized; his cousin Eva (Eszter Balint), a recent arrival from Budapest; and Willie's friend Eddie (Richard Edson), whose steady affability is a counterpoint to the crabbiness of the other two. Willie and Eddie do not have a fixed occupation, apart from playing poker and betting on horses. Like Allie Parker, they live from moment to moment, improvising their way through life, trusting luck and their ability to get by. The narrative is divided into three parts. The first one ("The New World") opens with Eva's arrival in New York. She is bound for Cleveland, where she will live with her aunt Lottie, but has to stay at Willie's apartment for ten days while Lottie gets out of the hospital. Initially Willie resents this unexpected charge since, in her innocence of American ways, Eva reminds him of a culture that he has completely left behind. ("Don't speak to me in Hungarian" is one of Willie's refrains.) However, during the course of her stay, he grows to like her, and when she finally leaves for the Midwest he and Eddie sit around crestfallen. In the second part ("A Year Later"), Willie and Eddie decide to take a break from New York after making some money by rigging a card game. They borrow a car and drive to Cleveland to visit Eva. They stay at Lottie's, play cards with her, watch television, go to the movies with Eva and her boyfriend, wander around the city's industrial ruins, and go to see the lake. (There is nothing to see but a vast, frozen expanse among swirls of wind and snow.) After some time, they decide to move on. The third section ("Paradise") has them rescuing Eva from Lottie's house and driving together to Florida, which turns out to be a succession of dismal highways, windswept beaches, and squalid souvenir shops. Once there, Willie and Eddie leave Eva in their motel room while they try their luck at the races. As she walks along the beach one day, Eva is mistaken for a contact and given a thick wad of money. She leaves some of it at the motel for Willie and Eddie and makes for the airport with

the rest with the intention of returning to Europe. In the meantime, Willie and Eddie have struck it rich at the horse track, discover Eva's intentions, and try to prevent her from leaving. In the end, Willie, who got on a plane bound for Budapest looking for his cousin, ends up flying back to his native land; Eva has changed her mind and returns to the motel hoping to find her partners; and Eddie drives off mournfully shaking his head—"Oh Willie, what you gonna do in Budapest?"

If *Permanent Vacation* populated the empty cityscapes of structural cinema, *Stranger than Paradise* applies structural rigor to the construction of the film. It looks like an exercise in stylistic primitivism: it is shot in grainy black and white with wide-angle lenses, which allow for staging in depth, and is entirely composed of static sequence shots—camera movement is limited to slight pans and reframes. The soundtrack consists of synch-recording and a melancholy string suite that, in Godard-like fashion, fades in and out of the aural field at seemingly random moments. (The music, composed by Lurie, has been described as a Bartók pastiche [Hoberman, *Vulgar* 201; Bugbee 55] and is reminiscent of the atmosphere of Bartók's string quartets.) This stripping down of film language has frequently been labeled minimalist. It certainly recalls one of minimalism's central concerns: formal reductionism, which in painting and sculpture entailed paring down the artwork to its most basic material components—lines, surfaces, and masses that do not necessarily represent anything but simply are. The film does represent, however, hence its minimalism is more clearly discernible in its modular structure, its emphasis on empty time and the inert physical presence of the performers, and its impersonal landscapes.

Rather than a well-woven story, *Stranger than Paradise* presents a succession of self-contained vignettes starkly separated by fragments of black leader. Eliding transitions and emphasizing the here and now of the action, the film gives spectators basic building blocks and allows them to develop their own connections. This procedure evokes musical minimalism, with its block construction, its abrupt transitions between parts, and its lack of tonal development. But it is also reminiscent of the 1960s work of the sculptors Tony Smith and Richard Morris, who frequently made pieces in modules that were dispersed across the exhibition space, forcing viewers to become physically active in the process of perception and to grow aware of their own position as spectators. In

film, this type of spectatorial involvement was pursued in such titles as Hollis Frampton's *Zorn's Lemma* and *nostalgia* or Michael Snow's *So Is This*. *Zorn's Lemma* and *So Is This* employ blacked-out sections as punctuation marks and rhythmic devices. While central to minimalism, modular construction may be found as well outside minimal art and its epigones: for example, in the tendency of artists such as Laurie Anderson, Robert Longo, and Cindy Sherman to build performances and works around fragments, film stills, or embryonic events pregnant with narrative possibilities but seldom developing into fully-fledged stories. Modular structure is a constant in Jarmusch's subsequent titles. It is especially prominent in *Mystery Train*, *Night on Earth*, and *Broken Flowers*; all are constructed as assemblages of short episodes and present sketchy situations full of gaps and indeterminacies rather than organically integrated stories. Jarmusch's fondness for composite works has been read against his fascination with Japanese cinema—specifically with Kenji Mizoguchi, whose films occasionally take the form of collections of stories. But a case may also be made for its similarity to some aesthetic procedures in Jarmusch's immediate environment, where fragmentation and modularity are symptomatic of what contemporary philosophers were defining as the erosion of the great *meta-récits* of modernity and the concomitant need to refocus attention on the micrological and the molecular, on punctual strategies and events.

Also minimal are the blank affect and the distended temporality of the film. Most scenes are devoted to inaction: to characters sitting around, listening to music, or half-engaged in saggy, desultory exchange. These scenes are filled with “dead time”—moments that do not propel the action forward nor add information about the characters. Early on, the camera lingers on Willie lying in bed for a long time before a knock on the door announces Eva's arrival and he gets up to let her in. In a later sequence, on her first morning in the new world, Eva is awakened by the phone; she has trouble understanding the caller, informs him or her that Willie is asleep, stresses that, yes, she really is his cousin, and takes a message for him from “Nice Guy.” Toward the end of the conversation, Willie, barely visible at the edge of the frame under the pillow and a tangle of bedding, slowly begins to stir into consciousness. He asks sleepily who it was, and as Eva responds, the image goes black. Many scenes seem to have arbitrary beginnings and endings; they could

have started earlier and ended later, or they might have been dropped altogether for different ones. While, cumulatively, the film does build up nuance and mood, the effect of individual scenes is quite slight. The tone of the film is deliberately flat, largely because the camera retains its distance, and there are no stress marks, such as musical cues, close-ups, or emphatic camera movements. There are few dramatic moments (when Willie and Eddie are accused of cheating at cards, when they lose most of their money at the greyhound races, or when Eva stumbles into wealth), but these are treated without much convulsion and blend in with the rest.

The performances emphasize disengagement and blankness, and rather than well-rounded “individuality,” they communicate “presence”: the temporality of bodies that wait, ponder (it’s hard to know what), and get bored. The characters seldom appear affected by their circumstances or each other. Willie is the only one with a quick temper, which he usually hides behind his scowl and his cool facade; Eva and Willie retain a constant mood of withdrawal and bemused contentment, respectively. Their rapport rarely reveals overt emotion. In part, this is because their being together is punctuated by silences and pauses; when they do address each other, their eyes rarely meet and tend to be directed at other foci of attention, such as comic books, the road, or the ever-present television screens (figure 3). Still, one of the outstanding achievements of the acting is the way it intimates that the emotion is still there, barely visible under the evasive cool and the frowning unconcern. It is caught in fleeting moments, when Willie shows up at the apartment with a good-bye gift for Eva, when Eva’s face lights up on discovering her cousin and Eddie at the hot-dog joint where she works in Cleveland, or when Willie and Eva sit snug and happy in Aunt Lottie’s kitchen, giggling at his inability to remember a joke. The deep focus and long takes allow these moments of revelation to emerge gradually from the meaningless debris of posing and small talk. In a way, this is the apotheosis of Bazinian filmmaking, with filmic duration as the vehicle of epiphany. But it is also a transposition into film of the flatness and muffled expressiveness of minimalist performance and dance, where subjectivity is generally eschewed, performers are reduced to physical presences, and emotions are deflated through repetition, everyday gesture, and linguistic banality.



Figure 3. John Lurie and Eszter Balint. *Stranger than Paradise*. Frame enlargement.

Muted as it is, the emotion is still important, since the overarching subplot of the film is the growth of a friendship between Eva and the boys. I use the word “friendship” heuristically, since one of the delights of the film—of all Jarmusch’s films—is the difficulty of trying to categorize their paradoxical rapport, made up of sympathy and caring as well as ridiculous power games, usually run by Willie. *Stranger than Paradise* could be the most understated love story ever put on film, if “love” is what the characters’ inchoate but pervasive sympathy for each other amounts to. In any case, it is hard to decide what to call it because little is actually verbalized, and relationships develop in the realm of the unsaid, in the unconscious of minute gestures, body language, and reflex reactions. These tell of a growing closeness and eventual falling out. It is moving, for example, that a whole year after Eva has briefly passed through their lives, Willie and Eddie are ready to embark on a long trip to visit her, even though there are no signs that they have been in touch all this time or that she might be interested in seeing them again. Once they reappear in her life, they take center stage. At the movies, Eva sits between them and leaves her boyfriend on the edge of the group, and later she cancels a date with him to stay with Willie and Eddie the evening before they plan to drive away. She jumps at the chance to travel with them, leaving her boyfriend and

Aunt Lottie behind. But the honeymoon is short-lived. She quickly grows disenchanted and angry when, at Willie's insistence and despite Eddie's protestations, they leave her behind in the motel room and run off to the races. In the end, she appears unable to resolve her ambiguous feelings. Stumbling into a fortune at the seaside, her first decision is to dump them and run, yet she soon recants and comes back to their motel room. Only they are no longer there and, in the last shot of the film, she sinks on the bed, the picture of disappointment.

In addition to mapping a particular emotional landscape, the film dwells extensively on physical landscape—highways, diners, cheap motels, trashed-out downtown streets, dingy apartments, cinemas, and postindustrial rust parks (figure 4). With the exception of Willie's bare pad and Aunt Lottie's living room, most of these landscapes fall under what the French ethnographer Marc Augé has called non-places: transitional locations devoid of symbolic significance and personal traces and intended for passage or temporary use, not for prolonged habitation. Non-places are repeatedly featured in minimalist art and film.



Figure 4. Non-places. John Lurie and Eszter Balint. *Stranger than Paradise*.
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One may remember the cold, institutional settings of Michael Snow's *Back and Forth* or Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*—a classroom and an empty hallway, respectively—the photographs of gas stations and roadside structures taken by Ed Ruscha in the early 1960s, and the industrial sites pictured by Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher throughout their career. For the architect and sculptor Tony Smith, the attraction of roads and industrial locations resides in their vastness. Their massive scale is lacking in most contemporary art, and, as a car ride through an unfinished stretch of highway revealed to him in the late 1950s, they also impose a new form of perception: it is not enough to observe them, they have to be experienced spatially and temporally (Wagstaff 19), a bit like the dead times of *Stranger than Paradise*. For the assemblage and land artist Robert Smithson, these landscapes offer unprecedented topographies; in his “Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” he observed that a parking lot in downtown Passaic cut the town into two, mirror and reflection, but it was hard to decide which was which since they seemed to change sides constantly. He further pointed out that such non-places fracture linear time: construction sites are a “zero panorama of ruins in reverse,” and the abandoned buildings and empty lots of warehouse and industrial areas are “holes” that “define . . . the memory traces of an abandoned set of futures” (Smithson 77). In his view, the post-metropolitan spread is “a Utopia without a bottom”; it exists “without a rational past and without the ‘big events’ of history” (77). It is as plotless and open to duration as Jarmusch's stories and characters.

Jarmusch's interest in these locations recalls other cultural genealogies beyond minimalism. J. Hoberman has noted the similarities between *Stranger's* landscapes and Robert Frank's *The Americans*, a celebrated photography collection published in 1959 that anticipated Jarmusch's interest in the elusive poetry of the road (Hoberman, *Vulgar* 321). Frank's book was the result of two years of car travel across the United States on a Guggenheim Fellowship. During this time, he compiled, in his own words, “a visual study of American civilization.” Frank photographed public and private life, politicians and anonymous folk, consumer landscapes and signs of spirituality, but he was most attracted to working-class life, ethnic minorities, religious cults, youth groups (bikers and teeny boppers), and leisure havens: ballrooms, soda

counters, bars, and parks. They countered the impersonality and conformity of the mainstream. To portray them, Frank relinquished his early style, characterized by careful, balanced framing. The pictures in *The Americans* are often taken on the run, as Frank's car speeds by; they are capriciously cropped, off-balance, and frequently out of focus. At times the main subject is turned away or half-covered in shadow, while peripheral details intrude on the composition.

Like Frank, Jarmusch extracts a laconic poetry from public spaces and peripheral subjects, even if his balanced, elegant frames differ from the photographer's gestural style. If Frank portrays the underbelly of the Eisenhower era, Jarmusch does the same with Reagan's America. It can be said that Jarmusch revived the aesthetics of the 1950s to portray the 1980s, except that the 1950s he revived were not those of consumer paradise, small-town homogeneity, and suburban bliss—the 1950s that crop up in Francis Ford Coppola's *Peggy Sue Got Married* or are latent in much of Steven Spielberg's work—but the 1950s of the Beat writers and artists. His fascination with Beat culture is not limited to *Stranger than Paradise*; it is already noticeable in *Permanent Vacation*, in the bop quotes and Allie's hipsterism, and reappears in *Down by Law*, with the neo-Beat musician Tom Waits, and in *Coffee and Cigarettes*, which features Taylor Mead, an important performer in Beat cinema.

The Beat artists, children of the Depression, revived the proletarian aesthetics of the 1930s to record the underside of the late 1940s and 1950s. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, for example, had its genesis in a number of cross-country journeys—like Frank's book—and depicted a nation of hobos, freight-car jumpers, workers' camps, and urban indigence: an America that seemed closer to the stock market crash than to the rock 'n' roll and TV revolutions. Frank and Kerouac (who wrote the preface for Frank's book) had either personal or aesthetic links with Depression culture. Kerouac grew up in a working-class family in the mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts, and Frank, who was born in Switzerland and did not make it to the United States until the 1940s, was a protégé of Walker Evans, who sponsored his Guggenheim application. Evans, who in the 1950s was the photo editor at *Fortune*, is best known for his record of rural poverty during the 1930s; his pictures of Alabama tenant farmers for James Agee's documentary book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are among the best-known icons of the period. Frank's *The*

Americans is parallel to Walker Evans's classic collection *American Photographs*, published as a book in 1938, and shares many of its thematic and stylistic concerns, including the mixture of modernist attention to form and the desire to delve into the margins of society. One could argue that *Stranger than Paradise* updates the mixture of modernism and marginality that characterizes Frank's and Evans's aesthetic and filters it through minimalist and post-conceptual art.

Stranger than Paradise also provides a snapshot of Jarmusch's connection with the Squat Theater, an experimental performance group formed in Budapest in 1969, exiled from Hungary in 1976 after repeated bans and clashes with the local authorities, and relocated in New York in 1977 (Buchmuller and Koos). Eszter Balint was the daughter of one the group's founders and main writers, Stephan Balint, and most of the performers in the film, from the central trio to Rammellzee, the vociferous beachside contact who mistakenly gives Eva the money, converged around Squat's activities during the early 1980s. The Squat Theater occupied a house on Twenty-third Street and Sixth Avenue, where the troupe lived and worked. They put on their plays on the ground floor of the house, typically at floor level and against a huge bay window that looked onto the street, while spectators sat in the back of the room facing the window. In this way, the random events taking place outside fused with the staged activity. People would often congregate outside the window, attracted by the bustle or the outrageous props inside. At times, troupe members would mingle with this spontaneous audience and would prompt them to react to what they saw, while their statements were broadcast to the spectators inside through a video link. Actors would make their entrances from the street or would play their parts right outside the window, and the performance occasionally spilled onto the sidewalk—one time a staged shootout caused a commotion among passersby and provoked the intervention of the police, unaware they were walking into a play. Squat developed a maximalist aesthetic of delirious excess, influenced by surrealism, opera, and Hollywood films, but they also presented unstructured, spontaneous quotidian occurrences in the style of minimalist performance. One act of their play *Pig! Child! Fire!* which started with a stage version of the postscript of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* and contained several sketches influenced by film noir and crime fiction, consisted in the children of the troupe

simply having dinner and carrying on their ordinary conversations in front of the spectators.

In the summer of 1979 Squat opened its doors as a music club while theater functions were suspended because the troupe was touring in Europe. Advertised as “Squat: Rock, Blues, Jazz,” it put on a wide-ranging music program—from the classic blues pianist Sunnyland Slim, to the cosmic jazz experimentalist Sun Ra, to robot-rap performances by Rammellzee, to contemporary new wave acts like John Lurie’s Lounge Lizards, Jarmusch’s Del Byzanteens, and Arto Lindsay’s DNA. (The Lounge Lizards’ music was also featured in one of the skits of the play *Mr. Dead and Mrs. Free*, whose opening segment was a short film titled “Leaving the New World.”) In addition, Squat developed some links with the experimental film intelligentsia, who might have wandered in on the wake of the music acts, or may have been attracted by Squat’s own films, screened during the performances. During the fall of 1982, a number of filmmakers were asked to program evenings of their favorite films, and both Eric Mitchell and Jim Jarmusch had an evening. And after the closing of St. Mark’s Cinema and the New Cinema in the East Village, Squat became an outlet for the downtown independents. There were shows of Mitchell’s *Underground USA*, Amos Poe’s *Unmade Beds*, Sara Driver’s *You Are Not I*, Jarmusch’s *Permanent Vacation*, and Ron Rice’s Beat classic *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (with Taylor Mead), among other titles. Subsequently, J. Hoberman held a twenty-four-hour B-movie marathon, Peggy Awesh programmed midnight movies, and the upstairs café, opened in an effort to prop up Squat’s tottering finances, offered music and video programs and a retrospective of Robert Frank’s films, including *Pull My Daisy*, *Energy and How to Get It*, made with Rudy Wurlitzer, and *Cocksucker Blues*, a documentary about the Rolling Stones made with Daniel Seymour.

Stranger than Paradise took Jarmusch out of obscurity. There was something topical in this, since the whole downtown scene was on its way up by the mid-1980s. Real estate values were beginning to soar; former gutter artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf were brand-new art-world stars, courted by critics, markets, and Andy Warhol; and some of the bands (with Blondie and Talking Heads in the lead) were becoming mainstream acts. Among East Village filmmakers, Amos Poe had just made *Alphabet City* with a relatively large budget of

\$1.2 million (his previous features had cost about six thousand dollars); Slava Tsukerman's *Liquid Sky* was drawing crowds at the Waverly in Greenwich Village; Charles Ahern was making a splash with his hip-hop docudrama *Wild Style*; and Susan Seidelman, another NYU film graduate who had chronicled downtown grit in the low-grade *Smithereens*, was on the verge of mainstream success with *Desperately Seeking Susan*, which confirmed the marketability of the scene and Madonna's star potential. What these facts revealed, and what had taken place between Jarmusch's first and second films, was the rise of independent cinema.

Independent Cinema: The 1980s

The success of off-Hollywood directors like Jarmusch, David Lynch, John Waters, Spike Lee, John Sayles, Jonathan Demme, and Susan Seidelman, among many others, made the label "independent cinema" a household term while changing its traditional meaning. Initially, "independent" referred to the small production units working outside the major studios. They had always been a significant force in the market; between the mid-1910s and the late 1940s, they were responsible for between a third and half of the total film output in the United States (Bordwell, Thompson, and Steiger 317–19, 330–35). The majority of independents tended to work with marginal talent and reduced budgets, putting out standardized product targeted at fringe markets or exhibition slots. The most frequently cited example of independence in this sense were the poverty-row studios—Monogram, Republic, First National, and Producers Releasing Corporation, among others—whose films were frequently shown as accompaniment to big-budget features, or destined for matinees, drive-ins, or second- and third-run theaters. Other independents, such as Samuel Goldwyn, David O. Selznick, and United Artists, turned out quality titles working in the shadow of the majors, renting their studio facilities and relying on their distribution infrastructure; these independents contracted talent packages and crews for specific projects on a limited-time basis, initiating a style of production that would become dominant after World War II. The independents were small-scale versions of the majors. They did not change the industry's labor hierarchies or methods of production, and they did not alter the basic traits of the classical style, even though, as critics later noted,

B-films did develop a peculiar aesthetic derived from their shoestring budgets, the taste of their audience, and the relative freedom of some directors. In this context, “independence” had an industrial meaning and referred to the lack of corporate links between the marginal units and the major studios.

In the 1980s, however, independence came to have primarily an aesthetic, rather than an industrial, meaning. It started to signify films that ventured into themes largely untouched by Hollywood, that assimilated the influence of the experimental and art traditions, and that voiced minority perspectives. The term had migrated from the music world, where it was widely used to designate alternative acts—especially punk and new wave bands—that rejected the standardized language of commercial pop, along with its circuits of advertisement and promotion, and relied on small labels—such as Slash, International Records Syndicate (IRS), Stiff, and Rough Trade—for recording and distribution. When applied to cinema, the aesthetic connotations of the term have clouded over the industrial ones. As a result, the label “independent” has become commonly attached to a thematically and formally unconventional film like Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*, even though it was made at Universal, but, in the mind of the majority of moviegoers, it does not apply to *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Dirty Dancing*, John Carpenter’s *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, Sylvester Stallone’s *Rambo* films, and James Cameron’s *Terminator*, all of which were financed by independent studios.

As an aesthetic development, the 1980s independent cinema is a recent—perhaps terminal—chapter in the history of alternative filmmaking in the United States. While its origins were in the experimental tradition, it quickly became assimilated, first by a new brand of unaligned operators and later by the major studios, and eventually became a cross-over phenomenon that attracted an art-house audience but also made significant runs into the mainstream. In the present, it occupies an off-center position in relation to commercial film, since it is often promoted and distributed by the majors or their subsidiaries yet continues to challenge some of the main assumptions of blockbuster film.

An early antecedent of the 1980s independents is the 1960s New American Cinema. A U.S. 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.

These films were shot on location, used amateur or relatively unknown performers, often took the form of character or social studies, and strove for psychological depth and perceptual realism. They often incorporated experimental gestures such as jump cuts, nonsynchronous sound, and handheld takes and introduced polemical subject matter, such as racial discrimination and urban poverty (Lionel Rogosin's *Come Back, Africa*, and Robert Downey's *Nothing but a Man*), drugs (Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*), military brutality (Jonas Mekas's *The Brig*), and male homosexuality (Clarke's *Portrait of Jason*). The leading director in the movement was John Cassavetes, whose first film, *Shadows*, made in 1959 and recut for a successful commercial run in 1960, was in many ways the opening act of the movement. Intellectually, the New American cinema was an inheritor of the ideology of the Beat poets and writers and of the underworld of bebop and hipsters, but its antecedents also include the small-budget filmmakers of the 1950s, such as Curtis Harrington, Morris Engel, and Sidney Meyer.

In its last stages, during the early 1980s, the New American Cinema converged with the rising independents. The last films of Robert Young, Robert Downey, and John Cassavetes coincided with the rise of Jarmusch's generation and benefited from the attention the new independents drew toward alternative cinema. But the connections are formal and thematic as well. Many of the 1980s indies seemed to 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*. Spike Lee's exploration of African American culture and cross-racial relationships could be traced back to Shirley Clarke's *The Cool World*, Robert M. Young's *Nothing but a Man*, and Cassavetes's *Shadows*. And Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy* replayed Shirley Clarke's *The Connection* as a road movie with a post-punk/MTV aesthetic. The 1980s independents were also influenced by the 1960s American underground and the European art cinema, especially the French New Wave. Andy Warhol's combination of sexual and formal revolt reemerged in the "new queer cinema" of the 1990s, and the French New Wave, with its double allegiance to the popular and modernist experimentation, was an additional model for subsequent filmmakers. Not surprisingly, references to this movement crop up in the work of Jim Jarmusch and (early) Spike Lee (*She's Gotta Have It* is a virtual compen-

dium of New Wave gestures), as well as in more recent independents such as Richard Linklater, Gregg Araki, and Bruce LaBruce.

The legacy of the New American Cinema and the underground was not limited to aesthetics; it extended to conceptions of cinema and models of production. Like their 1960s predecessors, 1980s off-Hollywood directors understood film in auteurist terms, as the expression of an artistic sensibility—"a Spike Lee joint," "a film by Jim Jarmusch"—rather than as an object of commercial exchange. But the opposition between artistic expressiveness and commerce must be qualified, since artistry has always been the alternative cinema's main commercial hook and the source of its market identity. Hence, in alternative cinema, auteurism is not a negation of film's commodity status but a particular incarnation of this status (Budd 15–19, Corrigan 41–42). If film was an artistic venture, it was also regarded as a collaborative effort where division of labor was not strictly observed and lines of authority were tenuous. Tight collaboration has translated into repertory filmmaking, with cast and crew reappearing in project after project. Waters, Sayles, the Coen brothers, and Jarmusch have worked with stable teams throughout their careers. In the case of Jarmusch, these include the cinematographers Tom DiCillo and Robby Müller, the editor Jay Rabinowitz, the sound technician Drew Kunin, the performer-musicians John Lurie, Iggy Pop, and Tom Waits, and the actor Richard Boes. Repertory filmmaking accentuates the singularity of a filmmaker's work and indicates investment in a sustained vision that carries from one film to the next, rather than on the manufacture of individual titles.

Just like filmmakers from earlier alternative traditions, the 1980s independents had to work with precarious funding, which they pieced together from a variety of sources, including public agencies (the National Endowment for the Humanities gave substantial grants to filmmakers during the 1970s and early 1980s), television networks, private investors, and even personal savings. Uncertain funding made independent work risky and unpredictable and accounted for the irregular rhythms of many marginal filmmakers. The case of Paul Bartel, who had to shoot *Eating Raoul* in fits and starts as money became available, is not unusual. (Eventually, a loan from his parents allowed him to finish the film.) Lack of money effectively limited the independents' range of topics and conditioned their aesthetics. At the same time, poverty, together

with stories of a particular director's resourcefulness and resilience, functioned as effective word-of-mouth, giving indie work an aura of authenticity and honesty. For many independents, Jarmusch among them, working haphazardly with scant backing is preferable to working with lavish budgets within the industry at the expense of relinquishing control over the film and the filmmaking process.

In the early 1980s, however, funding opportunities for independent cinema increased, and what had been an intermittent, artisanal movement, similar in this respect to the New American Cinema of the 1960s, began to receive some attention and capital. This was due to a rise in demand for film, available capital, a receptive audience, and the consolidation of a network of festivals, distributors, and exhibition outlets that had supported alternative cinema since the mid-1960s.⁶

Demand for film grew in the early 1980s due to a sharp increase in attendance (which peaked in 1984 at 1.2 billion admissions) and a 30 percent rise in the number of commercial screens between 1980 and 1983. The increase in screens was caused by the proliferation of multiplex theaters. While these were taken up with mainstream titles, it was not unusual for exhibitors to devote one screen to rereleased classics and specialty items geared to a cinephile audience. The home consumption of cinema grew exponentially in the 1980s as the result of the popularization of the VCR. As VCRs became household items, all commercial premieres were followed by video releases, while some films of uncertain prospects were directly released on tape.

The video boom was accompanied by the continuing expansion of cable and broadcast television. Between 1980 and 1988, the number of households subscribing to cable television multiplied by three, and the number of broadcast, independent, and public television stations grew by nearly one third. Television became an important market for independent cinema, as PBS's "American Playhouse" and the cable providers HBO, Showtime, and the Movie Channel started acquiring the broadcast rights for some independent films. Nearly half of the funding for Robert Young's *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, for example, came from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, with additional money from "American Playhouse." In exchange, they obtained the right to premiere the film as a TV broadcast, which actually hurt its chances with theatrical distributors. European TV stations, especially those funded

with public money and interested in alternative programming, were also important backers for American filmmakers. Charles Ahern's *Wild Style* was financed by the British Channel Four, which was often receptive to American independents, and by the German channel ZDF, a solid backer of Jarmusch's work. ZDF produced *Stranger than Paradise*, *Night on Earth*, and *Ghost Dog* (in collaboration with the French-based Studio Canal Plus). Other times, cable companies directly employed filmmakers. Robert Altman, who had fallen in disgrace with the majors after the disappointing performance of *Popeye*, coproduced by Paramount and Disney, made several films for cable and broadcast television in the mid-1980s—among them *The Laundromat*, *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*, and the series *Tanner '88* (Wyatt, "Economic" 59–60). Occasionally, network television had similar initiatives. In 1986, the syndicated show "Saturday Night Live" commissioned from Jarmusch the first short in the *Coffee and Cigarettes* series.

While video and cable television gave films new market windows that prolonged their life and yielded further sources of revenue, they also increased the demand for movies, a demand that could not be met by the established studios, since they had gradually cut their output through the 1970s to concentrate on a few high-concept, lavishly funded event-films rather than a steady stream of product (Wyatt, *High*). To fill the gap in supply, a number of independent operators entered what seemed a promising market—among them Cannon, Hemdale, Vestron, DeLauretis, Cinecom, Carolco, and Roger Corman's 1980s venture, New World Entertainment.

Most of these were born as production units, while others started out as distributors that ended up launching their own production divisions. Vestron, for example, was initially a home video distributor that moved into filmmaking; it had a huge hit with *Dirty Dancing* but was unable to reproduce this success and eventually went under after a string of flops. More successful were the film distributors New Line and Miramax: New Line started producing films sporadically in the late 1970s, while Miramax did the same through the 1990s and early 2000s with unparalleled fortune. Other corners of the media industry were paying attention to the commercial prospects of independent filmmaking in the early 1980s. Island Records is an example. Started by Chris Blackwell in Jamaica in the early 1960s and home to such legendary acts as Traffic,

Bob Marley, and U2, the company branched into film distribution by creating a subsidiary, Island Pictures, in the early 1980s. It handled Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* and Jarmusch's *Down by Law* and eventually moved into production with Lee's second feature, *School Daze*. This proved to be a commercial disappointment and the beginning of the end for Island's production division, which was eliminated in 1989. Seen in historical perspective, the early to mid-1980s seem a replay of the late 1940s explosion of independent filmmaking, when postwar prosperity and rising movie attendance prompted a demand that the studios, which were downsizing and being forced to divest, were not able to supply.

The output of the industrial independents was quite varied. Some sought to compete with the studios by providing action-oriented blockbusters. Carolco, one of the first to become competitive, found its fortune with the Rambo films and later with *Terminator 2*. As a rule, however, most independents tried to cater neglected genre and specialty films that the majors rarely touched, but in the end, their range was quite broad. Cannon, for example, started out handling exploitation of all types—teen sex comedies, soft porn, and gore—but a few years into operation decided to gamble for prestige as well and started backing art films: John Cassavetes's *Love Streams*, Robert Altman's *Fool for Love* (an adaptation of Sam Shepard's play), and Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* were Cannon productions. DeLauretiis started out with *King-Kong*, intended to segue on the monster-disaster trend initiated by *Jaws*, but also financed more personal work, such as David Lynch's *Dune* and *Blue Velvet* and Milos Forman's *Ragtime*.

In part, this wide range was a response to the porous, fragmented quality of the film market at the time. While high-concept action titles were clearly the blockbusters of the day, art-house films were also able to generate a considerable profit—especially when assessed in proportion to investment. The 1960s underground and its commercial followup, the 1970s midnight-movie phenomenon, had amply demonstrated that through a combination of serendipity, topicality, patience, and shrewd audience targeting, titles like *Chelsea Girls*, *Scorpio Rising*, *Flesh*, *Easy Rider*, *El Topo*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *Pink Flamingoes*, *Eraserhead*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* could grow into cults, generating substantial revenues in the process. European art films occasionally enjoyed similar success. Just to name an example: Fassbinder's *The*

Marriage of Eva Braun was picked up for five thousand dollars by Dan Talbot's New Yorker Films in 1974 and went on to make seven hundred thousand dollars in one New York City screen only (Pierson 12).

This indicated that alongside the allegedly "infantilized" audience of the Indiana Jones, *Star Wars*, and Rambo series, there was a cinephile audience eager for specialty and off-beat fare. Surveys showed that this audience was made up of educated adults who were interested in film as an aesthetic object, not only a weekend pastime; its volume, it seemed, was only a fraction of the total mass of moviegoers, yet it did constitute a force at the box office. Their taste had been prepared by 1960s experimental film, countercultural ideology, and, possibly, by the serious attention accorded to cinema at the time. An article exploring the growth of film culture in the United States published in 1969 in the *New York Times* was titled "The Movies Are Now High Art": "Don't go to the movies to escape," it advised (Schickel). Films were increasingly regarded as intellectual fare, as reflected in the growing presence of film courses in colleges and universities since the early 1970s. And equally important was the influence of the counterculture. Bob Shaye started New Line Cinema in 1969 by distributing Godard's Rolling Stones film, *One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil*, and *Reefer Madness*, a midnight classic in the public domain, and in the 1970s he floated John Waters's work. The Weinstein brothers, founders of Miramax, were rock-concert promoters in Buffalo, and they entered distribution by handling a Genesis concert film before moving onto foreign film with an aura of sexual audacity (Wyatt, "Formation").

While most historians have tended to oppose blockbuster-infatuated Hollywood to specialty-savvy independent operators, it is not entirely accurate to present the rise of independent cinema as an entirely off-Hollywood affair. Already during the late 1960s and 1970s, the studios fitfully promoted alternative filmmaking either by financing unconventional productions with commercial possibilities or by distributing art-house titles through specialty divisions. In the late 1960s, Hollywood had started cautiously to assimilate the European art film, the 1960s American avant-garde, and the counterculture; the result was a number of commercial titles with self-conscious art touches made by highly cine-literate auteurs—Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, Bob Rafelson's *Five Easy*

Pieces, and Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and *Nashville*. For the critic Peter Biskind, the Hollywood auteur film is the main progenitor of the 1980s independents.

Hollywood's raids on the counterculture are characteristic of a period when the industry operated on the post-Fordist principles of flexible accumulation and diversification and when it was forced to mine alternative audience niches in view of the fragmentation of the homogeneous public of earlier decades. But the truth is that Hollywood's flirtation with unconventionality was nothing new. From its beginnings, commercial cinema—and commercial culture at large—has selectively drawn on modernism and the avant-garde to give its products respectability and prestige and to introduce controlled stylistic variation to the extent that the history of commercial film cannot be written without taking into account this extended dialogue with experimental aesthetics. At different stages, montage, expressionism, social realism, and surrealism found their way into the Hollywood mainstream. Alternative cinema has acted as an inadvertent research-and-development arm for the industry by identifying markets, topics, and styles with commercial potential—or, what is the same, social resonance—that the studios have then proceeded to assimilate and popularize. While Hollywood's dialogue with marginal film culture in the 1980s was not new, the degree of interpenetration between the mainstream and the marginal, the commercial and the experimental, may have been. As the decade rolled along, the studios stepped up their policy of releasing independent work, and a considerable number of directors who had started out as exponents of minority sensibilities—among them, Spike Lee, Gus Van Sant, Susan Seidelman, Wayne Wang, Richard Linklater, Jonathan Demme, and Steven Soderbergh—ended up working for the majors. Jarmusch did not follow his contemporaries on this route, and yet many of his films after *Stranger than Paradise* are increasingly responsive to commercial cinema and genre film.

Oblique Lines and Languor: *Down by Law*

After *Stranger than Paradise*, Jarmusch's films seemed to have an assured place in the art-house circuit. His next project, *Down by Law*, confirmed his status as one of the main figures in independent cinema

and corroborated the indies' commercial potential. It received an award for best picture at Cannes in 1986, was one of the main attractions at the New York Film Festival that same year, and, in addition, it raked significant box office. The film was shot on location in Louisiana on a budget of slightly over a million dollars. It starred John Lurie as one of the leads (he also composed the soundtrack) and involved a number of new collaborators that would reappear in later Jarmusch titles. Robby Müller, who had worked with Wenders on *The American Friend*, *Hammett*, and *Paris, Texas* (in which Lurie had a small role), was the cinematographer; he would participate in all of Jarmusch's subsequent pictures, with the exception of *The Year of the Horse*, *Night on Earth*, and *Broken Flowers*. The Italian comedian Roberto Benigni received his first worldwide exposure through *Down by Law*; he would later appear in the first *Coffee and Cigarettes* short and in an episode of *Night on Earth*. And Tom Waits had his first sustained acting job in this film; he reappeared as a disembodied voice in *Mystery Train* and wrote the score for *Night on Earth*. A cult songwriter who had started his career in the early 1970s, Waits was not new to the movies. He had written the music for Francis Ford Coppola's *One from the Heart* and had a brief role in *Rumblefish*—like *Down by Law*, a stylistic exercise in black and white with classic genre resonances. At the time of his appearance in *Down by Law*, Waits's most recent albums were *Swordfishtrombones* (1984) and *Rain Dogs* (1985). It is tempting to establish parallels between these albums and Jarmusch's film. *Down by Law* opens and closes with two songs from *Rain Dogs* ("Jockey Full of Bourbon" and "Tango till They're Sore"), an album that had been released by Island Records, whose short-lived film arm distributed Jarmusch's movie. These two songs obscurely intimate a number of the film's motifs: murder, low-life queens, men on the run, and the New Orleans setting. Most of Waits's songs tell of fractured romances set in an underworld of drifters, pimps, and prostitutes—to a large extent the milieu of the film. And both Jarmusch's film and Waits's songs recycle retro idioms. The visual style of *Down by Law* draws from a number of 1940s and 1950s studio genres, while Waits's songs are replete with pastiches of polka, waltz, classic blues, and Caribbean rhythms.

Down by Law concerns the brief alliance between three people who meet fortuitously in a prison cell, break out together, and eventually

separate. Jack Romano (Lurie) is a cool, self-involved pimp. According to his girlfriend Bobbie (Billy Neal), he is an underachiever who “does not understand anything about women—and a pimp is at least supposed to understand women.” He is framed and arrested at the instances of a vengeful rival (Rockets Redglare). Zack (Tom Waits) is a radio DJ unable to hold a job. At the start of the film, he has just quit his current station, and his irate girlfriend Laurette (Ellen Barkin) reacts to the news by unceremoniously throwing his belongings into the street and expelling him from the apartment. Hours later, as he is drowning his sorrows in drink, an acquaintance (Vernel Bagneris) offers him some easy money for driving a car across town. He does not know that there is a dead body hidden in the trunk, but somehow the police do; they chase him, pull him over, and book him under suspicion of murder. Jack and Zack end up sharing a cell at the New Orleans Parish Prison, where they are joined by Bob (Benigni), a loquacious Italian who speaks little English, loves American poetry (he stentoriously recites Walt Whitman and Robert Frost in Italian), and has a relentlessly sunny disposition. Unlike Jack and Zack, Bob is in prison for a reason—killing a man in self-defense. Following a plan of Bob’s—“I saw it in an American movie . . . good American movie, with lots of action”—they escape and wander together through the bayou until, on the edge of the swamp, they come across a shop run by another recent Italian immigrant, Nicoletta (Nicoletta Braschi). Bob and Nicoletta fall in love instantly (“like in a story for children,” says Bob). He will stay with her and help run the establishment, while Jack and Zack decide to move on and try to cross the state line to avoid prosecution. The last sequence in the film has Jack and Zack taking different paths at a fork in the road, probably on their way to freedom.

Down by Law has a more conventional narrative structure than *Stranger than Paradise*. The modular structure of the earlier film gives way to a tighter plot held together by sustained actions and motivations; the frame-ups, escape from prison, and the journey through the swamp act as binding elements and give the work some linearity. Yet *Down by Law* has numerous formal and thematic continuities with Jarmusch’s earlier film. The central trio is a reincarnation of the character ensemble in *Stranger than Paradise*: Jack and Zack, supremely saturnine and always at odds with each other, recall Eva and Willie, while Bob is

an effervescent version of the amiable Eddie. In other respects, Bob has much in common with Eva in the previous film: his innocence of American ways and amusingly broken English have the effect of defamiliarizing the natives' perception of their own reality and language. Like *Stranger than Paradise*, *Down by Law* is shot in black and white and deep focus, it uses wide-angle lenses, and has a leisurely narrative pace. It also privileges long takes; sequence shots are rare, but most sequences are covered in two or three camera setups. As is habitual in Jarmusch, quite a bit of screen time is devoted to nondramatic events that do not seem to advance the plot: moments of trivial dialogue or silence, when characters simply sit and ponder. And at the same time, potentially dramatic events—like the escape from prison—take place offscreen and are insinuated by means of ellipsis.

The film brings together motifs from a variety of genres. The first section, before the protagonists meet in jail, contains abundant hints of film noir and the “city confidential” genre, typical of 1950s B-movies and exemplified by such titles as *The Phenix City Story*, *The Tijuana Story*, *Inside Detroit*, and their artier sibling, *Touch of Evil*.⁷ It shows an underworld of pimps, con men, prostitutes, and transients and takes place in a beautifully decaying New Orleans full of garbage and abandoned storefronts, elegantly rendered by Müller's cinematography. The following section draws on the prison film, and the ending, with the meeting of Bob and Nicoletta, suggests that of a romantic comedy (figure 5). These genres are drawn upon as sources of atmosphere and motifs, but they are not engaged in a sustained manner. The seriousness of the hard-boiled genre, for example, is constantly undercut by a subtle undertow of humor and absurdity, and the whole work is punctuated by intensely poetic moments in which elements of composition, lighting, and atmosphere are foregrounded in excess of their narrative function. In addition, the action unfolds in a subtly oneiric ambiance, which is one of the trademarks of Jarmusch's style. (He has stated that *Down by Law* is essentially a fairy tale.) This is particularly noticeable in the escape through the swamp. The location is depicted as a dream space where characters lose their sense of time and direction, and where some unlikely coincidences take place. On one occasion, the fugitives stumble on a shack by the river; the shack's interior, with two sets of bunk beds, looks like an exact replica of their prison cell. The overall



Figure 5. Roberto Benigni, Nicoletta Braschi,
John Lurie, and Tom Waits. *Down by Law*.
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strangeness of the swamp is amplified by Lurie's score, dominated by a ghostly, multitracked harmonica and by prickly percussion that suggests the echoing drips of a wet, live vegetable mass.

Such a combination of seemingly contradictory motifs is announced by the film's preface: a stylish montage sequence with images of New Orleans and its environs filmed in lateral tracking shots and crosscut with takes of Jack and Zack lying in bed with their girlfriends in the early morning. This opening is edited to Tom Waits's "Jockey Full of Bourbon" and has a slightly MTV feel to it, but it can also be seen as an anticipation of the entire narrative. It introduces two of the main players and foreshadows the main actions and settings to follow. The first image is of a hearse parked in front of a cemetery; subsequent takes show an arrest, the bayou, poor houses in rundown side streets, a shack by the river, and a roadside store. The sequence contains strong intimations of death and violence, intensified by Waits's obscure and urgent lyrics, and shows a hard-boiled sensibility. Other images convey a poetic calm: a group of black teenagers placidly standing around on a street corner, New Orleans iron balconies, high skies, and children playing ball in a

schoolyard. These views are ephemeral; the camera glides past them at a slow but deliberate pace. The steady horizontal movement announces the flight of the characters in the last third of the film and foreshadows the constant shifts in tone. None of these images lingers for long, and their overall effect is of an unstable mixture of tones presented with detachment.

The early scenes are overshadowed by the thematic concerns of film noir and the city confidential. They present a paranoid world dominated by corruption and crime in which Jack and Zack become unwittingly embroiled. Justice is arbitrary, and the police appear to be in cahoots with gangsters. The framing and lighting emphasize the connections with noir; compositions are often off-balance, full of diagonals and contrasts emphasized by the slightly distorting effect of the wide-angle lenses. In an early shot, for example, Jack sits at a table in the background of the frame counting money while, in the foreground, his girlfriend Bobby taunts him, deriding his lack of ambition and his general cluelessness (figure 6). The entire composition is slanted and slightly expressionis-



Figure 6. Billie Neal and John Lurie. *Down by Law*. Frame enlargement.

tic, with Jack, the target of her barbs, acting as a vanishing point while Bobby's face and upper body loom close to the camera. The first part of the film takes place entirely at night. In outdoor scenes, when lampposts provide the main source of illumination, the lighting is shadowy and directional. However, throughout the rest of the film Müller softened the high-contrast noir style to produce a nuanced spectrum of greys that is particularly noticeable in the prison scenes and in the silver winter light of the bayou. The dramatic charge of the noir atmosphere is also softened by the languor of the characters and the slow pace of the story. (Writing for *Positif*, the French critic Vincent Amiel summarized the film's atmosphere as "oblique lines and the languor of being.") Jarmusch's demimondaines are not in a hurry. Jack tarries in front of the mirror before he goes out to check on "the girls"; one of them, Dorothea, languishes on the veranda at sunrise, just "watching the colors change." Overall, this world is less threatening than picturesque—with the possible exception of the police, who retain an unnerving edge. Mobsters and goons are locked into incongruous mannerisms or reduced to caricature. This is the case with the sweaty, toothless Gig (Rockets Redglare), who engineers Jack's downfall, and with the suave, snakelike Preston (Vernel Bagneris), the white-suited con man who tricks Zack into driving a hot car. The New Orleans streets are populated by eccentrics, such as the jiving black man in a fedora and shades who greets Jack rather formally on a street corner and Bob, briefly glimpsed before he lands in jail. He walks into the frame, his back to the camera, while Zack is getting drunk in an alley, and greets him exultantly: "It's a sad and beautiful world."

Just like in the noir section, in the prison sequences drama is constantly derailed into comedy or diffused by the film's tendency to dwell on mere duration. The cell is shabby; the graffiti on the walls evoke the many previous occupants and, perhaps, earlier cases of injustice as well. The soundtrack, full of yells, echoing footsteps, and clanging metal, intimates institutional violence, as do the guards, whose occasional presence imparts an ominous air to these scenes. (Their violence was emphasized in an excised sequence, in which Jack, severely mauled, is dumped back in the cell after a beating.) However, the potential drama is muffled by numerous shots in which the film merely communicates boredom and the passing of time, as Jack and Zack sit around in silence, pace back and forth, or scribble on the walls, where Zack keeps a rudimentary calendar.

The prison is the setting for some of the most humorous moments in the film: when Zack, after much prompting by Jack, shakes off his torpor and zestily improvises a radio routine, complete with a detailed weather report; when Bob keeps mixing Jack's and Zack's names as, shaken with hiccups, he tries to cadge a cigarette from them; or when Bob starts a riot by chanting "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream," to be quickly joined by every inmate in the cell block in a roaring crescendo. After he walks on-camera, Bob becomes the main source of amusement. A large part of the comedy stems from his unsure grasp of English. The German critic Frieda Grafe has commented that in the prison interlude, when the development of the plot has come to a standstill and nothing moves, language does, pushed by Bob's endless chatter—a compendium of linguistic debris full of misunderstood expressions and nongrammatical turns (Göttler 192). He compiles all the English he knows in a small notebook that he often retrieves to search for an apt term or to put down a newly learned item. Part of the fun is his accent and his way of slightly distorting set phrases. "I yam a good hegg," he states, after he tells his cellmates, with an extremely contrite expression, why he has been put in prison. The others listen astonished and imperceptibly edge away from him, suddenly aware that they are sharing a cell with a true murderer, but Bob embraces them fraternally: "We are a good hegg." When he is flung into their cell for the first time, he is received with withering stares, and his greeting remains unanswered. Suddenly at a loss, he thumbs through his notebook until he lands on the right phrase. Triumphant, he proclaims: "If looks could a-kill, I yam a dead man now." In the next shot, he is still trying to break the ice: "Not enough room to swing a cat," he points out as he swings his hand in a circle, trying to elicit some response. The comedy here is as much in his language as in his upbeat temperament, which proves impregnable to the rudeness and indifference of the others.

But aside from language, the mere presence of the performers is a source of hilarity (figure 7). In prison, Jack and Zack perch on their bunk beds, supremely disdainful of their milieu and each other and generally more concerned with preserving some vestige of their former lifestyle than with their immediate situation. Zack often wears a hairnet, perhaps worried that a spell in prison may wreak havoc on his coiffure, but this moving touch of vanity fits badly with his grim personality and



Figure 7. Tom Waits, John Lurie, and Roberto Benigni. *Down by Law*. © 1986 Black Snake, Inc.

his deadbeat disposition. And Jack, with his saurian face, lankiness, and morose deportment, maintains a rather grand air, oblivious that he is no longer in full command of his girls and his business. For his part, Bob is consistently goofy. He is frequently unkempt, and his thinning hair has a way of sprouting unpredictable waves. One could repeat here what J. Hoberman wrote of *Stranger than Paradise*: “Half the fun in Jarmusch’s leisurely paced film is watching these palookas breathe” (Hoberman, *Vulgar* 200). Jarmusch’s humor often stems from his way of reducing performers to masks, heightening their iconic value and highlighting their physiognomic peculiarities. Much of their charm and comic potential derive from their looks, from the way they stand, gesture, or dress, and from their body language and style. Because of this, the affect of Jarmusch’s films—this is certainly the case with *Down by Law* or *Stranger than Paradise*—is often akin to that of silent comedy, where laughter is provoked by the strange warps of an uncontrollable physical world revealed by the camera. Perhaps the most significant example of this is when Benigni is put in the cell with Jack and Zack. These last have just had a huge argument culminating in a punch fight and now sit and fume in their respective beds, with their chins solemnly propped on their

hands. Waits still proudly wears his hairnet; Lurie's head is covered with a towel that is shaped into a sort of cowl and makes him look incongruously like a surly, bony-faced nun who has just emerged from a street brawl. In the background, visible between these sphinx-like presences, Bob is shoved into the cell by a guard. The others barely deign to turn and look, refuse to respond to his expansive greeting, and resume their pose of aggravation and mauled dignity.

In this way of reducing characters to their physical presence there is more than an attempt to raise a laugh. Often characters look funny because their appearance is out of place, yet, in spite of this, they doggedly seek to preserve it—as is the case with Zack and Jack in prison. The general lassitude of Jarmusch's characters reaches a limit when it comes to looks. They seem to operate under the stoic assumption that they are mere pawns of destiny, bad times are always around the corner, and there is little they can do about that; but they insist on being at least masters of their own style. Zack's world has fallen apart overnight. His girlfriend may be right in bawling him out, but (like in Carl Perkins's rock 'n' roll anthem) she had better leave his shoes alone (these are pointed, with a metallic reinforcement around the toe and silver buckles). When she throws these out of the window, she has definitely crossed a line, and the relationship is effectively over: "I guess this is it, Laurette," mumbles Waits dolefully, crouching on the edge of the bed. Later on, while he is in prison, he makes sure that his hair does not go to the dogs. This emphatic attention to style is present in practically all of Jarmusch's characters. For all his easygoing attitude toward life, Allie's clothes and hair are always right on. Willie and Eddie are outfitted in retro ensembles of fedoras, plaid shirts, and argyle cardigans: a crossing of 1950s beatnik, British mod, and 1980s East Village chic that is self-contained and coherent but at the same time as indeterminate and ultimately out of place as the characters themselves. In *Mystery Train*, Jun, the Japanese teenager, also appears inordinately proud of his patent leather Doc Marten's brothel creepers, which he buffs daily and rests on an armchair when it is time to go to bed. At the hotel's reception desk, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, in his black shirt, firehouse-red jacket, and matching tie, derides Cinqué Lee for his ridiculous bellhop uniform and advises him to take a walk to the Lanski Brothers store—a historic clothing store in Memphis's Main Street—to attire himself properly. And Ghost Dog signals his

warrior status through his black ninja clothes and the samurai emblem on his jacket. In all these cases, tenaciously hanging on to one's looks is made to look funny and enormously dignified at the same time. One may smile at these characters' sartorial devotion, but it is hard not to admire the determination with which they remain resolutely unmovable in their idiosyncrasies, which they telegraph to the world through their appearance.

This awareness of style may have contributed significantly to the popularity of Jarmusch's films during the Reagan-Thatcher years, a time of sharply diminished expectations, un- and underemployment, and gentrification, and dominated by the dismantling of the welfare state and political conservatism in the United States as well as in much of Europe. This was a period when the countercultural impulses of the 1960s and early 1970s fragmented and individualized, evolving from utopian mass movements to personal stylistic choices. The midnight-movie phenomenon of the 1970s and the rise of independent film in the 1980s can be read as symptoms of the distillation of the counterculture, which was driven further underground to specialized taste communities and commodified to particular market niches. In the process, it became more a matter of fashion than of radical communal aspiration. It is also significant that the 1980s saw the introduction of the VCR and the Walkman, first marketed by Sony in late 1979; both individualized the reception of popular culture, bringing it into the intimate recesses of the home and the inner ear. They repackaged youth culture as a private style, a solipsistic choice that did not necessarily entail connection with others but, rather, otaku-like disconnection and absorption—the enjoyment of privately screened images and customized sonic landscapes directly fed into one's head. Encased in their personal styles, sharply individualistic and self-involved, Jarmusch's characters traverse the world listening to their own music and absorbed in their private iconic repertoires. In *Stranger than Paradise*, Eva keeps playing Screamin' Jay Hawkins's "I Put a Spell on You" in her portable tape player; in *Mystery Train*, Jun and Mitzuko, a young couple from Yokohama on a visit to Memphis, are invariably jacked into their Walkman and live in the virtual reality of classic 1950s rock 'n' roll. In a similar way, Zack lives in his music and radio shows, Jack in his elegance and factitious self-importance, and Ghost Dog in the world of medieval Japan. All of them have the

disconnected look of someone tuned to a channel that only they can hear. In their self-absorption and concern with style, they are witnesses to the fact that, starting in the 1980s, utopian aspiration was progressively expelled from public concerns and confined to the management of one's life and looks. They implicitly point out the depletion of collective life and suggest that the last realm of creative intervention may now be one's record collection, one's clothes, or some private cult—Mitzuko's Elvis-mania or Ghost Dog's fascination with the ancient samurai code. But in their overwhelming dignity, these characters also remind us—as punk did all along—that looks, after all, do matter and that one should not underestimate style. In a radically absurd, ugly world, a cool style may be the only reward. Which may be the reason why, before they part ways at the end of *Down by Law*, Jack and Zack trade jackets—humble hand-me-downs inherited from Nicoletta's dead uncle that, incidentally, look very much like Willie's and Eddie's duds in *Stranger than Paradise*. Whatever may happen in the future, at least their clothes will have the right fit.

Phantom Memphis

Jarmusch's next film, *Mystery Train*, returned to the block composition of *Stranger than Paradise*, only the building blocks in *Mystery Train* are not sequence shots but three fairly self-contained stories that are presented successively but unfold simultaneously within hearing range of each other. Once again, the protagonists are strangers in the land—foreigners passing through Memphis, Tennessee, who respond to their American surroundings with a mixture of fascination and befuddlement.

The first episode, “Far from Yokohama,” concerns Jun (Masatoshi Nagase) and Mitzuko (Youki Kudoh), two Japanese rock 'n' roll fans on a sort of musical grand tour of the United States. In Memphis they visit Sun Studios and Graceland, linger around the old downtown, sit at the feet of Elvis's statue, argue about the relative merits of Elvis and Carl Perkins, and, in the evening, they check in at the derelict Arcade Hotel (figure 8). The following morning they board the train on their way to New Orleans, where their first stop will be Fats Domino's house. The second story (“A Ghost”) starts at the airport with Luisa (Nicoletta Braschi), an Italian tourist, consigning a casket with her husband's



Figure 8. Nasatoshi Nagaki and Youki Kudoh.
Mystery Train. © 1989 Mystery Train, Inc.
 Photo: Sukita.

remains to an airline official. While the story does not reveal the circumstances of his death, it is inferred that it happened unexpectedly while the couple were traveling through the country, perhaps on their honeymoon. Stranded in Memphis for a day before returning to Rome, Luisa wanders through downtown following a similar route to Jun and Mitzuko's. In the evening, while sitting at a diner, she is accosted by a creepy local with a trite story about Elvis's ghost and is later stalked in the street by him and a friend. She finds shelter in the Arcade Hotel across the street. In the lobby she meets DeeDee (Elizabeth Bracco), a young woman who has just broken up with her boyfriend and is leaving town the following morning, and they decide to share a room for the night. As Luisa is about to fall asleep, the ghost of young Elvis—in a gold lamé jacket and slicked-back hair—materializes in front of her eyes. The third story ("Lost in Space") centers on DeeDee's spurned boyfriend, Johnny (Joe Strummer), a British man whom the locals call Elvis for his retro "cat" style. In addition to being dumped by DeeDee, Johnny has just been fired from his job. At the beginning of the episode, he is soaking his sorrows at Shades, a downtown bar with a black cli-

entele, and brandishing a gun. His friends Will Robinson (Rick Aviles) and Charlie (Steve Buscemi) come to take him away, afraid that he will end up causing trouble, and they all go drinking and driving in Will's battered truck. When the alcohol runs out, they stop at a liquor store where Johnny idiotically shoots the manager (Rockets Redglare). They take flight and end up hiding at the Arcade. After more drinking and sodden talk, ranging from race relations to the 1960s sci-fi TV show "Lost in Space," they nod off. The following morning, as he wakes up, Johnny puts the gun to his head with the intention of killing himself but is hindered by Charlie. In the scuffle, the gun goes off, and Charlie ends up with a bullet in his leg. They jump in the truck, and, since there is an arrest warrant on them, they try to cross into Arkansas to find a doctor. The end of the film crosscuts between Luisa rushing through the airport to catch her plane, Jun, Mitzuko, and DeeDee on a southbound train, and Johnny, Will, and Charlie driving away to a background of police sirens.

The specifics of the plot, however, convey little about the film, since, as is often the case with Jarmusch, the storyline is merely a framework through which to explore stylistic effects and showcase performances. More determinant than what happens is the leisurely pace, sober color scheme, self-restrained visual vocabulary, amused attention to peculiarities of behavior and speech, and, above all, the film's temporality. The three stories develop concurrently, and their simultaneity is cleverly indicated by a number of motifs that recur in all of them and serve to keep spectators oriented in time. One of these is a train—thirteen coaches long?—passing in the middle of the night; it is seen by Jun and DeeDee from the window of their respective hotel rooms and by Johnny, Charlie, and Will as they cruise around in Will's truck. Another marker of simultaneity is a segment of a late-night radio show that is heard by the Japanese travelers after they have sex in their hotel room; by Luisa and DeeDee as they get ready to turn in for sleep; and by Will, Charlie, and Johnny as they drive around hitting the bottle. In all cases, after the last beats of Roy Orbison's "Domino," Tom Waits's husky voice—or is it Zack's, relocated to Memphis?—introduces Elvis's version of "Blue Moon," and then the song comes on. The most obvious marker is the gunshot, which surprises the Japanese couple as well as Luisa

and DeeDee as they leave their rooms in the morning, but remains an enigma only explained in the last minutes of the film.

There are also less blatant suggestions of simultaneity. At the hotel, as Mitzuko updates her Elvis scrapbook and Jun takes pictures of the furniture, the bellboy's voice is heard in the hallway outside ushering DeeDee and Luisa to their room. In the second episode, as DeeDee pours her heart out to Luisa, telling her about abandoning her boyfriend and her hopes of starting a new life further south, they hear Jun and Mitzuko's lovemaking in the adjoining room, a scene that had been shown in the earlier episode. Also repeated in all three episodes is the absurdly humorous interaction between the night clerk (Screamin' Jay Hawkins) and the bellboy (Cinqué Lee) (figure 9). The entire exchange starts with the night clerk tricking the bellboy out of the plum that Mitzuko has tipped him, then asking him if he happens to have any more "exotic fruits from around the world" on him. The bellboy, miffed and bored, pulls out a flyswatter and slaps a huge brass fly sitting on the desk, then puts on huge sunglasses and stares intently at the night clerk, who



Figure 9. Cinqué Lee and Screamin' Jay Hawkins.
Mystery Train. © 1989 Mystery Train, Inc.
Photo: Sukita.

continues impassively filling out the register. Then the bellboy complains about the state of his uniform; in reply, the clerk pontificates about the importance of clothes (“it’s like they say: the clothes make the man”); suggests that the boy buy his own clothes; and mocks him for looking “like a damned mosquito-legged chimpanzee” in his ridiculous hat. Shown from a slightly different angle each time, the exchange is relayed in overlapping fragments. The second one starts with the swatting and ends right after the dissertation on clothes, while the third starts with the bellboy pulling on his glasses and runs on past the talk on clothes and the clerk’s mockery to a radio commercial for a local seafood restaurant, the Jiffy Squid.

The critic Murray Smith has pointed out that the use of parallel, simultaneous storylines is a frequent trope in recent American independent film. Most visible in Quentin Tarantino’s work, from *Reservoir Dogs* to *Jackie Brown*, it is present as well in a number of independent titles, including Richard Linklater’s *Slacker*, John Sayles’s *City of Hope*, and Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts*, and is approximated in other episodic films such as Hal Hartley’s *Flirt* and Amos Poe’s *Triple Bogey on a Par Five Hole*. The nearest antecedent for this structure—apart from classics like Jean Epstein’s *La Glace à trois faces*, Max Ophüls’s *La Ronde*, Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*, or Stanley Kubrick’s *The Killing*—is Jarmusch’s *Mystery Train*. For Smith, these films’ disjointed chronology promotes “a formal fascination,” an “architectural pleasure” that derives from the overhaul and subsequent reconstruction of the story’s sequence in the spectators’ minds. Yet in *Mystery Train* this construction serves other purposes as well. In addition to nudging the viewer into active decoding, the parallel stories are characterized by repetition, and repetition has an essentially rhythmic function. The film’s pace is then determined by the reappearance of familiar—and largely nondramatic—motifs across all three episodes, rather than, as is the case in more traditional narratives, by the introduction of new incident, the succession of cause and effect, enigma and resolution. And what *Mystery Train* repeats is not only the temporal markers mentioned above but also settings, characters, frames, and camera movements. Places like the hotel, the diner, Shades, the boarded-up Lamar Theater, a railroad bridge, and a grass-grown empty lot with high-rise office buildings glimmering in the background recur throughout. And so do some of the odd locals that populate the stretch

where the action takes place—Charlie and Will Robinson, for example, are briefly glimpsed during Jun and Mitzuko’s and Luisa’s wanderings. The drift of these foreigners, which leads through many of the same landmarks, is repeatedly shown in formally identical takes. These frame the characters in long shot moving, like Allie Parker in *Permanent Vacation*, through a bottomed-out inner city: a landscape of broken sidewalks and gutted storefronts. Typically, the camera glides along for a while and suddenly stops as the characters walk on into offscreen space. John Lurie’s soundtrack, consisting of three alternating themes characterized by nonmelodic circular progression and culminating in an unresolved minor chord, underlines the repetitiveness and seeming aimlessness of their trajectory.

The insistence on repetition reinforces Jarmusch’s connection with minimal art and music, where poverty of means is used to emphasize structure and construction. But in Jarmusch, repetition also contributes a slightly oneiric quality by portraying a highly schematic universe, a “closed” world where the same components knock against each other over and over again as in a vacuum—or in a dream. At the same time, Jarmusch’s repetitions do not work toward closure but uncover difference at the heart of the same. By being inserted in new contexts, what is repeated is constantly reworked anew. The same radio routine, for example, has a completely different signification in each episode. For the Japanese teenagers, it marks the end of the argument that breaks out between them after sex and hints at the reconciling power of music, while the lyrics of “Blue Moon” suggest that, reconciled or not, their relationship may not palliate a deeper, incurable loneliness. In later episodes, “Blue Moon” rhymes with the losses experienced, in different ways, by Luisa, DeeDee, and Johnny. In a more comic vein, it also anticipates the ghost’s visit and underlines Johnny’s status as a secondhand Elvis—despite his protestations that he “hytes” the King. The embedding of difference in repetition is a familiar Jarmusch motif. Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’s “I Put a Spell on You,” Eva’s fetish song in *Stranger than Paradise*, connotes differently whether Eva plays it in Willie’s kitchen, in the car on the way to Florida, or in the streets of the Lower East Side during her first walk in the New World. In all instances, the repeated same turns out to be a source of nuance and surprise; conversely, difference yields similarity: “You come someplace new and everything looks

just the same,” says Eddie after surveying Cleveland in Willie’s company. Like the characters in *Stranger*, Jun and Mitzuko find themselves far from Yokohama, but in a way they seem not to have moved at all. Upon arrival, they are greeted in Japanese by a local, and to Jun, it all looks just like home anyway: “You take out a third of the buildings in Yokohama and you end up with Memphis.”

A further reason why repetitions keep generating difference, and why *Mystery Train* never becomes a rigorously closed system, is the unpredictable human element. Characters are the most resonant ingredient in the film, which rather than by the chain of events—what Roland Barthes calls “the code of actions”—is dominated by “the code of character.” The plot seems a mere excuse to display a number of highly idiosyncratic and impressionistically rendered personalities in odd interaction. There is the usual gallery of surly males, from Jun to Johnny to the night clerk, plus a number of motormouthed women (DeeDee) and men (Will Robinson), and a string of unaccountable secondary figures (the oppressively cheerful guide at Sun Studios, the suave newsagent who talks Luisa into spending a small fortune on magazines). They are as funny as they are peculiar—or perhaps funny because peculiar, that is, irreducibly themselves. While often reduced to a few surface effects—style, gestures, or verbal riffs—they never fall into types and often intimate depths that the film does not try to fathom. Perhaps the best example of this is Luisa; strained and slightly nervous, she projects an image of resignation and never externalizes her feelings about her recent bereavement. As DeeDee torrentially details her plights in their hotel room, she merely listens, pointing out that even the best love sometimes may only last a week, a comment whose resonance is totally lost on her interlocutor. The following morning, as they are ready to leave, they hear the gunshot a few rooms away. DeeDee reacts with alarm, while Luisa expertly assesses that it is “probably a .38,” even though, given her soft manner and delicate physique, it is hard to picture her as someone familiar with firearms. (In a review of the film for *Cahiers du cinéma*, Nicolas Saada surmises that her husband was “no doubt a Mafioso.”)

Such character idiosyncrasies disrupt the film’s smooth flow and momentarily suspend what little plot development there is. They also prompt intensely cinephiliac moments that do not advance the action

nor add narrative information but still color the film decisively. The scenes between the bellboy and the night clerk are a perfect example of this. They are redundant in terms of narrative development, yet they contribute some of the most memorable comedy in the film. They ride exclusively on the actors' brilliant timing and vocal style. The imposing night clerk greets the guests in his cavernous voice with a solemnity that contrasts with the dinginess of the establishment. Occasionally, he affects a note of concern: he asks Luisa, when she checks in for the night with DeeDee, "And how are you, my dear?" She promptly reports that she is just "a little discombobulated" at the moment but otherwise alright, at which he nods sympathetically. Every time guests materialize, he impertinently rings the bell to call the bellhop, who is invariably sitting right by his side. In a late scene, when Charlie drops and shatters a whiskey bottle in the hotel lobby, he stares at the embarrassed barber reprovingly and ominously intones: "Man, you've got a curse on you sure as the moon *roooooooooose* over the world tonight"—and he punctuates the moonrise with a wave of his hand and a dramatic twitch of his eyebrows. The bellboy is a similarly memorable character. He appears fastidious, fidgety, bored, and painfully self-conscious in his uniform. He seems hurt by the night clerk's derision about his looks and beams with delight when Luisa claims to like his hat, which he keeps adjusting in front of a mirror in the hallway. In the last episode of the film, when he is asked to clean up the mess caused by Charlie, he dutifully sweeps the broken glass onto a dustpan, opens the door of the hotel, throws the glass right in the middle of the street, and walks back in, the picture of keen efficiency. A moment that has a similar cinephiliac quality yet is not associated with a character proper takes place in the first sighting of the Arcade Hotel. As Jun and Mitzuko stand across the street, a black woman in a *decolleté* silver dress decidedly strides out of the hotel, and a male voice calls from off-screen: "Hey silver fox, where's the fire?" She smiles proudly and just keeps going, stressing the swagger in her walk. Mitzuko watches, enchanted: "That looks like a funny place. Lets spend the night there."

Moments like these are common throughout Jarmusch's work, and they are the vehicle of much of his comedy. At times they consist of merely verbal outbreaks, when a character gabs on, invariably in a funny voice or accent, or using language in a peculiar manner. One such out-

break is the heated argument between Yo-Yo and Angela in the New York episode of *Night on Earth*, but most often it is characters with foreign accents or even non-English speakers who tend to hold the floor, such as Benigni in *Down by Law* and in the Rome episode of *Night on Earth*, Isaak de Bankolé as Raymond, the ice-cream man, in *Ghost Dog*, or Jeffrey Wright as an Ethiopian immigrant in *Broken Flowers*. Other times, as we pointed out in relation to *Down by Law*, these moments are visually arresting and center on a face, posture, or gesture. (One might also think here of Helmut, the inept cabbie, and Yo-Yo, sitting side by side wearing nearly identical fur hats with earflaps in *Night on Earth*.) And still on other occasions it is an occurrence, like the appearance of the lady of the night in a silver dress in downtown Memphis. *Ghost Dog* is especially prolific in such incident: as Ghost Dog spies on the local mafia from a street corner, he sees how an infirm-looking, old Chinese man knocks out a strapping, young assailant with a couple of deft kung-fu kicks and, later, an exuberant blonde in tight jeans and high heels has her car stolen (by Ghost Dog himself) while she steps into a convenience store on a quick errand. Such moments put the story on hold and give Jarmusch's work some of the quality of vaudeville or silent-film comedy—presentational rather than representational genres that stress their own fictionality, the fact that they are deliberately constructed for the spectators' eyes.

But if such discrete moments convey much of the affect of Jarmusch's films, the films also make sense as whole statements and must be interpreted as such. Taken as wholes, they are more elegiac than comedic; they may abound in humorous moments, but these are inserted in stories that generally advance toward conflict, dissension, separation, or death. With its upbeat ending, *Down by Law* may be an exception, and yet there was also an alternative *unhappy* ending, shot but eventually discarded, in which Jack and Zack freeze to the baying of police hounds about to catch up with them. Despite its abundant comic touches, *Mystery Train* is a fairly melancholy reflection on the transience of love. The song that gives the film its title narrates the loss of a beloved woman who disappears into a train taking her to an unknown destination. The film is bracketed by two versions of the theme: the first one, sung by Elvis, is heard at the beginning of the film; the second, by "Little" Junior Parker, a gifted Beale Street blues singer who recorded it as Little Junior's Blue

Flames in 1953, plays over the closing credits. Both were recorded in Sam Phillips's Sun Studios. Elvis's version—one of the last sides he recorded for Phillips before moving on to RCA and to international stardom—is the more spirited, in part because of its rockabilly, rather than blues, beat. As Greil Marcus has pointed out, Elvis infused a rebellious energy into the theme that was absent in the original; his angry delivery emphasized the determination, by the end of the song, not to let that loved one disappear again (Marcus, *Mystery* 171–73). Junior Parker's version has a slower tempo and is permeated by a mood of resignation. When he sings that the train will never take his baby again, Parker seems unable to inject much conviction into his plea. Giving Parker—the song's co-writer and original performer—rather than Elvis the last word has been taken as a sign of Jarmusch's purism. But it might also be read as a sign of pessimism, as if Parker's despair, rather than Elvis's cockiness, were a more suitable close to the film.

The film moves from the youth of the Japanese teens to the early maturity of the others, and the shift in the age of the characters is accompanied by a transition from love in the present, as experienced by Jun and Mitzuko, to love in the past, a memory glimpsed through disappointment (in DeeDee's case) and loss (in Luisa's). It is tempting to read an allegorical intention in the order of the episodes, as if the film proposed that Jun and Mitzuko represent the past of Johnny and DeeDee's, or even of Luisa and her husband's, relationships, and that the fate of these relationships awaits the unwitting youths in the future. Love, the film seems to say, is frustrated either by death or dissolution; in either case, someday one wakes up to find it gone, like the girl in the phantom train. There are abundant suggestions that this is actually in the cards for the young lovers. Mitzuko is in many ways as bubbly as DeeDee, and Jun is as sullen as Johnny, of whom DeeDee says that he has "the cutest accent . . . when he talks," which, like Jun, he seldom does. Jun often condescends to Mitzuko and holds himself aloof; he starts absurd arguments and, on one occasion, spitefully quotes Mitzuko's words back to her to underline her silliness. A bit like Willie in *Stranger than Paradise*, he seems fond of imposing his views just because, as when he insists that they take at least one of the hotel towels, since it is an American tradition and they are included in the price of the room, and thus forces Mitzuko to wear a stack of t-shirts, one on top of the other,

to make room in the suitcase. Jarmusch has stated that in this episode he sought to explore a relationship where arguing turned out to be a bond of union, an idea to which he returns in *Night on Earth* and, especially, *Coffee and Cigarettes*. Yet the flow of the film suggests that this way of bonding may also lead to attrition and breakup.

Jun and Johnny—one might make something of the phonetic coincidence—are similar to many other Jarmusch protagonists. Like Allie Parker, Willie, Jack, Zack, and Don Johnston in *Broken Flowers*, they are moody, disengaged “men in orbit,” to recall the title of John Lurie’s short, and that orbit revolves around themselves, something especially evident in their concern with their image and in their solipsism. Like DeeDee, Mitzuko complains about Jun’s inexpressiveness and wonders if his silent, morose expression is a sign of sadness. “I am very happy,” he counters with one of the longest faces on filmic record. Quietness may be a feature of character, but it may also be a way to limit, and hence to control, intimacy. In either case, Jarmusch’s men seem uneasy about communicating, and their silence is accompanied by a fastidious attention to style. The “to-be-looked-at-ness” that, according to Laura Mulvey, is the defining trait of women in classical narrative film is transferred in Jarmusch to men, who turn themselves into spectacle much more frequently than women. Jarmusch’s films reverse the psychoanalytic notion that femininity is associated with artificiality and masquerade while masculinity, due to its phallic attribution, is somehow natural and complete in itself. In Jarmusch’s world, it is men who seem hard at work on their appearance, while women, a bit like analysts, observe and diagnose. It is most often they who do the looking and the talking. The films tend to feature masculine scenarios; women are pushed to the margins of the plot or else killed off at the outset, as in *Dead Man*, or even before, as in *Ghost Dog*, but when they do step in, they prove far more insightful than the men. This is clearest in *Down by Law*, where Jack and Zack seem totally unaware of themselves, trapped in their own compulsion and vanity, while their girlfriends, Billy and Laurette, provide penetrating analyses of their motives—analyses that, naturally, make little impression on them. In *Mystery Train*, immediately after passionate sex, Jun asks Mitzuko why women are always thinking about their hair. The question takes her aback; after all, her hair, gathered in a simple ponytail, is a lot more natural than his shellacked pompadour. She angrily retorts that not once in the eleven times they have had sex

has the thought of her hair so much as crossed her mind—while, one imagines, this is what he may have been thinking about throughout their lovemaking. Earlier in the evening, while trying to make him smile, she puts on abundant lipstick and gives him a tight kiss, smearing rouge all over his face and leaving her mark on his carefully composed facade, then pulls back and laughs at the results (figure 10).

Mystery Train is a knowing homage to one of the capitals of contemporary popular music—an early center of blues and R&B and, more relevant to the film, the birthplace of rock 'n' roll and soul. The first two episodes are studded with references to 1950s rock 'n' roll and rockabilly. The first landmark visited by Jun and Mitzuko is the legendary Sun Studios. Although the studio had been functioning as a recording facility for years, Sun Records was established as a label in 1952 by the sound engineer Sam Phillips with the intention of promoting local R&B artists. A few years into operation, Phillips began to record young white musicians from the region who were fusing blues, R&B, and hillbilly music, the explosive mixture that gave birth to rock 'n' roll. Rock 'n' roll is still the music most frequently associated with Phillips's now-defunct



Figure 10. Nasatoshi Nagaki and Youki Kudoh.
Mystery Train. © 1989 Mystery Train, Inc.
Photo: Sukita.

company. Fittingly, Sun music opens and closes the film and is heard on late-night radio, where the King is played back to back with Roy Orbison, a post-Elvis Sun act. In addition, upon arriving at the Memphis station, Jun and Mitzuko run into Rufus Thomas, one of Sun's earliest R&B stars, in a cameo appearance as a cigar-toting local who asks them for a light and thanks them in Japanese.

But if the film starts out with Sun, it eventually moves on to Stax, the other greatly influential label in Memphis music history, the purveyor of a driving style of R&B that ruled the charts in the mid-1960s and has often been called the "Memphis sound"—as if there had been no other. One of Stax's earliest hits was recorded by Rufus Thomas. Subsequent Stax stars included Rufus's daughter Carla Thomas, Booker T. and the MGs, Wilson Pickett, Sam and Dave, Otis Redding, and Isaac Hayes. The music played on the jukebox at Shades in the last episode of the film is an impressive sample of Stax's goods: Rufus Thomas's "Night Train," Bobby "Blue" Bland's "Get Your Money Where You Spend Your Time," Otis Redding's "Pain in My Heart," and the instrumental "Soul Finger," by the Bar-Kays, who were also Redding's last touring band. When a drunken Johnny complains because some of the black guys in the place call him Elvis, he snaps: "Do I call you Sam and Dave?" A corpulent fellow wearing a shower cap who has been playing pool in the background freezes and stares bullets at him: "Hey, man, my name is Dave." Later on, as Johnny and his friends drive around, they pass Stax's old building, now a whitewashed empty hull with the company's name spraypainted on the wall.

These references to the past are inevitably filtered through the musical present, represented by Joe Strummer, who plays DeeDee's ex. Strummer was the singer and one of the songwriters of the British punk band the Clash. By the time Strummer starred in the film, the Clash had already dissolved and the band's members faded out of the scene or embarked on individual projects, but they had left a deep imprint on punk and post-punk with albums like *London Calling*, *Combat Rock*, and *Sandinista!* While the Sex Pistols were mercurial and street-smart, the Clash were literate, articulate, and politically engaged. (They were the main promoters of the Rock against Racism campaign in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s.) They had a very broad stylistic range and a sophisticated awareness of their musical roots. The Pistols' musical influ-

ences were rock 'n' roll and garage; the Clash also recycled classic rock 'n' roll—they resurrected British classics like Vince Taylor's "Brand New Cadillac" and toured with Bo Diddley—and, in addition, sought to link punk to Jamaican dub and toast, reggae, ska, Zydeco, New Orleans R&B, and Memphis soul. By going back to these modes, many of which belong in the prehistory of rock, the band sought to assimilate their visceral energy and structural clarity, which had been clouded over by decades of—in the band's own words—"phony Beatlemania," that is, blandness and pretension. Punk may have split rock history in two, as Greil Marcus once wrote, but the Clash's music shows that it also prompted considerable historical self-consciousness. Hence Strummer's presence in the film might be taken as yet another bow to his musical ancestors; and it also suggests that *Mystery Train*'s dive into the past is anchored in recent music history and therefore owes more to punk—even as late as 1989—than to nostalgia or antiquarianism.

And Elvis? As the protagonist of the most successful chapter in Memphis music history, he naturally hovers throughout the film. He sings the opening song, is constantly on the characters' lips, makes a ghostly appearance, gives Johnny his nickname, and his likeness hangs in every hotel room at the Arcade. But he is also referred to in more subterranean ways: the night clerk tells the bellboy to get a new set of clothes at Lansky's, a long-standing business on Beale Street probably visited at some point by every blues musician that ever was and where Elvis himself bought his clothes. The King is not only the object of constant homage; he is the basis of Mitzuko's entire worldview. Her scrapbook juxtaposes photographs of the King with pictures of the Statue of Liberty, Buddha, and Madonna, and all of them *do* look like Elvis; history is nothing but ever-recurring Elvis in slightly changing form. "I didn't know Elvis was so important," Jun quips. There is an affectionate jab at the extremities of fandom here, but also some topicality. Elvis floats across *Mystery Train* as he seemed to be doing in U.S. culture at the time. More than ten years after his death, Elvismania was rife, with growing numbers of pilgrims visiting the hallowed Memphis landmarks and a recently launched yearly convention held in Memphis on the day of his birth. Elvis was also the subject of art shows such as Joni Mabe's reverential *Encyclopedia of Everything Elvis* or Robert Longo's *Beyond Good and Elvis*, which he curated for the Scott Hanson Gallery in the summer of 1989.⁸ When *Mystery Train* was

made, there had just been a spate of sightings that started shortly after the tenth anniversary of his death. First he was glimpsed at a supermarket in Kalamazoo, then photographed in a parking lot in Vegas, then seen all over Memphis, often hitchhiking at night, and on September 20, 1988, a *Sun* cover revealed the existence of a statue of Elvis on Mars. He was a steady presence in the East Village club scene, in John Sex's routines and in Jon Moritsugu's film *Der Elvis*. And for a time in the late 1980s he haunted Avenue B, on New York's Lower East Side, as an image projected on a disused gas station on the occasion of the *No Way Normal Film* program in a nearby venue (Carr 144–46).

But Elvis is not the only ghost, nor the only King, to haunt *Mystery Train*. The scarred downtown that serves as the film's setting is what remains of what had been for nearly a century one of the liveliest hubs of black American culture. The decline was already under way due to suburbanization and the growth of the "crabgrass frontier," but it was accelerated by the rioting that followed Martin Luther King's assassination at the Lorraine Motel, not far from the Arcade's real location (Hetzberg 127–28). In the aftermath of the disturbances, the area took on an unsafe aura; whites stopped going downtown, and what had been a fairly integrated shopping and entertainment district turned segregated and poor. The businesses and services that remained in the area soon started to trickle out and to relocate to the suburbs, leaving behind an empty shell of a city (Jackson). By comparison with Elvis, King is barely alluded to in the film—only by a poster tacked to the door of Shades from the inside—but his absence is written all over it. His murder truncated that famous dream he broadcast on the steps of the Capitol, the same one that can still be heard in the best of Memphis music, and certainly in Elvis's Sun recordings: the coming together of white and black—country and western and R&B, hillbilly and blues—which, if nowhere else, could at least happen in song.

Transient Intimacies: *Night on Earth*

Night on Earth came about almost by accident, after an attempted collaboration between Jarmusch and the writer Rudy Wurlitzer (a Western with the working title *Ghost Dog*) foundered due to differences of temperament and approach. Frustrated by the sinking of this project,

Jarmusch quickly conceived and wrote his next film. *Night on Earth* further fragments the episodic structure of *Mystery Train* but retains its simultaneity. Rather than a series of interweaving storylines, it presents a succession of five vignettes occurring at the same time in different parts of the world: Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Rome, and Helsinki. They all take place inside taxi cabs and have a symmetrical structure: they start with a montage of city views followed by the interaction between a taxi driver and his or her fare during a ride.

The premise seems borrowed from structural cinema. Like Michael Snow's *Wavelength* or *Back and Forth*, Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity*, or James Benning's *8.5 x 11* or *11 x 14*, to name only a few examples, *Night on Earth* isolates a spatial frame—a cab's interior—with the intention of exploring whatever unfolds inside it. But while human presence is merely accessory in structural film, it is the central concern in *Night on Earth*, whose focus is the character traits and fragmentary stories glimpsed during a brief transit. For its combination of structural rigor and human interest, *Night on Earth* is actually close to Walker Evans's projects of the early 1940s: the shots of subway passengers gathered in the book *Many Are the Called* and his reportage of "anonymous labor" for *Fortune*. In both cases, Evans selected a spot from which to photograph, in candid-camera fashion, the people who entered his camera's visual field. In *Many Are the Called*, these were the passengers who happened to sit across from him in the subway; in the *Fortune* photo-essay, workers leaving the factory at the end of their shift. But there are important differences between Evans and Jarmusch: Evans enlisted chance into his work, while Jarmusch only simulates it. His film opens with the earth floating in outer space followed by a frame that ranges hesitantly across the surface of the world (a colorful school-room map) before zooming in, as if by accident, on Los Angeles. Needless to say, such randomness and hesitation are mere make-believe; everything in the film is fictional and carefully staged.

Everything in the film carries Jarmusch's signature. The critics Umberto Mosca (81) and Andreas Kilb (221–22) have pointed out that *Night on Earth* purveys a collection of private cinematic homages. Each episode employs actors or settings associated with some of Jarmusch's favorite directors. Los Angeles and Gena Rowlands evoke John Cassavetes—as does the film's cinematographer Frederick Elmes, who shot

some of Cassavetes's films. In Brooklyn, Rosie Perez and Giancarlo Esposito invoke Spike Lee, and particularly *Do the Right Thing*, which had opened the previous year. Armin Mueller-Stahl recalls Fassbinder. Isaach de Bankolé had appeared in the films of Claire Denis, who had been Jarmusch's assistant in *Down by Law* and was becoming a significant director at the time. Rome recalls neorealism (especially Fellini's poetic-grotesque brand). And in Helsinki, the actor Matti Pellonpää, the names of the episode's main characters, Mika and Aki, and the blue-collar setting suggest the cinema of the Kaurismäki brothers.

Consequent with its rigid temporal and spatial frame, the film uses a spare visual vocabulary: close-ups and medium close-ups of the characters interspersed with occasional shots of the cabs driving through the cities and with views from the cars. This formal economy allows for some subtle variation. In the first episode, which takes place in Los Angeles, cab driver and future fare are introduced simultaneously by means of parallel cutting: as Victoria Snelling (Gena Rowlands) steps off the airplane, walks to the terminal, and waits for her luggage, endlessly talking on her cellphone, Corky (Winona Ryder) deposits two blotto rock musicians at the airport. Victoria and Corky eventually converge, and the ride begins. In the New York episode, Yo-Yo (Giancarlo Esposito) is first seen in the vicinity of Times Square trying to catch a taxi; a veritable fleet goes by, but none will take him, probably because he is a black male in b-boy style.⁹ Finally, the sweetly inept East German expatriate Helmut (Armin Mueller-Stahl) picks him up. The Paris episode starts inside the cab, where two slightly tipsy Cameroonian diplomats on the way back from a reception make fun of their moody cabby's driving and of his national origin: he is Yvoirien, which, they quip, suffocating with laughter, "explains everything—*il-voit-rien*." Aggravated, the Yvoirien throws them out and drives on until he finds another passenger, a blind woman (Beatrice Dalle) who eventually proves as irritating as the diplomats. In Rome, Gino (Roberto Benigni) is introduced in a tight close-up driving maniacally at night with his sunglasses on and delivering a torrential monologue; and, in a rhyming shot, the more sedate Mika (Matti Pellonpää) melancholically cruises around Helsinki waiting for a dispatch. The main differences between the segments emanate from the personalities of the characters in each and from the general tone of the episode. The Los Angeles and Helsinki segments are wistful, the ones set in New

York and Paris are humorous, and the one in Rome is darkly comic. At the same time, such labels grossly simplify what actually goes on, since all episodes are quite unstable. One of the main themes of the film is the mutability of interpersonal relations and the capricious oscillations in the emotional temperature of even the most casual of exchanges.

Like many other Jarmusch films, *Night on Earth* presents a fairly closed universe made up of the combination of a limited number of elements that recur in rhyming patterns. Corky's enormous sunglasses echo Gino's. Corky drives by the Los Angeles Coliseum and Gino by Rome's. The Los Angeles montage shows a plaster image of Rocky and Bullwinkle by a decaying diner, and later, in the New York episode, Angela (Rosie Perez) wonders at Yo-Yo and Helmut's giggly rapport: "What is this? The fucking Rocky and Bullwinkle show?" Cigarettes pop up in three of the five episodes with different narrative valences—Corky and Victoria smoke together while sharing confidences; Gino smokes to bother the priest he has just picked up; and the Parisian blind passenger to vent her irritation at the driver. Mika circles around a monument in a Helsinki square in the same way that Gino had done in the previous episode, only Mika does it out of boredom while Gino does it to tease the priest. Most of the cabbies are bad drivers: de Bankolé is distracted and self-absorbed, Benigni is reckless, and Helmut does not even know how to put the car in gear, so Yo-Yo has to drive himself home while Helmut admires his ease at the wheel. The blindness of the Parisian passenger is reprised by Benigni who, unaware that he is still wearing his sunglasses, complains about the street lighting; when he removes the glasses at the priest's request, he enthuses that he feels like a blind man who has regained sight. The most striking repetition is the nearly identical hats—thick fur affairs with long earflaps—that Helmut and Yo-Yo wear in the New York section (figure 11). (Eager to assert his sartorial superiority, Yo-Yo disclaims all resemblance: "Mine's fresh. It's cool. It's the hype.") These repetitions endow the film with some comedic absurdity; it is quite preposterous that, despite the distances and the disparity of the characters, similar elements keep intruding into the frame. Recurrence also conveys a certain cosiness and seems to suggest that the world is, after all, small and familiar, reducible to a few essential components. And yet the kind of closure transmitted by the recurring graphic patterns and objects is undercut at another level by the open-endedness of the situations.



Figure 11. Armin Mueller-Stahl and Giancarlo Esposito in New York. *Night on Earth*. © 1991
Locus Solus, Inc. Photo: Christine Parry.

There is a different way in which these episodes talk to each other. Some make explicit what in others is only implicit; or, differently put, some openly articulate what in others remains a dimly perceived unconscious. The New York, Paris, and Rome segments depict situations where there is a strong sexual attraction between the characters, but what in New York remains repressed, in Paris, and especially in Rome, becomes openly expressed. In New York, while Yo-Yo is driving Helmut's taxi through the Lower East Side, he sees his sister-in-law Angela walking around. He pulls up, gets out, literally lifts her off the pavement, and throws her into the back of the car with the intention of driving her home. A heated argument ensues; its ostensible cause is that Angela, who is married to Yo-Yo's brother, is neglecting her marital duties—"a party here, a party there. You're always partying," Yo-Yo grumbles. Yet there is an undercurrent of sexual tension in their exchange. This is intimated by Helmut, who keeps remarking how beautiful she is, and by the sexual terms Yo-Yo and Angela use to reject each other: "Fuck you, Angela"; "No. Fuck you, Yo-Yo." Gino, the Roman cab driver, also has a sister-in-law who does not make an appearance but is mentioned in his

endless chatter, and their relationship is more amiable than that between Yo-Yo and Angela: they had a sexual escapade behind his brother's back. In his minute description of the tryst, Gino spares no postures, bodily shapes, and tactile sensations, all for the benefit of the Catholic priest who agonizes in the back seat. Sandwiched between New York and Rome, the Paris segment also brings sexuality to the surface, yet in less explicit terms. The cab driver is struck by his beautiful blind passenger and perhaps further excited by the late hour and the woman's primping up in the back of the car—like Angela, she might be going to a party. He turns on the (red) light inside the car to be able to observe her better, something she immediately senses. When he catches her adjusting her décolleté, he asks point blank how she does it in bed if she cannot see the man she is with. She replies by affirming her sexuality while, at the same time, putting the questioner completely outside her range of interest: she cannot see but she can feel the man she is with “with every centimeter” of her body and “every pore” of her skin, and she is happy she cannot see the cabby because he is probably “an ugly bastard” (figure 12).



Figure 12. Béatrice Dalle and Isaach de Bankolé
in Paris. *Night on Earth*. © 1991 Locus Solus, Inc.
Photo: Moune Jamet.

The Los Angeles and Helsinki episodes can be read as two successive stages of a similar situation. In Los Angeles, young Corky fantasizes to Victoria about her future family life—she wants to marry a good man and have “lots of boys.” The Helsinki sequence may reflect what awaits Corky in the future. Mika, the cab driver, and the three drunken workers he has picked up in the dead of a winter night are coping with difficult family problems. One of the workers, Aki, has passed out in the back seat and remains unconscious through the ride; his cronies chronicle Aki’s disgraces: he has just lost his job, totaled his new car, and found out that his teenage daughter is pregnant; in addition, his wife has asked for a divorce. Mika replies that it could be worse: he and his wife Eija (her photograph is on the dashboard) have wanted a child for a long time; eventually, Eija became pregnant, but the baby was premature and died after a few weeks in the incubator. Seen in juxtaposition, the Los Angeles and Helsinki sequences respectively embody youth and maturity, fantasy and actuality. Corky’s desire for children stands in counterpoint to the death of Mika and Eija’s baby, and her idealization of family life contrasts with Aki’s predicaments. The succession of the two episodes suggests that in the course of time, the hopes of youth crash against the realities of drunkenness, teen pregnancy, joblessness, and marriage failure. In the same way as, in *Mystery Train*, DeeDee and Johnny’s troubled present may be Mitzuko and Jun’s future, Mika’s and Aki’s present may be Corky’s future. Tom Waits’s elegiac song, “Good Old World,” played over the opening and closing credits, reinforces this arc from hope to disillusionment: “When I was young / the moon was a pearl / the sun was a yellow gold. / And when I was a man / the wind blew cold / the hills were upside down.” The contrast is conveyed by the music as well: the song has an upbeat waltz tempo at the beginning of the film and a dirgelike melancholy at the end.

While tragic at bottom, the transition from ideal to actual, from youth to maturity, is neither sentimental nor bitter, in part because it is streaked with humor. Even the Helsinki episode, perhaps the bleakest one, has some comedy that stems from the delivery of the burly workers and their childish inconsistency. The workers mutate from gruff to maudlin after Mika narrates his own troubles and abruptly withdraw their sympathies from their friend Aki, who remains out cold in the back of the cab, at the end of the ride: “Aki is so full of shit. . . . He fuckin’ whines about

such trivial shit.” As they leave the cab, Mika asks them, “What about your friend?” “Fuck him,” they reply. The last shots show Aki, still drunk, sitting on the frozen sidewalk in front of his house, trying to figure out his bearings as his neighbors leave their homes to take their places in a system of production from which he has just been expelled.

I keep calling the different parts of the film “episodes,” but a better word might be “intervals.” Rather than narrative units with clear beginnings and ends, conflicts and resolutions, they are open-ended situations, instances of mere duration that conventional narratives would ordinarily omit since nothing particularly dramatic happens in them. They show characters in transition between presumably more significant events and locations and evidence Jarmusch’s interest in, as he once put it, “moments in between,” in “the kind of scenes which would be left out in . . . more conventional or commercial” films (Hetzberg 75). These moments are not entirely empty: they are filled with snatches of incident and hints of character and contain loose threads that will never be picked up again. Their inconclusiveness may be a realistic gesture given the big city settings and the nature of cab use. In large cities one constantly brushes against people who are never seen again. The means of public transportation are privileged sites for this kind of fortuitous contact; buses, subways, trains, and taxis allow fragmentary glimpses of other people’s personalities and stories. Perhaps because of this, the film gives incomplete knowledge of its characters. Victoria Snelling’s successful exterior barely hides a sadness that goes largely unexplained. Shortly after landing, as she talks on her cellphone to an unseen interlocutor, she claims to be looking forward to something, but her eyes and forced smile tell a different story. Moments later, in the cab, she phones her secretary to ask whether a Mr. Kincaid has called; as she hears the reply, she insists: “Are you sure?” When Corky, who has overheard from the front of the car, asks whether Mr. Kincaid is, “like, your boyfriend,” Victoria muses: “Yes, he is. Or at least I think he is.” In turn, as Corky tells Victoria that she wants her future husband to respect her and love her for who she is, her words intimate some wariness about relationships, perhaps born of a history of disappointment that is not fleshed out for the viewer. In New York, Helmut’s assertion that he left East Germany because he had no family left there and was free to go similarly alludes to a story that remains in the shadows.¹⁰ As does Yo-Yo’s

anger at discovering Angela roaming the streets alone at night: “There she goes,” he mutters to himself, “fucking up again.” Yet what “fucking up” refers to is never clarified. For his part, the Paris driver complains about a horrible day and has a band-aid on his forehead. Has he been in a fight? What is happening in his life? And what about his blind passenger? Why is she going to the deserted waterfront at 4:00 AM? As is often the case in everyday life, these questions remain unanswered in the film. In this way, *Night on Earth* seems to suggest that there is something inexhaustible about quotidian experience. A simple taxi ride, the most random of encounters, brings us into contact with personal depths and complexities that are often difficult to account for.

These complexities account for the unstable nature of all exchanges. While the external action seems simple and schematic, the chemistry between the characters never is. The tenor of the relationships shifts constantly across a wide scale that runs from dire hostility to attraction, compassion, and caring, and back again. Such shifts are often triggered by the smallest occurrences and, because of this, are subliminally perceptible in slight inflections of gesture and numerous silences. These modulations are what the film is largely about. In Los Angeles, Corky and Victoria view each other with mistrust; Victoria is initially put off by Corky’s grimy appearance and brusque manner, while Corky finds her customer patronizing and protective. In the course of the ride, however, Victoria is won over by Corky’s resourcefulness, and Corky is mellowed by the traces of concern and admiration in Victoria’s comments about her driving alone at night. But even after they warm up to each other, a trace of antagonism still hangs in the air. Hence their interaction is quite multileveled, as different and often unresolved tones are sounded in quick succession, at times simultaneously.

This idea applies to the rest of the film as well and, beyond it, to Jarmusch’s entire work, where it is difficult to pinpoint what characters feel toward each other because their feelings are never simple, and that lack of simplicity is never put into words. The blend of contempt and attraction in Yo-Yo and Angela’s relationship is one example. Another is Yo-Yo’s feelings toward Helmut: a mixture of irritation at his incompetence, amusement at his improbable past as a clown in East Germany, and concern about his apparent inability to make it in a city like New York. In Paris, as the driver keeps checking out his blind passenger

through the rearview mirror, he provides a textbook example of the kind of aggressive voyeurism that characterizes masculinity's confrontation with sexual difference, according to the classic formulations by John Berger and Laura Mulvey. But at the same time, his voyeurism is compounded and perhaps prompted by his admiration for the woman's autonomy and street smarts—by the fact that, blind and all, she can actually read him better than he can read her. His attitude toward her is anything but univocal. There is a bit of apprehension at her disability, a bit of one-upmanship, a desire to reassert himself after being humiliated by his previous customers, and a failed attempt to assert the privileges of masculinity and vision; yet tangled up in these sentiments, there is considerable awe at her intelligence and skill.

Moments like this are difficult to apprehend through standard ways of discussing intimacy because they do not show clear-cut, one-channel affect but clusters of contradictory, quickly changing emotion; and, in addition, these emotions arise in the context of ephemeral contacts that do not solidify into stable relationships. While they are forms of intimacy—in every segment the characters end up revealing extremely personal information about themselves—they are best described as what Laurent Berlant and Michael Warner have called “border intimacies”: adventitious relations that take place on the margins of long-standing associations, like those between parents and children, long-term lovers or friends, or family members (Berlant 282–85; Berlant and Warner 547–66). Liminal intimacies are rarely the object of event-centered stories, which are more focused on sweeping movement and general design; they emerge in moments that fall outside the range of traditional storytelling, and because of this, they are best explored in narratives that purvey no narrative at all but focus instead on the minuscule and often uncategorizable oscillations in people's rapport—the ones that emerge in the moments of duration and hesitation, when nothing is apparently taking place. And yet, *Night on Earth* seems to suggest, these are still crucial moments. One may catch in them registers that normative stories rarely capture, frequencies that may be familiar but are seldom systematically explored and may reveal something beyond the already known in personal relations.

These liminal intimacies arise in a very particular location—the taxi, which, like all forms of public transportation, arose in a histori-

cal and cultural matrix defined by urbanization, industrialization, and the attendant commodification of time and space. Taxis gave urban dwellers the opportunity to cross the city safely and efficiently—that is, the opportunity to buy time and do away with the “dead” space that lies between origin and destination, home and work, or home and shopping and entertainment districts. One catches cabs because time, like money, is not to be wasted, and space is to be treated in a purely instrumental way as something to be traversed as quickly as possible. The point is to eliminate waste and drift. The connection of the cab with functionality is hinted at by the precise timing of the film. Each ride takes approximately twenty minutes, as is made clear from the wall of clocks that prefaces each segment, with each clock set to the time zone of one of the film’s cities, and from the street clocks that are periodically visible in facades, bus stops, and billboard kiosks. As time- and space-saving devices, taxis contribute, in terms borrowed from the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, to the production of a type of urban space that absorbs labor time and becomes “nothing more than the necessary transition between forced labor, programmed leisure, and habitation as a place of consumption” (Lefebvre, *Urban* 21). This way of practicing the city produces, in Lefebvre’s terms, “homogeneous” space: the space of industrial culture, which eliminates anything that might cause delays and detours or that may prevent the smooth functioning of the systems of production and exchange.¹¹

Yet homogeneous space is never absolute. It superimposes itself on what Lefebvre calls “urban culture,” where “urban” designates the city as a heterogeneous fabric of relations and conjunctions, an aggregate of absolute singularities that cannot be totally linearized and integrated into the networks of capital and exchange: “The urban is defined as the place where people walk around, find themselves standing inside piles of objects, experience the intertwining of the threads of their activities until they become unrecognizable, entangled in such a way that they engender unexpected situations” (Lefebvre, *Urban* 37). The estrangement of experience by contact with the unforeseen that characterizes the urban is the core event in the film, a sort of musical theme repeated with some variations in each segment, and the location where this happens is the taxi. The taxi is an instrument of homogeneity and a setting for urban heterogeneity; it is a place where, as the meter ticks away,

translating time and distance into money, homogeneity is snagged in baffling encounters with otherness.

Otherness in the film takes the form of class identity (in Los Angeles), national origin and gender identity (in New York), disability (in Paris), and death (in Rome and Helsinki). It further appears as drift and waste, a willful rejection of profit. The Los Angeles episode is especially emblematic in this respect. Victoria Snelling uses the taxi as a prolongation of her office. Glued to her cellphone, she retrieves messages, schedules meetings, and placates her anxious boss. She takes a respite when she accepts a cigarette from Corky and they slide into a more personal conversation. Yet the conversation turns into another professional move for Victoria when she realizes that Corky may be exactly the “inexperienced, nervy, young” actress she is trying to find for the part she is casting at the moment. She makes her pitch and is astonished to hear that Corky is simply not interested—she is happy with her cab, does not want to mess up her job, and really wants to be a mechanic anyway. In the capital of the spectacle, Corky incarnates the antispectacle and squanders her potential star capital. Helmut, the émigré cab driver in New York, and the Finnish workers occupy a similar position as they appear inassimilable by the industrial system. Helmut brims over with personal charm but does not seem to have the drive or skills needed in a businesslike city of flashing neon and fast cars. For his part, Aki could never make it to work on time, and one day he was fired. Mika, the cab driver, picks him and his friends up in front of a bar at 28 Industrial Road, an address that suggests they might be the refuse that the system cannot digest and must be disposed of. As Mika asks if they have called a cab, one of them snottily but insightfully replies: “No, we called a garbage truck, but you will do the job.”

The film’s interest in refuse—another word for unmarketable matter—is clearly announced by the montages of city images that inaugurate each episode. They forgo the picturesque and monumental and offer instead trivial or degraded spaces: defaced facades, nondescript side streets, and modern ruins—the disused diners and motels in the Los Angeles montage. Because of their marginality, these spaces are akin to the nonnarrative intervals in the gaps of conventional narratives, or to the border intimacies that appear alongside long-standing relationships. The film aligns spatial, narrative, and relational marginalities and implic-

itly values their unpredictability. These different marginalities mark the limits of dominant regimes of representation and evoke unmapped realms of experience and affect.

Because it dwells on these largely unmapped cultural terrains, *Night on Earth* presents a view of circulation and car culture that differs considerably from those offered by a number of critical writings and films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time when the car was often regarded as a privileged observatory on social reality. With its mobility, its promise of self-containment, and its limited visibility, it may have seemed an ideal medium for exploring a society that, as was widely theorized at the time under the rubric of the postmodern, allowed for multiple trajectories but did not cohere around a center and was therefore difficult to envision as a totality. In the early 1990s, the French sociologists Jean Baudrillard and Marc Augé associated car culture with the postmodern dominants of the simulacrum and hyperreal; that is, with a social and cultural regime where lived experience had been replaced by its representations. In the eyes of these critics, car transportation produced a flattened social space voided of personal markings and history, constantly mediated through signs. In Jarmusch's film, however, the car—especially a shared vehicle like a cab—turns out to be the setting for modalities of difference that question the seemingly uninflected facade of the spectacle.

In popular films of the period, cars appear less as vehicles for the reproduction of the hyperreal than as technological supports of endangered selves. Films such as *Colors*, *Thelma and Louise*, *True Romance*, and *Set It Off*, to name only a few, emphasize the car's mobility and self-containment rather than its ability to elide social complexities. In the police film *Colors*, set in a gang-dominated South Central Los Angeles, these qualities are put at the service of law enforcement and surveillance, while in *Thelma and Louise*, *True Romance*, and *Set It Off*, self-containment and mobility allow women to escape from oppressive conditions—particularly from patriarchal subjection, as Kathleen McHugh has shown.¹² In all cases, the car offers safety in an uncertain milieu; it marks an opposition between inside and outside, self and other, autonomy and heteronomy. No car, no shelter. *Falling Down*, another emblematic title of the period, depicts the breakdown of a recently laid-off aeronautical worker whose disintegration starts when his car dies in a traffic jam in the middle of the highway and he has to make the rest

of the way home on foot, exposed to the random violence of the streets and to his convulsive emotions.

In contrast with these films, and offering a much more amiable take on contemporary society, *Night on Earth* is less about the conflicts between inside and outside than about the complexities that unfold on the inside. The taxi is not a shelter against otherness but the place where self and other come together and negotiate some sort of rapport. In this respect, Jarmusch's film has more in common with the recent independent video *Once upon a Ride*, written and directed by Marcos Antonio Miranda and Freddy Vargas and produced by Warrington Hudlin. With a structure and a number of visual motifs that recall *Night on Earth*, *Once upon a Ride* consists of three episodes in the life of a Queens-based Puerto Rican cab driver. In each of the episodes, the driver encounters different forms of social and ethnic otherness with which he must come to terms: an obnoxious Dominican man who despises Puerto Ricans, a Chinese woman in despair, and two black college students who, like Yo-Yo, cannot get a taxi to make it to class on time. Like *Night on Earth*, Miranda and Vargas's video does not try to contain a hostile outside but suggests instead that there is no clear-cut division between in- and outside: heterogeneity shapes every inch of the urban fabric and pervades every human encounter.

And so does antagonism. It would be pleasant to conclude that the taxi, as the locus of heterogeneity and liminality, offers a space for friendliness where encounters culminate in unqualified acceptance and mutuality, but this is seldom the case. For all the variability of the ephemeral relationships established in this space, there is in them a steady note of animosity. The mere presence of an/other prompts in most characters a reflex of ill-concealed contempt. The clearest example of this might be the Rome episode, in which Gino bombards the fatigued, obviously unhealthy priest he has just picked up with a lengthy confession of his sexual libertinage, from his childhood, when he and his friends "relieved themselves" with pumpkins, to his teenage affair with his sheep Lola, to his more recent fling with his sister-in-law. As he proceeds with his tale, he lights up a cigarette, which provokes a coughing fit in his passenger, and later stops in a park to greet some friends, two transsexual prostitutes who fuss over the priest—they find him "*caruccio*," while the cutie in question gapes in a panic. Gradually, the priest's discomfort

turns into a fatal heart attack, and Gino leaves him on a bench by the roadside and drives on. While the beginning of the episode is funny, it soon becomes uncomfortable, as the driver's humor turns from a way of deflating authority (early on he also makes fun of two policemen who try to stop him) to a means of aggression, and it eventually shifts into the grotesque as the heavy corpse refuses to cooperate with Gino and keeps slipping from his grasp and, once seated on the bench, insists on tilting over. This segment is perhaps the most extreme demonstration that most interpersonal exchanges are pervaded by an undertow of hostility, an idea that recurs throughout Jarmusch's films but is particularly explored in *Coffee and Cigarettes*.

Are You Trying to Tell Me the Drumming in My Records Sucks? *Coffee and Cigarettes*

Coffee and Cigarettes is a compilation of eleven shorts in black and white made between 1986 and 2003 and released in May 2004. Like *Night on Earth*, the series is based on the combination of formal rigor and emotional drift. All the shorts are about people coming together around the leisurely enjoyment of coffee and cigarettes. A number of them were spinoffs of Jarmusch's features and involve actors or locales present in them: the earliest, "Strange to Meet You," with Steven Wright and Roberto Benigni, arose from Benigni's participation in *Down by Law*; "Somewhere in Memphis," with Cinqué and Joie Lee and Steve Buscemi, derives from *Mystery Train*; and "Those Things'll Kill Ya" involves two secondary actors in *Ghost Dog*. Other shorts were conceived independently but include performers that had previously appeared in Jarmusch's work or had some relation to it: Isaach de Bankolé ("No Problem"), Iggy Pop and Tom Waits ("Somewhere in California"), Alfred Molina ("Cousins?"), and the RZA ("Delirium"), composer of the soundtrack for *Ghost Dog*. The rest of the shorts could be read as personal homages to those who star in them—the actors Cate Blanchett, Alex Descas, Bill Murray, Bill Rice, and Taylor Mead, the musicians Meg and Jack White (of the White Stripes) and E. J. Rodriguez (of Lounge Lizards), and the comic book artist Renée French. The film recapitulates part of Jarmusch's career and, like *Night on Earth*, partially maps his tastes, friendships, and collaborations.

The shorts' minimal premise allows for considerable variation. At times the characters who come together around a coffee table are friends, other times relatives, and on a few occasions, casual acquaintances. Most drink coffee and smoke, but in later episodes cigarettes are rejected or postponed while coffee is replaced by tea—perhaps a bow to Coogan's Englishness, or to the GZA and the RZA's health-consciousness. The tone of the encounters ranges from affectionate, to absurd, to downright hostile, and the shorts vary in degree of elaboration and polish. Some ("Strange to Meet You" and "No Problem") seem to rely amply on improvisation, are minimally plotted and barely verbal, with characters merely observing each other in silence or stuck at the dead end of a conversation. Others, such as "Cousins" and "Cousins?" seem more tightly scripted and are quite discursive.¹³

Despite these differences and the fact that production was spread over a long time, the shorts are unified through a series of recurring motifs: the coffee-house setting, ambient music, checkerboard patterns (in table tops, tablecloths, lamp shades, or wallpaper), nosy waiters, and the tardiness of one of the characters. Nearly all the episodes contain vertical high-angle shots of the table tops, and in all except two the characters clink their cups in a toast. Lines and even entire snatches of conversation travel through the different segments: Tom Waits's monologue about the similarities between music and medicine is repeated almost literally by the RZA in "Delirium," and Steven Wright's rap about drinking coffee in order to dream faster ("like those cameras they put on the Indy 500 cars") is later reprised by the GZA. In four episodes, a character admonishes that coffee and cigarettes is not a very healthy lunch, and in two others, someone voices that the early twentieth-century inventor Nikola Tesla conceived of the earth as "a conductor of acoustical resonance"—perhaps the reason why the same bits of conversation keep echoing throughout the film. A further shared trait is the ambiguous fictionality of these vignettes: even though they were largely improvised on the basis of loose scripts, most performers appear as themselves; the film can be read as a sort of family album that captures these artists at a particular moment in their lives. Iggy Pop and Tom Waits talk about their music; the RZA and the GZA appear as members of the Wu-Tang Clan; and Alfred Molina and Steve Coogan discuss recent events in their respective careers (like Coogan's success

in Michael Winterbottom's *24-Hour Party People*). In addition, the film plays up the cultural connotations of these performers. The picture-perfect Renée French, whose unsettling comics combine the naive and the perverse, appears completely absorbed in a gun catalog; Taylor Mead, an underground cinema star and bohemian at large, toasts to the lost splendor of *rive-gauche* living ("Paris in the 1920s . . . Josephine Baker in the Moulin Rouge"); and Bill Rice, who acted in the punk films of the Bs, recalls "New York in the late 1970s."

What also reverberates throughout is a sense of constant mismatch that translates into faulty communication. In "Strange to Meet You," Benigni keeps mispronouncing Steven Wright's name, the conversation jolts in unexpected directions, and Benigni repeatedly confesses his inability to understand. More commonly the mismatch is less linguistic than caused by differences in personality, as in "Champagne," where Taylor Mead reproaches Bill Rice for being "provincial" and lacking "*joie de vivre*" for preferring (Rice's words) "simple, workingman's coffee" to champagne. In this particular case, disagreement is mild and does not ruffle what seems an essentially sweet rapport, but in most other segments, personal differences provoke barely concealed irritation and impatience. The most obvious case is the Lee twins, who argue about who is copying whom and about the relative merit of their choices of tobacco. When Steve Buscemi enters the fray, they rally against him and ridicule his fascination with Elvis, who stole the music of black composers like Otis Blackwell and Junior Parker. Buscemi, however, will not budge: "No. You see, that wasn't Elvis. It was his evil twin," he says, meaningfully eying Cinqué, the most hostile of the twins. In "Cousins" and "Cousins?" the confrontation is fiercer but better concealed under a veneer of good manners. In "Cousins," Cate Blanchett plays both a famous film star and her evidently envious cousin Shelley. Shelley quips about the multiple inconveniences of stardom: the paparazzi, the constant travel, and the stinginess of producers: "Why don't they give you an extra suite to do your press work? I mean, that's kind of cheap." Cate minimizes her success and feigns modesty, which irritates Shelley even more. In "Cousins?" Molina generously acknowledges Coogan's recent successes, while Coogan haltingly concedes to be "aware . . . of . . . you," cannot help mentioning Molina's latest television show (it got canceled), and points out that his grandmother loved Molina's role in

Boogie Nights: “She talked about it once.” He is visibly apprehensive of Molina’s discovery, after much genealogical research, that they are distant cousins and recoils when Molina suggests that they should spend some time together. “You are not gay, are you?” Coogan winces. In the end, he refuses to give Molina his phone number but tries to recant when he discovers that Molina is friends with Spike Jonze and that being on good terms with him may help his future career.

In no other segment does hostility reach a comparable level of refinement, but it never disappears completely. In “Those Things’ll Kill Ya,” Vinnie and Joe constantly nag each other over their respective smoking and coffee drinking, and Vinnie ridicules his son’s spendthrift ways and teenage mannerisms: “Oh, Jesus! Here comes my freaking kid.” In “Somewhere in California,” Tom Waits is instantly miffed by Iggy Pop’s suave manner and riled when the latter mentions a wonderful drummer he has just discovered: “What are you trying to tell me? That the drumming in my records sucks?” (figure 13). In “No Problem,” Isaach (de Bankolé) is dismayed to find out that there is nothing the



Figure 13. Iggy Pop and Tom Waits. *Coffee and Cigarettes*. © 2003 Smokescreen, Inc.

matter with his friend Alex (Descas), whom he has not seen for years, and, since there is no problem to discuss—or wallow in—he cuts their meeting short. In “Jack Shows Meg His Tesla Coil,” Jack is obviously put off by Meg’s lack of interest in his coil; she eventually relents, but as he starts to demonstrate, the device malfunctions. More placid is “Delirium,” but the RZA and the GZA still tease Bill Murray about his fondness for tobacco and coffee, and they voice their exasperation at their friend Ghost—Wu-Tang Clan’s Ghostface Killah—who has failed to show up.

One of the points of these sketches is that miscommunication and contempt are endemic to human interaction. Being together inevitably entails arguing and engaging in competitive games of one-upmanship, perhaps because social existence inevitably demands self-assertiveness, which has to be achieved at the expense of others, but also because one only discovers the other when there is disagreement. When there is not, one merely sees oneself reflected on the other’s surface. Lack of match makes interlocutors opaque and therefore visible to each other. Still, acknowledging the other’s inalienable difference confirms one’s essential solitude. Hence, in a way that is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett or Harold Pinter, the characters in *Coffee and Cigarettes*—Jarmusch’s characters at large—are locked into verbal and gestural routines; confined to their own worlds, they observe each other across chasms of incommunicability. Their physical proximity contrasts with their emotional distance. Mahler’s lieder, “I Have Lost Touch with the World,” which is briefly heard in “Champagne,” the last episode, does not refer only to the terminal stage reached by Bill (Rice) and Taylor (Mead), the aged janitors of “the armory” who huddle together during their coffee break at the end of time, invoking memories from earlier cultural history. Mahler’s song summarizes the basic situation of all characters in the film: together but disconnected, physically close but intellectually and emotionally distant. The film’s form reinforces this sense of disarticulation. The vertical shots that punctuate the different fragments dwell on the space that separates the characters. Only in “Somewhere in Memphis” and “Champagne” are the interlocutors repeatedly shown together in the frame after the establishing shot. In the rest, the editing usually keeps them confined to their separate orbits by the alternation of shot and counter-shot. The alternation is asymmetrical, and the reverse fields differ considerably

in angle and distance, as if each personality demands a particular visual idiolect and a degree of discontinuity is necessary to communicate the way characters keep missing each other in their encounters.

These inconsistent encounters, where being together is actually being alone in company and where communication leads to constant misunderstanding and rivalry, are staged around pleasures that are themselves unstable and paradoxical: at once social and solitary, communal and solipsistic. Smoking and coffee drinking take place in public and are props of sociability. On several occasions, the first character to arrive at the scene takes the liberty of ordering coffee (or tea) for the absent one, as if having the drink ready on the table were an indispensable catalyst for the exchange about to follow. Yet, as has already been mentioned, the exchange rarely comes off without a snag, perhaps because, after all, coffee and cigarettes are also intensely solipsistic. They are means of self-relation and autostimulation through which one gives and receives pleasure in a closed circuit that starts and ends with oneself. They are often the pleasures of those who would rather be by themselves, like the protagonist of Bach's famous *Coffee Cantata*: a wealthy burgher's younger daughter who would rather remain single than give up the brew. Or like the Parisian *grisettes*, the streetwalkers that Baudelaire describes in *Spleen de Paris*, for whom the cigarette is a way to signal their separateness from the rest of society. Or like the dandy, who, according to the French poet Theodore de Banville, is the eminent cigarette smoker and, one could add, coffee drinker.¹⁴ Properly done, both activities require contemplative repose and easily prompt self-stylization in gesture and pose. Richard Klein suggests that cigarettes act as linguistic shifters or deictics: like pronouns, they are both empty (universally available) and full (semantically "filled" by the antecedent that they denote), and their signification changes with their context. They can be seen as an equivalent for the pronoun "I," as they are impersonal means to express the irreducible particularity of the self (Klein 13–14). They serve to stake a temporary claim on public space: they personalize a location through a cloud of smoke or else by creating an ephemeral habitus around one's cup.

"Renée" is exemplary in this regard; smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee are, in her case, ways of being alone, lost in reverie, yet she is constantly interrupted by her overtly solicitous waiter (E. J. Rodriguez), who, obviously struck with her beauty and eager to engage her

in conversation, keeps returning to her table to pour coffee and to ask if she would like to order anything else. A similar situation appears in Jarmusch's short "Int. Trailer. Night," included in the omnibus *Ten Minutes Older*, a collection of ten-minute pieces by such filmmakers as Werner Herzog, Claire Denis, Spike Lee, Jean-Luc Godard, Víctor Erice, and Zhang Yimou, among others. During a ten-minute break in the middle of a shoot, a young actress (Chloë Sevigny) tries to relax in her trailer by smoking a cigarette and listening to music, but she is constantly interrupted: by a phone call from her jealous, inquisitive boyfriend, by the sound technician who comes to wire her for sound (he apologetically gropes inside her dress while she is still on her cellphone to her boyfriend), by the make-up artist, and by a gofer with some food. Supremely indifferent to mundane interruption, the music (Bach's "Goldberg Variations") tinkles away celestially, invariant in its perfect composure, unlike the actress herself, who has to keep responding to the demands of others until the break is over and she has to go back to work. Even when characters are not trying to be alone, as Renée and Sevigny, coffee and cigarettes still allow for a form of self-relation that is interrupted by interlocutors who command attention, criticize the other's choice of coffee and/or tobacco, or simply object to the combination: "Coffee and cigarettes? That's not a very healthy lunch." When at the end of most episodes one of the interlocutors leaves and the other one remains alone, puffing away at the table, one often has the feeling that this was what it was all about: sociability was merely tolerated; the real pleasure lies in being alone with one's choice of stimulants.

"That's not a very healthy lunch": the recurring reprove is an objection to waste—the waste of one's health—and the RZA is the most eloquent of the health advocates in the film. In his view, and those of others who voice similar claims, smoking and drinking coffee are acts of rebellion against the careful management of one's bodily resources. But the objection to the waste of one's health also contains a discomfort with the gratuitous character of these unproductive activities that yield nothing but ashes, dregs, and, in the best of cases, a mild bodily effervescence. Hence, Coogan's irritation at Molina in "Cousins?" is due largely to the fact that Molina has not called him to talk about a future project—"Is it green lit? Is it treatment? What stage is it at?" he eagerly asks when Molina offers him the folder with his genealogical chart—but to waste

time sipping tea and talking about their remote kinship. Such a waste of time is also a waste of story-time since it does not yield a narrative. Instead, idle chat, coffee (or tea), and cigarettes tend to arrest the movement of the plot. They give rise to open-ended situations, tenuous and volatile like cigarette smoke, rather than to discrete occurrences that might serve as building blocks for a story. In conventional cinema they accompany more dramatically charged events or are restful intervals; they are incidentally noted but rarely turned into the subject matter of a sequence, or even less of an entire film. An exception might be Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, where an extreme close-up of a cup of coffee in which a lump of sugar slowly dissolves prompts a digression, by a whispering offscreen voice, on the indifference of distant galaxies to human predicaments. Another exception, of course, is Jarmusch's film; as it focuses on these narratively barren intervals, it implicitly defends their interest, if not their (monetary, narrative, spectacular) value. Their interest resides in their lack of value, in their vagueness and gratuitousness—the very qualities that make them difficult to conceptualize and commodify. In this respect, *Coffee and Cigarettes* continues the exploration of underexplored intervals: the moments of excess and ambiguity that conventional narrative film cannot integrate into its system and thus exiles to the edges of the diegesis.

On these edges there is a register of signification that exceeds human particulars and occasionally claims center stage. It is the subterranean register of things, a sort of film within the film that becomes most visible in the vertical shots of table tops. These shots could be read as metaphors for cinema itself, with the table top as a stand-in for the film frame: a device for isolating particulars out of the perceptual continuum. At times, these particulars are human (hands with perhaps a suggestion of a thigh or a lap tucked under the table), but in most cases they are objects: cups, lighters, matches, cigarettes, saucers, sugar bowls, creamers, and assorted litter on the tables. Their recurrence recalls that one of the early vocations of the medium, before it became the vehicle of storytelling, was the exploration of the intricate life of matter. The memory of the cinema's affinity with things occasionally emerges in narrative film, but it has been better kept by a fairly eccentric brand of film theory and by the film avant-garde. For an early theorist like Béla Balázs, for example, film was a means of exploring the physiognomy of the object world, an

idea later reformulated by Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. And for Fernand Léger, the cinema was the paramount expression of a new perceptual regime dominated by “the advent of the object.” The association between the cinema and objectuality has been remarked more recently by Gilles Deleuze, for whom the filmed image creates “a line of the universe,” connecting spaces, people, and things (*Cinema 1* 194); it precipitates temporal disjunctions as “crystals” (*Cinema 2* 81) and re-creates history as costumes and geological strata (*Cinema 2* 247, 255). Even the close-up of the face, the most frequent trope of personhood, is less a gateway to a character or a self than an aggregate of material parts (“hard and tender, shadowy and illuminated, dull and shiny, smooth and grainy . . .”) that express singularity and affect; it is also a relay station that links and detaches fragments of the world (*Cinema 1* 103). Experimental cinema, from dada and surrealism to Soviet montage and beyond, often focused on the life of things. Victor Schlovsky once described Sergei Eisenstein’s *October* as a “Baroque film about the uprising of dishes” (qtd. in Tsivian 53), and Hans Richter defined his dada film *Vormittagsspuk* as “the rhythmical story of the rebellion of some objects against their routine” (qtd. in Curtis 27)—prominent among these objects are coffee cups, saucers, and even entire tea sets that fly through the air and smash on the ground.

The objects in *Coffee and Cigarettes* do not rebel; they recur rhythmically as a sort of visual riff overlaid on the dialogue and the (in)action. Their quiet insistence has been cleverly captured in Adam Bhala Lough’s short *Table Tops*, a montage of all the vertical shots in the film edited to “Midnight Jam” by Joe Strummer and the Mescaleros. *Table Tops* shows the changing assemblages on the tables, the periodic clinking of cups, and clouds of cigarette smoke blown from offscreen space. *Coffee and Cigarettes* also explores objects singly, not always in assemblages. In “No Problem,” as he waits for Isaach, Alex rolls dice on the table. His attention is suddenly caught by a little figure, hardly discernible in long shot, on the napkin dispenser; he picks it up and examines it intently, then sets it down. At the end, after Isaach leaves, he goes back to dice rolling. He throws a double six, then a double three, then puts the dice back in his pocket. In extreme close-up, the edge of a hand places a cigarette on an ashtray. Then the screen goes black. These are close-ups of matter outside symbolism or narrative, inscrutable as the

lyrics of the polemical (and allegedly obscene) “Louie, Louie,” a musical theme repeated twice in the film, the first time in its original version by Richard Berry and the Pharaohs and the second time, during the final credits, covered by Iggy Pop. Inscrutable matter and sound embody the irreducible otherness that animates *and* undercuts every encounter in the film: the kernel of difference that cannot be melted into smoke or ingested like coffee on which all attempted relations eventually stumble and fall.

Tracking and Literature: The 1990s

After *Night on Earth*, Jarmusch’s rhythm of production became somewhat slower. In the rest of the decade he produced two fiction films, *Dead Man* (1995) and *Ghost Dog* (1999), and a documentary on Neil Young and Crazy Horse, *The Year of the Horse* (1997). The slightly diminished productivity may be attributed to the contraction of the independent film market after the early 1990s, a contraction paradoxically brought about by the independents’ success.¹⁵ In early 1980s, when films like *Stranger than Paradise* or *Return of the Secaucus Seven* made over \$2 million in the box office—a 20:1 return upon investment—they were regarded as financial successes. In the early 1990s, because of the steep rise in filmmaking costs, which more than doubled between 1980 and 1990, \$10 million was considered the benchmark of success in independent cinema. By 1998, James Schamus, a film critic and partner of the independent distributor Good Machine, stated that this was the amount at which overages started, and it must have risen since. Steven Soderbergh’s *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) is often cited as the turning point in this shift to rampant inflation. Made for over two hundred thousand dollars, it was first screened at Sundance and outbid by Miramax for \$1.1 million (the budget of Jarmusch’s *Down by Law*). It went on to win a Camera d’Or at Cannes and to gross \$26 million in the domestic market alone. The success of the film raised somewhat unrealistic expectations for later independents. But the problem was that these expectations were subsequently met—even exceeded—by titles such as Kevin Smith’s *Clerks* and Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction*, and that these titles often set the standards by which later independent films were measured.

The underside of success—or rather, of a few independent successes—was that distributors and exhibitors eventually started to handle independents as if they were regular studio releases, seeking to recoup their investment quickly and expecting new titles to perform well in a short span. Yet one of the characteristics of niche films—as midnight movies and foreign films had amply demonstrated—is that they need to be carefully nurtured over the long term for good word-of-mouth to spread and for audiences to begin to respond. In the mid- to late 1990s, when independents failed to develop legs, they were often dropped in favor of something else that might. Miramax, one of the few independent distributors that thrived in the transition to the new market conditions, was the main practitioner of this hard-boiled approach to the indies, as its handling of *Dead Man* evinces. Miramax picked up the film for distribution in the United States for \$4 million shortly after it was shown at Cannes in May 1995 but released it a year later without much enthusiasm or support, after the film had opened in most international markets. As the film did not take off immediately, it was quickly withdrawn. According to Jonathan Rosenbaum, Miramax's indifference was a response to Jarmusch's refusal to shorten the film to the distributor's specifications—something that other directors like Tarantino had agreed to do (14–15). Jarmusch, in turn, publicly blamed the distributor for the disappointing performance of the film in the United States (Hirschberg 44). *Dead Man* was not an isolated case. According to Peter Biskind, the Weinstein brothers, Miramax founders and longtime owners, had behaved similarly with Bernardo Bertolucci's *Little Buddha*, a costly production starring Keanu Reeves and financed by CiBy 2000. They bought *Little Buddha*'s North American rights for \$8 million, sight unseen; when Harvey Weinstein had access to the final version of the film, he demanded cuts that Bertolucci did not immediately agree with. In the end, Bertolucci shortened the film, but apparently not enough. *Little Buddha* was released in the United States in May 1994, long after its European premiere; it was poorly distributed and, as it did not seem to catch on, was soon off the screens (Biskind 181–84). The examples of Jarmusch and Bertolucci are merely symptomatic of Miramax's vagaries. After the early 1990s, when the distributor became the main mover in the indie market, it occasionally picked up art films that required strategic handling and then failed to release them or released them to

the wrong markets, something that has affected the visibility of work by such directors as Jacques Demy, Chen Kaige, and Abbas Kiarostami in the United States (Rosenbaum 16).

Despite inflation and the inconsistencies of distributors, however, the independent cinema has continued to be the source of much provocatively inventive work. The early 1990s, for example, saw the rise of the “new queer cinema,” for a time the most radical crop in the indie scene, and the emergence of important new filmmakers. Besides Soderbergh, Tarantino, and Smith, one could name African American directors such as Matty Rich, Reggie Hudlin, the Hughes brothers, or Leslie Harris, minimalists such as Hal Hartley or Tom DiCillo, explorers of intimacy such as Whit Stillman, Nicole Holofcener, Alexander Payne, or Allison Anders, or comedy directors such as David O. Russell and Alexander Rockwell (Jarmusch had an acting role in Rockwell’s breakthrough title, *In the Soup*). And more recent years have witnessed the surfacing of such personal filmmakers as Spike Jonze, Mike Figgis, Darren Aronofsky, Todd Solondz, and Harmony Korine.

Taken in broad outline, Jarmusch’s career has reflected the changing fortunes of the independent cinema. His early work benefited from the commercial success of the independents in the 1980s, but he also suffered the recession of the 1990s. His slightly waning productivity is a sign that chances are slim for a director who insists on “making films by hand,” as he puts it, on working outside the studios and maintaining control over all aspects of production and distribution. Still, Jarmusch maintained his television sponsorship, with Le Studio Canal Plus co-producing *Ghost Dog*, and remained able to tap into European public sources and corporate money. Subsidies from the German Nord-Rhein Westfalen Film Foundation and the Berlin-Brandenburg Filmboard, for example, helped to finance the production of *Dead Man*. (The two foundations, designed to promote German production, have occasionally been open to non-German projects as well [Finney 217–19].) The Japanese electronics manufacturer JVC, which first ventured into film production with *Mystery Train*, underwrote *Ghost Dog*, probably on the basis of Jarmusch’s continued success in Japan.

Aside from the new market conditions, the mid-1990s opened a new aesthetic phase in Jarmusch’s career. While his early films—with the possible exception of *Down by Law*—were built as additions of fairly

self-enclosed segments, *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* were conceived as overarching plots. They are peculiar genre pictures: *Dead Man* is a Western, and *Ghost Dog* crosses the samurai and the gangster film. Jarmusch's early titles pushed the conventions of structural film and minimalist performance in the direction of narrative, while his later work inflects the conventions of narrative cinema with self-conscious, experimental touches.

Perhaps because they adopt—as they undermine—the conventions of well-known genres, Jarmusch's late films abandon the minimalist austerity of the early work, assume a richer visual vocabulary, and have a more conventional execution. The long takes and dead time of the early work are replaced by conventionally structured sequences, and the stark cuts and fade-outs of the first films alternate with superimpositions that make for more fluid transitions and attenuate the modular construction of the earlier work. The complex montage scenes that open *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* are good examples of such expanded stylistic range and, placed as they are at the beginning of the films, seem to announce a new approach to the mechanics of storytelling. Part of their novelty lies in their concentration on lone protagonists. While most of his previous titles had been ensemble pieces with a collective protagonist, the 1990s films center on individuals pitted against their milieus. In the opening of *Dead Man*, the protagonist's urban dress and manner differs sharply from the rougher types that share the train car with him, and sustained eye-line matches make him the central perceiving consciousness in the scene—and in most of the film. *Ghost Dog* opens with the protagonist at home preparing for one of his jobs as a hired killer. As he drives to perform his first hit, his face is superimposed on a landscape of tunnels, lamp-lit streets, and night traffic and thus dominates the physical environment. The individualization of the narrative does not entail an attempt to explore the characters from a psychological perspective. As in the early films, they remain largely inscrutable, reduced to verbal or gestural riffs that intimate depths into which the films do not venture.

These films have bigger budgets than the earlier productions and draw selectively on the star system, something that Jarmusch started to do in *Night on Earth* by casting Winona Ryder, then a hot new star, as one of the cab drivers. The promotional material for *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* highlighted the participation of stars in these projects—Johnny

Depp and Forest Whitaker, respectively—and this tactic has continued in *Coffee and Cigarettes* and *Broken Flowers*. Yet the performers seem selected not only on the basis of their commercial appeal but also because of their connection with independent film culture. While he has been typecast as a heartthrob throughout his career, Depp has cultivated an unconventional persona, staying outside the Hollywood mainstream, and has consistently participated in idiosyncratic projects, such as John Waters's *Cry Baby*, Tim Burton's *Ed Wood*, and Emir Kusturica's *Arizona Dream*. Whitaker's most memorable roles have been in independent productions such as Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*, Clint Eastwood's *Bird*, and Wayne Wang's *Smoke* (Jarmusch had a brief part in *Smoke*'s companion film, *Blue in the Face*). At the same time, the stars coexist with amateurs or lesser known performers whose inclusion in these films obeys Jarmusch's cultist interests and therefore has a more personal justification.

More profound differences between the early and late Jarmusch stem from the varying emphasis his films place on the spatial and temporal components of narrative and from the different conceptions of the medium actualized in each phase. One might say that the early titles—especially *Permanent Vacation*, *Stranger than Paradise*, *Mystery Train*, and *Night on Earth*—start out by framing spaces that are gradually filled with snatches of story and pulses of unspoken desire and emotion, while the late ones are premised on the distension of a narrative temporality inherited from genre film. The early films are invested in cinema as a recording device; in a way that seems inspired by André Bazin, they seek, by means of long takes and deep focus, to dwell on duration and to capture peculiarities of gesture and setting. *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* use film as a synthetic medium capable of mixing a number of streams of signification into a whole. The operative metaphor here might be “tracking,” understood as the building of a musical piece in the studio by means of combining, through a mixing board, different audio strands into a whole (Ray).

With its ability to integrate image, text, and sound, film has always been an all-inclusive medium, the ultimate example of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and has always been based on a form of tracking. What makes Jarmusch's late films distinctive is the way the different “tracks” do not create a completely smooth mix but preserve their identity as distinct

components, each importing into the final product particular cultural histories and meanings. *Dead Man*, for example, takes the structure and iconography of the Western, which constitutes its main track, and overlays it with William Blake's poetry, Henri Michaux's surrealist writing and art, Neil Young's guitar score (along with everything Young connotes as a musician), Native American viewpoints, and a number of Jarmusch's own concerns and stylistic trademarks. *Ghost Dog* blends samurai, yakuza, noir, and martial arts films, together with hip-hop style, cartoons, ecological concerns, the RZA's electronic soundtrack, and allusions to Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and Ryunosuke Akutagawa's and Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. This manner of composing a film out of a variety of parallel semiotic strands is characteristic of such filmmakers as Kenneth Anger (in *Scorpio Rising*), Jean-Luc Godard, and Chris Marker. Jarmusch differs from them in that his own form of cinematic tracking does not promote Brechtian distanciation or thwart illusionism. His films may be easily consumed for character and plot while, at the same time, they are experimental attempts to combine disparate materials in order to stage an unprecedented dialogue among them. Jarmusch has suggested in passing that an important referent for this mode of construction is hip-hop music—a genre that, like his own work, has a double allegiance to the avant-garde and the popular (Hetzberg 190). Hip-hop music is an aural collage that incorporates several tracks (a rhythmic beat, break-beats and snatches of melody, the rap of the MC, and sound effects) into an overall flow. Jarmusch's late films further share with this musical style the taste for direct quotation and the combination of preexisting materials. Originality in hip-hop music resides less in inventing than in creatively combining the available archive; it is an effect of mixing (juxtaposing different components) and scratching ("bending," modifying, inflecting by means of subtle manipulation) what lies at hand.

Along with genre film, literature is one of the main frames of reference in Jarmusch's late films. *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* open with literary quotations, and literature is additionally featured in allusions, in intertitles containing blocks of writing, and in the characters' speeches. Characters often appear engrossed in reading. (According to Godard, filming someone reading is the radical cinematic gesture.) In *Dead Man*,

William Blake (Depp) spends some of his train journey to the West reading the *Bee Journal*, while Ghost Dog regularly pores over *Hagakure*, an eighteenth-century compilation of samurai lore. Just as often, literature is spoken (in *Dead Man*, Nobody constantly quotes Blake's poetry) and spoken about (talking about books creates a bond between Ghost Dog and the schoolgirl Pearline), and books are exchanged and circulated. Literature is more than a topic of conversation or a way to pass the time for these characters; it is fully integrated into the fabric of their experience and at times ends up becoming the script of their lives. Ghost Dog molds his existence according to the samurai code, and Nobody, the Indian co-protagonist of *Dead Man*, shapes his speech after the poetry of William Blake. The attention paid to writing may be a way to vindicate a medium that is progressively outmoded in a predominantly audiovisual culture. And being outmoded, it seems ripe for the kind of attention that Jarmusch often lends to what has fallen out of the mainstream and lingers on the margins. As Jarmusch himself has pointed out—for example, in the interview reprinted in this book—the radical gesture only two decades ago was to defend the artistic value of comic books, popular music, and commercial film. In the present, however, when mass culture has widely succeeded in marketing the rebellious energies of the popular, the truly disruptive move may be to locate some of these energies in high culture: rock and rap, yes, but also Henry Purcell's *Fantasy for Viola* (his example [Eue 84]) or, one might add, Michaux, Blake, Cervantes, or *Hagakure*.

One does not have to wait until the 1990s to find literary references in Jarmusch's work; in *Permanent Vacation* Allie Parker reads to his girlfriend from *Chants de Maldoror*; in *Down by Law*, Bob enthusiastically recites Walt Whitman and Robert Frost; in *Mystery Train*, Jun and Mitzuko walk down Chaucer Street, and Luisa carries a copy of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* under her arm. In these examples, literature puts in an incidental appearance; however, in the late films, starting with *Dead Man*, its presence is more sustained, and it becomes another track of meaning (and meaninglessness) that contributes to the semiotic density of the texts. Hence, as Gregg Rickman has pointed out in an excellent essay on the film, Blake's shadow hangs over the entirety of *Dead Man*—the film invokes and inverts the poet's universe—and constitutes, in Jonathan Rosenbaum's words, “an undertone” (Hetzberg

157, 161). The poet's words infiltrate the characters' speech and add a further layer of connotation to the images. The recurrence of Blake's line "some are born to endless night," for example, links the fate of the characters to the nocturnal atmosphere of the film and to the blackouts that separate the different sequences. A quotation from Michaux, placed at the outset of the film, invites a reading keyed to this author's oeuvre, which purveys one of the guiding threads of the text. And when, in response to entreaties from Nobody and a demented trapper, Depp's Blake inadvertently echoes Herman Melville's *Bartleby* ("I'd rather not do that," he says), he invokes a parallel with the "incurably pallid, pitifully neat" scrivener: like *Bartleby*, Depp's character is a clerk, a victim of modern bureaucracy, an unreadable surface, and a living dead.

Literature provides the moral center in the late films; it is the reservoir of value in a world blighted by stupidity and greed. Blake's poetry, with its potent critique of capitalism and industry, confirms Nobody's rejection of the white settlers' predatory attitude toward nature in the West. And *Hagakure*, with its careful regimentation of daily life, gives *Ghost Dog* a principle of order in an unmanageable environment. But literature also provides a way to confront random violence and death—the central traumas in these films. These realities, which were already present on the margins of Jarmusch's early works, become progressively dominant in his later universe. *Dead Man* is essentially a protracted dying scene, and *Ghost Dog* is bracketed between two losses, one intimated at the beginning of the film, as the protagonist walks by a cemetery and nods respectfully at a tombstone, and a second, more crucial, one featured at the very end. Literature—Blake's poetry and Tsunetomo's manual—allows the protagonists to integrate the overwhelming reality of death into their daily lives. Nobody and Depp's William Blake like to repeat that some—certainly themselves—"are born to endless night," an awareness that does not change their fate but gives it a distinct and therefore more manageable contour. The way of the samurai, which *Ghost Dog* embraces after being viciously attacked as a teenager by a group of white youths, allows him to be the subject rather than the object of violence and to fend off future aggression. But even more important is the fact that it allows him to come to terms with the inevitability of his own finitude, not as a punctual event in the future but as an ever-present possibility. In the words of *Hagakure*: "The Way of the

Samurai is found in death. . . . Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily. . . . And every day without fail one should consider himself as dead” (Tsunetomo 17, 164). It is writing that expresses this important insight at the center of these melancholy films.

Dead Man

Jarmusch’s long-standing desire to make a Western was finally fulfilled with the somber *Dead Man*, which the director described as the first black-and-white exponent of the genre since John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. It is the story of William Blake, a mellow accountant from Cleveland who ventures out West when the West was still being won. After his parents die and his fiancée abandons him, he decides to take a job at the Dickinson Metalworks in the distant town of Machine. Once there, he finds out that the position promised to him by letter has already been filled. He tries to straighten things out with the manager (John Hurt) and owner, John Dickinson (Robert Mitchum in his last role), but he is laughed at and eventually expelled from the plant at gunpoint. (Dickinson thunders at him, “The only job you are going to get around here is pushing up daisies from a pine box. Now, get out!”) That night, as Blake is drinking outside the town’s saloon, he meets Thel (Mili Avital), a former prostitute who makes a living selling paper flowers, and soon afterward they end up in Thel’s bed. The pillow talk is interrupted when Charlie Dickinson (Gabriel Byrne), Thel’s former boyfriend and John Dickinson’s son, walks into the room. He tries to shoot Blake, but Thel interposes her body and is killed instead. The bullet that killed her also wounds Blake, who kills Charlie and quickly skips town. The following day, John Dickinson hires three assassins to bring back Blake dead or alive. In the meantime, Blake has taken to the woods and met the Indian Nobody (Gary Farmer). By turns cantankerous and affable, Nobody tries to cure him, mistakes him for the poet William Blake, and helps him escape through the wilderness. Most of the film is taken up with the parallel narratives of Blake and Nobody riding toward the northwest coast and the hired killers hot on their trail. In the course of this journey, Blake and Nobody become friends. Blake turns into a skilled gunslinger and ends up adopting the violence of the West, first despite himself and eventually in a more deliberate manner,

following Nobody's suggestion that he become a killer of white men. The hired killers bicker and fight among themselves throughout the chase; in the end, only one of them is left in pursuit: Cole Wilson, who has shot both his companions and eaten one of them. In the last sequences of the film, Nobody arranges a funerary canoe to send the dying Blake across the ocean back to the spirit world: "The place where you came from," he tells Blake. (Hardly one for metaphors, Blake replies, "You mean Cleveland?") As Nobody pushes Blake's canoe into the water, Cole Wilson appears behind him. He and Nobody shoot each other off as Blake drifts away.

Dead Man has received more critical attention than any other of Jarmusch's films. It has been insightfully discussed by Gregg Rickman, Kent Jones, Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, Justus Nieland, and Jonathan Rosenbaum. All of them have shown that the film rewrites the conventions of the Western with demythologizing intent. Drawing on Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, Nieland brilliantly discusses *Dead Man* as a radical meditation on the history of Western expansion, as it accounts for the traumatic content of the past and rejects chronological linearity. Jones, Rickman, Kilpatrick, and Rosenbaum focus on *Dead Man* as an exponent of the "post-" or "deconstructive" Western, a phase of the genre that started in the late 1960s with such films as *The Wild Bunch* and *Little Big Man*, and some of whose most recent examples have been Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, Sam Raimi's *The Quick and the Dead*, and Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves*.

Like these titles, Jarmusch's film rewrites the myth of the frontier. It contests the idealized interpretations of this seminal motif in the national imaginary and highlights the role that ethnic violence and unhampered greed played in western expansion. *Dead Man*'s frontier is not the repository of democratic values and institutions described by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in the 1890s but the domain of tyrannical oligarchs such as Dickinson, whose word seems the only law in the land. It is not an inexhaustible natural reserve but a territory maimed by ecoterrorism and polluted by industry: pioneers shoot buffalo indiscriminately, encouraged by a government eager to deprive Native Americans of their livelihood, and the smokestacks of Dickinson's foundry loom over Machine, covering everything in sight with a layer of soot. While the settling of the West has been depicted as the process of taking civilization

into the wilderness, in *Dead Man*, civilization is a technology of death that leaves in its wake piles of corpses. In *Machine*, the buildings are decorated with animal skulls thickly hung on every available surface, and empty coffins are propped up against the walls, ready for use; the trading posts in the wilderness are used to wage biological war on the Indians, as they sell blankets infected with smallpox and tuberculosis. Jarmusch's frontier does not seem the place for unfettered individualism or for the cultivation of "the strenuous life," as Theodore Roosevelt suggested in the 1900s, but the theater of operations of demented industrialists and the setting of a massive genocide. As Kent Jones puts it: "There is no mastery here among the white man, as there is in most Westerns, no instinctive understanding of the land. There is only mute incomprehension or violently aggressive dominance" (46). The violence, as Jonathan Rosenbaum has pointed out, is not regenerative—one of the linchpins of the Western mythology—but an ugly, awkward affair that leaves behind absurdly contorted bodies (37).

Central to the film's revisionism is its treatment of Native Americans. For the Native American critic Jacquelyn Kilpatrick, *Dead Man* is the only Western by a white director to assume Native American perspectives and to acknowledge Native Americans as a prospective audience (174–76). The most sophisticated and complex character in the story is Nobody, played by Gary Farmer. Of mixed descent—Ungumpe-Peccana and Absolucca—Nobody straddles several worlds but is not entirely at home in any. He was rejected by his two peoples because his particular mixture "was not respected," as he puts it, and he was forced to wander on his own, hence the negative identity that his name denotes. He was captured by British soldiers and sent to England at an early age to be exhibited as an ethnographic trophy. In England he spent his adolescence and early youth. He received a western education and came to know Blake's poetry but never identified with the ways of white Europeans; in fact, Blake's writing compelled him to escape from his English masters and to return to the American West. He is a Squanto figure, a product of modern displacement, or, from a different perspective, an effect of what Homi Bhabha has described as colonial mimicry, since he can replay the sounds of the metropolis accompanying them with a critical sense very much his own. Nobody's character is enriched by the connotations that Farmer imported into the role.

A promoter of Native cultures and founder of the journal *Aboriginal Voices*, Farmer's most memorable roles had been in Native American theater (Tom Highway's *Dry Lips Ought to Move to Kapuskasing*) and cinema (Jonathan Wacks's *Powwow Highway*). In *Powwow Highway*, he plays a character that seeks to become an old-style medicine man and is, like Nobody, an outsider among his own, enigmatic, and oddly resourceful. *Dead Man* engages Native perspectives through more than Farmer's character. There are insider jokes—such as Nobody's insistent requests for tobacco—and untranslated speeches in Native languages (Cree, Blackfoot, and Makah). These are gifts, Jarmusch has pointed out, for the people who do speak these languages and know Native cultures, yet they remain out of reach for the majority of spectators (Hetzberg 158–59).

Focusing on the Western filiation of *Dead Man* clarifies Jarmusch's peculiar approach to the genre and explains the film's polemical reinterpretation of U.S. history, but there are other strands of signification that deserve commentary. *Dead Man* is certainly a Blakean post-Western, but it is also a meditation on death and dying influenced by the Belgian-born writer and painter Henri Michaux (1899–1983), whose presence in the film has not been sufficiently studied.

Michaux's work has often been identified with surrealism, despite the fact that he never aligned himself with any of the official surrealist groups and remained a maverick throughout his long career. His work is the source of a number of visual motifs and plot turns in the film, and it provides the epigraph ("It is preferable not to travel with a dead man"). This intriguing line comes from *Un certain Plume*, a collection of sketches that Michaux revised and expanded several times during his lifetime. The core of the book consists of twelve prose fragments concerning Plume, a "tractable," naïve, and totally impervious man with an absurd knack for walking into compromised situations. In the first sketch of the series, he wakes up repeatedly during the night to confront a number of disasters and, unable to deal with them, he just falls asleep again. The first time he opens his eyes, ants have eaten the walls of his bedroom, and his wife, who has been sleeping next to him, chides him for his carelessness; the second time, the entire house has disappeared, either devoured by the insects or "stolen"; the third time, a train charges at him and his wife while they are lying in bed; the next time he opens his

eyes, he is covered in blood as his wife has been torn to pieces, perhaps by the train. A judge suddenly materializes to accuse him of the crime, but Plume blandly protests his innocence and sinks into sleep again.

The succession of sleep and wakefulness culminating in an encounter with a forbidding authority figure is evoked in the opening of *Dead Man*, which summarizes Blake's journey to the West. Blake keeps dozing off and waking up to an ever wilder company of travelers and to a landscape that turns progressively alien and dotted with signs of violence. The sequence ends not with a judge but with the train stoker (Crispin Glover) walking into the car to browbeat Blake and issue an ominous warning. In subsequent sections of Michaux's *Plume*, the homonymous character is harassed and put upon in his travels. People are "not excessively considerate of him": they step on him, wipe their hands on his coat, or refuse to give him accommodation. He is either too indolent or too good-natured to take offence and thinks instead "of the luckless who are unable to travel at all, while he travels continually" (93). Because of his passivity, awkwardness, and penchant for disaster, Plume is, in many ways, an antecedent of Depp's character.

But Plume is not always mild-mannered and peaceful—just like Blake. The quotation that opens *Dead Man* belongs to the fragment "The Night of the Bulgarians," one of the most disturbing in the book. During a train ride at night, Plume and an unnamed friend have to share a compartment with five Bulgarians. Annoyed by their constant whispering and shiftiness—the narrator confides that they are not to be trusted—Plume and his friend pull their guns and open fire on them. To conceal their crime, they sit among the dead and keep them upright by propping them up with their own bodies. But the dead bodies cool off quickly, and soon enough the temperature in the car begins to drop, a fact that draws lively complaints from other travelers. In addition, the corpses begin to topple and slide off their seats—like the dead priest in *Night on Earth*. At this point, Plume decides that it is preferable not to travel with dead men, since they are nothing but trouble.

"The Night of the Bulgarians" mixes grotesque violence with absurd humor and presents an ordinary situation—a night journey on a train—that unpredictably veers toward violence in a manner that is as laughable as it is disturbing. The formula is a blueprint for many episodes in *Dead Man*. Blake walks into the Metalworks eager to start his new job but

finds himself facing a derisive manager and a double-barreled gun held by mad Dickinson. His tryst with Thel mutates from a romantic encounter to a clumsy shootout that ends with Thel's and Charlie's deaths. In the course of his journeys with Nobody, Blake runs into three bizarre trappers led by the cross-dressing "Sally" Jencko (Iggy Pop). The scene starts as comedy, with the hirsute Big George (Billy Bob Thornton) visibly smitten with Blake. He asks him how he keeps his hair soft "like a girl's" and mournfully explains: "This old thing of mine is just like barn hay. There ain't a goddamn thing you can do with it." But the comedy soon shifts into violence when Big George and Benmont Tench (Jared Harris), the third trapper, start arguing about who is going to "have" this young man—apparently Big George has had the last one, and Tench wants his share of the action. The argument heats up, and they end up shooting each other. As the wounded Big George is about to shoot Blake ("I guess nobody will have you," he says aiming at him), he is killed by Nobody, while Blake guns down Tench. An instant later, Nobody's gun accidentally goes off and kills Sally.

The savagely surreal humor of *Plume* is only one facet of Michaux's writing. His work is often steeped in a brooding atmosphere that has much in common with that of *Dead Man*. The dark, foggy ambience of the film seems drawn from the imaginary landscapes of such pieces as "I Write to You from a Far Away Country" (*Space* 215–27) or "The Letter" (*Oeuvres* 793–94). Both are set in murky, insular lands where the sun rarely shines and life is driven by unexplained, arcane rituals. Like Jarmusch's film, these pieces are haunted by a deep sense of longing and loss; obscurely explained characters—women in both of them—lament the separation from their beloved ones in a language that is vividly imagistic and concise.

The itinerant quality of *Dead Man*'s action is consistent with Jarmusch's fondness for errant characters and plots but is also reminiscent of Michaux's travel books, *Ecuador* and *A Barbarian in Asia*. *Ecuador* in particular, which Michaux described as "a travel journal by someone who doesn't know how to travel or how to keep a journal" (13), provides an antecedent for the uncertain trajectories of *Dead Man*, where characters are in constant motion but their direction remains vague. Like *Dead Man*, *Ecuador* is set in an uncertain geography, where trajectories are hard to ascertain. The country itself is an ambiguous entity whose borders are the subject of constant dispute with neighboring nations and whose

surface changes constantly due to frequent landslides. In the last part of the book, when the narrator decides to travel down the Amazon basin to the Atlantic, motion becomes particularly convoluted; he has to retrace his steps frequently due to floods and unexpected changes in the river bed. At this stage, the journey proceeds by canoe, as in the last scenes of *Dead Man*, with the moribund narrator on board, his foot infected by jungle parasites. Like in *Dead Man*, traveling in *Ecuador* is not only a matter of covering external distance but is also internal and visionary. The narrator of *Ecuador* confesses his fondness for intoxication and re-creates the ether-induced visions he experiences one night in the jungle when he feels like a condor flying through “floor after floor of the atmosphere” (61). Similarly, Nobody performs a peyote ritual halfway through the film, but his visions are less joyous than those in *Ecuador*. During his trance, a death mask appears on Blake’s face (figures 14 and 15); seen in the dark of the forest at night, the iridescent skull recalls Michaux’s painting *The Prince of the Night*, in which a skull tops a bundled figure sitting on a throne under a sky spotted with multicolored stars.

The parallels do not end here. The bullet that killed Thel pierces Blake’s chest; it ends up lodged near his heart. Similarly, the narrator of *Ecuador* complains of having been born with a small hole in his chest, where there is “hatred, terror, and helplessness”: “My void is a great



Figure 14. Johnny Depp. *Dead Man*.
Frame enlargement.



Figure 15. Johnny Depp. *Dead Man*.
Frame enlargement.

guzzler, a great crusher, and a great exterminator” (69). The narrative does not bear this out, however, since the wound does not prompt the narrator to become a killer. Yet, as is the case with Blake, the hole does make him an indeterminate being, hard to conceptualize: “Though this hole may be deep, it has no form. / Words don’t find it, / only wobble around” (71). An inert figure who tries to make the best of his circumstances, this narrator is in many ways as ineffectual as Blake and Plume, but there is also something of the stolid Nobody in him. Nobody’s other name, given to him in mockery by his own people, is “He Who Talks Loud, Saying Nothing.”¹⁶ Michaux’s narrator describes himself in the following terms: “He talks loud, he is rude, / He is fat, he spews joy. / So he hasn’t changed. / A victim as much of good events as bad. / In a word, impressed. / Let’s get it finished” (120).

Beyond such distinct motifs, there is a more profound connection between Michaux’s and Jarmusch’s aesthetics. Jarmusch’s work is largely about the molecular, near-imperceptible gestures and affects that crop up in ordinary interaction yet are overlooked by conventional narratives. In an analogous manner, Michaux describes his own work as an attempt to pick up an undetected, microscopic vibration in the quotidian: “My drawings express the epiphenomenon which irregularly appears in the wake of this or that reflection. They are, whether images or words, deposits,

instantaneous, occasional, fugitive, but unable to be shifted while they are present, as though invisibly arrowed to a final spot, deposits resulting from involuntary and always surprising evocations, and which I would be inclined to call ‘tide-marks of reflection’” (cited in Beaumelle and Pacquement 117). And for Octavio Paz, the author of one of the most insightful pieces about the artist, Michaux inhabits the “trans-real”: “the beyond of the visible which is also the beyond of the expressible” (22).

The parallels should not make us forget that there are also important differences between the two artists, however. There is certainly a difference in tone: Michaux is fiercely sardonic, while Jarmusch is coolly ironic and generally sedate, even if, at times, *Dead Man* is a very angry film. Jarmusch usually locates his particular trans-reality in interpersonal rapport and temporal intervals, while Michaux tends to locate it in an interior realm of mental associations and visions. (Starting in the early 1950s, he took mescaline, produced art under its influence, and described its effects.) However, both share the desire to go beyond the existing symbolic repertoires and to venture into undercodified areas of experience.

This desire explains the central concern of *Dead Man*: death, or rather the interval between being hit by a bullet and dying, two occurrences that usually follow each other mechanically in ordinary Westerns but are pushed here to different ends of the plot. Dilating in this way the process of dying, the film explores a series of intermediate stages between life and death and also delves into various modalities of death. In the terms of the film, dying is not only a bodily process but also a symbolic one. In this last sense, it is a crisis of signification, the result of a tear in the signifying network that places one in the social circuit. One begins to die when one no longer makes sense as a social being—the core of William Blake’s drama. He experiences a gradual drain of meaning that starts, before the beginning of the film proper, with the demise of his parents—sources of one’s social identity—and his fiancée’s abandonment of him. After these losses, he seems to lack origin and destination, past and future, and it is only fitting that we first encounter him on a train, in motion between a life that is no longer and another that has not yet started. As he moves away from home, he enters a social terrain where he has no place and, therefore, makes no sense. His polished appearance still means something among the men and women in thick plaids

and urban styles that sit on the train in the early stages of the journey but looks completely out of place when these are replaced by heavily armed pioneers in pelts and wide-brim hats. The familiar landscapes of the Midwest are progressively changed into a wild terrain scarred by traces of the Indian wars of the 1870s, the decade in which the film is set. This is a landscape where he cannot find a place, and, perhaps for that reason, he bides his time reading (a form of withdrawal), playing solitaire, and sleeping (a simulation of death). He is recognized as someone touched by death by the train stoker, who, after delivering a hallucinatory speech that foreshadows the protagonist's final moments, warns Blake that he may find his grave in his destination.

He certainly finds further displacements that continue his drainage of sense and advance his figurative and literal death. At the Dickinson Metalworks, the manager keeps changing his name from Blake to Black. The company, tired of waiting for him, has hired another accountant, and he thus finds himself turned into a castaway: a penniless, jobless clerk in a strange town. His crisis of definition increases when he is thrown away from the factory at gunpoint, as if he were a criminal, a position he comes to assume by killing Charlie Dickinson and, in subsequent episodes, Sally Jencko, two marshals, a minister who runs a trading post (Alfred Molina), and two pioneers who try to shoot him. Slowly dying from the bullet near his heart as well as from being unmoored in society—or what remains of it in *Machine*—he is, like a zombie, between two deaths, the first one that starts before the beginning of the film, when he begins to lose signposts of identity with the death of his parents and the elopement of his girlfriend, and the second one, when he glides across the water to the distant horizon in a canoe, after *Nobody* performs the proper funeral rites.

Why does it take so long for Blake to die? Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek has invoked the figure of the zombie to illustrate the integrity of the drive: the inassimilable demand that always persists beyond satisfaction and dialectical mediation. Like the zombie or the ghost, the demand presented by the drive refuses to die; it keeps coming back to collect an unpaid (and unpayable) debt that remains the animating residue at the core of all desire (Žižek, *Looking* 21–23; Žižek and Dolar, *Opera's* 121–51). In the case of William Blake, this may be the desire to be “somebody,” to be contained in discourse

and to occupy an identity that fits and explains him. The possibility that this desire may be satisfied by a new job in another town prompts him to undertake his journey; what he has lost with the death of his parents he may gain by starting a new life somewhere else—as an accountant in Machine. Yet he proves unable to satisfy this wish; he either exceeds or falls short of the symbolic command that places him as a social being and gives him some sort of identity. Showing up late for work, he fails to abide by the conditions of the labor contract and finds himself without a position—in its double sense of job and social location. He is given a new position when he is thrown out of the factory as if he were a public danger or a thief, and he embraces it with a vengeance—in more than one sense—by killing Dickinson's son and stealing his horse, hence placing himself outside the social compact. Once Blake assumes his new mandate, given to him by Dickinson, a surrogate father who has, in fact, borne him into a new identity, he seems unable to stop. His effectiveness as a gunman and his criminal record keep growing as the film advances, and with both, his inability to regain his footing in society.

Yet an outlaw is not all he is. On the basis of his name, Nobody recasts him as the poet William Blake, the revolutionary romantic whose work he learned to admire during his British exile. And refashioned as a poet, Blake is enjoined by his companion to “write his poetry in blood” (figure 16). Blake complies but remains lackadaisical and unfocused. He repeats the lines he has learned from Nobody and asks strangers if they know his writing, but he drifts through his new role without completely filling it out. This is why he is both already dead (“Did you kill the white man who killed you?” asks Nobody) and still dying: dead to his former self, which has been overwritten by other identities, and dying in so far as he keeps failing in his search for a role that may keep him alive by making him “somebody” once again. In his liminal condition, he is infinitely malleable and totally unmanageable. Despite the claims of earlier critics—and of Jarmusch himself—that he is a completely passive figure, a *tabula rasa* constantly written over by other characters who project their desires on him, Blake is also possessed of his own uncontrollable inertia. There is in him an obstreperous remnant that thwarts people's attempts to make him signify. “It's so strange that you don't remember any of your poetry,” wonders Nobody, flabbergasted that this Blake hardly lives up to his name. He is an unaccountable accountant, a representative of numeric



Figure 16. “Write your poetry with blood.” Johnny Depp. *Dead Man*. © 1995 12 Gauge Gun, Inc.

rationality and calculability *and*, at the same time, an embodiment of the incalculable—of the unmanageable rest invariably found at the heart of identity. Like the Bulgarians in Michaux’s sketch, he will not stay put; he becomes completely unpredictable, chills the atmosphere, shifts in his seat, and, ever out of place, causes considerable discomfort.

His placelessness and unmanageability are variously figured in the film. They are embodied through his bleeding wound—which literalizes the slow drain of meaning, the gap at the center of his being—as well as through the bullet that kills him: the piece of “white man’s metal” that lodges near his core and is internal and external, proper and alien. But his placelessness, his difficult definition, is also represented through his unstable motility—his constant slipping, tottering, tumbling, and falling. The first object that catches Blake’s attention, as he is sitting on the train at the outset of his journey, is an oil lamp swinging from the ceiling whose unbalanced movement seems to prophesize Blake’s subsequent unsteadiness. He gets tangled in another traveler’s gear as he gets off the train; trudges laboriously in the thick mud of Machine’s main street; steps aside, nearly losing his balance, to avoid a pig, and

nearly collides against a sinister figure who suddenly materializes in front of him. In the factory, he keeps bumping against the equipment and the workers. After killing Charlie Dickinson, he escapes by jumping from Thel's window but loses his hold and topples onto the street. On horseback, he is noticeably wobbly, a quality accented by the uneven terrain and circuitous trajectory. And as he gets out of the canoe at the gates of the Makah village, he just flops onto the ground. In his walk through the village, from where he is sent by Nobody to "the next level of existence," he can hardly stand on his feet; his precarious balance is conveyed by point-of-view shots and superimpositions that suggest disorientation and dreaminess.

In the end, however, he does die, only after he becomes a killer—a bearer of death—himself, gradually taking on attributes from the dead he leaves behind. He runs away from his first crime with Thel's gun and Charlie's horse, wears Big George's fur coat, and smears his face with the blood of a dead fawn he encounters in a clearing in the forest. As he accumulates mementoes from the dead, he sheds many of the marks of his former life and his civilized status, such as his plaid coat and his glasses. (Nobody takes them away: "Maybe you'll see better without them.") Simultaneously, he acquires some Indian attributes, such as facial paint and a nomadic life in the wilderness. Dying entails taking on the marks of the dead *and* becoming Indian; either way, it is a process through which he comes to embrace a sort of inassimilable remain expelled from the dominant symbolic. This remain takes the form of the corpse or the Indian: the lifestyle and culture that westerners pushed to a death space—the space of the holocaust, cultural disintegration, and invisibility. Or, differently put, since Blake cannot be somebody, he might as well be nobody (Nobody) or nothing: an Indian or a corpse—in sum, what has no place in the white man's frontier.

Dead Man signaled a sharp turn in Jarmusch's trajectory. Its genre references had been foreshadowed to a certain extent by *Down by Law*, but its somberness, violence, period setting, and sustained concern with death had no precedent in his previous work. And yet, for all its strangeness, its pace and humor are immediately identifiable. The film is frequently taken up with pauses and intervals—leisurely riding and talking—and with the contemplation of nature rather than with action. And what action there is is slowed down and bled of dramatism. The

chase proceeds at a sluggish, if inexorable, rhythm, and the various shootouts that punctuate the film have a spaced-out, listless quality. The film abounds in moments of absurdity, usually driven by the eccentricity of the characters. The hired assassins are a good example. One of them, Conway Twill (Michael Winicott), is delightfully incongruous: he sleeps with his teddy bear, is superlatively friendly, and his unrelenting talk is full of folksy cadence. His childishness is shared by the other hired guns. While they wait for John Dickinson, all three repeatedly draw their guns at his likeness, a large oil portrait that presides over the office, but they immediately turn into the picture of meekness when the industrialist walks into the room. Equally absurd is Dickinson himself, alternately forbidding and silly. He laments in the same breath the death of his son Charlie and the loss of “a spirited young pinto” belonging to his personal stables and stolen by Blake. Instead of addressing the assassins directly, he delivers his instructions to a stuffed grizzly on a corner of the office while they stare in amazement. However, the humorous traits of these oddballs cannot entirely erase the fact that they are volatile and destructive. While in Jarmusch’s earlier films oddness always has an edge of benignity, and contains an implicit defense of personal singularity, this is rarely the case in *Dead Man*. There is nothing endearing about the chilling Cole Wilson, John Dickinson, or the unctuous, Bible-thumping missionary that tries to sell Nobody an infected blanket.

Perhaps the only respite from the bleakness of these characters is the friendship between Blake and Nobody. Like all central relationships in Jarmusch’s films, this one is hard to formalize. It is initially characterized by contempt and mistrust, as Nobody repeatedly calls Blake a “stupid fucking white man,” but his contempt eventually turns into affection as he realizes that Blake is not a rapacious pioneer like the rest but an outcast like himself. Their friendship is clinched when he discovers that Blake bears the name of the poet he idolizes—in Nobody’s mind, they are the same person—and, realizing that Blake is fatally wounded, he takes it upon himself to provide him with a safe passage to the afterlife. Yet their rapport is haunted by constant miscommunication. Nobody’s poetic pronouncements and Blakean allusions totally elude Blake: “Rise now, William Blake. Don’t let the sun burn a hole in your ass. Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead.” On another occasion, Blake asks Nobody what they should do to escape their persecutors; Nobody

grins enigmatically and delivers another one of the poet's adages: "The eagle never wasted so much time as when he submitted to learn from the crow." Naturally, Blake draws a blank. The most often noted example of their constant misunderstanding is Blake's inability to grasp Nobody's constant demands for tobacco, the substance that allows communication with the spirits, cements friendships, and cures—blowing tobacco on the ill was a means to drive away disease (Hirschfelder and Molin 305). For Blake, who does not smoke and knows nothing of Native lore, tobacco is a disposable prop of social life, and he cannot understand Nobody's insistence. Their way of speaking at cross-purposes is another modality of the unaccountability that haunts Blake as a character. Not only his identity but his interactions with others are hindered by incongruity, by the way in which speech, like himself, keeps slipping, always landing in a place different from the one intended. This does not impinge on their actual feelings, however, and their affection for each other grows stronger with the passing of time, even if their communication does not become any more fluid. Since such affection is not articulated in words, nor accompanied by mutual understanding, it is relayed by the simple physicality of the relationship: by the proximity of two bodies sharing a fire, riding, and eventually dying together.

Rock Sublime: *Year of the Horse*

Much of the somber affect of *Dead Man* stems from Neil Young's soundtrack. Played almost entirely on a single electric guitar, it was largely improvised, in the manner of silent film accompaniment, while he watched a rough cut of the film. It is made up essentially of two truncated melodic lines that endlessly blend into each other; they sound like instrumental intros or codas to a part that remains unheard and therefore give the impression of circling around a void, of gradually approaching but never reaching a center. The melodic parts are separated by bridges of guitar noise or by dissonant chords, resonant with drone and played on the lower end of the scale, where the guitar is used as a percussive rather than as a melodic instrument. For Diedrich Deidrichsen, Young returns here to a concept already present in his album *Arc*, which contains a thirty-minute collage of guitar noise that occasionally modulates into melody (242), but *Dead Man*'s music derives as well from the sonic

ambiance of Young's *Sleeps with Angels*, issued shortly before the film was in production. Much like the music of Jarmusch's other films, Young's soundtrack provides an atmospheric layer over the action, but it is also used, for the first time in Jarmusch's work, as a mark of emphasis. The abandoned wagons and teepees that Blake sees from the train, as well as the stoker's announcement that Blake may just find his grave in Machine, are underlined by brief, jarring phrases that act as the orchestral stingers of classical film. Similarly punctuated by distortion or by discordant repetitions of the main musical themes are the killing of Big George by Nobody, the appearance of the death mask on Blake's face, the sight of a pioneer camp massacred by Indians, and Cole Wilson's final pursuit of Blake and Nobody. At times, music and guitar noise appear to emanate from the world of the film. During the opening sequence, for example, the guitar sound blends with the train whistle and the beat of the rolling stock, and on a couple of occasions when Nobody starts chanting, Young's guitar accompaniment follows him perfectly in tune.

The soundtrack was issued as an album, *Music from Dead Man*, that contains additional instrumental music—also by Young—and Johnny Depp's readings of Blake's texts; both are mixed in with noise of highway traffic, a gesture toward Young's occasional experimentalism and Jarmusch's minimalist leanings. As regards the film's reception and meaning, however, more important than Young's (rare) incursions into noise are his folk roots and his sympathy toward Native American cultures. From his mid-1960s beginnings in the seminal California band Buffalo Springfield, Young's music has oscillated between stylized folk (in the albums *Neil Young*, *Harvest*, or *American Stars 'n' Bars*) and guitar-driven rock (in *Tonight's the Night* or *Zuma*). At the same time, his songs ("Cortez the Killer" or "Pocahontas"), album art, and the name of his band, Crazy Horse, have consistently homaged Native American cultures.

Year of the Horse, Jarmusch's next title after *Dead Man*, continued the collaboration between the director and the musician. It is a documentary about Neil Young and Crazy Horse that surveys the band's history and showcases their powerful live performances. It was commissioned by Young, a keen documenter of his own career. Evidence of Young's interest in self-chronicle are his compilation records (starting with *Decade* in 1977) and films, the most famous of which are still the

earliest: *Journey through the Past* (1972) and *Rust Never Sleeps* (1979). Both were produced by Young himself with the collaboration of Larry A. Johnson, who was responsible for most of the actual shooting. Johnson, who has acted over time as a house cameraman for Young, was nominated for an Academy Award for his work as one of the sound technicians for the documentary *Woodstock*. He also collaborated in Bob Dylan's *Renaldo and Clara* and in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*, a concert movie centered on the Band and featuring, among many others, Dylan and Young (Baumgarten 167).

Johnson produced *Year of the Horse* and shot most of the footage with Jarmusch in amateur formats: Super-8, 16mm, and Hi-8 video. (The film announces itself as "proudly shot in Super-8.") These formats hark back to Jarmusch's beginnings in downtown punk cinema, but they were also used in his music videos. Two examples are the video for Tom Waits's cover of Cole Porter's "It's All Right by Me," shot in Hi-8 for the AIDS-benefit project Red, Hot, and Blue, and the video of the Neil Young song "Big Time" (from *Broken Arrow*), made with Larry Johnson. According to Jarmusch and Johnson, Young was so pleased with the look of this video that he conceived the idea of shooting a feature-length project entirely in this format. The small-gauge equipment favored a gestural camera style; it allowed the filmmakers to immerse themselves in the audience relatively unencumbered and to follow the band closely on stage and off—into their hotel rooms, the tour bus, and a convenience store where they put on a fake candy robbery. In addition, as Jarmusch and Johnson have pointed out, the grungy visuals—characterized by a grainy, high-contrast image—match the simplicity and directness of the band's sound. The music and the deceptively amateurish style of the film lend each other a feeling of authenticity and suggest a lack of pretension that are very much part of Young's aura as an artist—even if they contradict his concern with self-documentation and -dramatization.

Year of the Horse combines concert footage, backstage scenes, and interviews with the band members and a few associates. Most of the material was shot during the 1996 tour, but there is also footage from earlier tours in 1976 and 1986. The closing number of the film, the performance of "Like a Hurricane," skillfully blends the 1996 and 1976 performances, and thus ranges across the band's history and creates a tribute to its durability. And durability is largely what it is all about, with

interviews revolving frequently around the band's longevity and the history they share. The continuity created by the editing proves that, in their fifties and after nearly a quarter of a century together, Young and the Horse keep rocking, and that, as Young himself has famously sung, "rock 'n' roll will never die."

The overall tone is celebratory, as is perhaps to be expected of a commissioned film. Unlike less conventional rock documentaries such as the Maysles brothers' *Gimme Shelter*, an exposé of the counterculture's potential for violence, or Robert Frank's *Cocksucker Blues*, a Rolling Stones film that dwells on the seamier aspects of touring and celebrity, *Year of the Horse* is about the positive side of rock. It praises the sense of commonality created by the music and the artistry of the musicians. The drummer, Ralph Molina, declares that playing with Neil Young and Crazy Horse is "the epitome of heart and soul. It couldn't be better. . . . Heavy," he concludes with a sigh. The film never seems to question the band's self-image or the terms in which its members discuss their music and their past. It respectfully conveys their view of themselves as a family, and their definition of their music as a solid fusion of four different sensibilities that remain distinct while blending into a whole that none could create in isolation. It is often acknowledged, for example, that while the music they play is mostly Young's and the role of Crazy Horse is providing instrumental backing, they are never as good as when they play together. At the same time, the nature of their collaboration remains indefinite; it boils down to years of shared experience and to an instinctive understanding of each other that, in Young's own terms, is "hard to describe in words." Early on, Jarmusch asks "manager extraordinaire" Elliot Roberts about the band's peculiar guitar-based sound, and Roberts's answer immediately shifts the discussion into the sublime, where it remains for the rest of the film: "It's more than a sound. . . . What [the musicians] bring to the table is their whole lives. They've been together thirty years. . . . We've been through everything with these guys." And later, the guitarist Frank Sampedro claims that when he's on stage, he does not listen to what they are playing: "I just let it go and it works out. You just hear one big guitar." Statements like this place the music in the realm of the ineffable: it is a force that just flows from—in the words of the film poster—"four guys who like to rock." Such idealization obscures some limiting omissions. There is practically

no discussion of musical influences; no attempt to place the band in the complex history of rock; no mention of the technicalities involved in composing, playing, or recording; and very little about the personal side of all the years of artistic collaboration. Sampedro, the most incisive of the band's members, alludes in passing to "changes in lifestyle, family, ways of recording, instruments we've played, loving each other, hating each other." Yet the film never comes down to specifics. As a result, Young and the Horse seem a self-enclosed, self-feeding entity whose music starts and ends with themselves, feeding on their long-standing togetherness.

Despite this isolationism, there is more in *Year of the Horse* than its ostensible subject. In addition to being a document about Young and his outfit, it may also be read as a meditation on many of Jarmusch's pet themes and on his status as an artist at the time. The concern with temporality and death at the center of *Dead Man* and, subsequently, *Ghost Dog* are also present here, especially in the song "Barstool Blues" and in the words of the band members, who reminisce about former members of the Horse who are no longer around. These are Bruce Berry, who is only mentioned in passing, the producer David Briggs, dead from cancer in 1995, and Danny Whitten, a member of Danny and the Memories and later of the Rockets, two pre-Crazy Horse bands, who died from a heroin overdose in 1972. Briggs and Whitten are memorialized in the film through montages of black and white photographs edited into the interviews. On discussing Whitten's death and the Rockets' dissolution when some of its members regrouped as Crazy Horse, Young muses about his "guilt at the trail of destruction that I've left behind me"—an inadvertent echo of William Blake's deadly passage through the West. These memories are the obverse of the celebration of the band's longevity. While the passing of time gives band members a sense of achievement, it also entails accumulating losses. Time adds as well as subtracts. "Like a Hurricane" could be read in this manner. Its overt purpose may be to celebrate endurance, but it is also elegiac. The twenty years intervening between the two versions of the song have taken a toll; the musicians have aged visibly, and the song does not remain quite the same. In the 1976 concert, the rendition is terser, closer to the recorded version; in 1996, it is burst apart with long improvisatory breaks, and it closes with an avalanche of feedback, as if time and experience had

eroded the musicians' faith in structure and symmetry. The entire film can be read as an elegy to the passing of time, to the fact that all evenings and performances will pass (have already passed) irremediably, leaving behind fading memories and traces in fragile technological supports.

Since time is such an ambivalent force, any attempt to fix and examine its flow is doomed to failure. Already at the beginning of the film, Sampedro taunts Jarmusch with the futility of his project: "What I don't understand is how you think you are going to sit there and ask a couple of questions and capture everything there is to capture about Crazy Horse." And later he repeats his charge: "There's this new guy Jim. He's coming in here. He thinks he's going to lob us a couple of cute questions and sum up thirty years of total insanity, of us trying to make music and be humans, and have families, and live through all our problems and indifferences and everything else. . . . [The film] is not going to capture anything. No matter what he asks, he'll never get it all." What sounds like a put-down is in fact a rephrasing of Jarmusch's own aesthetics of incompleteness—of his fondness for gaps and unexplained characters and situations. All his work is haunted by the sense that experiences, like people, are essentially unknowable; hence the inability to capture the totality is not a failure but a structuring condition of human perception. In Jarmusch, this awareness is never tragic; instead, it triggers humbleness before the complexity of the world and humor in response to its absurdity.

It may be absurd that the band members pour out their souls, so to speak, in a humdrum basement with a sink and washer visible in the background—suggesting, perhaps, dirty laundry in the offing? Or rhyming with the Tide t-shirt Young wears on stage? The backdrop is hardly fit for rock glamour and, because of this, quite appropriate given the band's eagerness to come across as regular guys, and given Jarmusch's interest in quotidian, nondescript locations as settings where unexpected disclosures take place. The disclosures here echo many of Jarmusch's own interests and perceptions, to the extent that the band's statements, after a while, begin to sound like a summary of Jarmusch's aesthetic; hence, what started out as a commission ends up becoming a subtle act of self-affirmation for the filmmaker. The band's emphasis on collaboration and unity rhymes with Jarmusch's tendency to deflate his agency as a director and to describe himself as a coordinator of disparate sensibili-

ties. Young and Crazy Horse's taste for onstage improvisation—"the great thing about playing with Crazy Horse," says Young, is that "you never know what is going to happen"—has a parallel in Jarmusch's tendency to use his scripts as points of departure for further stories and situations ad-libbed with his actors. Young's disregard for fashion is similar to Jarmusch's, whose latest film at the time had been in a genre often called "dead" after the late 1970s. And the band's stated desire to stay "close to the source" (a source that remains undeclared) and to keep "getting purer and purer" (faithful to their basic rock sound?) recalls Jarmusch's comparable concern with purity, which in his case could be understood as the desire to reject outside interference and market imperatives and to explore a number of stylistic devices and themes with complete autonomy.

In this desire there is much wishful thinking, as the form of the film ultimately corroborates. The isolationist portrait of Young and the Horse shows the extent to which rock—especially as practiced by singer-songwriters such as Young—has uncritically absorbed the romantic conception of art and the artist, with music as a transcendent force that can forgo all considerations of audience, technology, and webs of dialogue and influence. This romantic notion of art contrasts sharply with Jarmusch's habitual way of discussing his work. While he has retained a belief in the value of style and in art as unfettered subjective statement, he has never placed himself above material circumstance or historical dialogue. He has openly described his working methods and the material history of his productions, and his statements—and his films—customarily acknowledge his numerous influences and abound in literary and musical allusions. The absence of such details in relation to Neil Young and his group may be attributed to the band's way of seeing themselves rather than to Jarmusch's conception of artistic production.

Jarmusch's view of these matters can be read between the lines, or rather between the splices, of the film. Unlike Crazy Horse, whose music is an organic emanation from the band's familial relationship, the film presents itself as the result of openly flaunted stylistic choices: small-gauge formats and particular ways of recording the performances and staging the interviews. It is also the result of a number of combinations and appropriations. *Year of the Horse* mixes celluloid and video, recent and past footage, and Jarmusch and Johnson's images with bor-

rowed ones. The borrowed images include films and photographs from the band's archives, a glimpse of *Robocop* shot off of a TV monitor, a fragment of Steve Segal's animation *Red Ball Express*, the Chinese ideogram for horse, and, at the opening of the film, a brief shot from the Universal Studios production *Chief Crazy Horse*. The result of the mix is not organic and seamless—a far cry from the band's emphasis on “one big sound”—but collage-like and composite. It is not a straightforward authorial statement. Jarmusch's signature is only perceptible indirectly, refracted through alien images and voices and through the way the bits are pieced together.

From a stylistic perspective, the composite nature of *Year of the Horse* signals a turning point. In Jarmusch's previous titles, allusions and quotations had never disrupted the continuity of the diegesis; *Year of the Horse*, however, is the first of his works to practice collage and to incorporate whole fragments from borrowed texts. The procedure becomes central to the dense media mix of his next film, *Ghost Dog*.

Citing, Touching, Dwelling: *Ghost Dog*

Ghost Dog is about composite identity, quoting as a way of living, and building a text out of preexisting fragments. It tells the story of Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker), a black hired assassin who styles his life after the samurai codes contained in *Hagakure*. He does occasional assignments for Louie Bonacelli (John Tormey), a small-time Mafioso who once saved his life. Feeling indebted to him, Ghost Dog made a commitment to be his retainer and obey him blindly, in compliance with the customs of ancient Japan. Ghost Dog communicates with Louie through his carrier pigeons. On one occasion, Louie asks him to kill Handsome Frank (Richard Portnow), a middle-aged member of “the family” who is having an affair with Louise (Tricia Vessey), the pretty and slightly deranged teenage daughter of Mr. Vargo (Henry Silva), the head of the clan. Frank is violating a number of the family's rules. “Rule number one,” warns his uncle, Joe “Rags” (Joseph Rigano): “Never fuck with the boss's daughter.” But in addition, Louise happens to be the love interest of Sonny Valerio (Cliff Gorman), Vargo's closest associate and the gang's second in command, and it is actually Sonny who gives the order to kill Frank. When Ghost Dog carries out this order, however, he is seen by

Louise, a fact that disturbs Louie and Sonny. As Handsome Frank's killer is an outsider to the family, honor demands that he be put out of circulation. The members of the clan comb the region in search of a black man who breeds pigeons, and they eventually find Ghost Dog's home and kill his birds. If the code of the samurai requires obedience to the daimyo, it also demands vengeance, and, during the rest of the film, Ghost Dog locates and kills off the members of the gang responsible for the death of his pigeons until only Louise and Louie remain. Seeking to avenge the extermination of the clan, Louie confronts Ghost Dog in a Western-style shootout at the end of the film. But as Ghost Dog owes Louie complete submission, he refuses to defend himself and lets Louie shoot him to death.

Ghost Dog is perhaps the most linear of Jarmusch's films. It displays a narrative economy that is often absent in earlier titles and that may have been inspired by the genres from which the film takes its cue—gangster and samurai films with additional intimations of the Western. (Jarmusch defined the film as a “samurai-gangster-hip-hop-Eastern Western” [qtd. in Meyer 252].) The relatively brief opening sequence is an example of such economy. It slides smoothly from aerial views of the setting to the protagonist's home, to the execution of his first job—the killing of Handsome Frank. Along the way, it offers a complex characterization of the protagonist, shows his proficiency at work—stealing a vehicle, locating his victim's house, breaking in, and shooting him—presents all the major players in the story, and narrates the film's generative conflict. Later sequences are similarly compact, especially the ones involving Ghost Dog's revenge on the organization, when he invades their country estate and picks off the entire clan, or when, close to the end, he goes after Sonny Valerio.

However, the most distinctive elements in *Ghost Dog* are not the lean action scenes but those that depict what standard genre pictures tend to leave out—the moments of contemplation that surround the action, when the samurai sits at home, reads, prays, practices with his sword, naps in the sun next to the coop, or flies his pigeons (figure 17). These moments characterize Ghost Dog as a paradoxical assassin with religious inclinations and a love of birds. One of the achievements of the film is that the peaceful routines do not clash with the violence, and Ghost Dog's asceticism does not seem to contradict his being a killer.



Figure 17. Forest Whitaker. *Ghost Dog*. © 1999
Plywood Productions, Inc. Photo: Abbot Genser.

This is partly because the film aligns the spectators' sympathies with him, not with his victims, the Mafiosi, who are outrageously bigoted and bloodthirsty, if also hilariously ineffectual. In addition, *Ghost Dog*'s meditative nature flows into the precision and elegance with which he does his jobs, transforming his killings into discrete dances.

In addition to being a film about characters and their actions, *Ghost Dog* is also an extremely self-conscious text about other texts that it references and reworks. A "personal thanks" list in the closing credits mentions many of the film's sources: Yamamoto Tsunetomo, Mary Shelley, Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Seijun Suzuki, Jean-Pierre Melville, Miguel de Cervantes, Akira Kurosawa, and the rappers' collective Wu-Tang Clan. This dense intertextuality has prompted the critics Nils Meyer and Umberto Mosca to call *Ghost Dog* "a palimpsest" and a "cinephiliac" text, respectively (Meyer 253; Mosca 127). This palimpsest-like quality applies to *Ghost Dog* in the first place. He resembles the protagonist of Jean-Pierre Melville's stylish *Le Samourai*, Alain Delon in one of his most memorable roles: an inveterate loner who lives in a modest neighborhood with the sole company of his canary and wears white gloves when performing his assignments. *Le Samourai* also starts with

the protagonist stealing a car on his way to a killing and ends up with his death. Ghost Dog is also reminiscent of Parker (Lee Marvin) in *Point Blank*, a pursued man bent on vengeance who takes on and defeats an entire clan, and, as Jarmusch points out in the interview reprinted in this book, he is also similar to Marlon Brando's character in Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront*, a boxer who falls foul of an underworld organization and keeps pigeons in a coop on the roof of his building.

Many incidents in *Ghost Dog* allude to a range of other films. To conceal from the clan his subordination to Louie, Ghost Dog shoots him in the shoulder, like Clint Eastwood does, under similar circumstances, to Lee Van Cleef in Sergio Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars*. Ghost Dog buys his birdfeed at a store called Birdland, a reference to the nightclub that gave the jazzman Charlie Parker his nickname and to Forest Whitaker's role as Parker in Clint Eastwood's biopic *Bird*. At one point, when Ghost Dog is about to shoot Vargo with a long-range rifle, a bird lands on the gun barrel and blocks his view, a remake of a similar scene in Seijun Suzuki's delirious yakuza film *Branded to Kill*. And when Louie and Ghost Dog have their showdown at the end of the film, bells toll in the distance, as in the climax of Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*. The contradictory views of Ghost Dog and Louie's first encounter, when Louie rescues Ghost Dog from death at the hands of a group of white youths, are directly inspired by Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. Louie claims he shot one of Ghost Dog's assailants in self-defense, while Ghost Dog thinks he did it disinterestedly to save his own life. In Jarmusch's film, the indeterminacy of these narratives is incidental to the plot, which does not delve into the truthfulness of the different accounts or what they reveal about the teller. The literary source of Kurosawa's film, Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short-story collection *Rashomon*, is also referenced in *Ghost Dog*, as a copy of the book passes through the hands of several characters during the course of the story. Other literary sources—explicit but largely unremarked by critics—include *Frankenstein* and *Don Quixote*. By saving Ghost Dog from death, Louie, like Frankenstein, creates an uncontrollable creature that eventually destroys his world. And like Cervantes's knight, Ghost Dog follows old-fashioned chivalric codes that can only be found in books.

There are also allusions to a number of Jarmusch's films. Like Allie Parker in *Permanent Vacation*, Ghost Dog steals a car from a blonde

woman slumming in his neighborhood, watches a black woman in silver-lamé overalls that evokes *Mystery Train*'s "silver fox," and, toward the end of the film, Ghost Dog's friend, the young girl Pearline (Camille Winbush), picks up a gun and points it at Louie, recalling the familiarity that women in Jarmusch's films often show with firearms—think of Luisa in *Mystery Train*, Corky in *Night on Earth*, Thel in *Dead Man*, and Renée French in *Coffee and Cigarettes*. Yet most of *Ghost Dog*'s allusions point to *Dead Man*. Gary Farmer makes a brief appearance as a pigeon breeder; when a Mafioso shoots one of his pigeons he retorts with his famous line from *Dead Man*: "Stupid fucking white man." The friendship between Ghost Dog and Raymond (Isaach de Bankolé), the Haitian ice-cream vendor—a role that reprises Jarmusch's own in Billy Bob Thornton's *Sling Blade*—is as paradoxical as that between William Blake and Nobody; Raymond speaks French and Ghost Dog English, but they somehow manage to establish an affectionate rapport that bypasses verbal connection. And when Ghost Dog reprimands Raymond for carrying a gun, Raymond responds, as Thel does in *Dead Man*, that, after all, they live in America. The joke carries echoes of earlier films: in *Mystery Train*, when Jun hears a gun shot in the hotel, he shrugs his shoulders and tells Mitzuko that this is America; and at the end of the New York episode of *Night on Earth*, Helmut drives through a part of Brooklyn that looks like a warzone and sighs, "Ah . . . New York."

At a less anecdotal level, *Ghost Dog* shares a number of traits with Blake and Nobody. Like both of them, he is an outsider, and like Blake, he becomes violent only in reaction to other people's aggression. He has Blake's skill as a killer but not his listlessness and bewilderment. On the contrary, he has the intellectual dimension of Nobody and lives his life as deliberately. His devotion to Tsunetomo's *Hagakure* is parallel to Nobody's love for Blake; texts are paramount in their lives and help them to order their existence amid chaotic surroundings. These master texts are charged with moral ambiguity. In Nobody's view, Blake's poetry justifies the use of violence, and he consequently encourages Depp's Blake to become a killer; *Hagakure* justifies violence in the service of one's master or to preserve one's honor. (Tsunetomo's book gives minute advice about when and where to "cut" someone and how to perform a beheading and encourages practice of these skills.) Nobody, Blake, and *Ghost Dog* all move toward "inevitable death," but with slight differ-

ences. Death is final in *Dead Man* but less so in *Ghost Dog*, since, after the protagonist's end, his values may survive in Pearline, a bookish girl who inherits the black samurai's copy of *Hagakure*. The last shot of the film shows her engrossed in the manual, just as Ghost Dog had been at the outset, positing her as a Ghost Dog in the making and suggesting that the story may repeat itself in the future.

It is congruent with Jarmusch's respect for literature that books endure beyond the time of the story and the life of the protagonist. A book determines Ghost Dog's existence and may also determine Pearline's, and texts and stories in different formats dominate the film. Just like Cervantes's Quixote became possessed by old chivalry books and Ghost Dog by the teachings of *Hagakure*, the film is possessed by a cultural memory that it seems compelled to reenact, returning to what has already been filmed, written, and read. This secondhand quality of the film, where telling is always a retelling, and where creating inevitably entails re-creating the archive, is a familiar modernist trait. It evokes the densely allusive modernism practiced by aestheticists such as T. S. Eliot or James Joyce and the more politicized modernism stemming from Bertolt Brecht. Intertextuality has a different purpose in each case: in aestheticism it implicitly defends the supremacy of art over life and enthrones a particular canon; in political modernism it reveals the constructed character of the text and fosters critical distance—the Brechtian alienation effect—rather than acritical immersion.¹⁷ Intertextuality is also central to the vernacular modernism of hip-hop culture, which is closer to political modernism than to aestheticism. Rap, which makes up much of the soundtrack in the film, is constructed out of the already recorded and based on break-beats of preexisting tracks that are played—or sampled—to form a continuous loop. In the end, the intertextuality of *Ghost Dog* has aestheticist and Brechtian connotations: it contains a reflection about the power of texts to shape rather than reflect experience and highlights the constructedness of the story, but without dispelling the illusion.

Ghost Dog's life is the effect of textuality not only because his character quotes from a number of filmic antecedents, but also because texts define who he is and how he lives. His own narrative of the incident in which Louie saved him prompts him to make a commitment that changes the course of his life. His interpretation may be wrong, but in

the terms of the film, what matters is its performative effect: the fact that the stories one tells—or tells oneself—are of enormous consequence since they not only tell *about* things but also help to bring them about. In *Ghost Dog*, there seems to be nothing outside the text, to recall the well-known Derridean maxim, since “living” is quoting—it is always between quotation marks—and quoting is a way of living. The excerpts from *Hagakure* that recur through the story reveal the tight interpenetration of life and text. They appear as intertitles placed outside the flow of the story but remain linked to it in various ways. Ghost Dog’s offscreen voice reads the texts as they appear on the screen, a fact that highlights the extent to which he has internalized them. In addition, many of the quotations from *Hagakure* seem to anticipate the progress of the plot and take precedence over the visuals. An early quotation stating that “the way of the samurai is found in death” is edited to cut-away shots of guns and knives on Ghost Dog’s desk and foreshadows the protagonist’s violent demise. Another one proclaiming that “it is bad when one thing becomes two” predicts the division of loyalties that Louie and Ghost Dog experience in the course of the film and that will prove their undoing. And a later one declaring that “the condition of the samurai is complete devotion to one’s master” is edited to a close-up of Louie—this is the first time we see him in the film. Other quotes from *Hagakure* give the story some thoughtful density. A dream sequence in which Ghost Dog remembers how Louie saved his life ends with the intertitle: “It is a good viewpoint to see the world as a dream.” And as Ghost Dog lovingly repairs his weapons, we are reminded that “there is nothing other than the single purpose of the present moment. . . . If one fully understands the present moment, there will be nothing else to do, and nothing else to pursue”—hence the care the samurai puts into his daily routines. At times, the relation between the text inserts and the image is humorous. In preparation for his assault on the Mafiosi’s lair, Ghost Dog drops his habitual black duds for an elegant blue suit stolen at gunpoint from a hapless nightclubber; while he changes clothes in a highway rest area, a quote extols the usefulness of a bit of powered rouge to freshen a samurai’s faded complexion and to keep him looking good even in battle—or in death. Later on, a parable about staying calm in a storm—“you will not be perplexed, though you still get the same

soaking”—is edited to a raging rainfall in which Ghost Dog is caught as he resolutely drives to his last job, the killing of Sonny Valerio.

A universe where quotations and textual memories have the power to determine the future with such precision is inevitably tinged with the fantastic. The film takes place in a space that is at once real and somewhat magical. On the one hand, its setting is that of a social-realist text or a rap track—a slumlike sprawl dotted with overgrown empty lots, disused industrial structures, and ruined apartment buildings. Yet for all these signifiers of urban squalor, it is also a magical space with ample room for the unreal. A Hispanic man builds a boat on a rooftop; two men who do not speak each other's language read each other's thoughts; a dog haunts a black man who lives like an eleventh-century samurai on the top of a deserted building; a book cuts a loop through the story, changing hands several times and eventually returning to its owner; guns wound even when they do not go off; gangsters (like Sonny Valerio) cite rappers (like Flavor Flav), and rappers sing about “trigger-happy Mafiosos” and effectively foreshadow much of what happens in the story. The fantastic may be seen as a carryover from Akutagawa's stories. An important exponent of Japanese modernism, Akutagawa was familiar with the European literature of his times; he translated Anatole France and W. B. Yeats but also remained faithful to Japanese tradition. Like Yeats, he was fascinated with folktales and myths; many of his short stories, the genre at which he excelled, were based on legends compiled between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries and are fantastic in character. Among the tales in *Rashomon*, “In a Grove,” the main source for Kurosawa's film, features the ghost of a murdered man speaking through a medium. “Rashomon” takes place on a stormy night laden with supernatural intimations. In “Yam Gruel,” a fox carries messages between people and delivers them into the addressee's dreams. And in “The Dragon,” a priest plans a hoax on his community by predicting that a dragon will rise from a pond on a given day and, when the day comes and a large crowd has gathered to watch the wonder, it actually happens, to his great astonishment.

The fantastic elements give the film the character of a cartoon, an alternative reality where physical laws are momentarily suspended, where humans and animals appear in narrow interaction, as humans are ani-

malized and animals humanized. This is especially the case in relation to Ghost Dog, who seems engaged in subliminal communication with a neighborhood dog, is compared to a bear, and is closely associated with his pigeons. Like the pigeons, he is a means of contact, linking present and past and connecting a number of textual references and cultural memories. And he is also locked into an invariable circuit of departure and return governed by Louie's orders. He embodies a certain "becoming animal"—an oscillation between the human and nonhuman, as well as a restructuring of human perceptions and reflexes by association with animals (figure 18). Is this why *Ghost Dog* insistently cites cartoons? They appear on the screens of the televisions that the gangsters constantly watch. Like the fragments from *Hagakure*, the cartoons frequently forecast the future. At the beginning of the film, Louise watches Betty Boop flying her pigeons just as Ghost Dog does in a subsequent segment. (There is a further parallel between them: Betty Boop was initially conceived by its creators at the Fleischer studios as a mixture of dog and human.) Shortly before the Mafiosi receive a message from Ghost Dog announcing his imminent revenge on them, Vargo has been watching a cartoon in which a white-moustached professor complains about being frustrated by "Felix the Cat and his bag of tricks." Ghost Dog is black like Felix, also carries a briefcase, and is about to bring more than just



Figure 18. Forest Whitaker. *Ghost Dog*.
Frame enlargement.

frustration to the gang. And Sonny Valerio's death is prefigured by another cartoon in which a dog-cop shoots his gun into a pipe on the side of a house and the bullets end up coming out of the shower on a thief who is hiding in the bathtub. When they do not forecast the future, the cartoons replicate what is happening in the "real" world of the film. In an earlier scene, when Ghost Dog is hiding in the forest that surrounds the clan's shelter, he becomes distracted by a woodpecker; at exactly the same time, Vargo and his daughter Louise are driving up to the compound and watching a Woody Woodpecker cartoon on the car's television. And when Ghost Dog is on the rampage killing off the clan's gunmen, Vargo sits and watches a shootout between Koko the Clown and an elk, unaware that a similar scene is taking place under his own roof.

The cartoons might be read as a comment on the schematic and lurid mental life of the gangsters, who are the main spectators of the animation fragments, but they also highlight the artificiality of the film as a whole. In this respect, their effect is similar to that of the soundtrack. It was composed by the RZA, a member of the Wu-Tang Clan, and consists largely of synthesized sounds containing reedy keyboard phrases, programmed rhythms, and eastern chimes and gongs. (There are, in addition, raps by the Wu-Tang Clan, the RZA, and Killah Priest, a sample from Jimmy Lyons's free-jazz piece "Nuba Time," and a fragment of Willie Williams's classic "Armageddon Time" that introduces Ghost Dog's last killing spree.) The cartoons, with their highly improbable relation to the plot, and the RZA's electronic, exoticist soundtrack contribute to turning the film into an artificial universe of the kind that has always been consubstantial to rap. With its unconventional approach to composition and interpretation, unprecedented juxtapositions, layering, and technophilia, rap is a monument to aural artifice. Perhaps for this reason it has frequently been attracted to the world of science-fiction, video games (the source of many of its sonic atmospheres), comic books, and cartoons. The taste for the synthetic, which runs through much of contemporary black music, implicitly rejects the racist identification of Africa and its diasporic cultures with nature and savagery—jazz as the beat of the jungle, R&B as the pulse of primeval sexuality, and so on—but it has other connotations as well. According to futurists and electro-masters such as Sun Ra and George Clinton, artificiality is the defining condition of the African Diaspora: there is nothing natural about the situation of

a people forcibly wrenched from their original settings and relocated as aliens in America. For all its seeming evasiveness, Afro-futurism conveys a deep sense of cultural dislocation (Eshun).

The artificial may also be interpreted as a survivalist aesthetic whose main concern is not the recovery and cultivation of the authentic—what may once have been—but what to do with what is left: a messy present and a heterogeneous cultural archive. The aesthetics of artifice affirms the possibilities of the synthetic, the hothouse mix, the lateral identifications and projections that make cultures and identities always plural and derivative. If this seems to contradict *Ghost Dog*'s earthiness—his love of nature, his selective rejection of money and technology—it is consistent with his devotion to the samurai code, which, like all codes, is an arbitrary set of restrictions imposed on “life.” Equally artificial is his fixation with ancient Japan, which, in terms of time, space, and ethnicity, is remote from his immediate circumstances. And yet, if there are no direct “organic” links between *Ghost Dog* and his choice of lifestyle, there are analogical ones. The samurai class proliferated in Japan in times of internal division, when central authority was lacking, but it began to disappear in the late seventeenth century, when the centralized government of the Tokugawa limited the power of the feudal lords and their retainers. The film renders the present in the light of feudal Japan—as an era of decay and disintegration when authority has imploded and in its vacuum atomized coteries thrive. Hence there is much irony in Louise's and Pearline's reaction to Akutagawa's *Rashomon* stories: that “ancient Japan was a pretty weird place.” Its weirdness, the film suggests, is actually not far from the weirdness of the present. In this volatile milieu, the figure of the samurai gives *Ghost Dog* a model for survival; it combines ascetic spirituality, demanding a simple but highly regulated living, with the mastery of the art and the “poetry of war,” as Vargo puts it in a rare moment of insight (figure 19).

Ghost Dog is not the first to notice the resemblance between the ancient martial artist and the contemporary slum survivor. Before *Ghost Dog* there were *Black Belt Jones* (1974) and *Black Samurai* (1976), both starring Jim Kelly, an African American karateka whose film debut had been in the phenomenally successful *Enter the Dragon* (1974). *Enter the Dragon* made Bruce Lee, who died shortly after the film's premiere, an international star and is credited with inaugurating the martial arts genre



Figure 19. Forest Whitaker. *Ghost Dog*. © 1999 Plywood Productions, Inc. Photo: Abbot Genser.

in the United States.¹⁸ It was a low-grade Warner Brothers production that sought to capitalize on the growing popularity of Hong Kong martial arts films in American drive-ins and inner-city theaters in the early 1970s. While the first Hong Kong films to emerge in the United States were productions from the Shaw Brothers studio, the most popular titles were the Golden Harvest Studios releases featuring Lee: *Fists of Fury* (a.k.a. *The Big Boss*) and *The Chinese Connection* (a.k.a. *Fist of Fury*).

The early martial arts films were fairly standard in plot; they typically pitted ordinary folk with extraordinary fighting expertise against tyrants, corrupt law enforcers, drug cartels, or crime syndicates (Desser 104–5). Perhaps because of their anti-authoritarian bent and stylistic flair, they found immediate echo among subcultural and inner-city audiences disaffected with mainstream culture; African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos were the genre's initial constituencies. An additional attraction for these audiences may have been that martial arts films did not pivot on Caucasian protagonists—although this would change in time. Some U.S. forerunners of the Hong Kong martial arts invasion could actually be classed as minority cinema. Tom Laughlin's Billy Jack films, *Born Losers* and *Billy Jack*, center on a half-white, half-Native American

protagonist who uses his skill in hapkido to fight corrupt local authorities. Another example could be blaxploitation, a genre centered on a lonely but skilled protagonist striking against large-scale evil. Some titles even featured karate chops and kicks—as did the polemical *Superfly*.

The creators of *Enter the Dragon*, the producer Fred Weintraub and the director Robert Clouse, tried to repeat the success of their Lee vehicle by specifically targeting black youth. The result was *Black Belt Jones* and *Black Samurai*, which tried to benefit from Kelly's previous exposure alongside Bruce Lee, as well as other Kelly vehicles such as *Hot Potato*, also by Weintraub/Clouse, and *Three the Hard Way*, by the director of *Superfly*, Gordon Parks Jr. In these movies, blaxploitation and martial arts briefly crossed paths, but the formula did not endure. Blaxploitation slowly petered out toward the mid-1970s, but black audiences remained loyal to the martial arts film. Hip-hop culture shows traces of this loyalty. Some martial arts moves have lodged in the repertoire of break-dancers, and break dancing—a competitive display in which dancers challenge each other—borrows the structure of one-to-one combat. In addition, the pioneer DJ Grandmaster Flash mixed in his name the DC Comics superhero Flash with the Shaolin temple grandmasters (Toop, *Rap* 128–29). And the rapper DMX has appeared in some Jet Li films. But the Wu-Tang Clan has made the crossing of rap with martial arts lore their trademark. The band introduces itself as “straight from the slums of Shaolin.” Their first album, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)*, alludes to two Hong Kong hits in its title and uses numerous samples from Shaw Brothers films. Their videos (for “Gravel Pit” and “Da Mystery of Chessboxin’,” for example) occasionally feature ninjas and fight scenes, and their theme, “Careful,” talks about the way of the samurai, a self-conscious reference to their collaboration with Jarmusch.¹⁹

Such cross-currents of sympathy between black and eastern culture show the ability of black culture—and ultimately of all culture—to combine disparate sources and operate as a translation machine. Only this is a process where there are no original and target texts but momentary relay stations in a chain of connection that stretches indefinitely into the past and will continue into the future. Hence the black youth's appropriation of martial arts film, whether in music or as a sign repertoire, is not simply a western assimilation of an eastern form. It operates on a wildly hybrid genre whose immediate origins are in the Japanese

samurai films (the *Jidai-geki* genre) and the Chinese *wu-xia*, but their more distant ancestors are the American Westerns and gangster films of the 1930s and 1940s, which influenced Kurosawa, among other eastern directors. In turn, Westerns and gangster pictures have their own intricate genealogies. In some ways, *Ghost Dog* continues this process of translation, appropriation, and combination and suggests that identity is an accumulation of citations and is inevitably mediated through texts. To paraphrase Homi Bhabha, there is no “human” quality outside the processes of translation and quotation through which “being” accedes to its historicity and clears out a place—or rather, a number of them—for itself in the world (203). Ultimately, the emphasis on translation may be the reason why the dissolve is the most widely used transition in the film. It is used as a means of condensation rather than displacement, as a metaphoric rather than metonymic procedure that fosters equivalence and analogy rather than spatial and temporal continuity. It blends and integrates, turning, for example, a bird in flight into a landscape, a face into a row of houses, or a close-up of guns and knives into a block of text. When used to abridge the protagonist’s movements, the dissolve creates an ectoplasmic aura around him and highlights his ghostliness—his shadowiness and stealth but also his being always multiple, haunted by a plurality of textual traces (figure 20).



Figure 20. Forest Whitaker. *Ghost Dog*.
Frame enlargement.

Being haunted by traces is also haunting these traces, traversing them, and making one's home in them. In the same way that *Ghost Dog* inhabits a derelict postmetropolitan setting dotted with memories of earlier forms of production, he inhabits the cultural archive—and so does the film as a whole. *Ghost Dog* offers an image of a different kind of dwelling, one that takes place in the sign—in texts and cultural memories—as much as in actual physical spaces. This is something that Jarmusch's characters have always done: Allie Parker lives in the “real” space of the Lower East Side as much as in the *Chants de Maldoror* and jazz; Willie lives mostly in his Americanness; Esther in her cult of Screamin' Jay Hawkins; Jun and Mitzuko in 1950s rockabilly; and Nobody in William Blake's poetry. Their identity is a matter of elective affinity with a cluster of texts that they choose to “occupy,” not a natural emanation of their body and national-familial origin. In the case of *Ghost Dog*, living in the virtual space of the sign can be contrasted with the characters' precarious hold on literal space. The film's physical landscape is an accumulation of ruins occasionally relieved by a hospitable park or street corner; the Mafiosos' houses are up for sale—a suggestion of imminent removal; the factories and industrial structures visible from *Ghost Dog*'s rooftop have been abandoned; and *Ghost Dog*'s own home, perhaps the first space to deserve the name in Jarmusch's oeuvre, is intimate and inviting but lacks solidity—it is a plywood affair erected on the roof of a boarded-up structure, and proves vulnerable to trespass and destruction. Architectural spaces provide little shelter; in contrast, books, memories, and the codes of mobsters and samurais provide more durable protection.

The fragility and impermanence of physical space provides a tangible counterpart for a number of temporal disruptions—in particular, the rupture of narrative and history. *Ghost Dog* unfolds in a world of looped temporality where the past haunts the present and moving forward consists in bringing back the texts of the past. History and narrative do not order the world effectively. Their power to structure experience is undermined by the impermanence of the present and the traumatic irruption of death. At the same time, history and especially narrative are not abandoned but compulsively reenacted, perhaps because, uncertain as they may be, they still offer a handle on experience. Rather than a rejection of the past and its fictions, the film enacts a temporary habita-

tion of their possibilities; it outlines an afterlife pieced together from textual odds and ends, from the sifting of history's remains.

I use the terms “piecing” and “sifting” deliberately, for they imply not only a textual process but also a physical one of groping one's way around. Groping is present in the tactility that the film insistently recreates through the depiction of Ghost Dog's delicate, almost ritualistic way of holding his birds, breaking into cars and houses, and generally playing with things—his gadgets, briefcase, and guns. This emphasis on the tactile brings the choreographic nature of martial arts cinema from the macro- to the micrological level, that is, from the acrobatic fighting to minute quotidian gestures. These gestures show Ghost Dog making himself at home in an intricate but habitable material world. While tactile manipulation often “lines” action scenes, it also has some of the quality of spectacle: it provides moments given to contemplation, instants that seem to stand outside clock time and plot development. Perhaps because, as he reads in *Hagakure*, the way of the samurai resides in self-denial and death, and because “every day, without fail, one should consider oneself as dead”—orphan of the grand designs of time—he can abandon himself entirely to the immediacy of the instant and the feel of the world: to the opulence of the cars he steals, the sensuousness of music, the touch of his customized weapons, the openness of the solitary spaces he slides over at night.

In such moments, perhaps the most intimate and peculiar in the film, vision re-creates touching and can actually be said to be modeled after it. There are ways of seeing that are akin to ways of touching, as Roland Barthes and Roger Cardinal have pointed out, and they consist in lingering on the margins of the image rather than taking in its global design; seeing as touching reverts to the kind of interval that Jarmusch's films have always sought to explore—the molecular aspects of experience, the plotless incidents and dead times. These moments are not exactly utopian, however. They are inhabited by mismatches and mistimings that entail their undoing and are embedded in stories that move toward death and defeat. They provide fleeting illuminations but not blueprints for action. At most, they seem to recommend something as inchoate as a degree of respect—in the etymological sense of attentively looking (and looking back)—toward the intricacy of the world. It may not be much, but to invoke more might be misleading. The inability to

imagine an elsewhere—"You come someplace new and everything looks just the same"—may be a limitation in Jarmusch's films; yet this limitation is also these films' greatest critical strength: the notion that, in an essentially damaged world, utopia cannot be anything more substantial than a fleeting shadow.

"Strange How People's Lives Change": *Broken Flowers*

In his two latest films, Jarmusch has evolved from the multilayered, quotational style of the 1990s to the simplicity of his beginnings. *Coffee and Cigarettes* goes back to the spare, absurdist style of the shorts he made in the mid- to late 1980s, and *Broken Flowers*, with its episodic structure, emphasis on duration, and reliance on gesture and speech peculiarities, seems closer to *Mystery Train* or *Night on Earth* than to *Dead Man* or *Ghost Dog*.

Broken Flowers was financed and distributed by Focus Features, a new player that is poised to become the main purveyor of art cinema in the United States, particularly after control of Miramax reverted to Disney in May 2005. Created in 2002 from the merger of two small independents, USA Films and Good Machine, Focus Features is currently the specialty unit of Universal Pictures (part of the NBC Universal conglomerate). It has a genre and "urban" division (Rogue Pictures, responsible for such thrillers as *Altered*, *Assault on Precinct 13*, and *Unleashed*), but its mainstay have been quality productions. Focus has attracted young non-American directors with art-house potential either by funding their work, as with Walter Selles (*Motorcycle Diaries*), Fernando Meirelles (*The Constant Gardener*), and Alejandro González-Iñárritu (*21 Grams*), or by distributing their overseas productions (François Ozon's *8 Women* and *The Swimming Pool*). The company has also supported older, well-established auteurs: among its earlier successes were Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (distributed by Focus in the United States) and Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*, recipient of several Academy Awards.

There is nothing surprising about Focus's interest in Jarmusch. One of Focus's main hits was Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*, which goes over emotional and stylistic terrain opened by Jarmusch two decades earlier: the difficulties of communication and the elusive significance of

uneventful moments and liminal intimacies. But if, to an extent, Coppola was building upon Jarmusch's legacy, *Broken Flowers* also segues on *Lost in Translation*, a fact captured by the press—"Bill Murray jumps from *Lost in Translation* to Jarmusch's films," read a Spanish headline—and noted by Jarmusch himself, who expressed concern that the film may ride as "*Lost in Translation* meets [Alexander Payne's] *Sideways*." Like *Lost in Translation*, *Broken Flowers* dwells on the disenchantment of middle age, cannily showcases the poetry of public spaces, and features Bill Murray as an anomic fifty-something on the verge of crisis. And it gestures playfully toward the earlier film: in the midst of his road trips, Don Johnston (Bill Murray) complains to his friend and neighbor Winston (Jeffrey Wright), who organized the logistics of his travels, that he should have rented for him "something that I might be able to drive, like a Porsche"—mentioned in Coppola's film as symbol of male smugness. And Don's presumed son claims to be interested in philosophy, just like Scarlett Johansson's character in *Lost in Translation*.

Broken Flowers mixes ingredients from the road movie, the romantic comedy, and the detective story, but, in 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. The film narrates the adventures of Don Johnston, a retired executive who made his fortune in computers. As his current girlfriend, Sherry, (Julie Delpy) walks out on him ("I don't think I want to be with an over-the-hill Don Juan any more"), he receives an anonymous typewritten letter on pink stationery informing him that he has a nineteen-year-old son who may be looking for him. At the instigation of his neighbor, Winston, an Ethiopian immigrant "with three jobs and five children" and a fondness for Web-surfing and detective fiction, Don grudgingly agrees to visit his former girlfriends and to find out who may have given birth to his "hypothetical son," as he likes to put it. Through the Internet, Winston finds out these women's addresses and practically pushes Don out of the house to search for an answer. Predictably, the search yields only a series of puzzling encounters with an array of vastly different women who were once close to him: the "closet organizer" Laura (Sharon Stone) and her daughter Lolita (Alexis Dziena); the hippie-turned-real-estate-agent

Dora (Frances Conroy); the “animal communicator” Carmen (Jessica Lange); and the biker girl Penny (Tilda Swinton), who lives out in the country with a posse of motorcyclists. A fifth one, Michelle, died in a car crash, and Don has a rare emotional moment when he leaves flowers on her grave. Back in his hometown, Don spots a young man (Mark Webber) who looks like a runaway. When he tactlessly approaches him to find out if he is searching for his father, the youth panics and bolts away. By the end, it seems that all Don has gained from his troubles is a bewildering glimpse at his past.

The bewilderment is both Don’s and the spectator’s. It is Don’s because his sentimental journey gives him an estranged image of himself and his loves. The four women are extremely different from each other in temperament, lifestyle, and social class, and it is hard to imagine them connected to the same man. Don is visibly discomfited by how each of his former girlfriends has evolved, and he seems completely unable to connect with them. Dora and Carmen are distant and mistrustful, and Penny is outright hostile (“I don’t remember any happy end with you,” she says, tense with resentment) and eventually loses her temper when he inquires if she ever had a son. Her distress prompts her protective biker friends to punch Don: “Coming around here . . . and upsetting Penny like that. That just seems so rude,” groans one of them (Larry Fessenden) as he mashes his fist into Don’s face. Only Laura shows any warmth: she breaks into an open smile when she recognizes him and remains easygoing and appreciative through his visit. She and Don end up sleeping together and, in a touching gesture, she kisses his hand when he leaves the morning after. Her warmth does not completely close the gap between them, a gap caused by the time gone by and, perhaps, by class difference. While Don waits for Laura under the flirtatious attention of Laura’s precocious daughter Lolita, he is slightly put off by the kitschy living room décor, the junk piled up in the front lawn—they are having a yard sale—and the souped-up car in the driveway. And after their tryst, he is in a hurry to get away. With Dora and Carmen the gap is more a matter of lifestyle than class: Dora has settled for profit and faux elegance selling pretentious “quality prefab homes” in partnership with her friendly but unctuous husband (Christopher McDonald), and Carmen is a New Age animal therapist who helps pets and their owners communicate with each other.

Each of Don's exes conceals a story that the film barely hints at. Carmen is the only one who talks about her trajectory: she started out as a successful lawyer, but after the death of her beloved dog Winston, she came into possession of her gift: "I could hear animals speak to me." However, there is no explanation for why Dora evolved from a beautiful, relaxed "hippie chick"—as her husband calls her—to an uptight suburbanite, a contrast that becomes painfully visible when her husband brings to the dinner table an old picture of a smiling Dora with flowers in her hair and a peace sign around her neck. And there is no explanation either for why Penny ended up living in a remote rural area with a coterie of rough young men, or in what kind of relation she stands to them. Don emerges from these sentimental visits none the wiser about his son and increasingly mystified about the odd figure cut by his love life. The same mystification may affect spectators, who are made to share Don's puzzlement about his past and, in addition, learn very little about him along the way. There are no clues about his own personal history, about what kind of man he was, what he felt about each of these women, what their relationship was like, or why he was attracted to them in the first place.

Such lack of knowledge is the result of the characters' enormous reticence. Don is tight-lipped and awkward, even if one can divine currents of sentiment under his stiff exterior. When Winston inquires after his girlfriend Sherry, he merely states that "she left." The film shows the very end of their breakup and does not spell out the reason for it, but Sherry's words suggest that Don's aloofness and his lack of interest in family life may have played a part. When he is face-to-face with his old loves, he says little about himself and hardly dares to pop the question about his son. (The only time he does so outright, he meets with catastrophic results.) Dora and Carmen are equally hermetic. Dora's nervous self-suppression suggests an extraordinary fragility, as if she were afraid of stirring memories and desires that might unsettle a precarious balance. Carmen never drops her guard, perhaps with some justification; Don is obviously unreceptive to her values and ideas and repeatedly calls her "an animal psychic," and it does not help that her cat suggests that Don has a hidden agenda. She is uncomfortable revealing much about herself: she concedes that she was married for a while and has a daughter, but she refuses to provide much detail. Her young assistant (Chloë Sevigny) hovers about her protectively and eyes Don peevishly. At one point she

affectionately pats Carmen on the back, urging her to drop the annoying visitor and get back to work. An instant later, as Don is about to drive off, she strides out of the office to return the flowers he had left behind as a gift to Carmen. Are she and Carmen lovers? Is this why Carmen is unwilling to talk to an old flame about her present life?

And how can one interpret the film's ending? Is the cagey young man Don sees ambling about town his hypothetical son? Or is the entire story a hoax played by a spiteful Sherry? At the end of the film, as they confer about the outcome of the search in their favorite coffee shop, Don shows Winston a piece of pink paper with a message from Sherry: the paper and handwriting are identical to those of the anonymous letter. Winston picks it up and hurries home to subject it to "forensic examination." Immediately afterwards, Don spots the mysterious young man and decides to approach him, suddenly forgetting that it might all have been a prank. So is it a hoax or is it true? Or has his discouraging pilgrimage to his old loves made him see his life in a different light and triggered a desire for family connection—for a son, even a fake one? If this is the case, then Sherry wins out in the end ("I guess she still cares about you," says Winston after reading her message), and the film closes with a humanistic note of nostalgia for family and intimacy that is unusual for Jarmusch. Yet the final shot underlines that this is mere longing that may never be fulfilled. As the freaked-out young man scampers away ("Man, you're fucked up," are his parting words), Don stands frozen in the middle of the street while the camera whirls around him, underlining his isolation, more complete now that it may no longer be wanted. Some of the films of Jean Eustache, to whom *Broken Flowers* is dedicated, enact a similar contradiction between the desire for love and the personal inertias (selfishness, self-absorption) that undercut it. Eustache's most famous title, *The Mother and the Whore*—like *Broken Flowers*, it was presented at Cannes, where it created a scandal—pits the longing for emotional stability and commitment against the drive toward disengagement. The similarities are only thematic, however: while *Broken Flowers* is supremely laconic and subdued, *The Mother and the Whore* is torrentially verbal and passionate.

In addition to Don's isolation, the whirling camera outlines a gap at the center of the film—the gap of its protagonist, still fairly unknown, after all—and, en abyme within this gap, the gap of the unanswered

question (was there ever a son?). The movement might also allude to the plot's circularity. The adventure finishes where it began: right by the coffee house where Winston handed over to Don his exes' addresses and the itinerary to follow. But after all the traveling, it is clear that there is no answer to the original question, only more questions without answers. From the opening mystery to a series of concentric holes—gaps within gaps—at the end, the film is an elegant exercise in ellipsis, a narrative where telling largely consists in not telling; all it provides is a passing glimpse at events and characters that are vividly, if fragmentarily, conveyed, but thoroughly unknown.

The vividness comes from the film's use of objects and spaces. While characters are taciturn, the things and settings around them are loquacious. They telegraph a quality that Bertolt Brecht called "the *gestus*": a host of class attitudes, aspirations, and ideologies embedded in gestures and appearances (Brecht 104, 198). The film might be more about the gestic potential of objects and places than about individual lives—that is, more a materialist ethnography of the everyday than a psychological study of the disillusionment of the middle years and the aftermath of romance. Before we meet Don and Winston, the main players in the story, a lateral tracking shot shows their adjoining houses. Winston's is chaotic and lively: a colorful wooden structure with a toy-strewn, unkempt lawn where his children romp around. Don's is a modernist structure of brick, glass, and stone with a carefully landscaped yard surrounded by an imposing hedge; it suggests affluence and fastidiousness but is also slightly impersonal, like his tidy living room, done up in dark wood and chrome, decorated with designer furniture and modern art, and boasting an expensive television and sound system. Winston's place is painted in bright colors, cluttered, overrun with children, and hung with batiks and tapestries that recall his African origins (one of them homages the Ethiopian musician Mulatu Astatke, whose music Don listens to in his journeys). When he is home, Don is usually motionless among his possessions—one more thing among things—and glued to two emblems of inactivity: the couch and the television. Winston, in contrast, appears irrepressibly kinetic, even when sitting at the computer or chatting over coffee, in part because he is enthusiastic and expansive; his love of the Web suggests a fascination with connectedness that is the reverse of Don's inertness and self-isolation.

The opening opposition between Winston's and Don's milieus establishes a number of polarities that the film largely abides by: between upper middle and lower middle (or working) classness; order and messiness; austerity and excess; communicativeness and withdrawal; and generosity and stinginess. Laura's slightly flashy, cheap car and bright yellow house denote her lowbrow taste but also generosity and lust for life, and the mementoes of her late auto-racing husband that clutter her living room suggest a fondly remembered passion. Laura's space is also sexualized, first by means of Laura's daughter, who is bubbly and flirtatious and at one point walks stark naked into the living room to retrieve her gem-encrusted cellphone before Don's astonished eyes, and later by the rekindling of Laura's and Don's desire for each other. Generosity and passion are completely absent from Dora's glacial surroundings or from Carmen's sedate, tastefully appointed office. Dora's house is the epitome of bland artifice: clinically tidy, decorated in chilling beiges and pastels, affected, and rather unlivable—even the dinner she and her husband prepare is pedantically arranged on the plates and unappetizing. Carmen's office is warmer: rugs, floor cushions, and folk paintings give it a vaguely earthy flavor, but it is meticulously orderly and, like Dora's and Don's places, it suggests self-containment and withdrawal; access to it is guarded by Carmen's assistant, who carefully apportions the doctor's time. Finally, Penny's space is dominated by clutter, which in her case does not connote openhandedness but trauma. Rather than toys or mementoes, her property is strewn with rusting car parts, a broken typewriter (a clue?), and old furniture: they evoke poverty, neglect, and emotional wreckage whose particulars are never specified. In a way, the characters serve as excuses to delve into the intricacy of the object world—a world that, from Eva's tape player in *Stranger than Paradise*, to Mitzuko's Elvis picture collection, to Ghost Dog's weapons, to the table-top assortments of *Coffee and Cigarettes*, Jarmusch has always foregrounded, yet only in his latest film does it relegate characters and their stories to a secondary plane.

The prominence of objects explains the odd feel of the film—its combination of vividness and distance. “Object talk” combines hard-edged presence and textural detail with vague conceptual nuance and therefore it is concrete *and* abstract, clear *and* diffuse. Because the main channels of information turn out to be settings and things rather than

language, all exchanges are highly coded in terms of presence, posture, “gestus,” and atmosphere but low in verbal content. Object talk is also based on juxtaposition rather than on the kinds of modulations and transitions typical of language or (traditional) music. This abruptness is reflected in the composition of the sequences, which contain abundant cutaways to close-ups of things usually framed from Don’s point of view. Juxtaposition dominates the film, which is structured as a number of episodes connected by transitional scenes where Don drives or flies from ex to ex.

Such a structure owes as much to the modular minimalism of Jar-musch’s beginnings and the staccato presence of objects as to the kind of physical space in which the story unfolds. This space is the suburban sprawl: the dispersed habitat that became predominant in the United States after World War II. The critic and historian Edward Dimendberg has characterized this type of space as “centrifugal,” as opposed to the centralized (or “centripetal”) space of the metropolis in the first half of the twentieth century. Centripetal space was characterized by continuity and concentration of architectural and human “events”; in contrast, centrifugal space is discontinuous and relatively uneventful. It consists of low-density housing developments, industrial areas, and malls tied together by a network of highways, airports, and roads. *Broken Flowers* alternates between the spaces of intimacy—emotional nodes of the film and settings for the (admittedly low-key) “events”—and the communication network that Don uses to move across the country—places of transit where, as a rule, nothing happens. This “nothingness” has been explored by such artists as John Baldessari (*National City*), Ed Ruscha (*34 Parking Lots*, *24 Gas Stations*), Dan Graham (*Homes for Americans*), and Stephen Shore, to name a few. Their photographs explored the formal qualities of centrifugal space, emphasizing its nonexpressiveness, flatness, and ersatz quality by means of frontal framing and flat lighting. *Broken Flowers* is an exponent of this aesthetic. It spends most of its time in bland suburbs, impersonal motels, airport lounges, and highways and portrays them with a mixture of bemused interest and detachment.

The uneventfulness and impersonality of these locations condition the many intimate moments in which there is no communication or activity, only silence and inertness. It is as if the traits of centrifugal space invaded the nodes of intimacy. The prime example is Dora’s “sample”

house: a semipublic space designed to drive prospective consumers through in the hope of luring them into a purchase. Yet the most insidious invasion of the personal by the impersonal is caused by the generalization of the panoramic perception associated with centrifugal space. As a space designed for traffic flow and navigated from moving vehicles, it imposes a distance between the traveler and the territory, the viewer and the view, and it constantly mediates the relation between people and the physical environment by means of technological supplements. The panoramic perspective prompts, in Dimendberg's terms, a "poetics of distance, speed, pleasure, and technologically mediated solitude" (205). Speed and pleasure do not directly apply—Don complains to Winston that he is "a stalker in a Taurus" when he really wanted a Porsche, and rather than pleased by his journeys, he seems alternately jaded and apprehensive. However, "distance" and "technologically mediated solitude" precisely describe the tone of most personal exchanges in the film. Don looks at the world as through the windshield of a moving car. Among other characters, cellphones and the Internet are privileged means of communication: they bring up the possibility of relation but also the need to mediate it through technology and distance. This need may be why face-to-face encounters tend to fail and (with the possible exception of Winston and Laura) characters are more at ease speaking on cellphones or telephones. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that the film's dystopian perception of suburban space and mediated (mis)communication is tinged with nostalgia: nowhere in Jarmusch's oeuvre is it suggested that the walkable, centripetal city ever made things easier. Missed encounters and misunderstandings are unavoidable: to be is to miss the point and the other. Jarmusch's earlier films mediate this awareness through dialogues at cross-purposes, language and culture clash, and wrong timing, while *Broken Flowers* does it through postmetropolitan spatiality and electronic gadgetry.

Broken Flowers can be read as a commentary on the contemporary everyday, but it is also a self-enclosed artifact governed by a tautological dynamic of mirroring and replication. A letter that announces a search (of a son for his father) engenders another search (of the father for the likely mother). The search is a highly regulated game—rather like the French artist Sophie Calle's performances and rituals—and is therefore not only generated by the letter but also by a number of constraints

that Winston lays down for Don: he is to dress conservatively, bring pink flowers, and look for clues—typewriters, samples of handwriting, and a fondness for pink. Because of its pervasiveness, pink turns out to be a moot clue. It keeps riffing throughout: in Sherry's clothes, Laura's and Lolita's bathrobes, Dora's card, Carmen's check pants, and the gas tank of a motorcycle parked in Penny's yard. Signs generate (fictional) reality but also invoke other signs: Sherry's reference to an "over-the-hill Don Juan" seems to conjure up the Douglas Fairbanks vehicle (*The Private Life of Don Juan*) that Don is watching on television as she walks out—or does the film prompt her words? On his first journey, as he waits for his plane at an airport lounge, Don admires a flight attendant, who looks very much like Sherry, slumped on a chair completing a crossword puzzle. On an airport shuttle he comes across a young man (about the age of his potential son) whose clothes and sunglasses are exactly like his own; on the same shuttle, a couple of teenage girls burble on with the kind of effervescence that characterizes Lolita in the following scene. With her heart-shaped earrings and insinuating ways, Lolita evokes Nabokov's (and Kubrick's) character, and her "pineapple" hair replicates that of Winston's oldest daughter. Carmen's mistrustful cat turns out to be named Winston and is a living counterpart of another cat in a painting in her office. Dora's environment is especially rich in mirror play, perhaps a suggestion that everything there is lifeless and derivative. She lives in a housing development of nearly identical buildings, her own house is reproduced on a painting on the wall, a second painting (both are frightfully boring) replicates a vase with flowers right underneath, and the photograph of her as a hippie purveys a duplicate of herself. Near the end of the film, on his way to Michelle's grave, Don buys flowers at a shop run by a girl called Sun Green, and shortly afterwards he sights his prospective son, who happens to be wearing green. As soon as the son disappears at a lively trot down the street, a car drives by with another young man, about the same age as the one who just got away, wearing the exact same sweater in brown, and listening to the same music that accompanied Don in his travels. Don Johnston's name echoes the proverbial Don Juan as well as Don Johnson, of *Miami Vice* glory, a homophony that provokes much tittering throughout the film. ("It's 'Johnston' with a *t*," is one of his refrains.) And a last example: two dream sequences condense Don's misadventures and thus repeat the

plot, but they are rather redundant since it is not them but the entire film that is dreamlike, an alternate reality governed by uncanny coincidences and constant duplications.

Broken Flowers is a twilight film that offers a sad view of maturity and depicts a life of diminished expectations, but despite its bleakness and quirkiness, it found its public fairly quickly. It received the Grand Prix at Cannes and has done surprisingly well at the box office—\$13.7 million in its commercial run in the United States alone—especially considering that Jarmusch's films typically depend heavily upon foreign markets and video sales and rentals. Perhaps Don's clumsy charm and the film's respectful regard for the intricacies of personal history and everyday life offered a needed respite in one of the bleakest periods in recent U.S. history, a time marked by antagonism, militarism, and catastrophe. As the film opened, the American death toll in the Iraq War had surpassed nineteen hundred casualties, and discontent was widespread. In the *New York Times* of August 14, 2005, the columnist Frank Rich compared George W. Bush to Lyndon Johnson during the military escalation in Vietnam—two presidents at the lowest point in their popularity and hopelessly enmeshed in costly foreign wars. In early August, Cindy Sheehan, an unassuming middle-aged woman from Ohio whose son had been killed in Iraq the previous summer, showed up at the gates of Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, demanding to talk with the president about the futility of the invasion and occupation. Bush never received her—the press and the Web were rife with rumors of a paranoid president constantly railing against the thankless citizenry—but she grabbed the front pages until, at the end of August, Hurricane Katrina hit, razing an area the size of Great Britain and putting much of New Orleans—the setting of *Down by Law*—under water.

It felt like an odd time to be finishing a book on Jarmusch films—recording and analyzing a culture that was quickly becoming history. As the Grey Gallery, in Washington Square, was announcing a show on the late 1970s–early 1980s art scene in downtown New York, CBGB seemed about to close its doors. The legendary New York club, once a hub of the no-wave culture from which Jarmusch sprung, had struggled to pay rent for some time. If the club disappears, it will be a death foretold: the gentrification of the East Village and Lower East Side had been advancing apace since the early 1980s, when the explosion

of art and music gave the area an aura of irresistible urban chic. Clubs, performance spaces, and art galleries popped up all over the place, and property values rose accordingly. But it seems that in the last few years, gentrification has acquired an unprecedented monumentality, with huge upscale apartment buildings and hotels going up in Astor Place and Houston and Lafayette Streets. The rockers and bohos milling around CBGB look increasingly out of place among the shoppers, tourists, and yuppies that swarm the area, just like the patrons at the Poetry Café across the street. (How long will that one hold out?) This may be part of the regular cycle of history, the evolution from margins to center, marginality to respectability; it may be the city settling down to comfort and old age, just like Don Johnston, but also becoming increasingly cut off from the promises of the past and the possibilities of the present.

Notes

1. Some scholarly approaches to Jarmusch's work in English include Leibowitz, "Neither"; Barnes, "Independence"; and King, *Independent* 71–73, 80–81. In Italian, see Mosca, *Jim Jarmusch*; and Romagnani, *Jim Jarmusch*. In German, see the articles compiled in Aurich and Reinecke, *Jim Jarmusch*. These books provide detailed, thoughtful surveys of Jarmusch's work. Similar works have appeared in Polish (Mazierska), which I am unable to judge, and Spanish (Viejo). Viejo offers an informative panorama of the director's work that relies mostly on sources such as Mosca, *Jim Jarmusch*, and Hetzberg, *Interviews*.

2. Unless otherwise indicated, biographical information is drawn from Hetzberg, *Interviews*, and from Jarmusch's interview with Todd Lippy, reprinted in this volume.

3. On the music scene at the time, see Rockwell, *All-American*, esp. 234–45; and Frith and Horne, *Art* 117–35.

4. On alternative television, see Boddy, "Alternative." On performance art, see Goldberg, *Performance*; and Carr, *On Edge*, esp. 49–115.

5. On punk cinema, see Hoberman, "No Wavelength"; Hoberman and Rosenbaum, *Midnight* 275–88; Macdonald, *Critical* 1–19; Macdonald, "Interview"; and Carroll, "Film" 119–22.

6. For much of what follows I am drawing on the analyses of Rosen and Hamilton, *Off-Hollywood* 259–78; and Wyatt, "Independents."

7. On the city confidential film, see Mark Bergman "Phenix" (Bergman labels it "city exposé"). See also, more recently, Straw "Urban."

8. For Elvis's many afterlives, see Marcus, *Dead*; and Doss, *Elvis*.

9. The scenario of the black passenger unable to get a ride has often been discussed as an object lesson in racism—a virtual Brechtian *Lehrstück*. See, for

example, Jordan “Waiting”; and Antonio Miranda and Freddy Vargas’s video *Once upon a Ride*, discussed later in this section.

10. At a different level, this also alludes to Mueller-Stahl’s own story: black-listed by the East German authorities for signing the Biermann Resolution demanding democratic reforms, he moved to West Germany in 1980, where he continued his successful acting career.

11. Lefebvre elsewhere refers to “homogeneous” space as “abstract” space. See Lefebvre, *Production*.

12. On car culture in 1980s and 1990s films, see Davies, “Against.” On the liberating, antipatriarchal potential of car culture, see McHugh, “Women.”

13. On the way the early shorts were conceived and shot, see Raskin’s interview with Jarmusch (Raskin, *Art* 41–46). See also Raskin’s detailed formal analysis of the first film in the series (36–40).

14. Baudelaire and de Banville are cited in Klein, *Cigarettes* 8–9, 39–46.

15. On the economics of indie film in the 1990s and beyond, see Holmlund, Introduction, and especially King’s excellent survey (*Independent* 1–57). On the 1990s, see also Merritt, *Celluloid* 351–90.

16. It is probably also an homage to James Brown’s song “Talking Loud and Saying Nothing” (1970). My thanks to Matthew Mitchell for pointing this out to me.

17. The distinction between an aestheticist and Brechtian intertextuality overlaps with Ivone Margulies’s distinction between the use of quotations in a cinema of heterogeneity (Godard), and therefore anti-illusionism, and a cinema of homogeneity (Bresson) that respects the integrity of the fiction (*Nothing* 54–56). The uses I discuss produce heterogeneous texts that, paradoxically, may still be illusionistic, as is the case of *Ghost Dog*—or rap.

18. On martial arts cinema, I have found Desser, “Martial,” especially useful. See also Lott, *American*; and Clark, *At a Theater*.

19. For more on the band’s interest on martial arts and martial arts films, see the RZA, *Wu-Tang*.

Interview with Jim Jarmusch |

By Tod Lippy. Reprinted from *Projections* 11 (New York Filmmakers on Filmmaking; 2000): 251–67

TOD LIPPY: When did you first move to New York?

JIM JARMUSCH: I came to New York in 1974, I think, after spending a year at Northwestern University in the Medill School of Journalism. I was pretty much asked to leave the school because I wasn't completing my requirements in journalism—I was taking classes in literature and art history and history and philosophy. I transferred to Columbia, where I studied English and comparative literature, so that's how I got here.

TL: Was the city everything you expected?

JJ: It was pretty intense, because I arrived here in late August to start classes in early September, and I had a dorm room right on whatever avenue is on the eastern border of Columbia—Columbus Avenue. It was really, really hot, and really, really loud, and I'd hear salsa music all night. It took me a little while to adjust, but I was amazed by the

incredible energy of New York. And it was great to find a place that, no matter how strange you might be, you couldn't go a block without seeing someone much stranger. It was a great feeling to be here—it felt like anything was possible in a way.

TL: What happened when you finished up at Columbia?

JJ: Well, they had a program in Paris my last year, so I said, “Where do you sign up?” and I went there and ended up coming back with a lot of incompletes because instead of studying much, I discovered the Cinémathèque. Back then it was still run by Henri Langlois. And that was an amazing birth of something in me—a realization of how wide the diversity of films could be and what a beautiful form it was. I saw films from India by Sen and Ray, and films from Africa, and classic films from France and Japan and China and everywhere. Also I learned a lot about Hollywood films from seeing them in that context. Nothing was presented in a hierarchical way; you just realized that the world of cinema was so huge.

When I came back here, I was still writing prose and poetry, but I started imitating film scripts in a way—not in a literal way, but making allusions to the form in my writing. And they became a little more visual. I realized from that that I was really thinking of movies all the time. So I applied to NYU Graduate Film School really on a whim because I'd never made a film. But I submitted some writing and some photographs, and I was accepted with financial aid really unexpectedly, so I decided to try that.

TL: Weren't you also playing in a band around the same time, and a part of the whole Lower East Side music scene?

JJ: Yeah. We played the Mudd Club, CBGB's, Hurrah, Tier 3, Irving Plaza, Danceteria—pretty much everywhere in New York. Actually the aesthetics of that scene really gave me the courage to make films; it was not about virtuosity, it was about expression. It was that way with all those bands at the time—the Ramones and Talking Heads, Television, Blondie, and Patti Smith, Mink DeVille, The Heartbreakers, The Voidoids, Suicide. . . .

Anyway, in my third year of graduate school I went to tell László Benedek, who was the head of the school, that I wasn't coming back because I didn't have any money—I had a lot of student loans, and I

just really didn't see the point of returning to school for a third year. He said to me, "That's really too bad because I hired Nick Ray to teach here this year. He needs a teaching assistant and I thought you would be the perfect guy. He's in the next room, and he'd like to meet you." And I was like, "Oh, man. . . ." So I went in there, and the first thing Nick asked me was to define the word "dialectic"—which I did—and then we started talking. And he said, "You are my assistant—I need your help, and I'm going to teach you." In the end, László helped me get a fellowship—ironically, it was called the Louis B. Mayer Fellowship, after the guy who destroyed von Stroheim's *Greed*. So I went back for a third year.

TL: Is that when you made *Permanent Vacation*?

JJ: Yeah, which the school hated. I didn't get a degree because I didn't fulfill the requirements at the time for a thesis film—you weren't allowed to make a film that long. But they didn't like the film anyway—not László, particularly, but the school. They also made a mistake, because I think the fellowship money was sent to me directly rather than for tuition at the school, and of course I spent it on the film. We shot it in ten days on the street in New York for twelve thousand dollars total—the whole budget, including post. Then, somehow, someone submitted *Permanent Vacation* to a festival in Germany, in Mannheim. They sent me a letter saying they wanted to screen the film there, that they were inviting me and would fly me there. I was surprised and really happy. So I went, and then the film was given a prize, which included two thousand dollars! I had no money—I owed, like, six months rent—and I was ecstatic. And then a guy came up to me from German TV, saying "We'd like to buy your film. We don't pay a lot, but we can give you twelve thousand dollars for five years." And I was, like, "Whoa!"

I'd left home assuming I'd never make another film again—"So the school hates it: I'll be a writer, or a musician or something"—and I came back thinking, "I've got to make another film!" Not only that, they invited the film to the Berlin Festival, and at the time it was very rare to have a film in two German festivals, but they made an exception. And I was so moved that they would respond at all to this odd, handmade, first-time film, which is not very good—I mean, it's a first film, and I haven't looked at it in a long time, but it's probably not a good film. So I came home

and wrote *Stranger than Paradise*. Wim Wenders had seen my first film, and he liked it, and I was Nick Ray's gofer when Wim worked with him on *Lighting over Water*. So he offered me this black-and-white 35mm film stock that he had left over from *The State of Things*, just raw stock. It was this odd film material, like 4X—high speed, very grainy. But he had about fifty minutes of it that he gave to me, and I thought, "If I'm very careful, I can make a half-hour film." So John Lurie and I had this vague idea for a story and I wrote a half-hour script and we filmed it. That was the first third of *Stranger than Paradise*.

TL: You actually filmed the whole thing with that fifty minutes' worth of stock?

JJ: Yeah. Most scenes were shot in one, maybe two takes.

TL: When you shot the rest of the film, did you use the extant footage for the first third?

JJ: Yeah, and it was changed only slightly. I removed one little thing, maybe.

TL: John Lurie and Richard Edson and Eszter Balint were all people you knew from this downtown scene?

JJ: Yeah, I hung out a lot—as everybody did—at the Squat Theater on Twenty-third Street, because it was a bunch of Hungarian weirdoes who were really amazing, inventive, creative people with no particular interest in traditional theater. They weren't interested in anything commercial, anything like that. They lived communally. It was an incredible group of people. I still try to keep in touch with them, although they've dispersed—some are back in Budapest. And they had a lot of music—Sun Ra played there, for instance—and a lot of people hung out there, like James Chance and Arto Lindsay and me and John and lots of different people. It was a really great atmosphere of ideas being exchanged. So I knew Eszter through that. I think she was fourteen when I first met her, and she was seventeen or so when we were filming.

Stranger than Paradise was a very good lesson because I wrote it knowing the amount of material I had, so the style of the film reflected that—every scene being a single setup was by necessity. Learning to do that was something I have continued to benefit from. And then, when I was cutting the short in my Lower East Side walk-up apartment on an upright Moviola, I was also writing the rest of the script, because I got

ideas for making it longer. So when I had the short film finished, I also had a script to show. Then there's a whole thing I really don't want to go into—it was very hard for me to get the rights to the short film back from Wim's partner at the time. It was a big mess.

TL: And that led you to insisting on the ownership of your negatives ever since?

JJ: Yeah. It was a lesson that almost entirely formed my way of working. So it was very valuable, but at the time it was heartbreaking having to try to steal your camera negative back out of DuArt and stuff like that.

TL: Do you know of any other filmmakers who own all their negatives?

JJ: I don't. I think John Sayles maybe owns some of his films. Cassavetes owned some of his films, some he didn't. I don't know of anyone else, other than, you know, filmmakers like Michael Snow or Robert Frank. I own my own negatives and still produce all the films through my own company and am very, very attentive to all the details. Maybe obsessively so, but I learned from that first incident that people's intentions—or what they represent their intentions to be—are not always backed by their actions. And keeping your word doesn't necessarily mean much in America.

TL: Right after *Stranger than Paradise's* success, you were quoted as saying, "Right now I could go out to L.A. and set up enough deals to buy a house and a swimming pool." What held you back from doing something like that?

JJ: It's pretty much a personal reaction. I did get offers, but they were offers that I think were made by people who add up how many times your name or the name of your film appears in *Variety*. It really has nothing to do with your work or what it means, or what its content is. Also, I have always been drawn to things that were in the margins and not in the mainstream—this was true of me even as a teenager in Akron. I remember when I was fourteen or so, this friend of mine had an older brother who used to hitchhike to New York and other places, and while he was gone, we'd go into his room and find records by Ornette Coleman or the Mothers of Invention, and books by William Burroughs and Terry Southern. It was a revelation to me that there was more to the

world than Akron, and that there were a lot of really interesting ideas that you could pursue and investigate that were very obviously not in the mainstream.

And also, let's face it: Hollywood, for the most part, is about status and money and power—that's like the Holy Trinity. And that is not and never will be my religion. At the time, I was living in New York very happily, finding a sort of "bohemian" subculture here that was really invigorating and pretty adventurous. I met a lot of interesting artists, painters, writers, and musicians as well as plumbers and garbagemen and all kinds of people. So I don't know, to just transplant myself and go to L.A. and be a hack director of coming-of-age teen comedies or whatever was not my thing.

TL: Could you define the niche that your films tend to fit into? Would you consider them to be "art-house" fare, for example?

JJ: I hope that they are really difficult to categorize. I'm very intuitive, and I never calculated or made a path to be "marginal." I just do what I do, and where it is is where it is; it's not something I have any desire to control. Those categories are somewhat annoying to me. Trying to categorize artistic movements or whatever is ridiculous—it's like looking at the ocean from a helicopter and trying to number all the waves to see where they align themselves. It's impossible. Those categories are mostly used for marketing or defining something, for reducing things.

So I don't know where I fit. I don't feel tied to my time period. I'm an American by circumstance. I'm not really interested in nationalities or borders, though I'm very interested in cultures and what makes them different from other cultures. And I'm also very fascinated by those areas where the lines of cultures blur, because in those blurred edges is where synthesis occurs, and gardens grow. There are so many beautiful things that come from that blurring together of seemingly disparate elements.

TL: Pardon my being literal, but your use of the word "blurring" reminds me of those languorous tracking shots—usually from either a car or a train window—that one can find in all of your films. Why are you drawn to them?

JJ: Well, I love moving and being in motion, and I love being off-balance by not knowing everything about the place you're in; it opens your imagination up. You have to fill in the blanks, and you fill them in with

your imagination, not with facts. I like the simple landscape traveling shot because it's the most pure visual reduction of moving and things changing around you.

TL: My sense is that your first four films—well, after *Permanent Vacation*, which I've never seen . . .

JJ: That's good. [Laughs]

TL: Those four films are really informed by the notion of travel—for instance, you picked a different location for each one, whether it was Louisiana for *Down by Law*, or Memphis for *Mystery Train*, or the several different cities visited in *Night on Earth*. And within those films, the characters themselves are all on their own various journeys through these places, which is, again, taken to a pretty literal extreme with *Night on Earth*. But your last two movies [*Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog*] really have become more about interior—even metaphorical—journeys. Does that reflect a conscious decision on your part? You could almost call it a paradigm shift . . .

JJ: You know, I prefer not to analyze it, because I'm not very analytical. I can see what you mean by that shift, and I don't know how to respond to it that well. The only thing I can say—which is not a direct answer to the question—is that when I was twenty years old, I suspected everything; everything was a lie. I was inspired by the work of people like William Burroughs, or Sam Fuller (whose films really deal with the idea that the whole American dream is a big lie, a deception). I suspected everything and always looked around to see who was controlling this and that, and what was being manipulated.

Now I'm in my forties, and I have seen so many weird things in my life that I'm willing to believe just about anything. So it's almost like being in the same place, but with a different consciousness. I still very strongly believe that nothing is what it seems, but I'm much more willing to believe the possibilities of almost anything. So that's kind of a big shift in perspective, and that may be why my films have shifted to being a little more interior in their themes. But I don't really know.

TL: Greil Marcus wrote about *Dead Man*: "There's no hint in Jarmusch's previous work that he was into anything but irony. This movie has no irony." Do you agree with that?

JJ: First of all, there are different forms of irony; there's an ironic attitude toward the world, which I don't think the films have, and then

there's irony by situation. I don't think my characters are flippantly ironic in their attitudes, but their stories—their circumstances—are very ironic. At the end of *Stranger than Paradise*, Willie is on the plane going to Hungary, the girl, Eva, is back in the hotel, and Eddie is at the airport, about to drive back to New York. That's ironic by situation. But I don't find them ironic in tone, or in attitude. So I don't know how I feel about that. One thing I've learned is that with anything that you create, your interpretation of it is no more valid than the person who sees it. In a way, your interpretation is less valid because you can't see it clearly. The beauty of cinema is that you can walk into a film, whatever it is, and if you've never seen it before, you are entering a new world, and you go with that world. Same with a new piece of music—it really takes you somewhere, and you give yourself to it. I've seen each of my films a thousand times before it's finished—I wrote it, I directed it, I was there for the editing—so it can never be fresh; I can never not know where it's going to take me. Often other people explain things to me about my films that I wasn't conscious or that aware of, which is very interesting and valuable.

That's also taught me to not be offended by any kind of criticism of my work. I'm not a person that has trouble with negative criticism at all—in fact, I generally prefer to read the negative criticism because maybe it'll be an angle or perspective that's different enough from my own and I might learn something from it. Greil Marcus, as a case in point, has explained a few things to me in his writing about *Dead Man* that I'm not sure I saw. To have someone with a mind like that looking at what I did and expressing his feelings or perception about it is really interesting.

TL: In *Year of the Horse*, I was struck by how seldom during the concert footage we actually see shots of the audience and Crazy Horse in the same frame. You show lines of fans waiting to get into the concert in London, and you cut a few times between audience and performer during that same concert, but even then, the audience is shot in black and white, and the band is in color. I really felt a formal divide between artist and audience, and it called to mind that “Warholian” distance a lot of critics have characterized your films as having. Would you say that's something you're aware of when you're working?

JJ: My job is definitely not to presuppose what the audience wants or expects. I'll leave that to a lot of other people. Commercial cinema is

based on marketing analysis—you know, they show a film to a bunch of high-school girls in a shopping mall and then tell you to recut it because it was too slow. There are enough people who do that—that's not my job. My job is to make films that those people with whom I choose to collaborate would like to see. We're making a film for us. The rest of the world has to be ignored completely.

But I have to temper that by saying very sincerely that the film doesn't exist until somebody sees it and brings their energy, their life experience, to that moment. Even if it's purely for entertainment on a Friday night, they came to see this film and reacted to it, and they've completed an electric circuit. Without them there, it's like the light's not plugged in—the lamp's standing there, but it's not going to light up. So it's sort of a yin-yang thing. With *Stranger than Paradise*, we didn't think anyone would ever see it, so why should we try to gear it toward a certain prescribed audience reaction? Let's make what we want to make. I still do that, but I've learned that the film is really born when it gets disseminated and people see it, when it completes that full circuit.

TL: I was wondering if you would talk a little about *Dead Man*'s relationship to the Western genre.

JJ: The Western is such an important genre in America, because it's like a fantasy world that people have used to stamp all kinds of ideology on. And it was really interesting to me to work with that, because I tried for the first time with *Dead Man* to make a film that had a lot of layers to it, if you wanted to think about them. And if you didn't, it was hopefully an alluring surface that you could follow as a story. But the themes in *Dead Man* include aboriginal cultures, William Blake, violence, the history of America, white European responses to nature versus aboriginal responses. Death, religion, philosophy. It's about language. It's about guns, it's about law, it's about the status of an outlaw—there are all these levels to *Dead Man*, and maybe that was the first time I was conscious of working in that way while writing. Something opened up for me, and I think the Western led me to that, because the Western is such an open form; it's such a strange frame, within which you can have things as diverse as *The Searchers* or a film by Monte Hellman. After I made *Night on Earth* or *Mystery Train*, if someone had said to me, “You know, in a few years you'll make a Western,” I wouldn't have believed it. But I don't know, I got drawn into it.

TL: When did you decide to bring in the whole William Blake angle?

JJ: Blake walked right in at a certain point while I was writing. I was reading a lot of stuff written by Native Americans, about their language and their philosophy, and I was sort of getting overwhelmed by it. So I picked up a book of Blake just to clear my head. I was reading *Proverbs from Hell*, and parts of it sounded so much like Native thought—like, “The eagle never wasted so much time as when he submitted to learn from the crow,” or, “Expect poison from standing water.” This was William Blake! At that point he walked right into the story. And I always loved Blake for so many reasons—I mean, he’s a really fascinating, amazing character.

TL: A true “visionary” in every sense of the word.

JJ: Exactly. And a guy who was able to publish only his first book legitimately—for the rest of his life he was considered to be an eccentric nutcase and had to publish everything himself. He really wasn’t respected in his time. But he lived at a very odd time—he’s the last great Christian religious poet, yet he’s right on the cusp of industrialization, and somehow he transcends both religion and science in his ability to be a visionary. He’s also very contradictory, which I like a lot. A Christian who hates the church. It’s like Pasolini—a Marxist homosexual Catholic. I love those kinds of contradictions.

TL: Did the *Hagakure* serve as a similar kind of catalyst for *Ghost Dog*?

JJ: Very similar, because I was already in the process of writing the script when I discovered it. I had already read a lot about *bushido* and samurai culture—not in preparation for the film, but in the past, out of a sort of dilettantish interest. And the *Hagakure* was the perfect thing to read—it gave me a map for the character and also a structural map for the film, in a way. The book is composed of little aphorisms, each separated by a *monsho*, a little round symbol, which is like a breathing space, and then it moves on to another text. I ended up using the reverse—a section of film, of story, and then a text, like the *monsho*, as a breathing space. And somehow it formally opened things up.

TL: Would you consider either film to be an “adaptation” of sorts, since both relate back to specific texts?

JJ: It was more that I was open to their influence—they both walked

into the writing and affected me deeply, but without me having calculated or even expected that. So the texts got woven into the fabric of the film, rather than the stories of the film being adapted from them.

Ghost Dog was a big breakthrough for me. Though I refer to Chaucer or to Walt Whitman or things in passing in the earlier films, in this case I opened myself up to actually quoting other things, and that came, I really think, from my love of music. I love all kinds of music, but hard bebop, dub, and hip-hop, in particular, are forms that are very open about taking things from other places, and I think they gave me—well, “courage” isn’t the right word, but my love of those forms of music somehow spoke to me internally and said, “Don’t push things away just because they come from other sources,” which is what I often used to do. “Go ahead and open the windows and let them in, and don’t hide that you let them in.” I’m not going to play a game like all these ideas are original and they’re mine: I want to talk about where they came from, because if someone sees *Ghost Dog* and it leads them to see films by Melville or *Point Blank*, by John Boorman, or the films of Seijun Suzuki, or to read *Don Quixote*, or something that I mention in the credits, then that’s a good thing. I didn’t hide that in any way in *Ghost Dog*. Maybe *Dead Man* was a precedent, because that wacky poet William Blake walked right into my damn script.

TL: You mentioned Melville—there are some very conscious nods to *Le Samourai* in *Ghost Dog*, staring with their similar hit-men protagonists . . .

JJ: With their own moral code that the world doesn’t really respect or respond to.

TL: Can you talk more specifically about how you were influenced by Melville, and that film in particular?

JJ: I was interested in taking things from Melville that I found really moving. And some of them are minor things, like the fact that in various Melville films, before his killers kill someone, they put on white-cloth editor’s gloves—I don’t know if that was an inside joke with Melville and his editor—that he was saying his editor was a butcher or whatever, but I used that, too.

Also, Melville has been a teacher for me in something I love, which is cross-referencing cultures. His films are very, very French in their rhythm and certainly in the street language of Paris, yet the gangsters

drive big American cars, and wear American-style sharkskin suits. And, of course, Melville took his name from Herman Melville. Really, how more blatant can you be? So he was very interested in finding those things that he loved and mixing them up together and making something new out of it. So it's more of that kind of inspiration. There are specific details I took from *Le Samourai*, but I wasn't conscious of where I should distance myself from Melville at all, or how should I make it different. It was just, "These are things I love and they seem to intersect here, so I'm going to put them in." They are like "variations on a theme" in musical composition.

TL: In the night scenes, in particular, there are all of these gleaming reflecting surfaces—the cars Ghost Dog steals, the CDs he gracefully maneuvers, even the guns he uses . . .

JJ: Locations have quite a different effect than in the previous film. In *Dead Man*, the landscapes were almost characters in the film. Since there were themes concerning America as a place, and nature and how different cultures relate to it, the landscapes became incredibly important—they are a really essential part of the fabric of the film. They are living things that people move through, and they envelop the characters, like when they ride through the redwood forest—it's like a cathedral, or some gigantic thing that dwarfs them. In *Ghost Dog*, the locations are more background, in a way—it's almost the opposite way of using locations. The characters are always in the foreground, and the backgrounds are all atmospheric surfaces, which surround them somehow. That's not really answering your question, but that's the extent of my consciousness of the locations in *Ghost Dog*.

TL: Where was the film shot, by the way?

JJ: It was intended to be set in an undefined urban location, so we shot mostly in Jersey City because it's incredibly difficult to identify. The only thing we had to avoid was the Manhattan skyline, which isn't easy because there are views of Manhattan everywhere there. There was one scene where two of the mob guys go up on a roof and they kill a guy who is keeping pigeons, but he's the wrong guy. In the wide shot facing them, you could see the World Trade towers, but I really needed that shot, so we put a clothesline up and carefully placed the material on it to block them out so we could use that angle. I didn't really want it to be a specific place. Even now, people ask me—"Isn't that Red Hook?"

That doesn't look like Brooklyn; is it the Bronx?" I really wanted to take a signature off the landscape, not let it identify itself.

TL: In a way, the physical solitude of the "samurai" in *Ghost Dog* is much more pronounced than in *Le Samourai*, where we see scenes of Alain Delon with his girlfriend, or him showing up at clubs. In your film, *Ghost Dog*'s connections to other people are minimal, to say the least—there's very little "noise" in the background. Was that something that you thought about a lot?

JJ: Yeah, I always consider that. Some people say my films have always been abstractly depopulated, which may be true, but less is more for me. It reminds me of a beautiful essay by Carl Dreyer, where he talks about how the less you use in the location, the more identification with the character those objects you leave will have. Like if you have a roomful of furniture, your eye doesn't associate any of it with the character because there is too much information. Whereas if you strip it down and there's only one chair and one table and one lamp, the very form of those objects has some effect on the viewer, because it is the atmosphere within which the character exists. I'm very conscious of those things. I don't want to have too much activity buzzing around. It's like using black and white for certain stories rather than color—black and white gives you less information. That's the only real difference, psychologically speaking—you are not giving the audience the information about what color a shirt is, so it has a very strong effect. Those little things become big.

TL: There's a whole *Rashomon* subtext going on in the film, not only in the passing around of the paperback book, but also in the fact that you show two different versions of the scene where Louie saves *Ghost Dog*. The former remembers the assailant's gun pointing at him; *Ghost Dog*'s version has it pointing directly at him.

JJ: Which is pretty subtle. Some people don't even get that.

TL: It reverberates in so many interesting ways, because both men have built their relationship on the particulars of that remembered event.

JJ: Their whole lives are changed by that moment, and they remember it in a different way, a way that suits how each one's life has changed because of that moment. So your memory is not really to be trusted, because as your life goes on, you fashion your memories to fit the con-

sequent results. You know, people always say, “There are only twelve possible plots,” or “Only this many stories can exist,” and that’s true to a large degree. But what they seem to ignore is that even if there were only, you know, *three* plots possible, there are as many different perspectives on those plots as there are humans who have ever lived—and that’s why *Rashomon* is such a resonant story.

TL: Why did you decide to give Ghost Dog the carrier pigeons?

JJ: Because there was an old Italian guy who had pigeons on his rooftop right behind my house. I used to watch him flying them. I loved the way the light would hit the birds—if they were backlit, they would look black and then they would flip and look white, and there was something magical about it. The guy would stand out there, smoking a cigar, and he’d have his flag to bring them back. That’s the visual reason, but I also had them because I wanted Ghost Dog to be someone who uses ancient things and modern things at the same time—he doesn’t differentiate between their value. (Oh, and it’s a reference, of course, to *On the Waterfront*, but that was not primary, that was very secondary.)

It also showed Ghost Dog’s respect for animals and other life forms, the absence of which I think is maybe at the heart of a lot of stupidity on the part of humans. This will get way off on to a long subject which my friends are, like, “Oh, no, he’s going to start talking about the food chain again . . .,” but I really believe that once humans took themselves off the food chain they lost the understanding of the interconnectedness of all things. You know, the law of nature is Eat and Be Eaten, and life and death are part of the same thing, and animals that are predators are not more powerful than animals that are prey, because without prey there can be no predators. You can’t evaluate things in a human-centric way when you think about nature and animals and plants—all things are part of one thing. And that’s a part of *Ghost Dog* that certainly relates to Zen philosophy and to aboriginal philosophies, too. I’ve been interested in all of that since I was a child, but I really started to understand it more deeply while preparing and making *Dead Man*.

TL: I love Ghost Dog’s motion of deference paid to the dead in the graveyard every time he passes it.

JJ: Respect to the spirits. That’s something Forest brought to the film, all those wonderful little moments. The first time we did just a

run-through of that shot tracking alongside him, he gave that motion to the spirits. And we were like, “Yeah, yeah, that’s part of *Ghost Dog*.”

TL: You generally write scripts with your actors already in place, don’t you?

JJ: Yeah. The central actors. I do it backwards. [Laughs] I cast before I start writing the main characters, because I have to visualize them. I can’t write a vague character and then go out and see who fits it. I have to have them playing around in my imagination so I can visualize them moving down the street or whatever they’re doing.

TL: I loved the way the cartoons you selected for *Ghost Dog* played against—or even prefigured—certain scenes in the film. And their illogic—like the one with the bullets being shot up the drain and coming out of the showerhead—really deepened the poetry of the film when it referenced them. How did you choose which ones to use?

JJ: It was an odd thing, because first of all, the cartoons I originally wanted—like the Ted Avery stuff, Warner Brothers, Hanna-Barbera—I couldn’t use, because they refused to license any clip to a film that had any violence in it. The irony of that was kind of surprising, but predictable. Stacey Smith did a lot of research on who would license the clips, and collected hours of odd cartoons. So then we just sort of amused ourselves hunting for things that I could license that did play off of stuff that was happening in the film. A more Hollywood, or commercial, way to do it would have been to have the cartoons always come right after the action, so you would see them echoing it. But instead, they usually come before, and you don’t immediately get the connection. I just love animation, and I thought it was an interesting way to have another layer in the film that came from popular culture and one more element in there that could make things that were happening in the story resonate even more. In the way that the *Hagakure* echoes things that are happening, the cartoons echo them from a totally different place. Cartoons are incredible because your imagination as an animator is not restrained by anything in the physical world at all. I love it when Heckle and Jeckle, for instance, always say in those cartoons, “How did that happen? Because this is a cartoon, we can do anything!” [Laughs] I love that freedom of imagination.

I love popular culture, and I hope all my work indicates that. When

I was in college at Columbia, my friend Luc Sante and I used to argue with academics about the hierarchy of culture. We'd say, "Okay, we love to listen to Bach, but we love the Ramones just as much. We love Dante, but we love Charles Willeford, too." And how can you say that Willeford is just pulp crap, but Dante is classic stuff? Dante wrote in the vernacular of his time, which was unheard of. He was the first person to use spoken Italian—that's like hip-hop today! So how can that be different from listening to the Wu-Tang? I don't see the difference. Of course, now that I'm older, I find myself arguing the reverse side of the same thing, saying, "You know, I love popular culture, but are you guys familiar with Dante?"

TL: Speaking of the Wu-Tang Clan, I wanted to talk about RZA's score for *Ghost Dog*. In a piece in the *New York Times*, it was reported that you had a sort of clandestine meeting with him in a blacked-out van in the middle of the night, where he handed you a tape . . .

JJ: That was an abbreviation—it reduced the whole story of our collaboration to one little anecdote taken out of context. What happened was, I always listen to music before I write a script—I sort of hone in on things that are firing my imagination for the film's atmosphere. In this case, I was listening to a lot of dub stuff, outside jazz, and hip-hop—particularly instrumental mixes of different DJs, like DJ Premier and 4th Disciple. But RZA is my favorite, and I was madly taping off any instrumental mix by RZA I could find, because my dream was for him to do all the music for the film. I hadn't even started writing at this point. And then, after I finished the script, I tried to find RZA through his manager, his lawyer, his agent—and it was like, forget it. As I said to RZA, it was like trying to find a criminal by going to the cops. That's not the way it works.

So I talked to my friend Nemo Labrizzi, who is so much like family I call him my "nephew." He's very street-connected, so he put me in touch with a friend of his, Dreddy Kruger, who's an associate of the Wu-Tang thing, and Dreddy hooked me up with RZA. I met with him a few times, and I told him a little bit about the project. We come from different places, but it was very easy for us to talk with each other about a lot of different things, so after our second meeting, RZA said, "Yeah, I'm down, I want to do this." The film hadn't even been shot yet. When I had a rough cut—he has a brief cameo in the film—I showed it to

him, and then he called me a few weeks later and told me to meet him in a blacked-out van on Fiftieth and Broadway at two in the morning, which I did, and he handed me a little DAT tape with nothing written on it. A lot of the music on it was not exactly what I had thought it would be—I wanted that spooky, minimal, beautiful, slightly damaged, awkward sound of RZA's Wu-Tang's stuff. Some of it was like that, but most of it was more like a traditional score—well, not necessarily “traditional,” but a score that would be perfect in, like, a John Woo film from Hong Kong. And it was great music—he should use it for another film, but I told him that those pieces were not what I was really looking for. And he said, “Okay, I know what you want.” Three weeks passed, and he calls me and I get another tape from him, and this time the music is incredible, it's exactly what I want, all kinds of stuff. Then he came back a few weeks later with even more. By the end we had more music than we could use in the film, but it was incredible stuff.

TL: The score is such a perfect marriage of music and image. That “awkwardness” you talked about, for instance, plays so beautifully against the repeated images of the pigeons flapping their wings . . .

JJ: The weird thing is, RZA did it all by memory. He did it all via his feelings for the film. When he gave us music, rarely did he say anything about where it should go. He had a few ideas for the opening sequence, but otherwise, nothing was written for a particular place. So Jay Rabinowitz, the amazing “samurai editor,” and I played with the music and placed it. RZA said, “Cut it up, edit it, mix it together—I don't care.” It was just incredible to me that his sensitivity to the soul of the film was so strong that he would create very different pieces of music that were all perfect for it, but it was up to us to choose how we used them.

TL: There's a wonderful poignancy—not to mention hilarity—to the exchanges in the movie between Isaach De Bankolé and Forest Whitaker, where, even though they don't speak each other's language, it's clear that they've formed a deep bond. When the film came out in New York, weren't the subtitles for De Bankolé's French dialogue left out?

JJ: Yeah, that was a big mistake. It was only in New York, where Artisan released the film first. Fifteen screens with no subtitles. It was particularly painful because they had put the film in several “urban” theaters—in other words, in predominantly black neighborhoods. What-

ever—these kinds of categories are so foreign to me. But if you show the film in Newark to that particular audience and one-third of the humor and part of the plot is missing, then the guy with a similar theater in Oakland is going to look at how it did in Newark and probably not book the film. So it was fucked up.

But Artisan came through, admitted the problem, and did free screenings, which is pretty much unheard of. I told them I wanted them to do that, and I think most film distributors would have said, “Fuck you, you’re crazy! We can’t say that there was a fuck up—are you nuts?” But they stepped up, and I respect that about them.

TL: How involved are you in the marketing of your films?

JJ: I have some input and I make comments on details, but I don’t evaluate the overall thing—it’s another world to me. As soon as the *Ghost Dog* marketing strategy started referring to separating “art-house” audiences from “urban” audiences, you’ve lost me already, because that’s against everything I stand for. But that’s the way their thinking and their operations are, and I can’t change that. So I look at it, I make comments; sometimes I change things in the trailers or TV ads. But I’ve begun to sort of step back more and more—I’m more open to them doing what they want, as long as I feel they’re not really misleading the audience.

You know, when you think about it, getting people in to see a film is the oldest con in the world, because you are hooking them into paying for a product before they see it, and if they don’t like it, tough shit, you’ve already got them in there. It’s pure carnival hustle, with the poster, the trailer, all that stuff. I just don’t want them to misrepresent the film and put some chick with no shirt on the poster if that has nothing to do with it—which they do all the time. A case in point was *Eyes Wide Shut*. They marketed it as a “sexy” film, and yet the people who did that are the same fucking morons who blocked out the sex scenes in the actual movie! You can’t get more transparent than that. That sums it right up: we’ll use the sex to sell it, but we’ll take the sex out.

TL: Obviously, the New York indie scene has changed enormously in the past fifteen years, particularly with the rise of Miramax and, more recently, companies like Artisan, and with them the notion of the “indie blockbuster.” Do you have a sense of where things are heading, or whether these developments are good or bad?

JJ: Well, I don’t know how to predict anything anymore. Everything

is controlled by corporations now, and that's depressing. One thing you have to remember about New York is that there are no natural resources here. The city has always been based on trade, and that means con men, money changing hands, and who can cheat who out of what. That's why we have Wall Street. You know, the tip of Manhattan was originally a trading post for Native people. So that means that things are always in flux there—if you don't like change, it's not a good place to be. Many of those changes are really heartbreaking, like when they tore down Penn Station, or the way Times Square is now Disney World. But it's inevitable. Now we're at a particularly bad time because we live in Guilianville, and it's all about selling out to highest bidder and corporate greed. As far as independent film goes, that, too, is just a label they slap on to sell things, and now Hollywood imitates independent films. Todd Solondz made *Happiness*, which allowed Hollywood to make *American Beauty*—basically a watered-down version with no teeth to it. And it cleaned up at the Oscars.

But this is a culture that always usurps and repackages its own waste products and sells you the shit. They always do that. It's like what happened with the counterculture in the sixties—*Time* magazine called them hippies, the government made them seem like whacked-out drug freaks, and then a couple of years later they start selling tie-dyed shirts at the mall.

TL: And suburban housewives are wearing peace symbols around their necks.

JJ: Exactly. That's just the way it works. So I don't know how to even assess or predict what will happen. New technology is always interesting as a tool, but it does always get usurped very quickly. My favorite example is television. What a beautiful, incredible idea. But it's become like a big river that everybody throws their garbage into. And people say, "Oh, TV sucks, the river is ugly." But the river isn't ugly, it's all the garbage that's in it. Similarly, it's not the concept of the Internet that makes it into a shopping mall, it's the way people use it.

Digital video is very liberating for a lot of people because they can avoid the middleman—now they don't have to get on their hands and knees and genuflect to the studios to get money out of them. But you know, it all gets turned around. Like with Sundance. I read some account a few years ago of someone who showed his first film there, and it was

a nice film, and he was a promising director, but there was a feeding frenzy, and a distributor bought it for, like, eight million dollars. And of course on that level the film was a failure, and then the director's career was "over."

TL: Do you feel that there's still a viable creative scene here in the city?

JJ: Less and less. It was much more evident back in the late seventies and early eighties, when there was a creative burst here, particularly in music. As people slowly got signed to major labels and pulled away, the scene was dismantled. Now I really feel like there's no scene in New York, which is partly an economic thing because so many young people—the new blood—can't afford an apartment in the city. It's no longer, well, you walk out at night and go to CBGB's and you're going to find something happening there. It seems like there is no centered new wave of energy coming from anywhere, because corporations decide what we're going to hear—what music they're going to push down our throats.

I'm sure there are little enclaves here and there where you'll find exciting things happening—probably in the places you'd least expect. Iran is a good example—their films are so good; there's a garden of beautiful things growing there in a place you'd least expect to find them. So I don't know. Also, I don't like getting too nostalgic, because things always change—it's like the ocean: they keep rolling, and a lot of interesting things have happened during this change. But they're harder and harder to find. As RZA said, "Wu-Tang shit is underground. And if a large audience reaches out for it, we want it to be there for them, but we aren't going to change what we do in order to facilitate them finding it. Our shit is still underground."

TL: That sounds pretty close to what you might say about your own work.

JJ: Yeah, it's very close. Same with someone like Neil Young. I love Neil because he doesn't give a fuck about what's fashionable. He's also completely contrary. If I was his advisor, I would have told him not to go back out on the road with Crosby, Stills, and Nash, but that would just make him more inclined to do it. He'd say, "Oh, you think that's a bad move, do you? Then I'll definitely do it." Or Tom Waits. He lives in his own world. His last record was probably his best-selling one. It's a great

record, but it doesn't really make sense that *Mule Variations* sold more than *Swordfishtrombones*—and it was certainly nothing he planned.

He doesn't give a shit. And we need people that don't give a shit because there are already more than enough people who do—there's enough prefabricated garbage out there. I am very, very critical of people's expression. I have very particular tastes. Whether it's hip-hop or rock 'n' roll or gospel music, there's probably no more than 10 percent of it in any given genre that I'm going to respond to. And certainly these days the strange stuff—the more original stuff—is less valued in the marketplace, and everything is evaluated by the fucking marketplace. So even though I'm still very critical, I really try to look for the value in something if it's clear that the intention is not for profit or fame, or all that superficial stuff that means nothing to me.

Permanent Vacation (1980)

Cinematography: Tom DiCillo

Editor: Jim Jarmusch

Sound: Kevin Dowd

Music: Jim Jarmusch, John Lurie, Earl Bostic ("Up There in Orbit")

Producer: Jim Jarmusch

Production Manager: Sara Driver

Assistant Director: Sara Driver

Cast: Chris Parker (Allie Parker), Leila Gastil (Leila), John Lurie (sax player), Richard Boes (war veteran), Sara Driver (nurse), Ruth Bolton (Mother), Maria Duval (demented Hispanic woman), Frankie Faison (man in movie theater lobby), Suzanne Fletcher and Felice Rosser (girls in car), Eric Mitchell (fence), Chris Hameon (French arrival), Lisa Rosen (girl in movie theater lobby)

Production Company: Cinesesthesia

Format: 16mm, color, 77 min.

U.S. premiere: February 10, 1980. No commercial run in the U.S. TV broadcast: May 27, 1984, WNET-TV

Stranger than Paradise (a.k.a. *The New World*; 1982)

(Based on an idea by Jim Jarmusch and John Lurie)

Cinematography: Tom DiCillo

Editor: Jim Jarmusch

Sound: Greg Curry

Music: John Lurie, Screamin' Jay Hawkins ("I Put a Spell on You")

Producer: Jim Jarmusch

Production Manager: Sara Driver

Cast: Eszter Balint (Eva), John Lurie (Willie), Richard Edson (Eddie)

Production Company: Cinesesthesia

Format: 35mm (1:1.85), black and white, 30 min.

Premiere: October 29, 1982, at the International Hof Film Festival

(Internationale Hofer Filmtage). No U.S. premiere: the film was informally shown in clubs to raise funds for the feature-length version.

Stranger than Paradise (1984)

(Based on an idea by Jim Jarmusch and John Lurie)

Cinematography: Tom DiCillo

Editor: Jim Jarmusch, Melody London

Sound: Greg Curry, Drew Kunin

Music: John Lurie, Screamin' Jay Hawkins ("I Put a Spell on You")

Producer: Otto Grokenberger

Production Manager: Sara Driver

Cast: Eszter Balint (Eva), John Lurie (Willie), Richard Edson (Eddie), Cecilia Stark (Aunt Lottie), Danny Rosen (Billy), Rammellzee (beachside contact), Tom DiCillo (airline agent), Richard Boes (factory worker), Rockets Redglare (card player), Harvey Perr (card player), Brian J. Burchill (card player), Sara Driver (Eva's clone)

Production Company: Cinesthesia, Grokenberger Filmproduktion, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF)

Format: 35mm (1:1.85), black and white, 89 min.

Premiere: May 16, 1984, at the Cannes Film Festival. U.S. Premiere: September 29, 1984, at the New York Film Festival

Down by Law (1986)

Cinematography: Robby Müller

Editor: Melody London

Sound: Drew Kunin

Music: John Lurie. Songs: Tom Waits ("Jockey Full of Bourbon" and "Tango till They're Sore"), Naomi Neville ("It's Raining," performed by Irma Thomas)

Assistant Director: Claire Denis

Production Design: Janet Densmore

Props and Sets: Roger Knight

Producer: Alan Kleinberg

Co-producers: Tom Rothman, Jim Stark

Production Manager: Rudd Simmons

Cast: Tom Waits (Zack), John Lurie (Jack Romano), Roberto Benigni (Roberto), Nicoletta Braschi (Nicoletta), Ellen Barkin (Laurette), Billie Neal (Bobbie), Rockets Redglare (Gig), Vernel Bagneris (Preston), Timothea (Julie), L. C. Drane (L. C.), Joy Houck Jr. (Detective Mandino), Carrie Lindsoe (young girl), Ralph Joseph, Richard Boes (detectives), Dave Pettitjean (Cajun detective), Adam Cohen (cop in uniform), Alan Kleinberg (corpse), Archie Sampier (prisoner), David Dahlgren, Alex Miller, Elliott Keener, Jay Hilliard (guards)

Production Company: Island Pictures
Format: 35mm (1:1.85), black and white, 107 min.
Premiere: May 16, 1986, at the Cannes Film Festival. U.S. Premiere:
September 19, 1986, at the New York Film Festival

Coffee and Cigarettes (1986)

Script: Jim Jarmusch with Roberto Benigni and Steven Wright
Cinematography: Tom DiCillo
Editor: Melody London
Sound: William Sarokin
Assistant Director: Demetra MacBride
Producer: Jim Stark
Production Manager: Kathie Hersch
Cast: Roberto Benigni (Bob), Steven Wright (Steven)
Production Company: Black Snake
Format: 35mm (1:1.85), black and white, 6 min.
TV Broadcast: November 22, 1986, "Saturday Night Live"

Coffee and Cigarettes (Memphis Version) (1989)

Cinematography: Robby Müller
Editor: Melody London
Sound: Drew Kunin
Assistant Director: Eric Heffron
Producers: Rudd Simmons and Jim Stark
Co-producer: Demetra MacBride
Production Manager: Kathie Hersch
Cast: Cinqué Lee, Joie Lee, Steve Buscemi (waiter)
Production Company: Black Snake
Format: 35mm (1:1.85), black and white, 8 min.

Mystery Train (1989)

Cinematography: Robby Müller
Editor: Melody London
Assistant Editor: Jay Rabinowitz
Location Sound: Drew Kunin
Supervising Sound Editor: Robert Hein
Recording Engineer: Tom Lazarus
Music: John Lurie. Songs: Elvis Presley ("Mystery Train," "Blue Moon"),
Junior Parker ("Mystery Train"), Otis Redding ("Pain in My Heart"),
Roy Orbison ("Domino"), Rufus Thomas ("The Memphis Train"), Bobby
"Blue" Bland ("Get Your Money Where You Spend Your Time"), The Bar-
Kays ("Soul Finger")

Assistant Director: Eric Heffron

Set Design: Dianna Freas

Production Design: Dan Bishop

Producer: Jim Stark

Associate Producer: Demetra MacBride

Production Manager: Kathie Hersch

Line Producer: Rudd Simmons

Cast: "Far from Yokohama": Nasatoshi Nagase (Jun), Youki Kudoh (Mitzuko), Screamin' Jay Hawkins (hotel clerk), Cinqué Lee (bellboy), Rufus Thomas (cigar smoker at station), Jodie Markell (Sun Studios guide), William Hoch, Pat Hoch, Joshua Elvis Hoch (family at Sun Studios), Reginald Freeman (conductor), Beverly Prye ("Silver Fox"). "A Ghost": Nicoletta Braschi (Luisa), Elizabeth Bracco (DeeDee), Sy Richardson (news vendor), Tom Noonan (man in diner), Stephen Jones (ghost), Robert Lowell (Lester), Sara Driver (airport clerk), Richard Boes (second man in diner). "Lost in Space": Joe Strummer (Johnny), Rick Aviles (Will Robinson), Steve Buscemi (Charlie the barber), Vondie Curtis-Hall (Ed), Royale Johnson (Earl), Winston Hoffman (Wilbur), Rockets Redglare (liquor store clerk), Marvel Thomas (Dave), Charles Ponder, D'Army Bailey (pool players), Tom Waits (radio voice)

Production Company: JVC Entertainment, Mystery Train, Inc.

Format: 35mm (1:1.85), color, 113 min.

Premiere: May 13, 1989, at the Cannes Film Festival. U.S. Premiere:

November 17, 1989

Night on Earth (1991)

Cinematography: Frederick Elmes

Editor: Jay Rabinowitz

Location Sound: Drew Kunin

Sound Designer: Anthony "Chic" Ciccolini III

Music: Tom Waits. Songs: Tom Waits ("Back in the Good Old World," "Good Old World"), Davie Allan and the Arrows ("Cycle-Delic"), Blue Cheer ("Summertime Blues")

Set Design: Johan Le Teneux (Los Angeles), Meredith Souprios (New York), Catherine Demesmaeker, Jean-Charles Bachelier (Paris), Pietro Tonoglio (Rome), Kaija Ilomäki (Helsinki)

Producer: Jim Jarmusch

Co-producer: Demetra MacBride

Cast: Los Angeles: Wynona Rider (Corky), Gena Rowlands (Victoria Snelling), Lisanne Falk (band manager), Alan Randolph Scott, Anthony Portillo (drunk rock musicians). New York: Armin Mueller-Stahl (Helmut Grokenberger), Giancarlo Esposito (YoYo), Rosie Perez (Angela), Richard Boes (cab driver 1). Paris: Isaach de Bankolé (driver), Béatrice Dalle

(blind passenger), Pascal N'Zonzi, Emile Abossolo M'bo (Cameroonian diplomats). Rome: Roberto Benigni (Gino), Paolo Bonacelli (priest), Gianni Schettino, Antonio Ragusa (transvestites). Helsinki: Matti Pellonpää (Mika), Kari Väänänen, Sakari Juosmanen (workers), Tomi Salmela (Aki)

Production Manager: Susan Shapiro (Los Angeles), Kathie Hersch (New York), Gilles Sacuto (Paris), Manuela Pinesici-Berger (Rome), Pauli Pentti (Helsinki)

Line Producer: Rudd Simmons

Production company: JVC Entertainment, Victor Musical Industries, Pyramide Productions, Le Studio Canal Plus, Pandora Film, Channel 4 Production, Locus Solus Production

Format: 35mm (1:1.85), color, 129 min.

Premiere: October 2, 1991, at the New York Film Festival

Coffee and Cigarettes (Somewhere in California) (1993)

Cinematography: Frederick Elmes

Editors: Terry Katz, Jim Jarmusch

Sound: Steve Balliet

Art Director: Laura Chariton

Assistant Director: Laura Marks

Producers: Demetra MacBride, Birgit Staudt

Cast: Iggy Pop, Tom Waits

Production Company: Cinesthesia

Format: 35mm (1:1.66), black and white, 12 min.

Premiere: May 14, 1993, at the Cannes Film Festival

Dead Man (1995)

Cinematography: Robby Müller

Editor: Jay Rabinowitz

Sound: Drew Kunin

Music: Neil Young

Art Direction: Ted Berner

Sets: Marit Allen

Special Effects Animation: Don Nolan

Producer: Demetra MacBride

Production Design: Robert Ziembecki

Cast: Johnny Depp (William Blake), Gary Farmer (Nobody), Robert Mitchum (John Dickinson), Crispin Glover (train stoker), John Hurt (factory manager), Gabriel Byrne (Charlie Dickinson), Lance Henriksen (Cole Wilson), Michael Wincott (Conway Twill), Mili Avital (Thel Russell), Billy Bob Thornton (Big George Drakoulous), Iggy Pop ("Sally" Jenko), Eugene Byrd (Johnny "the Kid" Pickett), Jared Harris (Benmont Tench),

Alfred Molina (trading post missionary), Michelle Thrush (Nobody's girlfriend), Mark Bringleon (Lee), Jimmie Ray Weeks (Marvin), John North (Mr. Olafsen), Richard Boes (factory worker)

Production Company: 12 Gauge Production, JVC Entertainment, Miramax Films, Newmarket Capital Group, L. P., Pandora Film. With support from: Filmförderungsanstalt Berlin, Filmboard Berlin-Brandenburg, and Filmstiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen

Format: 35mm (1:1.85), black and white, 121 min.

Premiere: May 26, 1995, at the Cannes Film Festival. U.S. theatrical release: May 10, 1996

Year of the Horse (1997)

Cinematography: Jim Jarmusch, Larry A. Johnson, Steve Onuska, Arthur Rosato

Editor: Jay Rabinowitz

Sound: John Hausmann

Music: Neil Young, performed by Neil Young and Crazy Horse (Frank Sampedro, Ralph Molina, Billy Talbot). Songs: "Fuckin' Up," "Slip Away," "Barstool Blues," "Stupid Girl," "Big Time," "Tonight's the Night," "Sedan Delivery," "Like a Hurricane," "Music Arcade"

Producer: Larry A. Johnson

Production Company: Shakey Pictures

Format: Super-8, Hi-8 video, 16mm. Distributed as a 35mm film (1:1.66) for theatrical presentation

Premiere: May 8, 1997, at the San Francisco Film Festival. U.S. theatrical release: May 9, 1997

Ghost Dog (1999)

Cinematography: Robby Müller

Editor: Jay Rabinowitz

Sound: Drew Kunin

Sound Designer and Editor: Chic Ciccoloni III

Music: The RZA. Songs: Killah Priest ("From Then Till Now"), Willie Williams ("Armageddon Time"), Jimmy Lyons and Andrew Cyrille ("Nuba Time"), Public Enemy ("Cold Lampin' with Flavor")

Art Direction: Mario Ventenilla

Sets: Ron von Blomberg

Digital and Optical Effects: Don Nolan, John Furniotis

Producers: Richard Guay, Jim Jarmusch

Production Design: Ted Berter

Cast: Forest Whitaker (Ghost Dog), John Tormey (Louie Bonacelli), Cliff Gorman (Sonny Valerio), Henri Silva (Ray Vargo), Isaach de Bankolé (Raymond), Tricia Vessey (Louise Vargo), Victor Argo (Vinnie), Gene

Ruffini (old don), Richard Portnow (Handsome Frank), Camille Winbush (Pearline), Frank Minucci (Big Angie), Frank Adonis (Sonny Valerio's bodyguard), Vinnie Vella (Sammy the Snake), Joe Rigano (Uncle Joe Rags), Gary Farmer (Cayuga pigeon breeder), Clebert Ford (pigeon breeder), Gano Frills, Touché Cornel, Jamie Hector (gangstas in red), Dreddy Kruger, Timbo King, Clay Da Raider, Dead and Stinking, Defflon Sallahr (rappers in park), Roberto Lopez, Salvatore Alagna, Jerry Todisco (Ghost Dog's attackers), The RZA (black man in camouflage), Damon Whitaker (young Ghost Dog)

Production Company: Plywood Production, JVC, Le Studio Canal Plus, Bac Films, Pandora Film, ARD/Degeto Film

Format: 35mm (1:1.85), color, 116 min.

Premiere: May 18, 1999. U.S. Premiere: February 10, 2000, at the PanAfrican Film Festival. U.S. theatrical release: March 3, 2000

Int. Trailer. Night (2002)

Cinematography: Frederick Elmes
 Editor: Jay Rabinowitz
 Sound: Drew Kunin
 Sound Design: Anthony Chic Ciccolini III
 Music: J. S. Bach ("The Goldberg Variations")
 Producer: Cecilia Kate Roque
 Associate Producer: Stacey Smith
 Producer of *Ten Minutes Older*: Leontine Ruetten
 Cast: Chloë Sevigny (the actress)

Format: 35mm, black and white, 10 min.

Episode of *Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet*. Additional episodes by Aki Kaurismäki (*Dogs Have No Hell*), Víctor Erice (*Lifeline*), Werner Herzog (*Ten Thousand Years Older*), Wim Wenders (*Twelve Miles to Trona*), Spike Lee (*We Wuz Robbed*), and Chen Kaige (*100 Flowers Hidden Deep*).
 Companion film: *Ten Minutes Older: The Cello*, with episodes by Bernardo Bertolucci (*Histoire d'eaux*), Mike Figgis (*A Staircase about Time 2*), Jiri Menzel (*One Moment*), Istvan Szabo (*Ten Minutes Later*), Claire Denis (*Vers Nancy*), Volker Schlöndorff (*Enlightenment*), Michael Radford (*Addicted to the Stars*), Jean-Luc Godard (*Dans le noir du temps*)

Production Company: Atom Films, Emotion Pictures, Odyssey Films, Film Förderungsanstalt (FFA), JVC Entertainment, Kuzui Enterprises, London Matador Pictures, Road Movies, WGBH Boston

Premiere: May 18, 2002, at the Cannes Film Festival

Coffee and Cigarettes (2004)

Cinematography: Tom DiCillo, Robby Müller, Frederick Elmes, Ellen Kuras
 Director of Photography: Frederick Elmes

Editors: Jim Jarmusch, Melody London, Jay Rabinowitz, Terry Katz
Sound: William Sarokin, Drew Kunin, Steve Balliet
Music: Richard Berry and the Pharaohs ("Louie, Louie"), Funkadelic
("Nappy Dugout," "A Joyful Process"), Tommy Janes and the Shondelles
("Crimson and Clover"), the Stooges ("Down on the Street"), the Skatalites
("Nimble Foot Ska"), Modern Jazz Quartet ("Baden Baden"), Jerry Bird
("Hanelei Moon," "Serenade to Nalani," "Panaan Waltz"), Henry Purcell
("Fantasia 3 in G Minor"), Eric "Monty" Morris ("Enna Bella"), Tom
Waits/C-Side ("Saw Sage"), Gustav Mahler ("Ich bin der Welt abhanden
gekommen"), Doug Wood ("Lonesome Road"), Roland Alphonso and
the Soul Vendors ("Streets of Gold," "Sit Back [Just Cooly]"), Iggy Pop
("Louie, Louie")

Art Direction: Laura Chariton, Tom Jarmusch

Producers: Joana Vicente, Jason Kliot, Jim Stark, Demetra MacBride, Birgit
Staudt, Rudd Simmons

Co-producers: Stacey Smith, Gretchen McGowan

Production Design: Dan Bishop, Mark Friedberg, Tom Jarmusch

Cast: "Strange to Meet You": Roberto Benigni (Bob), Steven Wright (Steve).

"Somewhere in Memphis": Cinqué Lee, Joie Lee, Steve Buscemi (waiter).

"Somewhere in California": Iggy Pop, Tom Waits. "Those Things Will Kill
Ya": Vinny Vella, Joe Rigano, Vinny Vella Jr. "Renée": Renée French, E. J.
Rodríguez. "No Problem": Alex Descas (Alex), Isaach de Bankolé (Isaach).

"Cousins": Cate Blanchett (Cate, Shelley). "Jack Shows Meg His Tesla
Coil": Meg White, Jack White, Cinqué Lee (waiter). "Cousins?": Alfred
Molina, Steve Coogan. "Delirium": The RZA, The GZA, Bill Murray.

"Champagne": Bill Rice (Bill), Taylor Mead (Taylor)

Production Company: Smokescreen (released by United Artists)

Premiere: September 7, 2003. U.S. theatrical release: May 14, 2004

Broken Flowers (2005)

Based on a story by Sara Driver and Bill Raden

Cinematography: Frederick Elmes

Editor: Jay Rabinowitz

Sound Mix: Drew Kunin

Music: Mulatu Astatke ("Yegelle Tezeta," "Yekermo Sew," "Guebye"), The
Greenhornes and Holly Golightly ("There Is an End"), The Greenhornes
("Unnatural Habitat"), The Tennors ("Ride Your Donkey"), Marvin Gaye
("I Want You"), Brian Jonestown Massacre ("Not If You Were the Last
Dandy on Earth"), Sleep ("Dopesmoker"), Gabriel Fauré ("Requiem," Op.
48 [Pie Jesu]), Dengue Fever ("Ethanopium")

Art Direction: Sara Frank

Story Consultant: Sara Driver

Producers: Jim Jarmusch, John Kilik, Stacey Smith

Production Design: Mark Friedberg

Visual Effects: Jan Cillier, Chris Halstead

Cast: Bill Murray (Don Johnston), Jeffrey Wright (Winston), Sharon Stone (Laura), Frances Conroy (Dora), Jessica Lange (Carmen), Tilda Swinton (Penny), Alexis Dziena (Lolita), Pell James (Sun Green), Chloë Sevigny (Carmen's assistant), Christopher McDonald (Ron, Dora's husband), Mark Webber (son?), Julie Delpy (Sherry), Heather Simms (Mona, Winston's wife), Chris Bauer (Dan), Larry Fessenden (Will)

Production Company: Five Roses (released by Focus Features)

Premiere: May 17, 2005, at the Cannes Film Festival. U.S. theatrical release: August 5, 2005

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