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Written and Directed by **Jim Jarmusch**
Produced by **Stacey Smith, Gretchen McGowan**
Executive Producer **Jon Kilik**
Edited by **Jay Rabinowitz, A.C.E.**
Director of Photography **Christopher Doyle, H.K.S.C.**
With Music by **Boris**
Production Designer **Eugenio Caballero**
Costume Designer **Bina Daigeler**





THE TROUBLESOME TRUTH OF SADNESS AND BEAUTY: THE CINEMATIC WORLD OF JIM JARMUSCH

by Geoff Andrew

Though three-and-a-half decades have passed since Jim Jarmusch first came to the attention of the international cinema-going public with *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), there's a case to be made for the argument that he even now remains one of the most misunderstood American filmmakers around. 'Misunderstood', note; not 'underrated' or 'neglected'. After all, Jarmusch has long had a large and loyal following of fans, he has won plenty of prizes at major festivals – most notably Cannes, which in most respects is the one that really counts – and he's even had his fair share of success at the box-office which, given his uncompromising (and uncompromised) status as an 'indie' filmmaker, is quite something. Jarmusch first made his name as a writer-director of note with the aforementioned second feature (it had been preceded in 1980 by *Permanent Vacation*, an apprentice work shot on 16mm for a pittance after he dropped out of film school), and he has pretty much stayed in the limelight ever since. But that doesn't mean that he and his films haven't been widely misunderstood.

What I'm referring to is the way many of his followers – and, indeed, many who have written about him and his films over the years – have never really gone very far beyond characterising him as 'the King of Cool', or some such. The problem with such an assessment is not so much that it is inaccurate; worse, it is woefully inadequate. Defining 'cool' is obviously a matter of taste, and I for one am prepared to accept that Jarmusch, with his good looks, his shock of prematurely white hair, his sharp but casual dress sense, his musician pals and his history as a significant participant in the 70s New York underground, probably



qualifies as much as any other filmmaker around for that over-used epithet. But being 'cool' (or not) is entirely irrelevant to anyone's real worth as an artist – and Jarmusch is most certainly an artist. Moreover, being 'cool' is something Jarmusch himself – like most artists worth their salt – is not remotely bothered about, because he has other considerably more interesting and more important things on his mind. And it is undoubtedly those things – his thoughts and what he has to say about life and the world – that are deserving of our attention when we look at and assess his work.

How did the obsession with all things 'cool' come about anyway? It surely derives mainly from *Stranger than Paradise* and, to a lesser degree, from Jarmusch's subsequent film, *Down by Law*. The former, an arthouse hit after it won the *Camera d'or* in Cannes, immediately announced itself as something fresh, different and innovative by being shot in austere black and white and structured as a triptych consisting of 67 discrete single-shot scenes briefly separated by black film. One of its three central characters – more or less the protagonist, in fact – was a somewhat listless, self-regarding New York hipster named Willie, played by John Lurie of The Lounge Lizards, while his gambling partner and friend Eddie was played by Richard Edson, formerly drummer for Sonic Youth. The trouble was that many commentators of the time evidently felt that Jarmusch was whole-heartedly endorsing his characters and their actions – an erroneous impression which was then reinforced when Jarmusch cast, in his very next film, Lurie again as listless, self-regarding New Orleans pimp Jack, accompanied by Tom Waits as listless, self-regarding New Orleans radio DJ Zack.

Crucially, what many admirers of these films' deadpan humour, visual beauty, narrative invention and overall originality didn't quite register was that Jarmusch, while never depicting his characters with anything less than a wryly amused affection, was fully aware of their shortcomings: their ill-founded pride and masculine arrogance, their inability or reluctance to understand the needs or virtues of others, their lack of self-awareness. That's precisely why, in each film, he confronted the hipsters in question with someone very different – in *Stranger*

than Paradise, Willie's down-to-earth Hungarian cousin Eva (Eszter Balint); in *Down by Law*, the irrepressibly outgoing, optimistic and Italian Roberto (Roberto Benigni) – whose sudden irruption into the protagonists' stale, even cynical routines brings about... Well, Jarmusch's films, modest, unassuming and averse to tub-thumping as they are, tend to avoid 'big' moments or explicit 'messages', so let's just say that the American protagonists' encounters with the foreigners' different perspectives on life provides an opportunity, at least, for some kind of rethink or even, perhaps, for regeneration.

If some viewers appeared not to notice the element of gentle critique in these two movies, that's probably because Jarmusch's films have always been notable for subtle nuance rather than overt statement; for their focus on the kind of small but telling details and 'dead moments' which most other filmmakers ignore in their emphatic quest for dramatic climaxes. (Jarmusch's films for the most part underplay, ignore or subvert such narrative conventions.) Still, it is hard to see why, as the years passed and Jarmusch developed as an artist, the 'cool' tag so irrelevant to any serious consideration of his work stuck to him like a limpet. Perhaps it was because he continued, on and off, to work with musicians like Iggy Pop, Joe Strummer, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Neil Young, RZA, and Jack and Meg White. Still, that practice simply reflects another of the writer-director's abiding interests; he played in a band called the Del Byzanteens in the early '80s, co-wrote the score for *Permanent Vacation* with John Lurie, and contributed, with long-time associate Carter Logan, music to *The Limits of Control* (2009); later, he and Logan formed a band called SQÜRL, which played for *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013), *Paterson* (2016) and *The Dead Don't Die* (2019). For Jarmusch, whose curiosity about the world seems boundless, cinema is emphatically not the only art form of interest; indeed, even the most cursory viewing of a film like *The Limits of Control* will confirm that he is fascinated and knowledgeable about the arts in general... Before he became a filmmaker he had ideas of becoming a poet, and his work is packed with allusions to literature, painting, television, film and various aspects of popular culture; philosophy, religious beliefs and science also get a look in. So it is hardly surprising if music – by which I mean all kinds



of music, ancient and modern, from all over the planet – and musicians figure in his films; that is nothing to do with being ‘cool’, and everything to do with his feelings about life and the world.

That’s because creativity and art are very important to him, for reasons that became increasingly evident as his career progressed. Famously, in *Down by Law*, the eccentric but wise Roberto several times offers the observation that we live in ‘a sad an’ beautiful world’. Quite what was meant by that may not have been apparent to Jack and Zack, but as Jarmusch continued (consciously or not) working rich variations on that very same theme about the sadness and beauty of existence, we the audience were given some clues. *Mystery Train* (1989) and *Night on Earth* (1991) may have initially seemed more notable for their formal inventiveness, replacing the relatively straightforward triptychs of the earlier films with considerably more complex structures which experimented (very accessibly and playfully) with time and space, while simultaneously reflecting, in passing, on the nuts and bolts of cinematic storytelling. These narrative innovations, together with the many gags and other pleasures provided in the films, may have distracted attention from a constant undertow of melancholy; and while Jonathan Rosenbaum’s comment that the two films ‘are preoccupied with death’ is a rare exaggeration on his part, it is certainly true that human mortality does make its presence felt in each film.

Thereafter, an abiding theme of Jarmusch’s work becomes much more conspicuous. The western *Dead Man* (1995) deals, among other things, with the protracted demise of an accountant wounded in a chaotic shoot-out, and the film, in line with certain Native American beliefs, regards life and death as part of the same ongoing cycle or journey. *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999) and *The Limits of Control* are both hitman movies – although any such categorisation fails to do justice to their thematic richness and generic originality – in which the protagonist, in each a taciturn, solitary angel-of-death-figure, may not really be fully ‘alive’ himself. *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) and *The Dead Don’t Die* (2019) are quite literally about the walking dead, focussing respectively on

vampires and zombies. Even *Broken Flowers* (2005) – which includes a brief, very touching scene in a cemetery – and *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003) – which ends with two elderly friends listening to Janet Baker’s beautiful rendition of Mahler’s ‘*Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*’ (one of the great songs about death) – have their musings on mortality. Of Jarmusch’s features, only *Paterson* (2016) feels comparatively unconcerned with this theme – and even that account of a week in the life of a bus driver who also happens to be a poet does deal with life’s sadnesses, including the crucial, shattering loss of the only copy of the protagonist’s writings.

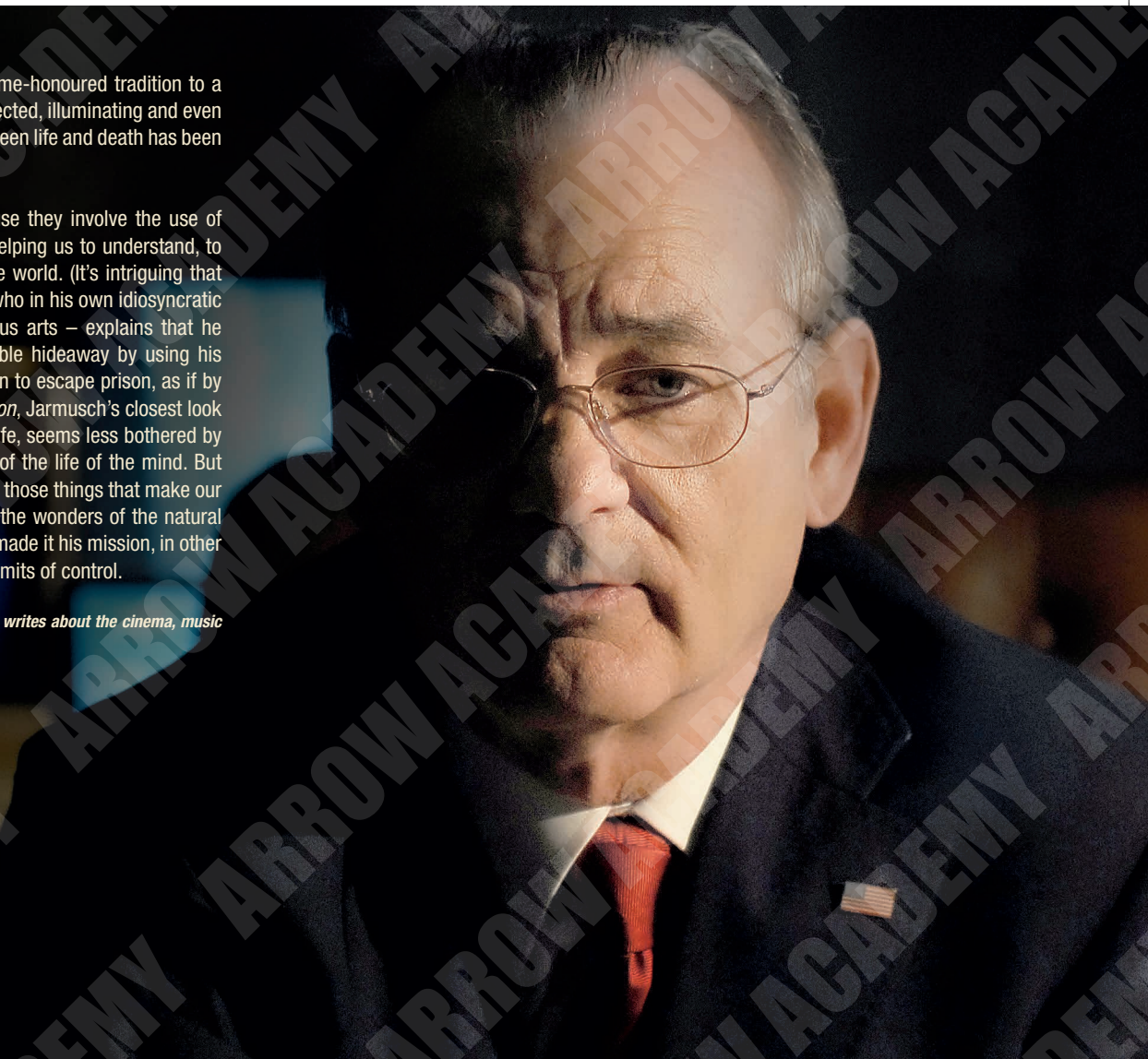
In short, then, the world is ‘sad an’ beautiful’ because it always includes death as well as life; it is as if Jarmusch is gently reminding us, in film after film, that ‘*media vita in morte sumus*’ – in the midst of life we are in death. It’s not only all around us, but it’s what inevitably awaits us. Notwithstanding this aspect of his work, however, Jarmusch’s films are never downers. For all that many of them include a *memento mori* – in this regard they are almost cinematic counterparts to *vanitas* paintings, except that they forego any moralising exhortation to repent – it should be emphasised that they are also a lot of fun. That’s because Jarmusch believes, in line with the traditional code of the Japanese samurai read by the protagonist of *Ghost Dog*, that, ‘Matters of great concern should be treated lightly. And matters of small concern should be treated seriously.’ His work, for all its modesty and lightness, is concerned – philosophically, spiritually, even, in films like *Dead Man*, *The Limits of Control*, *Only Lovers Left Alive* and *The Dead Don’t Die*, politically – with the state of the world; with how we relate not only to one another, but to the past, present and future, and to the cosmos. And so, while telling stories which gently remind us, at some point or points in the narrative, that we’re all going to die, Jarmusch uses jokes, judiciously chosen music, carefully composed images, resonant references to movies and the other arts, surprising narrative rhymes and intriguing narrative patterns (his episodic stories bear a rather closer resemblance to verse than to prose) in order to remind us, too, that there is always, in addition to the sadness, great beauty. Hence, again, *The Limits of Control* – a hitman movie (albeit with the reservations expressed above about



such a generic categorisation) which leads in the time-honoured tradition to a killing, but which does so by taking some very unexpected, illuminating and even amusing detours to explore how the relationship between life and death has been dealt with in the arts.

Creativity and art are important to Jarmusch because they involve the use of the imagination, and are therefore instrumental in helping us to understand, to deal with and even to counteract the sadness of the world. (It's intriguing that the nameless protagonist of *The Limits of Control* – who in his own idiosyncratic way is so caught up in 'encounters' with the various arts – explains that he managed to reach his 'hit' in his seemingly inviolable hideaway by using his imagination, just as Roberto had used his imagination to escape prison, as if by miracle, in *Down by Law*.) Perhaps that's why *Paterson*, Jarmusch's closest look at the relationship between creativity and everyday life, seems less bothered by the shadow of mortality; it's primarily a celebration of the life of the mind. But then Jarmusch has always found time to celebrate all those things that make our lives beautiful, such as love, friendship, community, the wonders of the natural world, and the wonders created by humankind. He's made it his mission, in other words, to celebrate the things that exist beyond the limits of control.

Geoff Andrew is a writer, programmer and lecturer on film. He writes about the cinema, music and the arts at geoffandrew.com.





ABOUT THE TRANSFER

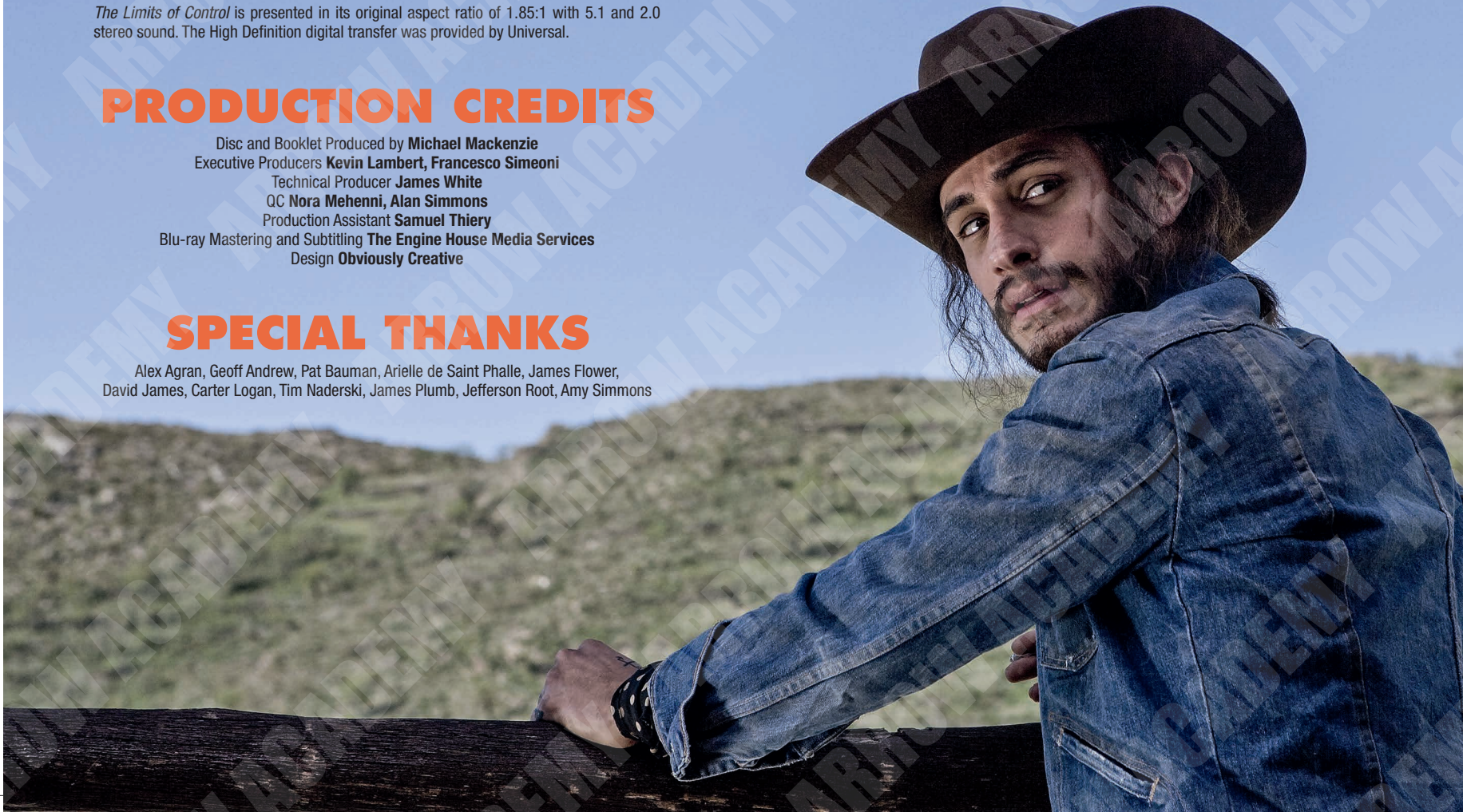
The Limits of Control is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 5.1 and 2.0 stereo sound. The High Definition digital transfer was provided by Universal.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Michael Mackenzie**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Geoff Andrew, Pat Bauman, Arielle de Saint Phalle, James Flower,
David James, Carter Logan, Tim Naderski, James Plumb, Jefferson Root, Amy Simmons





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