

The Cinema of Jim Jarmusch: Dry, Wry and Slightly Sly
OLLI@UCB Fall 2023
COURSE SYLLABUS

"Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul." – Jim Jarmusch, "Golden Rule For Filmmaking, #5". Perhaps no film director has been more identified with the late-20th century renaissance of independent American cinema than Jim Jarmusch. Born in Akron, Ohio but raised on a diet of European arthouse and American underground cinema, Jarmusch's work is renowned for its characteristic droll humor, minimalist visual aesthetic, and for the centrality of music, particularly rock and roll and the blues, with musicians including Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Tom Waits and Iggy Pop often cast in onscreen acting roles. Garnering top awards at Cannes, Locarno, Sundance, and smaller festivals too numerous to mention, Jarmusch's iconic (and laconic) body of work, unfettered by studio budgets and special effects, has been an inspiration to aspiring young filmmakers across the globe for nearly forty years. This course will focus upon four films selected from the early works of Jim Jarmusch supplemented by film clips, published reviews and interviews with the director.

Dates/Times: Thursdays, Oct 19, Oct 26, Nov 2, Nov 9; 9:30am-11am

Instructor:

Karen Davis is Senior Film Programmer for the Mill Valley Film Festival and Professor Emerita at California State University at Monterey Bay. She has also held visiting faculty positions in film studies at UC Santa Cruz, UC Davis and Vassar College.

NOTE: FILMS AVAILABLE VIA MULTIPLE STREAMING PLATFORMS. INFO: JUSTWATCH.COM

Week #1

THURS OCT 19

STRANGER THAN PARADISE (1984) 90 mins

Rootless Hungarian émigré Willie (John Lurie), his pal Eddie (Richard Edson), and visiting sixteen-year-old cousin Eva (Eszter Balint) always manage to make the *least* of any situation, whether aimlessly traversing the drab interiors and environs of New York City, Cleveland, or an anonymous Florida suburb. With its delicate humor and dramatic nonchalance, Jim Jarmusch's one-of-a-kind minimalist masterpiece, *Stranger Than Paradise*, forever transformed the landscape of American independent cinema. The film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Caméra d'Or prize. -Description courtesy of the Roxie Cinema, San Francisco

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Week #2

THURS OCT 26

DOWN BY LAW (1986) 107 mins

DJ Zack (Tom Waits) and pimp Jack (John Lurie) have the hipster con-man blues. Framed for crimes they would be too slack to commit, they land in a shared cell in Orleans Parish Prison. Then Roberto (Roberto Benigni) comes along. This inexplicable, irrepressible naïf, an Italian magpie of American idioms, transports Jarmusch's self-described 'neo-Beat noir comedy' into the realm of fractured fairy tale. Soon Jack, Zack, and Bob are off on a picaresque jailbreak journey, drifting in circles through the bayou toward a happy ending 'like in a book for children'...kind of. Lensed in gorgeous black and white by Robby Müller. – *Description by Juliet Clark, courtesy of Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive*

Week #3

THURS NOV 2

MYSTERY TRAIN (1989) 107 mins

Mystery Train, like Jarmusch's prior films, is a portrait of misfits and foreigners adrift in the American South. Here the setting has shifted to Memphis, the cast has widened, and the mood has slightly darkened. A young, rock-'n'-roll-obsessed Japanese couple (Masatoshi Nagase and Yûki Kudô) make a trans-Pacific pilgrimage to the home of (for her) Elvis and (for him) Carl Perkins. An Italian widow (Nicoletta Braschi), lost in the city, hears a disquieting story about the ghost of the King. And a down-and-out Brit (Joe Strummer), mourning the loss of his girlfriend and job, moves from boozing to a kind of tragicomic redemption over the course of one long night. With its sensitivity to the cultural memory of places, and its sense of the way taste can both bring people together and keep them apart, *Mystery Train* might be Jarmusch's signature movie. With Steve Buscemi, Cinqué Lee and Screamin' Jay Hawkins. – *Description courtesy of Films at Lincoln Center, NYC.*

Week #4

THURS NOV 9

NIGHT ON EARTH (1991) 125 mins

Jarmusch assembles an extraordinary cast, including Gena Rowlands, Winona Ryder, Giancarlo Esposito, and Roberto Benigni, for his disarmingly charming anthology of five short stories that take place in five different taxi cabs on the same night in five different cities (Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Helsinki, and Rome). Individually, these vignettes explore the intimate space between the front and back seat, and how strangers become connected by a shared ride. Collectively, they break down the boundaries that might divide us, and celebrate the connections we all share: language, communication, storytelling, and the universality of "grabbing a cab." Soundtracked by the moody growl of Tom Waits, NIGHT ON EARTH is a journey of the human condition. – *Description courtesy of the Gene Siskel Film Center*