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“That’s all we have, accents”

For Whom the Bell Tolls (Sam Wood, 1943)

- 1 Although *The Limits of Control* is considered a US film, it was shot in Spain, partly in Almeria, where many other English-speaking films, such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), *2001 A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *100 Rifles* (Tom Gries, 1968) or *Conan The Barbarian* (John Millius, 1981), to quote but a few, were shot.¹ Moreover, Jarmusch gathered money worldwide to finance it. Indeed, the film’s two production companies are American, Point Blank Films, and Japanese, Entertainment Farm, which funded such projects as *Nine Lives* (Rodrigo Garcia, 2006) or *Tokyo Sonata* (Kyoshi Kurosawa, 2008). On site, Jarmusch worked with Spanish units, and cast actors from many different countries. French-Ivorian star Isaac de Bankolé is the main character. Two other Frenchmen play in the film: Jean-Louis Stévenin and Alex Descas, who comes from the French West Indies. Luis Tosar and Oscar Jaenda are Spanish, while Gael Garcia Bernal is Mexican. Yuki Kudo is Japanese; Hiam Abbas, Palestinian; Tilda Swinton and John Hurt are British. Bill Murray is the only American actor.
- 2 The aim of this article is to find out whether the film is indeed American, first by explaining why it is institutionally considered so. To that end, we will use the economic and aesthetic criteria that define an American film-maker, or even an American author. Second, comparing American and Spanish press reviews will lead us to see how reception depends on a national stance. By taking into account these reviews we rely on context-activated reception theory. We will proceed to link the reviews with the “historical context” and find “meaning or significance” in “that contextual intersection.”² Studying reception leads us to consider the film’s viewing as an “event” related to other historical events, according to H. R. Jauss’s theory.³ To do so, we will consequently ground our discussion on the analysis of the film itself, moving from the

film as event to the film as text, and from “context-activated” to “text-activated” interpretation. Both interpretative methods will again be relevant to grasp our third point where we will come to terms with the very notion of national identity in the film, since aesthetic, economic and geographic factors are entangled.

- 3 Before moving on to the study itself, let us sum up the plot. A main character who remains nameless for the spectator (Isaac de Bankolé, credited as Lone Man), leaves from a French airport for a mission whose goals are left unsaid but whose operating methods depend on philosophical principles such as “use your imagination and your skills,” “everything is subjective,” or “he who thinks he is bigger than the rest, will go to the cemetery.” By meeting several people who exchange matchboxes filled with coded instructions or diamonds, the main character progresses to the south of Spain, where he murders the boss of an unknown organization.

An Independent American Film

- 4 In the opening sequence the man who explains the mission (Alex Descas) mainly speaks Creole peppered with a few sentences in Spanish. Meanwhile his assistant translates as much as he can into English to Lone Man, who is diegetically an English speaker. The snag is that neither Stévenin, who plays the translator's role, nor Bankolé are native English speakers. They are both French. The confusion of idioms—which does not imply a confusion of meanings—sets the tone of the film. Is this multilingual film really an American indie movie?
- 5 Director Jim Jarmusch owns an American passport and also owns the negatives of all his films. These possessions make him American and independent, technically speaking. Yet “technically” does not have the same value in both cases, whereas it is relatively easy to be an American citizen, it is extremely difficult to be independent *de facto*. Indeed cinematic independence is both hard to define and hard to get. It is linked to several levels of filmmaking that are financial (being independent from the major studios), aesthetic and ideological (being able to “depart from some or all conventions associated with classical narrative and film style”), and symbolic (being labeled as an independent and bringing added symbolic value as such).⁴
- 6 On the financial level, the independence of Jarmusch's film appears to be somehow tricky as its distributor in the US is Focus Features–NBC Universal's classics division. However he has two production companies that are unrelated to the majors.
- 7 Apart from economic criteria, aesthetic ones define *The Limits of Control* as an independent American film since it is located “in the space that exists between the more familiar-conventional mainstream and the more radical departures of the avant-garde and the underground.”⁵
- 8 Above all, it is “foregrounding form,”⁶ while narrative claims remain in the background. Spectators can easily point out some of Jarmusch's distinctive features in this film, for example his taste for repetition.⁷ First there are numerous lateral travelling shots: this way Jarmusch frames countryside and urban landscapes so as to emphasize their repetitive features, be it a row of white cisterns or simply lampposts. He thus creates a visual rhythm, a technique he had already used extensively in *Down by Law* (1986), where rows of graves and the void among them were included in the same travelling shot that displayed shingle houses. *The Limits of Control* also relies on an

episodic structure. This first encounter, just like all the others, begins with the very casual sentence “You don't speak Spanish, do you?” or in Spanish “¿Usted no habla español, verdad?” a password that enables Lone Man to identify those he is working for. He receives minimal instructions, “Go to the towers, go to the café, look out for the violin.” He is finally given keys and a matchbox containing a coded message. After this programmatic sequence and throughout the film, Lone Man/Bankolé will follow a sophisticated personal routine, practicing Tai Chi every day, sleeping with his clothes on, drinking two espressos at a time (yet in separate cups) and going to the museum to see just one painting per visit. The people he meets to advance his mission also respect a set protocol. They monologue for a few minutes about philosophical, cultural or scientific topics, exchange matchboxes with Lone Man and give him instructions that remain obscure for the spectator. Meanwhile, Lone Man remains silent the whole time. Each meeting works as an episode. The main character's routine as well as the meeting's protocol bring about a series of repetitions that are already found in other episodic movies by Jim Jarmusch such as *Night on Earth* (1990) or *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003). Eventually, Jarmusch takes the liberty to show the same event twice, successively (he repeats the moment when Lone Man removes the pistols in the hand of his aptly named contact, Nude)—a deliberate stylistic ornament he resorts to for the first time.

- 9 The emphasis laid on style goes hand in hand with a narrative where causality is kept minimal. The film's summary fits in a five-line paragraph where crucial pieces of information are lacking. We do not know the name of the main character, the goal of his mission, nor the nature of the organization he is fighting against in the end. Stylization and pared down causality make Jarmusch an American “auteur,” a title formerly reserved to French film-makers, but which took American citizenship thanks to Andrew Sarris in the 1950s.⁸ And there again, on the level of independence as a discourse, Jarmusch is seen as the arch independent, his name functioning as a selling argument—it is impossible to open a book on American Independent Cinema without reading about Jarmusch, and more particularly about his second film, *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), which appears as a case study for “ideal” independence as defined by Emmanuel Levy: “an indie is a fresh low-budget movie with a gritty style and offbeat subject matter that express the filmmaker's personal vision.”⁹

Jarmusch's Spanish film

- 10 While the director's nationality is not difficult to establish (compared to his independence), the film's nationality is not that obvious. In order to assess it, we will turn to US and Spanish reviews and find out whether they reject or praise it, whether they deal with its nationality directly or through the film-maker's, and how they comment on the representation of Spain. A study of US reviews reveals a lukewarm or even negative reception. The harshest criticism paradoxically offers the most detailed analysis. The film is seen as quintessentially Jarmuschian, even to a fault. It may be viewed as going far beyond “the limits of artistic self-indulgence”¹⁰ or boiling down to “the narrow inventory of Jarmusch's thematic concerns.”¹¹ Spain appears in two ways, indirectly, as the reviews refer to the deserts of the last third of the film, not to Andalucía, but to the shooting locations of the Spaghetti Westerns, and directly, when they comment on the city sequences.

- 11 First, for Jim Hoberman, “[Lone Man] travels to a forsaken town in the middle of nowhere; he might be wandering through the afterlife. The landscape goes through cosmic changes en route to a pueblo that looks like it was last inhabited by the cast of a Spaghetti Western.”¹² Here film enthusiasts’ references erase all documentary perception. Even if Jarmusch shot those sequences in the deserts and hills that were used for the setting of Spaghetti Westerns, he takes pains, contrary to Leone and his counterparts, to clearly locate these landscapes in southern Spain. The itinerary leading there is shown step by step, in a nearly didactic effort to localize places that had been purposefully disembodied by European and American films in the 1960s and the 1970s, namely all the James Bond films and *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), or *The Three Musketeers* (Richard Lester, 1973).
- 12 In the case of the Spaghetti Westerns, any Spanishness of the landscape was erased by the overwhelming power of the American Western mythology. On the contrary *The Limits of Control* labels the landscape as Spanish and even re-creates it thanks to an inventive cinematography. For example, as Lone Man travels by train from Seville to Almeria, the dull grey and brown tones of a sun-scorched countryside are seen through the train window in a lateral travelling shot that shows again and again the unspecific features of such an environment. Suddenly, this environment is replaced by an obliquely lit hub of highways under a very cloudy sky; the image becomes monochrome under this twilight, and silvery surfaces are surrounded by dark shapes that are like holes on the screen. The following shot cuts to a bi-chromatic landscape where the sky is blue and the hills are made of exceedingly contrasted patches of bright green and grey, the picture is deprived of depth and appears utterly bi-dimensional. These last two shots are accompanied by a saturated guitar chord that prevents one from hearing any other sound. For one moment we get the sense that it is a landscape seen in a dream, yet though a minimal color transformation, as the travelling shot continues, we discover quite realistic powdery hills. The change in colors creates an expectation in the spectator, who is then prone to reflect on what he is watching. The spectator’s attention is further directed to these uncommonly desert hills since the main character points towards them as he practices Tai Chi, designating them more as the subject of the shot than as its background. This is an invitation to re-envision the Spanish landscape, but American critics cannot follow the clear and new path designed by Jarmusch and cinematographer Chris Doyle.¹³
- 13 Second, the US critics value the quasi-documentary stance taken in the urban sequences shot in Madrid and Seville. However, some diminish Jarmusch’s work by making it into a mere holiday film which does not admit to being one. For example, Roger Ebert claims Bankolé could quote Gene Siskel: “I ask myself if I would enjoy myself more watching a documentary of the same actors having dinner.” Still speaking for Bankolé, he adds: “We all sat and thought about that, as the night breeze blew warm through the town, and a far-away mandolin told its tale” – a worn out, cheaply romantic sentence that reveals Ebert’s contempt towards the film.¹⁴
- 14 Harsher criticisms reproach the film with its lack of meaning, namely because of a reductive ending which relies on “art, music, literature, cinema, sex and hallucinations banding together to provide the instruments by which the evil of soulless American capitalism can be destroyed.”¹⁵ All the complexities and inventions in the film would only boil down to the following erroneous, simple equations: ‘art = good,’ ‘commerce = bad’.

- 15 Such an analysis reflects a marked rejection of the film and is tantamount to considering it as un-American (in the sense of the House Un-American Activities Committee). Subsequently, US reviews see the film as unlikely to break out of a very small art-house niche (and maybe they do not look forward to this), or alternately pretend to wonder how the film managed to get funding with those arguments. Putting these two items together suggests that the picture was able to get funding since it is confined to its American auteur niche, where it is harmless. But it can also more radically be seen as non-American, as if shading off its national identity, and catering to an audience that is not American either, but rather international.
- 16 The figures show that the film relied heavily on foreign grosses. In the U.S. it was screened from May to August 2009 in a limited number of theatres (there were only 27 copies). It grossed \$427,000 nationally and in September 2010 foreign grosses amounted to \$1,539,883 with a measly \$95,120 in Spain¹⁶ that might also be attributed to the generally poor performance of cinema in Spain in 2010.¹⁷ Incidentally, according to the production notes costs for this film were higher than in any previous Jarmusch film.¹⁸
- 17 If the U.S. figures are consistent with the depreciative reviews, the Spanish ones do not reflect the opinion of the press. In other terms, positive reviews failed to attract viewers, even if the Spanish journalists reacted enthusiastically, responding positively to the elements which the US critics disapproved of.
- 18 First, instead of seeing the film's stylization as excess of Jarmusch's aesthetics, for them it brings new evidence that Jarmusch is "the master of independent cinema"¹⁹ or even its "guru."²⁰ Second, they profusely applaud the way Jarmusch describes their country: "bravo for the dry, disembodied, not at all touristy view Jarmusch is giving of the landscapes of Madrid, Seville and Almeria."²¹ The adjective "dry" points to the need to bare Spain of its representative ornaments. The adjective "disembodied" rejects the Spanish tendency to represent itself and to be represented through what US academic Marsha Kinder names "Blood Cinema," which she defines as "national cinema that is frequently described as excessive in its graphic description of violence and obsessive in its treatment of incestuous relations."²² The third adjective "touristy" criticizes the accretions of clichés exaggerating Spanish idiosyncrasies. One of the articles denounces the tortillas contests, Scottish dances (an adulterated form of Flamenco) or decorated balconies,²³ in other words the "Españolada," a trend that had "originated in France during the period of romanticism," "which cultivated the exotic nature and the local color of an underdeveloped part of southern Europe" and that Spain promoted as its self-image under the impulse of Franco.²⁴
- 19 These reviews oppose tourism—a string of activities that form an organized tour—to Jarmusch's proposed encounter with Spain. The film's structure depends on the repetition of a ritual, which allows the plot to move on in a constantly unexpected way. Unlike in a tour, we never know beforehand what the itinerary will be, yet we can tell the main character will practice Tai Chi every morning and meet somebody who will trigger a new move.
- 20 Thirdly, the ending, much criticized in the US reviews, here elicits critical approval. It is seen as a worthy attempt to rebel against the Establishment, thanks to "a criticism of the American political class with a realist—that is to say, depreciative towards people—vision of things."²⁵ If we read the film as a comment on the film industry, then Jarmusch by shooting in the same locations as many super-productions, and by restoring the suppressed representation of Spain, does not directly attack capitalism

but rather the filmic text it produces. In other words it deals a blow to Hollywood formula films by using Bill Murray's extremely short and helpless part to debunk the stereotype of the all-powerful "villain" protected by his bunker. Thus the critics rally Jarmusch's cause since they wish to defend their national cinema against Hollywood's hegemony.

- 21 Moreover Spanish critics repeatedly translate Jarmusch's sentence, "You can kill people, you cannot remove their ideas,"²⁶ which seems to find its source in Miguel de Unamuno's famous speech during the civil war: "You will win [venceréis], because you have enough brute force. But you will not convince [pero no convenceréis]. In order to convince it is necessary to persuade, and to persuade you will need something that you lack: reason and right in the struggle."²⁷
- 22 Unamuno's sentence fits the film's arguments even better than Jarmusch's. It underlines the need for a true discourse ("reason") and for an action ("the struggle"). In the film such a discourse is built as the various characters' monologues progressively add up in the spectator's mind. One talks about musical instruments memorizing every tune played on them, another sees old films as testimonies of the past, yet another explains the possibility to reconfigure objects thanks to their molecular structure, and eventually a fourth dwells on the subjectivity of perception and on hallucinations as a source of knowledge. Besides, even if the main character does not speak, his behavior corroborates the same theories by making imagination a tool and an art, a means for understanding the situation at hand.
- 23 If this is correct, then Lone Man's itinerary becomes a struggle to foster this system of thought, and the killing of the character called "American" is an action to defend it. Fighting for the right to develop an alternative philosophical system, which amounts to proposing an alternative apprehension of the world, is reminiscent of anti-Franquist action. This remains a vivid memory for Spanish people, when their country still bears the stigmata of a very long dictatorship (Franco only left power in 1975).
- 24 Altogether the interest of the film rests on its manifold links with Spain, including the representation of landscapes, cityscapes and the expression of anti-establishment thought. Analyzing US and Spanish receptions acutely shows how much one's opinion depends on where one speaks from. *The Limits of Control* is a successful Spanish film, since it opposes Hollywood and helps a local cinema of sorts, while its alternative discourse resonates with still recent historical events. As an American film, it is a failure. The Americans cannot perceive the description of Spain; they are content with referring the film back to an American genre, the Western, and to the style of its American filmmaker. In addition to this, the underlying radical discourse opposing the existing power at best feels like a "tired and recycled"²⁸ ideology—redolent of the sixties and seventies, which still retains the immaturity of "sophomoric koans."²⁹ At worse, it goes unnoticed, the film becoming an aimless accumulation of non-sequitur remarks whose trivial conclusion verges on the absurd: art is better than business. The national perspective on the film can either create or erase its merits, a case envisioned by the film itself through one of its mottos: "everything is subjective."

Doing away with nationality

- 25 Yet the Spanish critics rather focus on their own national identity than on the idea of national identity as a generic concept. We will now, proceed to show how the film deconstructs this concept.
- 26 First, thanks to an international cast, Jarmusch underlines nationality only to better negate it later. Indeed, the actors' nationalities are nearly never mentioned (except for one character who announces "Mexican will find you, he has the driver"). The characters do not dwell long on the screen, they are mainly defined by the ideas they express in their monologues in which nationality is irrelevant. The only occasion when the characters deal with national identity is when they are trying to make sense of the word "Bohemian". Since the former links of the word with the Czech region are not valid anymore, "Bohemian" has referred since the nineteenth century, as in Puccini's opera *La Bohème* (1896), to a transnational chosen identity—an identity that signifies both internationalization and exclusion, from wealthy upper class elites, particularly in America. A first character positively sees "Bohemians" as a source of artistic creation, while, on the contrary, at the end of the film the character called 'American' uses the term to exclude and despise all those who work with Lone Man.
- 27 Second, the role of language as a factor for national cohesion does not apply. The characters speak various idioms that correspond:
- to the language spoken by the main character, i.e. English;
 - to the language of the place where the film is located, that is Spanish;
 - to the actors' nationalities.
- 28 French, Creole, Spanish, Japanese, English and Arabic are subtitled for the spectator, but we guess that the main character cannot speak these languages, hence he is able to understand his interlocutors' meanings beyond the linguistic barriers.
- 29 Here Jarmusch reworks a theme he first developed in *Ghost Dog* (1999). *Ghost Dog* is an English-speaking African-American killer who has conversations with a French-speaking ice-cream man (who cannot understand a word of English). Yet both friends seem to understand each other beyond words. One repeats what the other has just said, which shows they have developed a common mind.
- 30 In *The Limits of Control*, if Lone Man cannot speak Spanish, it is not to promote a form of linguistic imperialism that makes English the only worthy language, but because he does not pay attention to nor does he trust foreign languages, or even, language in general for that matter – an idea that stems from the essay by William Burroughs, which gave its title to the film. The core idea in this text is that language is the ultimate control tool.³⁰ Indeed, such power derives from what Claude Lefort calls "the enigma of language—namely that it is both internal and external to the speaking subject, that there is an articulation of the self with others, which marks the emergence of the self and which the self does not control."³¹
- 31 In the same way, the building where the Madrid sequences are shot, is a metaphor of Jarmusch's rejection of language as a control tool. Its name, Torres Blancas, contradicts what it really is: "torres" means "towers" in the plural, yet we can only see one single tower, and "blancas" means "white" whereas it is grey. The building, which lacks straight angles, was designed by architect Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oiza to be "a tree," that is, a vegetal instead of an artefact, and thus to transform a "goats' landscape into a

men's landscape."³² In other words, the open conception of categories that are usually clearly separated in language such as mineral, vegetal or artifact is the key to designing a humanist abode. This makes it all the more significant that Jarmusch chose Spain as a general location partly because he wanted to shoot some sequences in Torres Blancas. Spain, in the film, thus does not answer anymore to the "Españolada" clichés, but becomes the country where there are buildings that negate the controlling power of language. In this film, where people communicate beyond linguistic barriers, Torres Blancas could be seen as an attempt to erase the myth of the Tower of Babel and promote free global human communication.

- 32 Moreover, when Jarmusch explains his creative process in interviews,³³ he mentions picking up Spain right in the middle of choosing actors, as if Spain were an actor among others. This subtly yet deeply alters the common idea of Landscape as Character, into Country as Actor. We may draw the logical conclusion that Jarmusch *directs* rather than *represents* Spain, which makes the notion of Spanish national identity no more important than the nationality of any other actor.
- 33 Jarmusch's film opens up the notion of national identity, putting it into perspective by foregrounding the figure of the stranger—the main character does not even speak the country's idiom. Moreover Jarmusch constantly considers himself an alien, partly because of his European roots, but also because he has always felt estranged in the conservative town of Akron, Ohio, where he was born.
- 34 In all his films, estrangement has been an ideological tool to attack mainstream tenets. The sense of belonging nationally to a country always appears frail and irrelevant. From his training with Nicholas Ray, he has appropriated the sentence his master used as the working title for all his movies: "I am a stranger here myself" (which is the title of a Kurt Weil song). The main character in *Permanent Vacation* (1980), who feels distant from his own country, moves to France where he still experiences the same feeling. He thus voices the director's creed: "a stranger's always a stranger." In his second film, *Stranger than Paradise* (1985), Jarmusch continues his reflection on American identity by portraying Hungarian immigrants who are trying to figure out linguistic and behavioral customs. In *Night on Earth* (1991), a young Japanese couple visits Memphis where they are, as the intertitle, "Lost in space," puts it. They speak little English but they want to erase cultural differences by, for example, explaining that the only difference between Yokohama and Memphis comes from the number of houses. Then *Night on Earth* (1991) features a series of dialogues taking place at night in taxis driving through different cities around the world. It tends to unify the various countries it represents thanks to identical narrative and aesthetic choices and repeated conversational themes. Only a couple of anti-touristic shots at the beginning of each episode ironically point at the notion of national identity while the persona of the actors is so powerful that individual identity comes to the forefront. From then on, Jarmusch did not tackle the topic directly any more. However, he has continued his reflection on estrangement in the last episode of *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003), where the notion of national identity is entirely absent and the characters nevertheless experience nostalgia in their own country. Taylor Mead declares: "I'm divorced with the world."
- 35 Altogether Jarmusch's standpoint corresponds to Julia Kristeva's rhetorical question: "How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one's own country, language, sex and identity?"³⁴

- 36 While production conditions make *The Limits of Control* an American independent film, the film critics in this country reject the anti-free-trade ideas in it that eventually make it un-American. But all depends on one's point of view and for Spanish critics the film offers an innovative vision of their own country, a vision that remains altogether invisible to their American counterparts. To the Spanish, the film's ending is liberating and anti-fascist. Paradoxically, this national appraisal depends on a reading that grants nationality little importance. Hence Spain finds a restoration of its identity in a text whose aims are to dissolve this very notion. Jarmusch seems to be using one of Bryan Eno's *Oblique Strategies* cards he loves,³⁵ to foster ideas that have been his own ever since he was a filmmaker. The freedom he shows in his filming techniques—his creative independence—should be a means to help the spectator see this question from a different angle. However, his discourse, for the moment, only reaches a limited audience.

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1. José Márquez Úbeda, *Almería, plató de cine* (Almería: Instituto de Estudios Almerienses, 2009).
2. Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
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ABSTRACTS

The Limits of Control is considered an American film, although it relies on funding coming from foreign countries and on a multinational cast. The analysis of American reviews shows a rejection of the movie that is seen as un-American; American critics fail to focus on the film maker’s original depiction of Spain. Conversely, Spanish critics warmly welcome Jarmusch’s film. Their interest centers on the new vision of Spain it offers, and on the ideological criticism expressed by the various characters. Such a national approval paradoxically stems from a filmic text where nationality is voluntarily deconstructed through themes that are cut off from any references to nationality, and from a general defiance towards language, which undermines the role of national idioms in the building of national identity.

INDEX

Keywords: independent movie, Spain, nation, language, Jim Jarmusch

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