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Ma, *Mu* and the Interstice: Meditative Form in the Cinema of Jim Jarmusch

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Abstract: *This article focuses on the centrality of the interstice to the underlying form of three of Jim Jarmusch's films, namely,* Stranger Than Paradise *(1984),* Dead Man *(1995) and* The Limits of Control *(2009). It posits that the specificity of this form can be better understood by underlining its relation to aspects of Far Eastern form. The analysis focuses on the aforementioned films as they represent the most fully-fledged examples of this overriding aesthetic and its focus on interstitial space. The article asserts that a consistent aesthetic sensibility pervades the work of Jarmusch and that, by exploring the significance of the Japanese concepts of* mu *and* ma*, the atmospheric and formal qualities of this filmmaker's work can be elucidated. Particular emphasis is paid to the specific articulation of time and space and it is argued that the films achieve a meditative form due to the manner in which they foreground the interstice, transience, temporality and subjectivity.*

The cinema of Jim Jarmusch is distinctive for its focus on the banal and commonplace, as well as its rejection of narrative causality and dramatic arcs in favour of stories that are slight and elliptical. *Night on Earth* (1991), a collection of five vignettes that occur simultaneously in separate taxis in five different cities, explores the interaction between people within the confined space of a taxi cab and the narrow time-frame necessitated by such an encounter, while *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2004) focuses on similarly themed conversations that take place mostly in small cafes.[1] The idea of restricting a film to such simple undertakings is indicative of Jarmusch's commitment to exploring underdeveloped moments of narrative representation. In other words, his films foreground what other filmmakers choose to leave out. Jarmusch's cinema therefore, broadly speaking, seeks to capture the singularity of such interstitial moments. While previous literature on Jarmusch's cinema includes studies of aesthetics (Suarez 2007) and Eastern and Aboriginal spirituality (Rice 2012), as well as Jonathan Rosenbaum's comprehensive study of *Dead Man* (1995), this article will concentrate on the centrality of the interstice to the underlying form of three of Jarmusch's films, namely, *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), *Dead Man* and *The Limits of Control* (2009).

Before any elucidation of what distinguishes Jarmusch's specific formal approach, it is necessary to introduce two Japanese concepts that will help to clarify the focus of this article. Firstly, there is the concept of *ma*, which can refer to "an 'interval' between two (or more) spatial or temporal things and events … [it] carries meanings such as gap, opening, space between, time between" (Pilgrim 255). Containing both an objective and subjective meaning, it can relate to something within objective physical reality such as a room (since it necessarily contains "a space between"—the space between walls) while it also "signifies particular modes of experience" (Pilgrim 256). It is the subjective understanding of *ma* as a mode of experience that will be considered in relation to Jarmusch's cinema in this article. Although *ma* carries forth an abundance of meanings, a central idea behind the concept is that

it conceives of time and space as being rooted in void, and not as absolute measurable entities as they are traditionally viewed in the West. A key aspect of this experiential mode is the notion of being situated within time and space in order to perceive a particular atmosphere that arises from a formal affirmation of emptiness. Jarmusch directly expresses an interest in *ma* and describes it thus:

> There is a Japanese concept, *ma*, which can't really be translated. It expresses the spaces between all the other things … in Japan the significance of it is quite obvious, with certain painters. With Ozu and Mizoguchi as well. This feeling, of what is there between everything else, is also very important to me, it's not just a question of the black sections, but also about how the dialogue is written. (Qtd. in Hertzberg 76)

The other concept crucial to the specific form at hand is a fundamental principle of Zen, namely *mu*, which is complementary to *ma*, and will be discussed in more detail later in the article. As a concept of negation, emptiness and void, *mu* is thoroughly integrated into Zen arts—such as painting, poetry, Noh drama, judo and the tea ceremony amongst others. Emptiness has a different signification in Zen art than it does in the West, as it is perceived to have a certain fullness and sufficiency in itself rather than merely functioning as a backdrop to the principal elements of a design. In the cinema of Yasujirō Ozu the notion of void is sometimes expressed in terms of static shots, which detail empty railway tracks, deserted interiors and barren landscapes, while at other times it is manifested in more subtle ways such as the intervals between characters' delivery of dialogue.[2] It is this same sensitivity to the richness of silence and emptiness that will be scrutinised in Jarmusch's formal approach. Most visibly the concept of *mu* manifests itself in his cinema in terms of formal structure (spatio-temporal organisation) and visual rhythm, but it is also central to the overriding atmospheric qualities that pervade the films.[3]

Also of fundamental significance to this formal approach is the journey structure, the idea of being in motion and moving through time and space. Jarmusch's characters are continually placed within a state of inexorable transience. This is sometimes conveyed through the shot's duration in conjunction with an immobile camera, and the paradoxical lack of temporal progression that emanates from static compositions (*Stranger Than Paradise*), while at other times it is emphasised by reiterating the same type of image (*The Limits of Control*, *Dead Man*). The journey consequently serves an underlying formal function that allows for interjections and irruptions of blankness (*ma*). While there are occasions where an explicit emptying out of form occurs, such as the sections of black leader that permeate *Stranger Than Paradise* and the black sections of *Dead Man*, a subtler but nonetheless palpable indication of this emptiness occurs in the silent interstices and contemplative moments that are foregrounded along the paths of these journeys. The blacked-out sections of *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Dead Man*, whilst being indicative of a rigorous visual style, also serve to generate and accumulate a wide range of implications in terms of structure, visual rhythm, spatiality, temporality and spectatorial engagement.

Empty Space-Time and the Interstices of Being

The atmosphere produced by the extensive use of the black screen in *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Dead Man* is centred upon the timing of the empty presence contained within the black screen itself, as well as the time it allows the viewer to reflect on the rhythm of the images and the act of perceiving them in time and space. It is a highly specific use of the

black screen that thereby initiates a space between (*ma*) where the filmic form and its reception overlap. *Stranger Than Paradise* is a story that portrays the impact of a young woman called Eva (Eszter Balint), who arrives in New York from Hungary, on the lives of her cousin Willie (John Lurie) and his close friend Eddie (Richard Edson). While the film's narrative is conspicuously minimal, the emphasis placed on structure gives the images a striking musicality. Its spatial system is largely grounded in the reappearance of a paradoxically confrontational and placid void, which Gilles Deleuze refers to as "the highest degree of rarefaction … when the screen becomes completely black" (*Cinema 1* 12). The film's formal structure (both spatially and temporally) thus emerges from *out of* the so-called empty spaces that are ritualistically placed between each scene. Positing the film's form as being determined by a recurring "blank" space-time suggests that form is achieved according to these lapses into spatio-temporal rarefaction. Both Deleuze and Noël Burch have previously called attention to the notion of the black screen, or any colour for that matter, attaining a proper structural value within contemporary cinematic form. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze states in relation to modern cinema: "what is important is no longer the association of images, the way in which they associate, but the *interstice* between two images" (200; emphasis added). In other words, the temporal gap between two or more sequential images can serve an underlying formal function that contributes to both the receptivity of the image as well as the broader articulation of cinematic space itself. A striking aesthetic result of the repetitious use of black film leader between scenes in both of the aforementioned films is that it gives the impression of suspending time within diegetic space; an effect which in turn creates a spectatorial awareness of both artifice (and the medium's sequential unfolding of static images) as well as one's own place within time and space *outside* the filmic space. The structural use of the spatio-temporal gap therefore becomes an indispensable formal device, which generates a distinctive visual rhythm and atmosphere, while also working to systematically efface the illusionistic aspect of spatial continuity posed by the classical Hollywood paradigm.

Jarmusch's formal method clearly displays a fundamental connection with Far Eastern conceptions of form, particularly in regards to one of its primary aesthetic principles, the concept of *mu,* which Geist describes as "the emptiness that gives heightened meaning to form" (234). The principle of *mu* is complemented by a concept that posits time and space as being rooted in void (*ma*), while it also conceives of time and space as mutually interdependent elements. *Mu* is therefore realised through the repeated use of empty spatio-temporal intervals that disavow the continuity of diegetic space-time and foreground the presence of the absent image, the black screen, a void that is placed between the viewer and diegetic space. Stridently emphasising the here and now, *Stranger Than Paradise* conveys cinematic space in terms of exaggeratedly static images that impose an intense immediacy and flatness upon the viewer, an approach evidently at odds with the spatial configuration of the classical Hollywood paradigm and its predilection for pictorial depth. By continually returning to the black screen, the viewer is consequently forced to contemplate an "empty" interval outside diegetic space. These empty spaces placed within the broader articulation of cinematic space thus reflect the Far Eastern concept of *ma*. Geist articulates *ma* in these terms:

> *Ma*, the Japanese concept of a time-space continuum, complements *mu*: *ma* conceives of time and space not as absolute measurable entities, as we in the West think of them, but essentially as a void, defined only by the movements and events that take place within it. Space and time are not two distinct entities, but two interrelated dimensions. (235)

As a result of the repeated stress on intervals outside diegetic space-time, the film's mise en scène becomes filled with a present tense and a sense of the here and now. It is this heavy aura of temporality and sustained contemplation upon the present moment that distinguishes the film's form as meditative. Moments of spatio-temporal rarefaction constitute a literal expression of *ma* and void by virtue of the heightened emphasis they serve to place on the "events that take place within" the film's diegesis.

In *Stranger Than Paradise* the absence of dynamic cutting in conjunction with a static camera, which primarily displays scenes that are devoted to inaction and a lack of movement (moments where characters sit around reading, watching television, playing solitaire), indicates an attempt to confront the viewer with a distended, and practically suspended, sense of temporality. Coerced into relinquishing the classical formula of being oriented within a coherent and largely transparent spatial system, the viewer is thus presented with an uncompromisingly vacant and stagnant configuration of space; a blankness that is thoroughly accentuated by the pallid and washed-out black-and-white cinematography of Tom DiCillo. This elongated sense of temporality serves to evoke a prolonged transience in the viewer. Space is used in order to express a meditative atmosphere rather than to set up a clearly demarcated narrative chain of events. This is clearly exemplified at the film's outset when Eva walks through an unspecified run-down district of New York City bound for Willie's apartment; a sequence which amounts to the film's most "dynamic" camera movement. This type of lateral tracking shot is strongly opposed to the method of using camera movement to emphasise depth as well as to graphically display space for narrative purposes. As the camera pans laterally across the urban environment, tracking Eva's movement, it becomes slightly unstable. Rather than fluidly scanning the urban locale, it calls attention to its own presence. The camera moves parallel to Eva and, as a result of space passing in and out of the frame, what is onscreen no sooner becomes off-screen space as she traverses the environment. Space is used primarily to convey and illustrate Eva's movement, her subjective point of view—by refraining from showing the object of her off-screen gaze—and her perception of time (as well as the viewer's as a result of being aligned with her character). Far from being "dynamic" in terms of a more classical approach, this tracking shot eschews spatial depth in favour of a shallow image that foregrounds the passing of time by allowing space to gently pass out of the frame.[4] The shot therefore calls attention to the construction of cinematic space and precipitates a spectatorial engagement that is centred upon an awareness of artifice and temporality.



Figure 1: Opening lateral tracking shot: Space is used to convey subjectivity and foreground temporality. *Stranger Than Paradise* (Jim Jarmusch, 1984). Criterion, 2007. Screenshot.



Figure 2: Static space: DiCillo's flat and washed-out photography heightens the stagnant sense of space. *Stranger Than Paradise.* Criterion, 2007. Screenshot.

David Laderman's comments on *Stranger Than Paradise* are thoroughly insightful with regards to the film's pointed commitment to static inaction. He states:

> Stability … is so exaggerated it becomes an excessive caricature, the extreme opposite of movement and motivation, an "emptiness" in the mise en scène, a void that only mobility can fill. Yet mobility too will be "empty", unfulfilling, a rearticulation of nonmovement. (145)

The notion of the "rearticulation of nonmovement" is a central aspect of the film's meditative form, as its static inaction serves to force the viewer to maintain an awareness of the present. Far from displaying any sense of mobility whatsoever, Willie and Eddie's journey to meet Eva in Cleveland, Ohio is so devoid of movement that they frequently appear to be absentmindedly sitting in a motionless car, gazing beyond the frame into off-screen space. The manner in which the driving scenes are framed is so deliberately static that the viewer is continually reminded of cinematic artifice. This static spatial articulation, which abandons the notion of narrative causality in favour of a focus on the immediate present, becomes essential to conveying the atmosphere of *ma*. While indicating a specific concept of a space-time continuum, *ma* can also be understood atmospherically. Richard B. Pilgrim, in his article on "Intervals (*Ma*) in Space and Time: Foundations for a Religio-Aesthetic Paradigm in Japan", suggests that *ma* "constitutes a 'between world' as a particular sensitivity and atmosphere that arises when one empties the self (and subject/object distinctions) into the interstices of being" (268). During Willie and Eddie's visit to Cleveland in the film's middle section they take Eva to visit Lake Erie, where the atmosphere of *ma* becomes strikingly pronounced, manifesting itself directly within the film's mise en scène. The recurring presence of void and empty spatio-temporal intervals become integrated into diegetic space, temporarily aligning the viewer with the characters in a moment of serene and confrontational introspection. Gazing into the white expanse of Lake Erie, in the midst of a snowstorm, the three characters are shown standing in front of a fence with their backs facing the camera. As they look out toward the lake, they are plunged into a state of contemplation and self-reflection. Due to the immensity of the storm the lake is frozen over, becoming completely obscured and leaving only a void of sheer whiteness before them. Gazing upon the empty expanse, for a fleeting moment, they are presented with its utter formlessness. The camera, remaining static, frames them in a medium-long shot against the empty backdrop. As the sequence is delivered in one

continuous take and notably without the employment of point of view shots or cut-ins, a palpable divergence is detectable between what the characters see and what is displayed for the viewer by the camera; a discrepancy that is all the more pronounced precisely because no point of visual reference is given. The adoption of this restrained formal approach and the maintenance of this distance from the characters thereby subsumes the viewer into perceiving the emptiness that occupies the screen. If a point-of-view shot were employed to denote a character's perceptual field, it would not only interfere with the shot's duration, but more significantly there would be an impingement on the *imaginary* space or the emotional space contained within the characters. The manner in which the shot is approached formally is therefore conducive to upholding the characters' subjective and emotional states. The visual articulation of a distinction between the camera's perspective and the individual characters requires the viewer in turn to open up his or her own perceptual field. In this way, the formal emptiness of the frozen lake is, so to speak, refracted and diverted towards the gaze of the viewer. As a result of being subsumed into perceiving the emptiness of the frozen lake, the viewer is confronted with the weight of subjective temporality and forced to open up to the immediacy of the moment, reflecting a sense of *ma* as it constitutes an emptying of the self into, to use Pilgrim's words, "the interstices of being". The manner in which the atmosphere of *ma* is embedded within both the film's formal structure as well as its mise en scène therefore works cumulatively upon the viewer. As it generates layers of perceptual and emotional variation through the reiteration of spatio-temporal intervals, the film's underlying form thus constantly invokes a corresponding "emptying of oneself into the immediacy of the ever-changing moment" (Pilgrim 267). The interstice thereby acquires a formal significance beyond a mere temporary lapse of diegetic space-time, instead serving to accumulate and intensify the emotional layers of diegetic space. As a result of being coerced into perceiving the emotional space contained within the interstice and the temporal gap, the viewer interacts with an augmented degree of subjectivity.



Figure 3: Lake Erie: the manifestation of *ma* in diegetic space. *Stranger Than Paradise.* Criterion, 2007. Screenshot.

Temporality and the Transient Subject

At its surface, *Dead Man* is the story of a young accountant named William Blake (Johnny Depp) who, after being shot in the chest, is helped by an outcast Native American called Nobody (Gary Famer). Realising that the wound is fatal, as the bullet is lodged in Blake's heart, Nobody insists that Blake must reach the ocean in order to return to the "spirit level of the world". Guided by Nobody across the diverse American landscape, Blake

eventually reaches the coast and is sent out to sea to die in a Native American burial canoe. Despite the apparent simplicity of these narrative events, *Dead Man*'s scope is considerably ambitious. At the same time as constituting both a literal and metaphysical journey towards death, the film seeks to reevaluate Native American representations by challenging the historical and ideological validity of the Western genre's iconography. Jens Martin Gurr asserts: "the point of [Jarmusch's] attack is not the Western as a genre but the ideology encoded in the Western" (191–202). While the film certainly undermines the ideologies that are ingrained in the Western, it also draws on its generic traits and visual motifs in order to venture into other areas of formal expression. Described by Jacob Levich as an "allegorical Western", he underlines the way it uses the conventional outlaw narrative as a means to explore "the soul's progress from physical death to spiritual transcendence" (39). Although *Dead Man* adopts a considerably different visual style to *Stranger Than Paradise*, its underlying form maintains the same commitment towards the contemplation of temporality.[5] Whereas the visuals in *Stranger Than Paradise* sustain a flat washed-out appearance, in *Dead Man* the vibrant textures of Robby Müller's cinematography gradually increase in pictorial intensity to underscore Blake's perceptual awakening. The rich visual textures thus accumulate throughout Blake and Nobody's journey as they traverse the silvery light of immense forests, rivers and deserted landscapes, eventually attaining an enhanced luminosity when Blake is temporarily separated from Nobody's company.

At the film's outset, the paradoxical notion of static mobility becomes intertwined with formal circularity. In the opening train sequence, the stoker appears from the back of the train and sits opposite Blake. His bizarre and prophetic monologue evokes the film's final image of Blake moving out towards the open expanse of the ocean in a burial canoe:

> Look out the window. And doesn't this remind you of when you're in the boat, and then later that night you're lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head was not dissimilar from the landscape, and you think to yourself, "Why is it that the landscape is moving, but the boat is still?"

These comments express the idea of a simultaneous interior movement and static immobility. It is particularly striking that the words also serve to reflect the viewer's perceptual experience of the images themselves. Lynne Kirby, in her book *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*, notes how the train journey embodies concepts of spectatorship: "the perceptual illusion of movement is tied to the physical immobility of the spectator and to the sequential unfolding of a chain of still images" (3). The words thus subtly evoke the nature of the cinematic experience while also aligning the viewer with Blake in a surreal moment of encounter with one's transient self. Part of the emotional impact of *Dead Man*'s conclusion is thus related to the way that the viewer is brought back (internally) to the opening sequence upon recognising the association between the stoker's comments and the film's final moments. Furthermore, this recognition works to underline the viewer's own interior movement, which corresponds to the perception of cinematic space and the film's spatio-temporal progression. The film's formal circularity therefore reveals to the viewer a sense of temporal accumulation while at the same time foregrounding one's own passing in time.

As Blake becomes increasingly unstable after being shot, his dissolving into unconsciousness is explicitly signified by the rapid employment of blackouts. His interior state is therefore correlated with the film's visual rhythm and spatio-temporal structure. The literal irruptions and lapses into blackness at the Makah settlement near the end of the film

thus serve to illustrate Blake's loss of consciousness as he gradually slips into death (void). As in *Stranger Than Paradise*, where the journey structure constitutes a movement towards an encounter with a confrontational void (Lake Erie), *Dead Man* represents a metaphysical journey towards death, where Blake is relentlessly confronted by the threat of its potential formlessness. The black screen in *Dead Man*, however, acquires a more explicit relation to diegetic space since it denotes the experiential, interior realm of its central perceiving consciousness. Whereas in *Stranger Than Paradise* it operates predominantly as an abstract formal device, generating visual rhythm and shaping spatio-temporal structure (as well as obliquely constituting a "deeper" emotional/spiritual dimension of the characters' interiority), in *Dead Man* it constitutes an intermediary place of subjectivity. As a result of being correlated with the consciousness of Blake, the space-time of the diegetic world explicitly overlaps with its associated reception (outside cinematic space). The peculiar temporality emanating from the recurring black screen presents the viewer with a fundamental paradox since it serves to disrupt spatial continuity (in terms of diegetic space), draw attention to cinematic artifice and, at the same time, generate visual rhythm and structure. The intervals thus maintain spatio-temporal fluidity while keeping the viewer's awareness both inside and outside the filmic space. In other words, the viewer is oriented inside of cinematic space-time at the same time as being aware of an unceasing time-flow (flux) outside it. This foregrounding of temporality, in the form of interjections and intervals of "empty" space-time (*ma*), serves to precipitate a heightened emotional affectivity by coercing the viewer to contemplate the elusive presence contained within the image's absence. The irruptions of *ma* in conjunction with the flatness of the image (brought about by the black screen) thus open up the viewer to both cinematic space-time as well as a subjective temporality *outside* filmic space. In *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, Deleuze refers to the flattening effect of edge-framed compositions in Carl Th. Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (*La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1928) positing that "the more the image is spatially closed, even reduced to two dimensions, the greater is its capacity to open itself on to a fourth dimension which is time" (17). The film's formal structure therefore permits access to a subjective perception of time, an aspect that distinguishes its form as meditative.

Meditative Form and Spatio-Temporal Variation

The Limits of Control is an abstract road movie about a mysterious hitman called Loneman (Isaach De Bankolé) who travels to the south of Spain to assassinate an equally obscure figure called The American (Bill Murray). The narrative focus of the film remains so stubbornly threadbare and vague throughout that it teeters on the edge of narrative cinema. The film engages so intensely with the transience of existence that the core of its formal structure (its spatio-temporal organisation) and visual rhythm (the way it achieves and accumulates layers of variation) is embedded in a recurring image that articulates the relentless flow of time. The image portrays Loneman lying wide awake at night, absorbed in contemplation as the light swiftly changes around him, indicating the arrival of morning. By constantly returning to this particular image, which illustrates the character's passive observation of the changing light, the film's structure thereby emphasises stillness, inaction and meditation upon the present moment. The recurring signification of this image within the film's visual rhythm thereby serves to stratify its underlying formal structure with myriad layers of subtle variation. Not only does the image's recurrence generate disparate rhythmical layers within cinematic space but it also works to progressively accumulate and produce different perceptual responses from the viewer every time that it resurfaces. The accumulation of formal and perceptual variations can therefore be said to arise from the

changes in the formation of the image itself (due to its recurrence) as well as its reception by the viewer. As a result of being mutually placed within a constant time flow, both the image and its reception are necessarily subject to the changes brought about by the expansion of time. Since the reappearance of the image works to underline the viewer's own interior journey and accumulated perceptions, its repetition indicates time itself. Furthermore, a dialectical interplay is established by repeatedly juxtaposing this static shot with other images of differentiation. While the black screen operates rhythmically and empties diegetic space in *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Dead Man*, *The Limits of Control* uses an image of Loneman in deep meditation as its organising and structural motif. Instead of literally "emptying" out diegetic space in the manner of the rarefied image, which reduces the illusionistic depth of the screen, *The Limits of Control* foregrounds an atmosphere of transience by returning to an image of diegetic introspection. While it remains structurally rooted within the parameters of the film's story-world, its overarching visual (and aural) pattern constitutes another stage in the elaboration of a meditative cinematic form.



Figure 4: Stillness, inaction and meditation: the recurring signification of emptiness and Loneman as mediator. *The Limits of Control* (Jim Jarmusch, 2009).
Revolver Entertainment, 2010. Screenshot.

Rather than permitting time to reflect upon a scene by using the black screen, *The Limits of Control* emphasises structural and temporal dissonance. While it adopts the straight cut and calls attention to false continuity, it sustains the same structural and atmospheric focus of meditation as that of *Stanger Than Paradise* and *Dead Man* by returning to an image of abstraction within its actual diegetic world. In this way, its spatio-temporal structure is mediated by the contemplative presence that radiates from Loneman and his devotion to the present moment. The sheer blankness of his presence (he hardly utters a syllable throughout the film) embodies the notion of *mu* (formal emptiness). He is conveyed as entirely devoid of the conventional characteristics of a protagonist, while he also lacks any substantial character detail and articulates emotion solely through his physical presence. Since Loneman and his perception of reality serve to mediate the film's structure, the viewer's engagement with the immediate present (the most current shot) is necessitated. One is thus forced to keep pace with the film's visual rhythm precisely because its spatio-temporal structure highlights its own artificiality. Moreover, the intensification of the temporal gap becomes a governing structural principle that coerces an immediate relation to the image. Since the presence of the interstice is foregrounded *because* the straight cut ruptures time, the viewer is forcibly aligned with diegetic space-time. This is shown when Loneman infiltrates the compound towards the end of the film to carry out an assassination. As Loneman stares at the compound

from a distance, patiently observing the movements of the security guards, the film simply cuts to a shot of Loneman sitting inside the office of The American. Within the context of its spatio-temporal structure and its abstract visual logic, which evades causality and linear time, the question of how Loneman manages to infiltrate such a well secured and seemingly impenetrable spatial territory becomes invalidated. Moreover, the question is explicitly nullified in the scene that immediately follows his silent infiltration. Upon noticing Loneman quietly seated directly across from his desk, The American noticeably confounded and panic-stricken asks: "How the fuck did you get in here?" Loneman's response, "I used my imagination", confirms that the film seeks to celebrate the artifice of cinema rather than to depict a plausible or coherent story-world.

The strong emphasis placed on visual design in *The Limits of Control* had been previously intimated by the way *Coffee and Cigarettes* foregrounded the most minute of details. Suarez notes the way it uses images of objects as part of its visual rhythm: "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" (94). This notion of a "visual riff" is an apposite term to describe the way Jarmusch's films accrue visual layers that overlap in a manner analogous to musical composition. Such is the extent of *The Limits of Control*'s focus on spatio-temporal structure and visual rhythm that it is difficult to consider its spatial articulation according to such terms as "diegetic" or "story-world". Structurally, it thus constitutes an elongated visual and temporal progression that is filled with contemplative moments, which display nothing more than the simplicity of the present moment. We see this as Loneman sits at a café silently observing his surroundings, glancing round to a catch a glimpse of a scattering flock of pigeons. Also, in addition to the recurring image (the film's most prominent structural motif), the viewer is continually aligned with Loneman as he practices Tai Chi. He is shown immersed in ritual, exuding utter concentration and co-ordination, exercising quite a literal control of the space that occupies the screen. We see this from the very outset, after the credit sequence, where the character is framed in a manner that is clearly not motivated by conventional narrative concerns. Far from being conducive to establishing a sense of narrative space, the shot articulates Loneman's utter concentration as he is absorbed in Tai Chi. The approach of beginning the film with this shot therefore serves to align the viewer with the interior "empty" space of Loneman's subjective state and the pure contemplation of his practice. It begins with the atmosphere of emptiness (*mu*), conveyed when the surrounding diegetic sounds of the airport fade in immediately after the completion of his practice. The silence of his meditation thus gives heightened meaning to the sounds exterior to his consciousness.

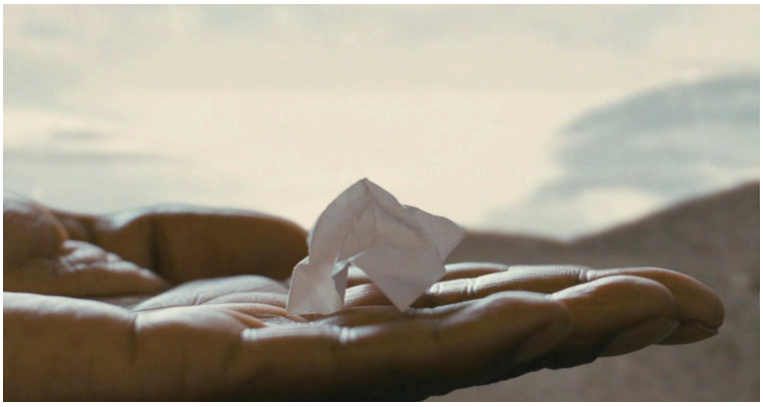
The Limits of Control completely disavows any form of verbal or visual articulation of what motivates the actions (or inactions) of the central character. The purpose of Loneman's journey is only obscurely intimated by the poetic digressions of the mysterious figures that he intermittently meets along the course of his travels. One can only assume that these oddly expressive and philosophical figures are co-conspirators in some form of illicit activity. Whatever the motive behind these clandestine meetings, it soon becomes apparent that such conventional epistemic questions relating to character or narrative causality are no longer applicable. In a similar vein to the way *Coffee and Cigarettes* acquires layers of visual and verbal resonance through the juxtaposition of different conversations between different groups of people being played out in a sequential order, each meeting that takes place between Loneman and one of the loquacious contacts is comprised of virtually the same stylistic formula and basic routine that is constantly repeated in the guise of a slight variation. Each meeting begins and ends in the same manner. The contact establishes the identity of

Loneman by asking the rhetorical question: "You don't speak Spanish, right?" Loneman merely shakes his head to indicate his compliance, and the contact proceeds to deliver a code that is written on a little piece of paper, which is contained in a matchbox. Consider Kent Jones's comments in relation to the way the film foregrounds a distended sense of temporality:

> As the film lopes from one elegantly extended moment to the next, the objective becomes increasingly unimportant, and we begin to understand that we are watching a theme and variations. Every scene offers us a variant of the force of contemplation in the living world. (26)

The fact that conventional epistemic questions are rendered futile is itself indicative of a formal attempt to locate the viewer within the meditative presence of the film's underlying structure and atmosphere. In this light, the questions themselves become a form of distraction when pitted against the perception of the film's tranquil atmosphere and its extensive articulation of inaction. Loneman's journey is therefore presented as having nothing to do with the objective (the climax). Rather than setting up a series of events and thereafter moving towards a suspenseful climax, it seeks to accumulate a succession of contemplative moments of inaction. Instead its "climax" of sorts occurs when Loneman is shown with the final code onboard a train after he has successfully carried out the assassination on The American. As he purposefully holds the crumpled blank piece of paper in his hand against the backdrop of the fleeting presence of the landscape passing in and out of the frame, he presents the viewer with the last "empty" code. This image succinctly articulates Jarmusch's meditative form in the sense that the film gravitates towards a moment where emptiness attains a new signification. What better way to convey the presence and immediacy of the present moment than to illustrate a blank page within the palm of the film's perceptually acute mediator, as well as placing its emptiness within the intense transience of a train journey.





Figures 5 and 6: The last blank code: the reiteration of ma and transience.
The Limits of Control **Revolver Entertainment, 2010. Screenshot.**

This article has argued for the relevance of the Japanese concepts of *ma* and *mu* to the formal structures of the three aforementioned Jarmusch films. Although there are clear thematic links throughout Jarmusch's work, I have selected the films discussed here for their sustained formal focus on emptiness and transience. While the article may go some way towards clarifying these aspects of meditative form in these particular works, it also highlights the need for a prolonged study of Jarmusch's oeuvre that might reveal further connections to Eastern concepts of form. However, in itself, the article provides recognition that Jarmusch's cinema is distinguished by its unique approach to time and space, which situates the viewer within the interstitial multiplicities of self and form.

Notes

[1] *Coffee and Cigarettes* is a collection of eleven shorts that were shot in black and white and made over a period of almost two decades (from 1986 to 2003). It was released as a full-length feature in 2004.

[2] Here I am referring to the use of specific static shots as exemplified by *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1949) and *Tokyo Story* (*Tôkyô monogatari*, 1953). For a more thorough investigation of Ozu's cinema see Paul Schrader's *Transcendental Style in Film*: *Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* and David Bordwell's *Ozu and The Poetics of Cinema*.

[3] While the influence of Eastern aesthetics and philosophy upon Jarmusch's approach to narrative are clearly apparent in *Ghost Dog: The Way of The Samurai* (1999), which concerns an assassin who lives his life according to a spiritual guide called Hagakure, the aforementioned three films better express *ma* and *mu* at a sustained formal level.

[4] For a more detailed examination of how space is treated in classical Hollywood cinema see Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* and Bordwell's *On the History of Film Style*.

[5] This notion is clearly exemplified by the fact that *Dead Man*, a film with an estimated budget of $9 million (which is most likely due to it being a period film), bears much in

common formally with *Stranger Than Paradise* (a production estimated at $100,000) (Suarez 6).

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