

Jim Jarmusch

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Whether or not a person knows it, just about everyone that has ever watched movies has a filmmaker that they adore more than any other filmmaker. It may take a person years to realize who that filmmaker is, but sooner or later, he'll eventually come to a conclusion about who he thinks is the cream of the crop in the film world. Maybe it's the type(s) of stories the filmmaker has done, the way the story is presented or in my case, the ethics and attitude of the filmmaker himself. This paper will look at a man who I think is the epitome of not only the independent film world, but all filmmakers. The name of this man is Jim Jarmusch. I want to start off by explaining how I came to know his work.

The first film of his I ever saw was *Night on Earth* on the Bravo Channel back in 1995. The movie is actually a collection of five short stories that unfold in five different cities in taxi cabs on a particular night. Each story is different, but each has the same underlying theme: the apprehensive and disjointed nature of speaking with strangers in a confined space. I was only twelve at the time, but I was very impressed by the film as I had never seen anything quite like it before. It is one of those few movies that I will always remember.

In 2003, I viewed *Stranger Than Paradise* for the first time. Just like with *Night on Earth*, *Stranger Than Paradise* sucked me in with the storyline (actually, the lack of a storyline as it is really a slice of life film) and with the neorealistic editing style. I didn't even realize that it was the same filmmaker that made *Night on Earth*, yet looking back on it, it makes a lot of sense that the two were made by the same man. When I finally

realized that the two films were made by the same filmmaker, I just felt that I had to learn more about the man. My findings made me appreciate the man more than I already did.

Jim Jarmusch is somewhat of an anomaly, even as an independent filmmaker. Every film that he has made was written by him and with the exception of one, *Year Of The Horse*, he owns the master copy to every work that he has done since the making of his first feature film, *Permanent Vacation*. During the late 1970s, Jarmusch enrolled at New York University and became a teaching assistant to the famous filmmaker Nicholas Ray. Although Jarmusch pulls influences from many different places, such as Japanese and Italian cinema, and filmmakers, such as Ozu and Fuller, Ray would turn out to be his most profound influence (Attanasio, 1984). The style of films that the two men have made differs considerably, but that's not where the main influence lies. It was the encouragement of Nicholas Ray that really propelled Jarmusch into the film world (Lawlor, 1999). "If you want to make a film, you can make a film. Don't let anyone tell you it's impossible or that you have to have so much money," are the immortal words of advice that Ray gave to Jarmusch under his tutelage (Attanasio, 1984). However, this is not to say that the encouragement of Ray is the only influence on Jarmusch. On the contrary, there was an additional influence in terms of the attitude and way Ray went about making his most famous works, *Johnny Guitar* and *Rebel Without A Cause*, that Jarmusch found appealing as well as a filmic influence. Both of these elements intertwined with each other and have helped Jarmusch craft his own style of films for the past twenty-six years.

During the late 1940s and all throughout the 1950s, Ray made films that contrasted with the traditional stories of Hollywood at the time. His films centered on the

protagonist's conflicts with the society in which he or she lived in (Lawlor, 1999). In the off-beat western, *Johnny Guitar*, Vienna is a tough-skinned saloon owner that is at odds with Emma and her lawmen lackeys. Vienna wants a new railway to pass through the town in which all of the characters of the film reside. She sees it as a golden opportunity for herself, and others, to profit from the influx of travelers and the new business establishments that will pop up over a period of time in the town. While this spirit of capitalism seems noble to most people, Emma sees it as the death of her small quaint town and is bent on destroying Vienna before something of this nature will ever happen. Unlike Emma, Vienna does not have the law on her "side," but we find out later in the film that Emma's lackeys only side with her because she has the power in town, not because they agree with her. Lastly, this particular film also does two things that no other films of the time did. First, the animosity between Vienna and Emma hints at an underlying lesbian undertone only made more obvious by Vienna's mannish dress patterns and Emma's butch haircut (Robertson, 1995) and second, this was the first western film in which the power wielders were female rather than male. In fact, the male roles are so subordinate that, with the exception of Johnny Guitar himself, even there greater number cannot empower them.

The *Rebel Without A Cause* protagonist, Jim Stark, is a teenage loner that has been frequently uprooted from town to town due to his anti-social behavior. He is constantly getting himself into trouble; however, this is not what he wants to happen. The society in which he lives misinterprets his personality and the end result is confrontation between the two. Jim really wants to fit in with the crowd, but that's not

how the crowd sees it. They view him as a malcontent bent on shaking things up rather than someone with a quirky sense of humor that is actually a likeable guy. If they took the time to get to know him, they would realize what kind of person he truly is. It is no wonder that this *Catcher In The Rye* type story is still popular today as every adolescent can find some way to identify with it. Even after all these years, it is still seen as the quissisential adolescent angst film, which is a testament to the film itself as it was the first of its kind to convey that type of subject matter (Simmons, 1995).

Later on in Ray's career, he made *King Of Kings*, the story of the Christian martyr, Jesus Christ. Just about everyone knows of the fate of Jesus during his short life on this planet as it is probably one of the most heartbreaking stories, even for those of us who are not Christians. Jesus walked throughout Jerusalem preaching the Word of his father, God, proclaiming that he was the Messiah sent by God. Although he had his followers (mainly, the Disciples), most of the people he encountered saw him as a false prophet and denied his wisdom. His wisdom made many of the people in his society leery of what his true intentions were, which ultimately led to a decision that cost him his life. Whereas Vienna and Jim Stark fought their society and eventually overcame their obstacles, Jesus had to accept the fate his society would give him, which was having to be crucified.

In all three of Ray's films, the protagonist was seen as a scapegoat in the society he or she resided in and was judged by that society accordingly. Jarmusch himself has continued on with this theme of portraying the protagonist as the social outcast that struggles against the society in which he lives (Lawlor, 1999). In his case, however, the characters of his films usually have off-beat personalities and quirky lifestyles (Bollag,

1986). In *Stranger Than Paradise*, Willie and Eddie are two misfits that are down on their luck. They live in crappy apartments in New York City and neither seems to have a desire to make their situations better. They are obviously not heroes, more like your anti-heroes. Even after winning a lot of money at a poker game and leaving New York City for Cleveland, Ohio, it seems that they can't fit in there either, even though they have money now. It appears as though the two men, "have no future and live in an acute state of lawlessness" (Bollag, 1986, p. 12) in which boredom consumes them. After leaving Cleveland for "sunny" Florida with Willie's Hungarian cousin, Eva, the two men are robbed of their money by Eva. The film ends with Eva boarding a plane with the money she stole from the protagonists at the hotel they were staying at, leaving the audience bewildered of the fact that in the end, the protagonists did not save the day, but walked away poor and in the same situation they were in before they won the money, only this time in a place foreign to them.

Jarmusch also followed in Ray's footsteps by making an off-beat Western of his own known as *Dead Man*. In most of classical westerns, if there were Indians present, they typically were shown as savages that needed to be dealt with in a harsh manner, usually death (Hall, 2001). In this film, however, the main Indian character, Nobody, actually helps the protagonist, Bill Blake, to survive until the end of the film where Bill dies from a injuries he sustained earlier in the film. Bill Blake is a poet that has to escape his way through the American West to dodge various forms of the law – hunters/trappers, police, bounty hunters and the like – all of whom are Caucasian like himself. It is clear that the white man is the antagonist here and that the Indians are shown in a better light,

but not really. The Indians we see are poor and disheveled, hanging onto lives that have been ruined by the white man. To me, it seems that the way Bill keeps his protagonist status is by slowly transforming into an Indian himself (by dressing and behaving as one) throughout the film, only to end with his death.

The last film of Jarmusch's that I will speak of is that very first one of his I saw and, to this day, is still my favorite Jarmusch film: *Night On Earth*. This film is in stark contrast to the other two films in that there really isn't an antagonist, but if there were one, it would be communication, not an actual person. We all have those moments in time where we have to speak to strangers, even if we don't want to. Depending on our own speaking-abilities and those of the stranger, the type of conversation engaged in can be varied to a considerable extent. A taxi cab is a great opportunity to see this reality in action. All of the conversations in the cabs were at times uncomfortable (a trademark of Jarmusch) and disjointed. The fare was too intruding (Los Angeles short), too intimidating (New York short), too obnoxious (Paris short), or too drunk (Helsinki short). In the Rome short, the cab drive actually causes his fare (priest) to have a heart attack due to his obscene story. I can only imagine how true to life this story is and if that is the case, I feel bad for all cab drivers.

All of Jarmusch's films (even the ones that aren't mentioned here) have their own unique vision, completely outside of what other filmmakers are doing now or have done in the past. Ray was yet again an influence here when he told Jarmusch that in order for him to be successful as a filmmaker, he needed to create his own vision for his work (Lawlor, 1999). This is why I love the man's work. It is all completely original and not

only does he make the films, he is the brainchild of them as well. In addition to his originality, he has remained true to his independent roots since the beginning of his career and has made it a point to stay out of the mainstream, so that he can continue to make the innovative films that he has under his belt (Lawlor, 1999).

As I look back on the works of Jarmusch, I realize that they aren't great *technical* feats with a bunch of scenes that dazzle the eye. They are honest films that are true to life in which everyone can find a character in which they can identify themselves with. Without the influence of Ray, I wonder what path Jarmusch would have taken as a filmmaker. Would I still like his work? Would he have even been able to make a name for himself? Those are some of the questions that I asked myself while researching him. All I know is that when it comes to who I think offers great films to the audience (a smart audience, that is), Jim Jarmusch is at the top of my list and will remain there for years to come.

References

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- Simmons, J. (1995, Summer). The censoring of "Rebel Without A Cause." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 23, 56-63.

Filmography

(The Films I watched are in CAPS and **Bolded**)

Autuer: Jim Jarmusch

Permanent Vacation (1980)

STRANGER THAN PARADISE (1984)

Down By Law (1986)

Mystery Train (1989)

NIGHT ON EARTH (1991)

DEAD MAN (1995)

Year Of The Horse (1997)

GHOST DOG: THE WAY OF THE SAMURAI (1999)

Ten Minutes Older: The Trumpet (2002)

COFFEE AND CIGARETTES (2003)

Broken Flowes (2005)

Influence: Nicholas Ray

They Live By Night (1948)

Knock On Any Door (1949)

A Woman's Secret (1949)

Roseanna McCoy (1949)

In A Lonely Place (1950)

Born To Be Bad (1950)

Flying Leathernecks (1951)

The Racket (1951)

On Dangerous Ground (1952)

Macao (1952)

The Lusty Men (1952)

Androcles And The Lion (1952)

JOHNNY GUITAR (1954)

Run For Cover (1955)

REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE (1955)

Hot Blood (1956)

Bigger Than Life (1956)

The True Story Of Jesse James (1957)

Amère Victoire (1957)

Wind Across The Everglades (1958)

Party Girl (1958)

The Savage Innocents (1959)

KING OF KINGS (1961)

55 Days At Peking (1963)

Wet Dreams (1975)

We Can't Go Home Again (1976)

Marco (1978)

Lightning Over Water (1980)