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JIM JARMUSCH AS META-NARRATIVE MASTER

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“Jim Jarmusch, the master of ‘cool’?”

In *Celluloid Mavericks* Greg Merritt claims that “In the eighties, Jim Jarmusch carved out his own ultracool cinematic nook with small stories set in the South. In the nineties, he expanded his environment”¹. I intend to articulate these two assertions in one single argument regarding self-reflexive narrative as evidence of authorial style.

Jim Jarmusch is generally considered one of the most important film directors of the American indie scene of the eighties and nineties². However, of all the artists who followed in the footsteps of John Cassavetes none has so widely and largely been described as “cool” as Jarmusch³. Other synonyms include hipster, alien, idiosyncratic, weird, uncanny. The word “cool” points

¹ Greg Merritt, *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2000, p. 359.

² Jgoresy, “Jim Jarmusch: Birth of the Indie Cool”, site *Reel Fanatics*, 4-8-2014. <<http://www.reelfanatics.com/2014/04/08/jim-jarmusch-birth-of-the-indie-cool/>> Accessed on 11 November 2015.

³ The epithet is used in books, online newspapers and blogs alike. See Emanuel Levy, *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1999, p. 188; Lévy, for instance, considers that Jarmusch’s second feature, *Stranger than Paradise*, “boasts a cool, fresh comic tone”. In the title of his review on *Down by Law* Peter Bradshaw claims that, “Jim Jarmusch Masters Cinematic Cool”, *The Guardian*, 11 September 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/set/11/down-by-law-jim-jarmusch-tom-waits>> Accessed on 11 November 2015.

to an obstinate independence from the mainstream and the Hollywood film formulas, a weird singularity perceived as a different sensibility, the defense of pop culture, the incorporation of foreign influences, original camerawork and *mise-en-scène*, humor based on small details mixed with deadpan dialogues, eccentric and lonely characters depicted as alien and/or social pariahs, and so on and so forth. However, to my knowledge, books about American independent cinema contain no accurate definition of the term “cool”. Actually, I agree with Geoff Andrew who claims that this adjective does not do Jim Jarmusch any justice⁴. Indeed, the “coolness” of the characters (usually taken to mean apathy) and the coolness of Jarmusch’s own *persona* (pompadour hair style and laconic posture) do not come close to expressing the importance of the film director for American post-classical cinema, a period of film history marked by the replacement of the homogenous classical paradigm⁵ by an overall aesthetics of fragmentation, most notably at the narrative level.

I will argue that in his *œuvre*, comprising thirty years but amounting to no more than eleven feature films, which, admittedly, is not the most prolific output, Jarmusch has managed to revolutionize narrative altogether and presented an alternative to the Hollywood formulas. Martín Figueroa R., writing on *Ghost Dog*, claims that there is a systematic fragmentation in the films Jarmusch directed, which is revealed both in the narrative and the typology of the characters⁶. The moments when the narrative is apparently suspended, and nothing actually happens except the passage of time, are interconnected with characters whose lives have no meaning and no continuity. The narration focuses less on the outcome of the action than in the multiple digressions taking place throughout the film, just as the characters live on a daily basis with no plans for the future, no goals whatsoever. I wish to reinforce that this is a state of pure being, something which exists as an act, independently of an eventual ending. At a narrative level, such a strategy is

On an entry posted on the blog *Madman Entertainment* on April 17, 2014, entitled “Jim Jarmusch – The Coolest Outsider Alive”, Michael_FM uses the adjective 13 times in three pages and a half. <<https://www.madman.com.au/news/jim-jarmusch-the-coolest-outsider-alive/>> Accessed on 11 November 2015.

⁴ Geoff Andrew, “Why ‘cool’ doesn’t do Jim Jarmusch justice”, British Film Institute site, April 2014. <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/why-cool-doesnt-jim-jarmusch-justice>> Accessed 11 November 2015.

⁵ For Barry Langford, *Post-Classical Hollywood: Film Industry, Style and Ideology since 1945*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010: This period begins in 1966, but the transition can be perceived as early as 1945, which corresponds to the aftermath of WWII.

⁶ Martín Figueroa R., “Hacia una Poética del Fragmento: el Cine de Jarmusch. Una lectura desde Deleuze”, *A Parte Rei. Revista de Filosofía*. Vol. 66, November 2009, pp. 1-18.

self-reflexive for it draws attention not to the story but to the storytelling as an act as well (i.e. enunciation).

Many of the most recent narrative trends in film lean towards meta-narrative – whether they are forking-paths narratives (or multi-draft narratives), modular narratives, multiform and multi-strand narratives, post-modern narratives or any other definition currently in vogue. Very often, these structures are adopted as a form to convey an authorial discourse on narrative cinema and the role of the master enunciator therein: the screenwriter and/or director (especially when they are one and the same person). I will refer to this authorial stance, which André Gaudreault calls the “mega-narrator”⁷, as a mega-enunciator because I feel this expression bears a heavier weight of extra-diegetic manipulation. Jarmusch has directed a trio of features specifically for this reason, even if their production process started in a completely intuitive manner. I am referring to *Mystery Train* (1989), *Night on Earth* (1991) and *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003). The present article will, therefore, focus on these three films, which not only have earned less academic attention than all the others but were not appreciated for their meta-narrative properties either.

Meta-narrative: an authorial discourse on fiction

According to Patricia Waugh, “metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”⁸. The same rationale can be applied to film, resulting in a willing discourse on cinema. In other words, the role and intention of the author are reinforced. However, the expression “meta-narrative” used by Kenneth Weaver Hope in his Ph.D dissertation⁹ to define the act according to which something or somebody (the author, the implied author, the director, the narrator, the camera) tells, shows or suggests something to somebody (the audience, the viewers, the spectator) is more appropriate in those cases where the narrative structure supersedes the fictional events. Besides, Hope conceives of meta-narrative as all the audiovisual technical aspects that link story to narration, confirming my belief that revealing the form alone is not enough for a film

⁷ My position is aligned with that of André Gaudreault, for whom the extra-diegetic narration of the author is composed of two layers of fictional manipulation: a pictorial demonstration regarding the mere articulation of frames (“*monstration*” in French), and a second one highly charged with a temporal dimension, consisting of the relationship between shots (“*narration*” in French). André Gaudreault and François Jost, *Cinéma et récit II - Le Récit cinématographique*. Paris: Nathan, 1990, p. 55.

⁸ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory of Practice and Self-Conscious Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996 [1984], p. 2.

⁹ Kenneth Weaver Hope, *Film and Meta-Narrative*. Doctoral Thesis. Indiana University Bloomington, 1975.

to be considered meta-narrative; it must also be shaped by the *mise-en-scène*, naturally associated with certain storytelling contents.

As I have previously stated¹⁰, in order to deserve the prefix *meta* in its most productive connotation, a fictional film needs to fulfill four conditions all at once: (1) it must evince an activity in progress, rather than a commodity already accomplished; (2) it must incorporate a conscious and deliberate authorial discourse; (3) it must occur throughout the whole film, manifesting itself, directly or indirectly, in the theme and the story/stories; (4) it must reinforce the fictional status of the film and the importance of storytelling in general, as opposed to the mere depiction of reality.

This is the opposite of the classical Hollywood film paradigm (1917-1960) defended by David Bordwell¹¹, of which the current mainstream products are just a more refined and up to-date variations¹². This paradigm advocates a clear story with a central plotline told with the minimum of convolutions, i.e., respecting the linearity of time and space as much as possible. The progression of the main plot, which may be backed by secondary plotlines that always resolve themselves before the main one, is unstoppable and brought about by the reactions of the protagonist(s) motivated by his/her/their psychological make-up. Thus, the film advances relentlessly, by cause and effect, until it reaches a necessary closure, often translated into a happy ending. This narrative pattern¹³ places the story and the satisfaction of the viewers above all else. Even though some cognitive work is expected of the viewers, it is only meant to reconstruct the order of events (the *fabula*) according to a cultural horizon of expectations.

Bordwell is so intent on defending the invisibility of the general narration and the role of the author that he even perceives the “new” multiple-draft narratives, for instance, as mere variations of the old phenomenon¹⁴. However, Bordwell fails to realize that the author’s intention is causing the focus to shift from the story to the story-telling, understood less as simple narration and more as overall enunciation. Thus, the narrative art and manipulation practiced by the authors (notably in the cases of writer-directors) is further stressed.

¹⁰ Fátima Chinita, “Do Metacinema Auto-Reflexivo como Forma de Enunciação Autoral”. Doctoral Thesis. Vol. 2. University of Lisbon, 2013.

¹¹ David Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures”, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. Philip Rosen (ed.). New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 17-34.

¹² David Bordwell, *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006.

¹³ Explained in great detail by David Bordwell in *Narration in Fiction Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, pp. 157-2014, and in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Modes of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge, 1985, pp. 3-84.

¹⁴ David Bordwell, “Film Futures” and “Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance”, *The Poetics of Cinema*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 171-187 and 189-250.

In *Mystery Train* (1989), *Night on Earth* (1991) and *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003) Jim Jarmusch conveys a downright discourse on cinematic narrative through film structure. Narration is not only a way to convey meaning: it is the very meaning that is sought to be conveyed. In this fashion, Jarmusch draws attention to himself and his way of making films and looking at the world. However, he does not use the same process in the three films. The enunciative work carried out in *Night on Earth* differs considerably from the one undertaken in *Mystery Train* and *Coffee and Cigarettes*¹⁵. In fact, in *Night on Earth*, although the film structure is not determined by the acts of the characters, there is a compilation factor which binds the various narratives thematically. They all concentrate on a subject or motif, as in *Coffee and Cigarettes*¹⁶ and they can be watched separately as short films, but there is a narrative connecting device which proves that they were never conceived as separate entities. They work better as a whole, presenting the spectator with complementary existential perspectives in stories of different emotional shades. Not only that, but *Night on Earth* is relatively simple to decode as what you see is almost what you get.

The film is a collection of five stories tied together by a three-part common device: a zoom-in on a clock hanging on a wall, followed by another zoom-in over a terrestrial globe, making the name of a specific city light up, and finally ending with several shots of a nearly deserted city at the precise hour indicated on each clock in each of the major cities marked on the globe: Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Rome and Helsinki. These shots are urban details that set the stage for what is going to take place in each story and also convey local atmosphere. There is no other formal connection between each story *per se*: all of the stories simply deal with taxi drivers and their customers in different situations. Thus, not only is the enunciative intervention of the author less

¹⁵ Previously I defended a meta-narrative taxonomy with three very large and encompassing categories: intra-diegetic meta-narratives, extra-diegetic meta-narratives, and hybrid meta-narratives. All the films by Jarmusch analyzed in this article belong to the second category. Intra- and extra-diegetic narratives are the polar opposites of an imaginary meta-narrative continuum, of which the hybrid variety would occupy the middle position. In intra-diegetic meta-narratives the film structure is determined by the acts of the characters or, at least, the events are directly related to the diegesis. The hybrid meta-narratives, being comprised both of intra- and extra-diegetic elements, are very complex and ambiguous, since the origin of the enunciation(s) is extremely difficult to determine. The extra-diegetic meta-narratives represent the pinnacle of authorial manipulation; the enunciation is clearly placed outside the stories in a multiple diegesis format that evinces the structural will and power of the author. Fátima Chinita, "Metanarrativa Cinematográfica: A Ficcionalização como Discurso Autoral", *Atas do II Encontro Anual da AIM*, Tiago Batista and Adriana Martins (eds.). Lisbon: AIM, pp. 40-53.

¹⁶ Only instead of the addictive substances referred to in this article we have taxis and taxi drivers.

marked – as it is reduced to the connecting device, but the film is less obviously fragmented as a whole (there are no introductory inter-titles for the stories, for instance). The film is based on a disguised strategy of temporal simultaneity: the clocks on the wall point to the variance of night hours in the different cities while the shot incorporating all five clocks reveals that every action is taking place at the same time (although with different characters).

Coffee and Cigarettes is completely fragmentary in that its structure consists of a succession of stories in a non specific timeline. They were conceived separately as shorts concocted into a pattern only after the fact, as indicated by Jarmusch himself. The stories are separated by an introductory inter-title although some consistency is achieved by the use of the same lettering and general design (white letters on black background). The film contains no plausible narrative explanation for the fragmentation and/or specious structure, thus stressing the manipulation the screenwriter-director exerts over the cinematic material. In fact, the website *Imdb*, the favorite source of information for film fans and general public alike, describes *Coffee and Cigarettes* as “a series of vignettes that all have coffee and cigarettes in them”. This is true, of course, but does not come close to defining the object in question. Apart from the vignette form, the same could be said of all the films directed by Jarmusch, where coffee and cigarettes (together with trains) are the preferred motifs. The aforementioned sentence, used as a brief description, causes the film to be perceived as an experimental whim and does not encourage most viewers to watch it. It simply does not evince, or even looks for, an overall pattern, regarding the film as a disconnected integration of bits and pieces, which, even without clear mention, turns the film into a minor opus in Jarmusch’s career. Actually, *Coffee and Cigarettes* is a lot more than it appears to be at a first glance, for it contains a structural secret that begs to be discovered. There is an overlooked connection between the parts that make this film true Jarmusch cinevision material, rather than the apparent scattered vignettes filled with bohemian nonsense.

Mystery Train is also composed of consecutive narratives, but the overall pattern is completely different from the one deployed either in *Night on Earth* or *Coffee and Cigarettes*. The *fabula* is reduced to three interconnected narratives where the characters not only live in the same time but also occupy the same space (the American city of Memphis, Tennessee). Moreover, their actions, concentrated on approximately a 24-hour period, make them, unknowingly, cross each other’s path. The film focuses on temporal simultaneity conveyed non-linearly as a means to subvert the classical narrative paradigm. Even more clearly than in *Coffee and Cigarettes* – which, notwithstanding, also belongs to the same meta-narrative category – the different intertwined narratives of *Mystery Train* put the film on a par with such meta-narrative artworks as Alejandro González Inárritu’s *Amores perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006); Alain Resnais’s *La Vie est un roman* (1983); Raul Ruiz’s

Mysteries of Lisbon (2010); Michael Haneke's *71 Fragments of a Chance Chronology* (1994); Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000) and even Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), among many others.

The whole and its parts: *Mystery Train* (1989)

Whereas the vignettes of *Coffee and Cigarettes* take place at different times and on different sites, the segments of *Mystery Train*, as already mentioned, are distinctly set in one place alone: the iconic city of Memphis, home-town of another American icon, Elvis Presley, the King of "rock 'n' roll". However, Jarmusch's Memphis is no less abstract (i.e. devoid of location markers) than all the unknown coffee-shops and bars that permeate *Coffee and Cigarettes*. Jarmusch's urban shots in *Mystery Train* are chosen to convey an atmosphere rather than portray a touristic reality. Both films have their inner stories clearly separated by title cards set against a homogeneous and monochromatic background. However, in *Mystery Train* the title cards are deceptive: "Far From Yokohama", "A Ghost" and "Lost in Space" seem to refer exclusively to the subject of each story as a separate part, whereas, in fact, the three stories in this film are strongly interconnected (spatially as well as chronologically). The characters' idiosyncratic dialogues and actions mask the intricacy of the narrative design which I will proceed to analyze in more detail.

The film is framed by the arrival of a train to Memphis Central Station and its later departure from it. All the stories are infused with ethnic and cultural issues, which create substantial differences between the parts: each one of them is driven by how the characters perceive Memphis and generally behave according to what they are and where they come from. The first story depicts a young Japanese heterosexual couple who is doing a musical tour of famous American cities; the second story is about two women who have recently become single again, either after having lost their partners or broken up with them; the third story centers on three men who get drunk after two of them were laid off from their jobs. All three stories come together at a cheap local hotel, with each group occupying a different room on the same night. The whole film is geared towards a shot fired by one of the three men and the consequences thereof. The stories are told in chronological order as far as the overall *fabula* events are concerned. The Japanese are the first ones to roam the streets of Memphis, something which all the protagonists do, and are the first ones to arrive at the hotel. Therefore, chronologically, the composite story really begins with them. In order to understand the complexity of the narrative pattern, a brief account of the actions of the three groups must be reviewed.

The young Japanese couple, Mitsuko (Yūki Kudō) and Jun (Masatoshi Nagase) walk around old Memphis, a desolate area filled with poor and/or decaying buildings (such as an abandoned movie theatre). Their stroll is framed in long lateral tracking shots from alternate directions (left-right and then right-

left). At dusk they walk on a street where newer buildings (skyscrapers) can be seen in the distance, an image more in accordance with an urban setting. Eventually, they decide to spend the night at the aforementioned hotel, where they are helped by two black clerks: the manager in smart uniform (Screamin' Jay Hawkins) and the young bellboy in livery complete with a funny looking hat reclined to one side (Cinqué Lee). When the Japanese girl talks to the manager the camera is placed at an angle to the right of the two men and the reception desk. The bellboy leaves the Japanese in room number 27, where they peruse a scrap book about Elvis, then make love and cuddle together afterwards; the next morning they pack their only suitcase and nonchalantly leave the hotel, after hearing a shot being fired.

Luisa (Nicoletta Braschi), an Italian tourist whose husband has presumably died in Memphis, is at the airport signing documents with the purpose of taking the coffin home to Rome, Italy. She calls someone on the phone, long distance, and wanders across Memphis, alone. The tracking shots that show her walking are all framed from right to left (presumably because she is not a couple and walks around for a shorter period than the Japanese). She is repeatedly exploited by local inhabitants who try to squeeze money from her and ends up entering the hotel to escape two men who are following her on the street at night. The camera now frames the two hotel clerks from another side, positioned to the left of the reception desk, an explicitly different *mise-en-scène* from the previous story. Eventually, Luisa shares a room with Dee Dee (Elizabeth Bracco), a talkative young American woman who is the sister of a local barber and who left her British boyfriend, nicknamed "Elvis", that same morning. In room number 25, they talk and listen to some music on the radio. Then Dee Dee falls asleep and Luisa is visited by the ghost of Presley. The next morning they leave and go their separate ways.

A British man, Johnny, nicknamed "Elvis" (Joe Strummer), is getting drunk in an Afro-American neighborhood bar at night. He has lost his girlfriend, Dee Dee, and he has been laid off from his job. He carries a loaded gun and starts turning it to himself. Meanwhile his brother-in-law Charlie (Steve Buscemi), is cutting hair in his barber shop. He is recruited by Will Robinson (Rick Aviles), one of Johnny's friends who has also lost his job, to take Johnny away from the bar. The three men end up in Will's old pickup truck, stopping on the way to buy liquor. Johnnie shoots the clerk when he makes a racist comment about Will, who is black, and the three men drive around town, getting drunker and drunker. They arrive at the hotel very late and ask for a room, so they can hide for a while, and end up in room number 22, a decrepit place. They keep on drinking, talk for a while, doze off a little, wake up and drink and talk some more. Then the barber tries to prevent Johnny from killing himself with the gun and he is accidentally shot in the leg. The two former co-workers make a run for the pickup truck, carrying the wounded barber, and speed up as they hear a train and, most importantly, police sirens.

Apart from the personal problems and situations experienced by the characters, which are culturally diverse and personal, allowing us to sample different facets of Memphis, the film reinforces the points of contact between the three segments. Each segment merely transects the other two in time and space since the characters of each story do not really interact with the other two groups and remain strangers to one another. A complex chronology of events can be pieced together based on the constant elements in the three stories and the purposely explicit variations in them. “Lost in Space” is the last story because its narrative starts a lot later than the other two, taking place (almost) entirely at night. The three men are, thus, the last group to enter the hotel.

The common elements in all three stories are the wandering in Memphis, the arrival at the hotel, the complaint regarding the missing TV, the portrait of Elvis Presley in each room¹⁷, the train that crosses a bridge at night, the voice of the radio broadcaster (Tom Waits), the songs “Domino” and “Blue Moon”, the awakening of all the characters, the radio news that says three men are “armed and dangerous”, the firing of the gun and the departure from the hotel. Stories 1 and 2 have other elements in common as well because both groups of people arrive at the hotel not far apart from each other and are lodged in adjacent rooms. Thus, the shot of the more recent part of Memphis at dusk where we have seen the Japanese also appears in “A Ghost” as part of Luisa’s aimless walking. The window in the hotel room is also a common element of both stories. Therefore, there is a consistency that allows for variations in the same structure, determined by the hour at which the events take place.

The film also presents random crisscrossing between the characters of the several stories: (1) in the morning the Japanese walk by the barber’s shop where Mitsuko actually talks to Charlie, then they walk past an abandoned movie theatre (which the three men will also drive by at night), and past the bar “Shades” and the Cadillac parked outside (which the drunk Johnny will want to drive later on); (2) Luisa crosses paths with Will Robinson when he is fixing the engine of his pickup truck (during the day), she has coffee in the restaurant near the hotel (which the Japanese had walked past before); (3) “Elvis” is the dejected boyfriend mentioned by Dee Dee and the barber is his ex-girlfriend’s brother, the drunk buddies are the three “armed and dangerous men” reported in the radio broadcast.

Both the temporal consistency and the crisscrossing make this film an interesting case of meta-narrative “time mapping”¹⁸. By piecing the time

¹⁷ The portrait of Elvis in room number 22 matches to perfection the decrepitude of that place. Instead of the young and elegant Elvis, this portrait is off the frame and corresponds to a later stage in Elvis’s career when he was already on the decline.

¹⁸ Fátima Chinita, “Juggling Time Concepts: Complex Metanarrative”, *Storying Humanity: Narratives of Culture and Society*. Richard Wirth, Dario Serrati, Katarzyna Macedulska (eds.). Oxford: Inter-disciplinary Press, 2015, pp. 83-90.

together, as a giant temporal puzzle, with the help of clues dispensed very parsimoniously by the mega-enunciator, the spectator is confronted with an intellectual challenge: watching three stories consecutively and all the while making sense of something that happens simultaneously in the *fabula*. This is the opposite logic of the crosscutting editing, where the viewers are always informed of what is taking place and where it is happening. Therefore, they are emotionally manipulated without knowing and fully enjoy the story. Inversely, Jarmusch makes the viewers their accomplices and imposes on them the task of making time whole again, in a process of reconstruction.

Let me point out a few examples of the decoding or piecing together that is required of the viewers of this film. At a certain point, both the Japanese youth and Dee Dee stand at the window of the hotel. Since they are in adjacent rooms, the camera frames them either on the right (Jun) or on the left (Dee Dee) of the window from which we can see the bridge where moments later a train will pass. This means that they are standing at the window at the exact same time. Likewise, when Roy Orbison's song "Domino" is heard on the radio the Japanese couple is making love, the two women are chatting in their room, and the two night clerks are at the reception desk; it is 2:17 a.m. and the three drunken men are still driving around in their pickup truck. Orbison's song, as the following one, Elvis Presley's version of "Blue Moon", links all the characters in one precise moment. Therefore, the viewers are not really watching three different *takes* on the same situation; they are watching different *parts* of the same set of circumstances. *Mystery Train* is not about narrative point of view; it is entirely about narrative reconstruction (from a spatial and temporal perspective)¹⁹.

The parts and the whole: *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003)

Coffee and Cigarettes is even less subtle in its deliberate fragmentation: the film is composed of conversations and stories being told to a listener, as two or three people meet in different coffee houses. Despite this minimalist description, the film also contains a pattern of relationships. The titles of the vignettes, which I prefer to call stories, provide a clue in some cases (as in the non contiguous "Cousins" and "Cousins?"), but in many instances, depending on the outcome of the stories, one has to look for the hidden meaning of the title. The realization of these connections is the game laid out for us by

¹⁹ The enunciation is further reinforced in *Mystery Train*: (a) the permanent verbal disagreements of the Japanese couple call attention to the literal nature of narration as a fact of language, as does the extremely fast speech of the Sun Studios guide; (b) the various nationalities and accents of the characters (in the first story the dialogues of the Japanese couple are subtitled in English), as well as the speed of their perorations; (c) the references to dreams, notably by the Japanese girl who loves to sleep so that she can dream; (d) the legend of Elvis Presley himself who has been turned into an urban myth.

Jarmusch and forms the secondary purpose of the film as an extra-diegetic meta-narrative work of art²⁰.

The film was shot in black and white but not for the same reason that motivated that choice of cinematography in earlier features by Jarmusch. In *Coffee and Cigarettes*, black and white have a symbolic meaning as can be attested by the tartan pattern of all the tablecloths in all the coffee houses. Some are, actually, a clear imitation of a chess board, others just have white and black squares. This element marks, in all the encounters, a confrontation between different personalities, which is resonant with the white and black pieces of the game of chess. In meta-narrative terms, this points to the dual nature of the film. The fact is made obvious in the credits, composed of white titles set against a black background, alternating with black titles set against a white background. Then the screen fades to black and the stories begin. Each story is highlighted by an introductory title card.

All the actors in all the stories play “themselves”, i.e. a fictional version of themselves. Only one aspect of this fabricated *persona* – not coincident with their social and/or artistic *persona* – is consistent with reality, and that is their name. Some of the “characters” have the same profession as their real namesakes – for instance, “Alfred Molina” and “Steve Coogan” are actors, “Iggy Pop” and “Tom Waits” are musicians –, but not necessarily so – Bill Murray portrays a clerk in a coffee house at night, although he keeps being called “Bill Murray” the actor²¹. Others share a trait or two with the people that made their name famous: “Roberto Benigni” is nervous and energetic and “Cate Blanchett” is a famous Hollywood star. There is a strange mix of notoriety and anonymity in these characters. They are famous because they have the same name as some artists in the American cultural scene, with whom the film viewers might be familiar (in fact, they have to be; otherwise they do not enjoy the meta-narrative gimmick at play). However, they are also anonymous because either they act incongruently with their professions (“Steve Buscemi” is a pestering clerk in one of the coffee houses), or they just meet for no particular reason and engage in trivial conversation. The fact that they are well-known personalities of the indie cultural scene makes the 95 minutes of *Coffee and Cigarettes* bearable to the viewer. Approximately one hour and a half may not be much for a feature film, but when that feature is entirely made up of apparently random vignettes filled with apparently random talk, located in uncharacteristic coffee houses of which we barely see more than a corner or a single wall, then that may seem a long time. The faked *persona* of these artists is the only thing that can provide an interest for the

²⁰ The main one is to bring to the fore the filmic narrative, which is the purpose of all meta-narratives.

²¹ The dialogues refer to him as having starred in the films *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *Ghost Busters* (1994), which is quite true.

viewers and sustain the activity of watching the film long enough for the meta-narrative connections to be established.

Independently of the subject of the conversation actually taking place in each story, all of these fragments have two actions in common: drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. Interestingly, in the story starred by Alfred Molina and Steve Coogan, coffee is replaced by tea, as both actors are British. Also, common to all the stories is an iconic vertical shot of the table, where the round cups of coffee (or tea) are prominent, as well as the use of background ambient music to set the mood. The rest is variable and filled with recurrent Jarmuschian motifs: mispronunciation of the personal names; allusions to Memphis, Nikola Tesla, and dreams; verbal misunderstandings; the importance of music; a satire of Britishness; sentence repetition; the presence of jukeboxes; etc. Most of the filmic encounters are straightforward appointments, in general for no apparent reason and with no special outcome²², but some are also random encounters. In any case, they are futile, dramaturgically serving to expose the frivolous and pointless nature of existence.

Nevertheless, in meta-narrative terms, some of the stories seem to operate in pairs – through spoken sentences, (re)enacted situations, the nature of the characters themselves, their professions, or motives in general. Just as in the second story there is, supposedly, an Evil Twin and a Good Twin – but twins nonetheless (played by the real Lee siblings, Cinqué and Joie) –, so there is also a narrative close kinship between some of the stories. This is not obvious from the start, as each pair of related vignettes is not shown consecutively. Each story is eventually interspersed with other vignettes from other meta-narrative pairs.

The story “Somewhere in California”, where two musicians meet (Iggy Pop and Tom Waits), couples with “Delirium”, where the DJs and rappers “GZA” and “RZA” come together, somewhere in Los Angeles. “Tom Waits” claims to be a doctor who spent the morning delivering a baby and saving lives on the highway; “RZA” claims to be specialized in alternative medicine, which is why he will not drink coffee, preferring the healthier tea. Both coffee shops have ornamental reflections: the former has a mirrored ball projecting sparkling light onto the wall; the latter is decorated with a large wall mirror. There is also a meaningful generation gap: according to “Iggy Pop” and “Tom Waits” they are “the coffee and cigarette generation”, whereas “GZA” and “RZA”, also known as The Genius and Bobby Digital, claim the opposite²³. The story “No Problem”, in which there is a local flavor, because both men (Alex Descas

²² They are usually very brief and the characters spend more time arguing and misunderstanding one another than anything else.

²³ “Caffeine leads to depression, makes you all irritable. Have your heart beating fast, faster heart-rate. Worse than anything, if you drink coffee, it gives you the shits. [...] Crisp and clean, no caffeine.”

and Isaach de Bankolé) speak French for a good part of the action, echoes “Twins”, set in Memphis and starred by the Lee siblings. All four characters in these stories are Black and prone to very opposite states of mind: “Cinqué” has a negative and glum outlook on life just as “Bankolé” irrevocably assumes that there is something wrong with “Descas”, notwithstanding the fact that his friend keeps rejecting his implication and assures him that everything is alright. Plus, “Descas” carries a pair of dice and whenever he rolls them the same number turns up in both, which is the opposite of misfortune.

In “Cousins” and “Cousins?” the dice are automatically set by the mega-enunciator, who chose the titles, thus stressing from the start the affinities contained in these two stories. In “Cousins” Cate Blanchett plays both “herself” and a female cousin, named “Shelly”, endowed with an undeniable Australian accent that, supposedly, the more refined Cate has suppressed. The whole conversation revolves on the celebrity status of Blanchett and the obvious social and cultural gap between the two women (one is blonde, the other brunette; one is upright, the other hippie-looking). They are polar opposites but, because they are blood cousins, they are still related and condescending towards one another. In “Cousins?”, whose action is set somewhere in Los Angeles, “Alfred Molina” invites “Steve Coogan” to a meeting in order to relate to him the amazing discovery that they are blood relatives, cousins to be more precise. Before that important bit of information is disclosed “Molina” is meek and very obsequious towards “Coogan”, whom he genuinely admires; “Coogan”, on the other hand, is a selfish snob endowed with a false notion of celebrity. For “Coogan”, hanging out with a clinging distant relation who worships him is not his idea of career advancement, until he realizes Molina is a close friend of Spike Jonze. By then, however, the damage is done and all the mutual condescending, whether true or false, is shattered. Celebrity and what it implies is very much at the core of this story which works as an exposé of Hollywood and the film industry in general, a part of which is also depicted in Blanchett’s “Cousins”.

The story “Jack Shows Meg his Tesla Coil” pairs with “Champagne”. In the former the ambient music playing is hard rock, whereas in the latter it is classical music; in both, however, the universe as a topic and the scientific work of Nikola Tesla are crucial. In the first story of the two, a young man (the musician and composer “Jack White”) tells his companion (“Meg White”, also a composer) that, according to Nikola Tesla, the “Earth [is] a conductor of acoustical resonance” and then goes on about his favorite inventor, while he shows his companion an electrical conducting device he has created himself. The second story of the pair largely seems to be about acoustics as “Taylor Mead” says he “feels[s] divorced from the world” and claims he is hearing a sad aria by Gustav Mahler. “I can almost hear it now”, he proclaims, and soon enough the film viewers hear it too. As the aria starts, the volume begins to rise, slowly; it disappears for a while but comes back later on, as “Mead” falls

asleep. The Earth is resonating, indeed. Because this is the last story of the film – set in an improvised coffee house of industrial atmosphere (which, once more, points to Tesla) –²⁴ the end credits follow, accompanied by Iggy Pop’s rendition of “Louie, Louie”.

We are now faced with a problem: eleven vignettes/stories cannot make up five or six pairs, because eleven is an odd number. However, this is not an oversight on the part of the mega-enunciator, but an intrinsic aspect of the film’s inner fabric. The story “Renée” stands isolated from the rest of the vignettes, right in the middle of the film: it is the 5th story to be enunciated. Not only does it not portray any real encounter (Renée is alone and not expecting anybody)²⁵, but it is also somewhat suspended in time. The coffee house is tacky, filled with plastic flowers for table centers and flowery curtains, Renée herself is coiffed in a 1950’s hairstyle and reads an old magazine. Some stories carry no indication of place (e.g. “Strange to Meet You”), while others carry too much indication of time(s)²⁶. None of them, however, is so abstract and perfectly balanced in terms of time and space as “Renée”, just like the coffee drunk by the eponymous character – which has to be “just the right color and the right temperature”. The same logic applies to *Coffee and Cigarettes* as a whole, which looks natural and effortless and yet is very contrived.

That leaves out “Strange to Meet You”, the very first story, and “Those Things’ll Kill Ya”, the fourth story. Both of them carry echoes of two other vignettes, already paired off. This means that two of the stories in the film are actually part of two different pairs, for different reasons. They are “Somewhere in California” and “Delirium”. “Those Things’ll Kill Ya” is a negative reinforcement of “Somewhere in California”, just as “Delirium” is a negative reinforcement of “Strange to Meet You”. In this case the pairs stand off *against* each other, rather than complementing one other. The stories performed by “Iggy Pop” and “Tom Waits”, on the one hand, and “Joseph Rigano” and “Vinnie Vella”, on the other, focus on addiction to cigarettes. Whereas in the former vignette a coping mechanism is found to deal with the consumption of tobacco, because cigarettes are just too good to let go²⁷, in the latter one man is always reproaching the other with smoking, which leads to a confession of extreme addiction. So, instead of being a “great combination” as in the Iggy Pop and Tom Waits story, coffee and cigarettes are here perceived mainly as something that consumed together, on an empty stomach, are “not healthy”. The hoarse voices of “Tom Waits” and “Joseph Rigano” are a formal device

²⁴ According to the characters they are in the Armory.

²⁵ The coffee shop clerk that keeps offering her more coffee can hardly count as such.

²⁶ For instance, the stories “Somewhere in California” and “Champagne” both allude to the 1970’s (“Champagne” also alludes to the 1920’s).

²⁷ The characters tell themselves they can have one smoke because they have officially “quit” smoking.

that joins the two stories together, while the moral position on cigarettes links them thematically.

In “Strange to Meet You” the character “Roberto Benigni” asks the question “Coffee is good for health, hum?”, which he considers to be rhetorical, while in “Delirium” the musicians claim that “caffeine can cause serious delirium”. Both “Roberto Benigni” and “Bill Murray” are severely addicted to its consumption (the latter even drinks it directly from the jug), which leads to erratic behavior. However, in both stories coffee is linked to dreaming, which in Jarmusch’s *oeuvre* has a positive connotation. In the first story, “Steven Wright” observes: “I like to drink a lot of coffee before sleep so I dream faster. [...] It’s whipping by like that. Dream after dream”. In the 10th story, “GZA” starts to recite part of the dialogue of the first story, particularly the excerpt where drinking coffee would make him dream faster. At this exact point, the mega-enunciator (Jim Jarmusch) accelerates the image of the film, making it indeed go faster. Form and contents go perfectly together and both reinforce the meta-narrative enunciation²⁸.

Jarmusch as master of textuality

A closer inspection of *Mystery Train* (1989), *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003) and even *Night on Earth* (1991) proves that, in reality, there is a lot more to these films than meets the eye of the unprepared viewer. Beneath the apparently nonsensical characters, repartees and situations that exist in all of them, there is also a pregnancy of narrative meaning that is not circumscribed to any specific decade or artistic period in Jarmusch’s *oeuvre*²⁹. In fact, Jarmusch’s output provides a triple perspective on narrative. According to Martín Figueroa, his *oeuvre* can be divided into: (a) early minimalist films in which, apparently, nothing happens (in the traditional classical Hollywood sense) and where the narrative is an excuse for the elegant *mise-en-scène* and cinematography; (b) mosaic of micro-stories united around a central topic, like a hotel, taxis, or coffee and cigarettes; (c) later genre films that deconstruct the Hollywood rules

²⁸ There are also weaker connections to be made between stories throughout the film: the unhealthy consumption of coffee and cigarettes on an empty stomach; the wearing of outmoded clothes so as to make the whole more abstract; and the reference to kinship. These become verbal motifs, rather than anything else, but they also stress the enunciation contained in the film.

²⁹ Although only separated by two calendar years, *Mystery Train* and *Night on Earth* were actually released in different decades (the 80’s and the 90’s, respectively) and *Coffee and Cigarettes* was released in 2003, although it had been in Jarmusch’s head since the 80’s. The first three vignettes/stories contained in this feature had already been made before as shorts, although “Somewhere in California” was slightly different as an autonomous short film.

of genre narrative, notably the action therein³⁰. What Martín Figueroa does not realize is that what he dismisses as unimportant trivia is, actually, the core of Jarmusch's career: the category of films most evidently meta-narrative and that best reveal the seed contained in the other two categories. I am referring to the authorial discourse present in many non-Hollywood narrative films, conceived to attract the spectator through the storytelling (the *syuzhet*) instead of the story. The narrative category of *Mystery Train*, *Night on Earth*, and *Coffee and Cigarettes* is extremely important because it exposes a fragmentation lacking in the other films by Jarmusch, thus reinforcing the manipulation of time and space by the mega-enunciator but not in an unrelated pattern. Indeed, as I have already mentioned in this article, the narrative landscape is made cohesive by internal strategies. Beneath the apparent disconnection of the parts lies the well conceived architecture of the whole. Therein resides the art of Jarmusch as meta-narrative master of the extra-diegetic category.

For *Mystery Train* and *Coffee and Cigarettes* Jarmusch started thinking about one single story, and only later did a pattern of interconnected narratives come to his mind. The trend was set by *Mystery Train*, which was influenced by writers such as William Faulkner (*The Wild Palms*), Boccaccio (*Decameron*) and Chaucer (*The Canterbury Tales*) – whom Jarmusch, as a former graduate in literature, was familiar with. The director, who wrote all the screenplays for the three films under analysis here, declares himself a fan of people telling stories and of a macro structure which can contain them. Thus, that specific structure, based on simultaneity, was in his head before he even started writing *Mystery Train*³¹. In 1989 the overlapping story structure was unique. He claims he wanted the film to be “episodic but simultaneous. While writing [he] was interested in playing around with time and things happening simultaneously and in the same place, but without intercutting them. So pieces within the film remained sequences or episodes in a way”³². This is a clear and intentional subversion of David Bordwell's Hollywood paradigm but without rejecting the cornerstone of American cinema: narrative. Indeed, Jarmusch remains loyal to his roots but deconstructs the form of the mainstream products. Ironically, he fights spectatorial immersion via an intensification of narrative, which he pluralizes on purpose as *stories* being told. It is no small matter that apart from *Coffee and Cigarettes* – which, according to him, “It's a series of short films that are also designed to eventually be put together” (because they also work

³⁰ Martín Figueroa R., *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³¹ Jonathan Rosenbaum, “Regis Filmmaker's Dialogue: Jim Jarmusch” (1994), *Jim Jarmusch: Interviews*. Ludwig Hertzberg (ed.). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001, pp. 128-129.

³² Danny Plotnick, “Jim Jarmusch” (1994), *Jim Jarmusch: Interviews*. Ludwig Hertzberg (ed.). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001, p. 135.

as a group, as he already thought *before* he finished the film) —³³, Jarmusch also had, at least in 1994, ideas for two other similarly designed projects. Even *Night on Earth*, which was written in only eight days, out of frustration, and which Jarmusch considers to be an “accident”³⁴, resulted in another meta-narrative opus, as if something was driving the indie *auteur* to this specific format.

Such films, being so unlike the mainstream narrative products, generate a special cognitive response in the viewers: they call for a voluntary activity of decoding through which the clues are perceived and the inner connections between the separate parts of the films are negotiated. Even a film constructed solely of vignettes, as *Coffee and Cigarettes*, needs to be made whole via the process of mental association. This is more than realizing that certain stories carry certain common subjects and that the film as a whole is charged with Jarmusch’s worldview. In order to fully understand the films analyzed in this article, as well as the general import of Jim Jarmusch in the American indie scene, one has to accept his meta-narrative *intention*. In other words, one has to accept that his subversive art, which some people consider to be one aspect of his “coolness”, is indeed derived from a meta-narrative stance. Therefore, because of his topical obsession with narrative and the masterful control of storytelling, I claim that Jim Jarmusch can be considered the King of “storying ‘n’ telling”.

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³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

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