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Jim Jarmusch: music, words and noise

Sara Piazza

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Among media scholars, cultural historians and film critics, the 1980s are often dismissed as a period of bloated blockbuster aesthetics, Reaganist/Thatcherite politics and greed-is-good myopia. Occasionally, a study will emerge that seeks to 'rescue' a select group of auteurs (David Cronenberg, Spike Lee, David Lynch, Gus van Sant, and/or Stephen Soderbergh, among others) from the damaging legacy of the so-called 'Me Decade'. Jim Jarmusch, the Cleveland-born filmmaker,

poet and musician, is another one of the ‘exceptions’ that are often invoked in order to prove the rule of irredeemably corporatized and conservative media in the Reagan Era. Since his emergence with films like *Permanent Vacation* (1980) and *Down by Law* (1986), Jarmusch has relied upon his ability to secure financing without relinquishing final cut or ownership of his negatives. This has distinguished him as one of Hollywood’s most ‘independent’ filmmakers, and he has been credited with kick-starting the 1980s ‘indie’ film movement that would gain commercial, cultural and industrial power throughout the ensuing decade.

Jim Jarmusch: Music, Words and Noise, a new book from Berlin-based journalist and producer Sara Piazza, admirably resists the temptation to isolate Jarmusch as a singular figure of genius in an artistically barren period of Hollywood history. The book also evades the trappings of simple, celebratory biography. Instead, Piazza critically and vitally interrogates the concepts of ‘independent’ and ‘filmmaker’ through Jarmusch’s 30-year career as an artist, director and musician.

What, after all, does it mean to call a filmmaker ‘independent’? Jarmusch himself has repeatedly rejected attempts to cast him as a singular *auteur*, and in reading Piazza one is often forced to confront this question. In both form and content, Piazza’s book considers the multiple influences on, and confluences in, Jarmusch’s seemingly ‘independent’ work. Between each of the book’s chapters are Piazza’s interviews with some of the director’s many interlocutors, including musician John Lurie, actor Roberto Benigni and composer Ennio Morricone. These sections not only provide scholars and fans with an insight into the director’s creative process, but also reveal the degree to which these people both directly and indirectly shaped Jarmusch’s films. Similarly, the book’s opening chapter places Jarmusch’s emergence as a filmmaker in the historical and cultural context of New York’s Super 8 film movement and the punk, post-punk and no-wave music scenes of 1970s. This reveals the extent to which the aesthetic and atmospheric qualities of Jarmusch films like *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), *Dead Man* (1995), *Broken Flowers* (2005) and *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) are echoes from CBGB’s and the Factory. Hip-hop, another cultural formation emerging from 1970s New York, provides the conceptual framework for Piazza’s analysis of Jarmusch’s proclivity for quotation, allusion and homage. Piazza argues that, like a DJ finding the perfect break or a record producer layering samples on a track, Jarmusch’s films include allusions (to literature, music, cinema, art and history) in order to celebrate, critique, extend and reimagine their source material. These observations are valuable not only because they provide an insight into Jarmusch’s films, but also because they encourage a critical reconsideration of the category of ‘indie’ itself, and its cultural currency since the 1980s.

As the title suggests, Piazza’s primary interest in Jarmusch’s oeuvre is in the realm of sound. This alone makes the volume a worthwhile addition to existing scholarship, as there are no extended studies of Jarmusch with this focus and few academic or critical monographs on any single film director’s use of sound. This comes at a time when some of the most exciting work in film and media scholarship is emerging from the realm of ‘sound studies’. Piazza’s primary claim regarding Jarmusch’s use of sound is that he engages in a form of ‘sound democracy’, wherein the aural elements of a film are considered as important as the visual elements (18). Further, Piazza argues, all the elements of sound in cinema – score,

dialogue and sound effects – are granted equal importance. Indeed, the categorical boundaries between and among these elements (the ‘music, words and noise’ referenced in the title) are shown throughout Jarmusch’s filmography to be illusory and easily transgressed. For example, Piazza reads Jarmusch’s tendency to omit subtitling of foreign languages (as in *Mystery Train* or *Dead Man*) as an example of the director’s toying with the distinction between ‘words’ and ‘noise’ (181–185). Another chapter (‘Jarmusch, the Poet’) considers the ways that Jarmusch utilizes dialogue as a kind of music. Still another chapter (‘Memphis Hip Hop, Mestizos, and Samurai’) considers the racial politics introduced by Jarmusch’s use of musicians as actors, from Screamin’ Jay Hawkins to Joe Strummer, from RZA to Tom Waits. These arguments thus encourage fans, historians, critics and scholars to be sceptical of film scholarship and commentary that only address film’s visual elements, or those that isolate discrete categories of film sound for examination.

One drawback of Piazza’s journalistic approach, at least for some academic readers, is that the analyses the book offers are rarely placed into the context of existing scholarship in film history, sound studies or studies of popular music. The book does regularly cite the pathbreaking work of Michel Chion, and occasionally gestures towards scholars like Rick Altman, but readers interested in drawing connections between recent scholarship on sound recording, music licensing or the shared industrial infrastructure of cinema and popular music from 1970s to today will be left to make those connections on their own.

On the other hand, the book does serve as an important and compelling model for film criticism/film scholarship that engages with and makes itself legible to non-academic cinephiles. The book balances close readings of Jarmusch’s filmography with historical background and personal interviews. Unlike many single-subject volumes aimed at the general public, Piazza never allows her book to devolve into a simple hagiography (despite her clear affinity for Jarmusch’s work). What she has produced, instead, is a genuine critical history of an important filmmaker, and the shifting, complicated and rich historical and cultural contexts in which he lived and worked.

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Film programming: curating for cinemas, festivals, archives

Peter Bosma

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If curatorial studies is a well established and diverse field of research in the visual arts, its foray into the realm of moving images has been much slower to emerge.