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Jim Jarmusch's Aesthetics of Sampling in *Ghost Dog–The Way of the Samurai*

L'esthétique du sampling de Jim Jarmush dans Ghost Dog : la Voie du Samouraï

Éric Gonzalez



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Jim Jarmusch's Aesthetics of Sampling in *Ghost Dog—The Way of the Samurai*

par

Éric GONZALEZ

Université de Rennes 2 – Haute Bretagne

Abstract. The aim of this paper will be to examine the stylistic and, to some extent, thematic interplay between written text, cinematic narratives and soundtrack in Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog—The Way of the Samurai*. Indeed, Jarmusch weaves a rich intertextual network by means of an aesthetic of sampling clearly reminiscent of that adopted by rap musicians since the end of the 1970s. The—mainly instrumental—music for the film is composed by hip-hop collective Wu-Tang Clan's mastermind The RZA, and underscores an *auteur's* rereading of the gangster movie *genre*.

Keywords. *Jim Jarmusch* — Ghost Dog — rap — sampling — pastiche

Ice Cube's "Gangsta's Fairytale" (1990), Tupac Shakur and Snoop Dogg's "2 of Amerikaz Most Wanted" (1996), 50 Cent's "What Up Gangsta" (2003): from the end of the 1980s, in countless raps,¹ the gangster persona has inspired a host of MCs, who since then have adopted—and adapted—an imagery and themes the American film industry started dealing with sixty years earlier.² However, this cross-fertilization can work the other way round too. A director like Jim Jarmusch has chosen to invigorate *Ghost Dog—The Way of the Samurai* not only with the charismatic power of the black gangster, but also with a particularly rich intertextual network and an aesthetics of sampling clearly reminiscent of that taken up by rap artists since the end of the 1970s. Indeed, rap music's dominant feature is arguably its elaboration technique, where the notions of code and quote play a major part. Most raps are built on loops borrowed from other records, more or less creatively appropriated, twisted—some would say defaced—and then rearranged in a process which gives a new significance to finished artistic products. The originality of Jarmusch's work lies partly in his use of a stylistic palette borrowed from contemporary popular—and particularly black—music,³ a palette which he brings into play to bypass the old binary tradition-vs.-modernity opposition and thus implement a poetics mixing sampling, layering and overdubbing.

The track(s) of a peculiar hit man

“Matters of great concern should be treated lightly. [...] Matters of small concern should be treated seriously.”

(*Hagakure—The Book of the Samurai*: 25)

This principle, stated by the main character of *Ghost Dog—The Way of the Samurai*, applies particularly well to the approach Jim Jarmusch embraces to tell a very classic story with means and in modes which are not so. The hero, whom everybody calls Ghost Dog, is an African-

1. Not that this subject dates back to the end of the 1980s: the heroes of famous 19th-century African-American ballads like “Railroad Bill,” “Staggerlee” or “Po’ Lazarus” were already larger-than-life outlaws. (See Levine: 410-420).

2. Most critics regard Josef von Sternberg's *Underworld* (1927) as the first major gangster film.

3. Jim Jarmusch, who played in a band called Del Byzanteens at the beginning of his artistic career, readily admits this influence (“Jim Jarmusch The Director of *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* Gets Philosophical”): “I’m a big fan of hard bebop and I love hip-hop, and those musical forms have always taken things from other places and woven them into something new. For instance, when Charlie Parker quotes some standard in a solo, he’s transforming

American hit man whose life is ruled by the precepts of a book entitled *Hagakure—The Book of the Samurai*. He is hired by a small-time Mafia *famiglia* satisfied with his efficiency, until one day a witness—who happens to be the daughter of the family's boss—sees him execute a contract and kill a mobster called Handsome Frank. From that moment, the gangsters hunt down the tragic hero. In this chronicle of a *seppuku* foretold, Ghost Dog, torn between his will to survive and his loyalty to his master Louie, eventually chooses death in a final shoot-out scene, in accordance with the central commandment of the text on which his existence rests, *i.e.* “Live by the code, die by the code.”

Jim Jarmusch associates an eighteenth-century book and an African-American character belonging to a minority which has embodied modernity in western culture—and above all music—for a long time. These connections can sound surprising at first blush, especially when one listens to the film's rap and jazz movie soundtrack, which sounds unmistakably “urban,” if I may use a catchall musical category. The film-maker's aesthetics falls within the framework of a convention—namely rereading—here used to explore a well-charted *topos*.

The first thing that strikes the spectator in *Ghost Dog* is the way Jim Jarmusch switches and jams codes. Not only is an African-American contract killer working for the Mafia immersed in Japanese culture. Sonny, an Italian-American, understands and obviously enjoys an aspect of hip-hop culture, *i.e.* rap. He is familiar with artists such as Method Man, Q-Tip and Public Enemy. The jester of this last band goes by the name of Flavor Flav and Sonny knows his boasting classic “Cold Lampin' with Flavor” (*It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back*) by heart, thus appropriating a song performed by a group borrowing a reference from a 1931 gangster film classic—*The Public Enemy*—in turn taken over by this character playing the part of a failed gangster. Sonny's boss, Vargo, is also capable of deciphering a message taken from *Hagakure* which Ghost Dog sends him:

Even if a samurai's head were to be suddenly cut off, he should still be able to perform one more action with certainty. If one becomes like a revengeful ghost and shows great determination, though his head is cut off, he should not die.

it. He's quoting from it, he's referring to it, but he's making something else out of it, in the same way hip-hop takes samples from different places but makes them into something new.” To my knowledge, however, no article analyzes the connection between music and film-making in this work.

Vargo explains to his puzzled associates the meaning of these words as “the poetry of war.” Handsome Frank, however, dies quickly as he mistakes Ghost Dog for a petty thug only interested in his Rolex and who would never dare shoot him simply because he is black.

In this code-switching strategy, Jarmusch uses quotations both for characterization and structuration purposes. Sonny is depicted as Ghost Dog’s reversed *Doppelgänger*. His limp mirrors the African-American’s heavy and awkward walk. When he raps

Live lyrics from the bank of reality
I kick da flyest dope maneuver technicality
To a dope track, you wanna hike git out ya backpack [...]⁴

his acculturation echoes Ghost Dog’s, who is to a certain extent integrated in a subgroup of the Italian-American community. Moreover, the film-maker articulates the plot around aphorisms taken from *Hagakure* recited in voice-overs by Forest Whitaker which help define Ghost Dog’s character and motives. As for his opponents, Jarmusch embeds extracts from cartoons to introduce or comment on the *mafiosi*’s deeds and attitudes. At one point, mobsters watch an episode of *Felix the Cat* in which the hero, thanks to his “bag of tricks,” thwarts the plans of a mad scientist. This “hip” cat has the same kind of cool, rolling walk as Ghost Dog and both characters are, at that point, invulnerable to their enemy’s efforts.

The written word also plays a major part in the film. The aphorisms read out by Ghost Dog are shown on titles. Furthermore books, which Jarmusch recycles as linguistic and iconic signs of recognition, are central to the plot. Ghost Dog and a little girl named Pearlina have a conversation on works such as Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and even Fern Shepard’s *Night Nurse* while Jarmusch shows the “pulp-style” covers of these cheap paperback editions. Nonetheless, one particular literary artifact, a copy of Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s *Rashomon* propels the plot in a decisive way. Jarmusch films Handsome Frank and Louise in a room. She throws a copy of *Rashomon* on the floor in a gesture full of contempt for Frank, who is obviously unwilling and unable to understand or share his girlfriend’s literary tastes. Instead of picking up the book, he casts a hangdog look at her. A subsequent shot of the book on the floor shows its cover picture of a half-dressed woman assaulted by a brigand (Akutagawa: 14) illustrating

4. “Cold Lampin’ with Flavor.”

one of the stories of the *Rashomon* collection, entitled “In a Grove” or “Yabu no Naka,” where a “bandit” puts an end to a couple’s relationship by killing the husband. This scene foreshadows Handsome Frank’s fate and enables Jarmusch to stress Akutagawa’s and also Akira Kurosawa’s legacies, with a reference to the Japanese director’s adaptation of *Rashomon* in 1951. The camera eye then moves up from the book to Ghost Dog who shoots the mobster. The hit man, attracted by the drawing and the Asian-sounding title of the book, enters the room and is seen by Louise. He spares her life and when she sees him looking at *Rashomon*, she tells him: “It’s a good book.” Ghost Dog takes the paperback and leaves the scene of his crime. Fade to black, end scene.

Pastiches et Mélanges

Jarmusch does not only resort to original cultural forms, however. His approach is also governed by what I would call a poetics of recycling and sampling applied to more or less veiled references, firstly on a self-referential mode. As rappers start a song with quotes from or hints at their previous raps,⁵ Jarmusch casts actors he has worked with in previous films. In 1991, Isaach de Bankolé, a Haitian ice-cream man in *Ghost Dog*, played the part of a cab driver in *Night on Earth*, and the role of Native-American Nobody that Gary Farmer was given in *Dead Man* (1995) is transposed three years later, with the same pithy phrase—”Stupid fucking white man!”—uttered just as vehemently in both works. Jarmusch’s casting of Forest Whitaker also has a definite resonance for jazz and cinema lovers: Whitaker played the part of the great saxophone player Charlie Parker in Clint Eastwood’s *Bird* and received the prize for best actor at the 1988 Cannes film festival. When Ghost Dog enters a derelict grain and feed store called Birdland, jazz connoisseurs immediately make the connection with the mythical jazz club of the same name on Broadway. On December 15th 1949, Charlie “Bird” Parker played on the opening night of this Mecca for be-bop named Birdland as

5. See for example Public Enemy’s “Brothers Gonna Work it Out” on *Fear of a Black Planet*, whose first lines:
 “Uh, the rhythm, the rebel,
 Don’t believe the hype,
 YES
 How low can you go?
 Don’t know if we can do this
 Here we go again”
 are quotes from “Rebel without a Pause” and “Bring the Noise” on *It takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back*.

a tribute to his talent and where he made his final public appearance in March 1955 (Carles et al.: 116).⁶ In a roundabout way, Jarmusch stresses his character's American and African-American cultural heritage. The status of jazz as "America's classical music" is recognized even at the highest level of the United States government,⁷ but it is also true that it is becoming more and more difficult for traditional culture to survive intact in a vacuum, judging from Birdland's dilapidated state in Jarmusch's movie, or the way *Ghost Dog* seems to confuse Frankenstein with his creature when he talks about Mary Shelley's novel with Pearline. What traditional "auratic" culture, to use a phrase coined by Walter Benjamin (1991: 143), *can* do is serve as a base on which new works can be created.

Indeed, Jarmusch acknowledges film history and some literary works from which directors have drawn their inspiration. *Ghost Dog* can be regarded as a tribute to Seijun Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* (1967) and, in an even more obvious way, to Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* (1967). Melville puts in a fabricated quotation from *Bushido*—*i.e.* the way of the warrior—as epigraph to his movie:

*Il n'y a pas de plus profonde solitude que celle du samourai si ce n'est celle d'un tigre dans la jungle...
Peut-être...*⁸

This code of practice based on loyalty and strong links of interdependence between lords and their retainers, even stronger than family bonds, originated when *Shogun* Minamoto no Yoritomo established a new government in Kamakura in 1192, and was entitled *Bushido* in the 17th century. The *Hagakure* collection was written by Yamamoto Tsunetomo,

a former samurai who was unable to follow his lord, Nabeshima Mitsushige, in death, for this practice had been prohibited in the 1660s by both the Nabeshima fief and the Tokugawa shogunate [...]. And though a samurai, [Tsunetomo] never engaged in warfare. (Tsunetomo Foreword: 1)

Like Melville, Jarmusch cites a recollection/reconstruction of things past.

Artistic tradition is not necessarily synonymous with obsolescence, though. In an approach similar to Akutagawa's and Kurosawa's, Jarmusch shows the turning point of his hero's life several times

6. The original club closed in 1965, but a new Birdland has opened since at 315 West 44th Street.

7. George W. Bush's proclamation of Black Music Month in 2001 reads thus: "Jazz, often called America's classical music, so influenced our culture that Americans named a decade after it." For a discussion of that status, see Taylor, Jones (1969: 18) and Tanifeani (1986: 92).

8. «There is no greater solitude than that of samurai, unless perhaps that of the tiger in the jungle.»

and shot from different angles, that is Louie rescuing him when three assailants attack him. The film-maker uses this episode as a sample, or a loop—to quote terms drawn from rap and electronic music—around which he builds up Ghost Dog's character. Here is what Jarmusch says about his *modus operandi*:

Talking to Forest [Whitaker], I [found] he was interested in Eastern philosophy and martial arts. So that led me to a samurai. And then I just collected a lot of random details and ideas. And I made a sort of connect-the-dots drawing. (Roston)

In rap music, old-school DJs did not pay any royalties for the samples which made up the sonic fabric of their tracks. However, after numerous lawsuits, “new-school” DJs did their best to avoid quoting their sources in too explicit a manner and adopted a strategy called “sonic shop-lifting” by their detractors.

Jarmusch can be regarded as both an old-school and a new-school director, more interested in pastiche and its open and rather reverent use of stylistic processes than in dissimulation, as Jarmusch's rereading of Melville's *Le Samourai* shows. Both the French hit man Jeff Castillo, played by Alain Delon, and Ghost Dog have a yen for car theft, with Castillo's bunch of keys changed into a magical electronic device by Jarmusch. Both characters put on white gloves when they are about to kill someone. Furthermore, Jarmusch's argument is similar to Melville's. Jeff Castillo murders a man running a night club. He is seen by a black female jazz pianist after his crime, which was evidently ordered because, like in *Ghost Dog*, a woman had an affair with a man holding a lower rank in the hierarchy of the underworld, in other words a retainer. In both films, the heroes must be stopped because a witness has seen them. The competence of these professionals is not questioned. Here is how Castillo's employers portray him:

- *Il est très fort. Il a respecté le contrat.*

- *C'est un loup solitaire.*⁹

And this is what Louie has to say for his «special guy»:

You wanted Handsome Frank whacked. So he got whacked. From outside. [...] For the past four years, the guy's done maybe twelve perfect contracts. Perfect. Like a ghost. [...] He's always showed me complete respect.

9. «He is very good. He respected the contract.» / “He is a lone wolf.”

To cut a long list short, both heroes keep birds, whose deaths announce similar dénouements, both hit men heading for certain death with a death wish and their guns unloaded.

Jarmusch's rereading tactic also has a more parodic dimension, with a humorous debunking of *Cosa Nostra* dramas, especially *The Godfather*. A somewhat pathetic bunch of wiseguys, the mobsters have difficulty paying their rent to their Asian-American landlord. They fail to make sure that a representative of the so-called weaker sex boards a bus and cannot keep their problems in the family to solve them, for good reason: the boss's daughter is having an affair with one of the few retainers left to her father. Ghost Dog is a kind of black Luca Brasi¹⁰ on whom these *mafiosi* must rely because they have no choice but to subcontract their trickier murders. The discovery of the henchman's identity hastens his ruin, first because of a kind of non-consummated miscegenation between an African-American and a white Italian-American woman, and second because Louise has seen an illustration of the decline of the family and its traditions. Jarmusch's scene ironically echoes this passage from Mario Puzo's *Godfather*, which Coppola has used in his trilogy:

“In my city I would try to keep [drug] traffic in the dark people, the colored. They are the best customers, the least troublesome and they are animals anyway. They have no respect for their wives or their families or for themselves. Let them lose their souls with drugs.” (Puzo: 290).

Pitch-shifting, time-stretching, tone-scaling

Nevertheless, it is not satire that prevails in Jarmusch's film, but rather slight formal displacements. Like a DJ with his home-studio feeding his sampler with various sonic sources, Jarmusch enriches the somewhat classic—if not hackneyed—story of an outsider alone against the world with numerous references which result in a dense intertextual network. There is more to sampling than simply copying and pasting. *Assemblage* and layering are crucial in the creative process of designing an original and hybrid movie. Jarmusch's use of slow motion is revealing in that respect. He resorts to this stylistic device first to deceive the spectator's expectations. When Ghost Dog sees the mobsters who are on his trail driving by, nothing happens. In another scene, Ghost Dog and another African-American in battle dress, who happens to be The RZA, that is the composer of the

10. In *The Godfather*, Luca Brasi is Don Vito Corleone's longtime henchman, who dies stabbed in the hand and strangled, his death symbolized by a large fish.

movie soundtrack and member of the Wu-Tang Clan rap collective, walk towards each other in a slow motion shot/reverse shot. The expected outcome—*i.e.* the attack on Ghost Dog—is defused when slow motion stops and the other man pays his respects to the hero. From a more visual point of view, slow motion is used for a scene where Ghost Dog practices martial arts. The same images are superposed with a slight delay, as if a reverb effect were applied to moves—including very western jabs and uppercuts—to underline their fluidity, contrasting with the usual rigidity and speed of kung-fu fighters' gestures. On the Foley track, the rendering effect¹¹ of these moves is repeated when Ghost Dog wields handguns like swords, with a “whoosh” sound.

The music soundtrack stresses these displacements in a very effective way. Ghost Dog's rolling and awkward walk is audible in “Ghost Dog Theme.” The loop on which RZA mixes metallic percussions with machinery noises in the background is far from perfect and sounds as if it were recorded from a scratched record. In the last third of “RZA #7,” the composer inserts a slower second beat box track between the beats of the first one, then fades it out. The Wu-Tang Clan's mastermind does not seek rhythmic efficiency at any cost. His stylistic standpoint is to include samples which do not completely blend with the others, as he does not want to conceal the nature of his work as *bricolage*. Indeed, originals are not untouchable. Two versions of the same track can be used¹² on a soundtrack which accompanies, but is also part and parcel of the movie. Jarmusch does not only resort to what Michel Chion calls “*musique de fosse*,” or pit music, that is music whose source and origin are not visible (Chion, 1995: 189). Besides RZA's music, with its traditional role of narrative cueing (*Ibid.*: 121) when it signals or stresses a particular situation or a character's point of view, Jarmusch uses several times what Chion calls “*musique d'écran*” or diegetic music, that is music whose source is visible, in this case the car radios of the vehicles Ghost Dog steals and the one he has transformed into a hi-fi system, or to be more precise, the PA systems which play data written in a digital medium. If rap is mainly studio music cut on CDs or vinyl records, it can also be performed without samples or loops. Jarmusch films four African-Americans in the park where Ghost Dog meets his Haitian friend. Unlike in most movies, where recorded music fades in when characters start to sing, the film uses an exactly opposing technique.

11. In French: *effet de rendu* (Chion, 1995: 227).

12. Cf. “Ghost Dog Theme (w/dogs and EFX)” and “Ghost Dog Theme,” or “Opening Theme (Raise your Sword Instrumental)” and “Samurai Showdown (Raise your Sword) (Featuring The RZA)” (The RZA).

Jarmusch defines his hero by an addition of elements and traits generally regarded as antithetic in principle but which, instead of being mutually exclusive, highlight both Ghost Dog's "old-school" ethos and his contemporary character. Ghost Dog "keeps it real" as today's hardcore rappers would say, a real "gangsta" true to his ideal to the end, choosing to communicate via carrier pigeons while using an electronic box of tricks enabling him to break any alarm code. The *nom de guerre* he chooses when he goes to Vargo's manse is Solo, reminiscent of his condition but also of other characters such as Han Solo in the *Star Wars* saga. Ghost Dog is a hero, but must have a tragic flaw in order for the film to reach its planned unhappy ending. He is aware of playing in a sequence already filmed thousands of times and tells Louie: "What is this Louie? *High Noon*? This is the final shootout scene. [...] It's very dramatic." Although he is familiar with Hollywood's codes, he does not understand that his master is an old-school low-grade *mafioso* who will remain a retainer. In fact, the new family's boss is Vargo's daughter, a woman with a standard American upbringing without a trace of Italian accent. "Nothing makes any sense anymore," says Louie when Ghost Dog dies. What does make sense, judging from the film and the moral of the story, is to read *Rashomon* and to watch an "Itchy and Scratchy" cartoon embedded in an episode of *The Simpsons* itself embedded in a film. Distance, layering and *bricolage* have become the new keywords. Autonomous art forms and self-sufficient, closed communities are history.

Outro

Overall, Jarmusch's vision of culture is decidedly deferent, but also unquestionably un-auratic. In the final scene, Pearline reads *Hagakure* while Ghost Dog's voice-over can be heard pronouncing these words:

In the Kamigata area they have a sort of tiered lunchbox they use for a single day when flower viewing. Upon returning, they throw them away, trampling them underfoot. The end is important in all things.

This echoes the first conversation between Ghost Dog and the little girl when she takes her books out of her lunch box to show them to the hero. The editions of the books Pearline has presumably borrowed from a library are obviously cheap and widely available and Jarmusch seems to reject any kind of fetishism concerning culture in general and high-brow culture in particular.

Jarmusch stages the quixotic revolt of an outsider waging war against his hierarchy in a doomed effort to perpetuate and live by the values he has chosen. Ghost Dog also abides by the old-school Mafia code of honor and refuses to murder a woman. He cannot and will not become a *ronin*, that is a samurai without a master, or find himself in the same position as the unnamed hero of the “Rashomon” short story, whom Akutagawa depicts thus:

[...] the servant was waiting for a break in the rain. But he had no particular idea of what to do after the rain stopped. Ordinarily, of course, he would have returned to his master's house, but he had been discharged just before. The prosperity of the city of Kyôto had been rapidly declining, and he had been dismissed by his master, whom he had served many years, because of the effects of this decline. (27)

As for Jim Jarmusch, he anchors his work to film and art history without joining in the “retro” nostalgia¹³ so many postmodern films bask in. Tinkering with cultural clichés, collaging and tailoring materials picked from diverse artistic fields, he keeps out of an umpteenth quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns and, like a jazz musician, reinterprets standards to innovate, or at least produce works that are original in the fullest sense of the word. Jarmusch does not choose between “ancient” Japan and modern multicultural America or, to use a musical analogy, between “sour grapes” and “moldy figs,” as advocates and opponents of be-bop called each other in the 1940s. The multiple (cross-)references he layers and keeps track of enable this *auteur* to explore in an elegant way the territory of the *film de genre*.

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Éric Gonzalez est maître de conférences à l'université de Rennes 2 – Haute Bretagne. Il travaille sur la musique africaine-américaine, et plus particulièrement sur les corrélations entre praxis esthétique et praxis sociale au sein de la communauté noire. Ses derniers travaux portent sur les transactions entre la musique populaire et d'autres formes artistiques, en particulier le cinéma et la littérature.

eric.gonzalez@uhb.fr