

No Suture: Screen Borders in Jim Jarmusch's Films

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Introduction

When we watch a film, do we mentally cross the screen border, like the heroine in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, 1985), and then remain in a closed fictional space until the end titles tell us to leave our seats, or remain conscious of the film being projected on the screen as a flat surface, with no other world beyond? For many of us the first case would prove we are watching a good film, while the second would mean we are watching a bad one.

However, there are films whose narration and fictional worlds hint both at their own presence and at the physical presence of the screen as a flat, impenetrable surface, at times pulling us inside the fiction and at others excluding us. This is the risky game Jim Jarmusch has been playing with his spectators ever since *Stranger than Paradise* (1984). In his films, we are both drawn into the fictional world of the film (thanks to the emotional content, the identification with the characters, and the power of the music) and reminded that we are watching a film; at times we are told so in so many words, at times we are trapped outside the fictional space by certain filmic devices. His works exemplify this tension for a variety of reasons. First, because they represent what Pascale Ferran¹ calls "film du milieu": independently produced, stylistically innovative, and yet narrative, fictional and shown in cinemas and, in most cases, attracting enough spectators who remain seated to the end of the film, and might even come back to see Jarmusch's next work, and in doing so, make his filmmaking modestly profitable. Secondly, these films dwell on the question of the subject: the I. The cinema viewer's I and the Eye of the camera or of the character (depending on the identification process) may indeed coincide, especially when we analyse filmic reception with semiological and

¹ Pascale Ferran, "Violence économique et cinéma français," *Le Monde.fr*, 26 février 2007, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2007/02/26/violence-economique-et-cinema-francais-par-pascale-ferran_876347_3232.html.

psychoanalytical tools.

If we define a border with the tools of topology, it is seen as the limit of a closed space. In the physical world, the screen is the border of a two-dimensional space in which the film is projected. On the other side of the border, there is a three-dimensional world that we usually call "reality." Such a view goes against the cinemagoer's experience, as is clearly shown in Woody Allen's film, where the screen is the border between two three-dimensional spaces. In André Gardies's work on cinematic space,² the screen is, clearly, if not a border, an interface separating two half spheres, one belonging to the non-filmic reality, the other, mentally rebuilt and depending on the spectator's presence and gaze. This puts two seemingly heterogeneous spaces on the same level. Whether the hemispheres are connected, separated, or united depends on the way our eye works: but what do they tell us about the I, about us as a cinematic subject?

Our topic connects the physical situation of the cinemagoer with the topology of psychological entities as defined by Jacques Lacan, in which the orders of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic are thought of as places in our psyche that define our mental structures. He develops these ideas in the *R.S.I.* seminar (1974–1975),³ and in the *L'Insu*⁴ seminar. When applying Jacques Lacan and Jacques-Alain Miller to filmic analysis through the notion of suture in *Les Cahiers du cinéma*,⁵ theoretician and film critic Jean-Pierre Oudart was already linking psychoanalytical theory and film viewing. Slavoj Žižek bases much of his thought on this principle. French psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron⁶ moves very smoothly from the creation of mental images to the reception of cinematic image, as does Madelon Sprengnether in *Crying at the Movies*.⁷ Using all this background as our underpinning, our topology will show how the screen can work actively as a border that is felt and can at times be crossed.

The basic observation of our complete involvement in a movie corresponds to the filmic interpretation of the system of suture as defined by Jean-Pierre Oudart, where the cinematographic subject's place depends on the cinematographic discourse and the Eye/I is at the centre of the perceived world, thanks to the use of the shot-reverse shot pattern as explained by Slavoj Žižek in *The Fright of Real Tears*:

Firstly, the spectator is confronted with a shot, finds pleasure in it; in an immediate, imaginary way, and is absorbed by it. Then this full immersion is undermined by the awareness of the frame as such: what I see is only a part and I do not master what I see. I am in a passive position, the show is run by the Absent One (or rather, Other) who manipulates images behind my back.

What then follows is a complementary shot which renders the place from which the Absent One is looking, allocating this place to its fictional owner, one of the protagonists. (In short, one passes thereby from imaginary to symbolic, to a sign, the

² André Gardies, *L'Espace au cinéma*, Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1993, 81.

³ Jacques Lacan, *RSI : séminaire, 1974-1975, Séminaire 1974–1975*, Paris: Association freudienne internationale, 2002.

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, 1, Points 5, Paris: Seuil, 1992, 177.

⁵ Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Suture I & II," *Les Cahiers Du Cinéma*, May 1969.

⁶ Serge Tisseron, *Comment Hitchcock m'a guéri : que cherchons-nous dans les images ?* Paris: Albin Michel, 2003.

⁷ Madelon Sprengnether, *Crying at the Movies: A Film Memoir*, vol. 1, Saint Paul (Minn.): Graywolf Press, 2002.

second shot does not simply follow the first one, it is signified by it.) When the second shot replaces the first one, the “Absent One” is transferred from the level of the enunciation to the level of diegetic fiction.⁸

In a classical movie, you see a speaker from a given point of view, while the addressee is not visible in the frame, and the effect which is produced is called “the Absent One.” We ask: “Who is this person talking to?” and start wondering about form, that is to say, cinematic enunciation rather than content. However, when in the reverse shot we are confronted with a character standing where “the Absent One” was supposedly standing, what was perceived as a problem of enunciation is now transferred to the level of fiction and dialogue. The enunciative system, the apparatus, becomes invisible, as is normal in classical Hollywood cinema⁹ for instance. The onscreen space is continuous: there is no “gap,” no hole, no visible manipulation of images; we, the spectators, are at the centre of a fictional world that unfolds by itself. The borders mentioned in the introduction are now far away from us, they are not relevant to our understanding of the film. Hence, one hypothesis of this paper is that in mainstream cinema the screen is not really a border as it is not relevant to the spectators’ reception.¹⁰ In the same way, this corresponds to a psychological situation where the subject is complete and centred on her or himself. The system of suture accounts for our pleasurable involvement in many films, that we probably compare (but neither Žižek nor Oudart go as far as this) with a total self-centredness, the absence of a “hole” in our psyche, the complete mastery of language – in other words to the delicious wishful thinking of a comfortable position from which nothing escapes. In the words of Roland Barthes, sutured filmic texts are “*textes de plaisir*”¹¹ and not “*textes de jouissance*.”¹²

No Suture: Cinematic Device(s) to Decentre the Cinematographic Subject

Jarmusch’s motto could instead be “No Suture,” and “Let’s Cross the Border.” The first cinematic borders to be clearly experienced in his films are in *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), his first film to be distributed (even if earlier, he had made *Permanent Vacation* (1980), which was only exhibited in cinemas after he had been awarded a Golden Bear in Berlin for *Stranger than Paradise*). The film deconstructs the system of suture by renouncing the shot-reverse-shot pattern while making sure that we expect it; it also refuses editing, since every shot is a long take separated from the next by a black screen. In several sequences, it stages two characters and a dialogue to ensure we expect to see the speakers exchange positions on the screen and the reaction on their faces. But none of this

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Friction of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski between Theory and Post-Theory*, London: British Film Institute, 2001, 32.

⁹ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, London: Routledge, 1988, 50.

¹⁰ According to Louis Seguin, the cinema is an ontological machine that allows us “to cross the mirror,” while the price to pay is a form of closure: “But there a price to reproduction, the price is confinement: it is the limits imposed by making use of the ontological machine, of the mechanics of transcendence that bring spectators though the looking glass”: our translation from Louis Seguin, *L’espace du cinéma: hors-champ, hors-d’oeuvre, hors-jeu*, Ombres-cinéma, Toulouse: Ombres, 1999, 44.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, Points, Paris: Seuil, 1982, 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

happens.

In *Stranger than Paradise*, Eva, a Hungarian girl, flies from Budapest to New York in order to visit her aunt who lives in Cleveland, yet before she can travel there, she has to stay for a while at her cousin's apartment in Manhattan. In the sequences that take place inside the apartment, the short camera movements are limited to panning and reframing, accompanied by zooms. Even if we are used to rebuilding mentally the continuity of the fictional space, it takes us four or five sequences to be able to map the apartment (00:17).

We then realize that the world unfolding on the screen contains a kind of hole, since part of its space is only a construct of our minds: this becomes clear when Eva is looking towards the camera inquiringly as if to try and take in the smallness and shabbiness of the rooms she has to occupy for ten days. This hole is the place where "I," the cinematographic subject, am standing, on my side of the "fourth wall," outside the fictional world and in front of the screen as a border, a limit I am not invited to cross, since there are no reverse shots. In this instance, the hole in the fictional space (first due to the lack of reverse shot and second to the black screens that isolate each sequence), means that the off-screen space will never find its way back onto the screen: the world cannot be grasped totally, some of it will escape. This hole corresponds to the Lacanian Real, which, by definition, is what cannot be imagined or understood. According to Jacques Lacan, "The Real is what resists symbolisation absolutely."¹³ As Susan Hayward explains:

The Real order refers to what is outside the subject, what is "out there," what the subject bumps up against but does not make sense of immediately – because it cannot or it will not. The Real Order is what subsists outside symbolisation, what has been expelled or foreclosed by the subject. If something gets excluded from the Symbolic, it appears in the Real. It is what the subject is unable to speak, so it is like a hole in the Symbolic order. Only through reconstruction can the Real be understood.¹⁴

Indeed, experiencing such a gap may result in either a form of "angst" or, even worse, the impossibility of locating the Ego/self/I at the centre of one's world (with the impossibility of using language as an extreme consequence). The subject cannot be built:¹⁵ a question that has fascinated Jim Jarmusch from the very beginning of his career when he shot with fellow screenwriter Sarah Driver a film about schizophrenia called *You are not I* (1981).

Letting in Non-Dualism

In *Stranger than Paradise*, Jarmusch decentres us and makes us aware of the gaps. We can relate this to our own, and very limited experience of sensing the Real, to the cracks in our awareness.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester, 1st American ed., vol. 1, Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. English, New York: W. W. Norton, 1988, 66.

¹⁴ Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, Second ed., Routledge Key Guides, London New York: Routledge, 2000, 282.

¹⁵ In Lacanian theory, the subject, I, is not a given but a construct, as explained by the "mirror stage" (1949) and depends on images.

Decentering the self goes hand-in-hand with portraying characters that are foreigners who do not master language completely, such as Eva, or the main character in Jarmusch's first film *Permanent Vacation*, or even his apparently schizophrenic mother.

In *Stranger than Paradise*, the hole of the Real is hinted at through the lack of suture. The result is that we are aware we are watching a movie: the screen is a border, a barrier for us. For example, later in the film, the three characters are facing Lake Erie, turning their back on us and leaning against a black railing: the lake is a hard, white surface, on which our gaze bounces, with no counter shot to allow us to cross the border underlined by the railing (52:08-53:47).

Paradoxically, this dual opposition between the spectators' world and the fiction lets us see something rather amorphous, such as the void of the lake or, earlier in the film, the wasteland in front of the airport. These are "non-spaces" or "non-places,"¹⁶ for example, during her trip to Florida, Eva comments: "I thought we were going to Miami, this is nowhere." In other words, the fixed screen border in *Stranger than Paradise* makes a certain number of things feasible, such as facing the void.

If we relate all this cinematic and psychoanalytical interpretation of thematic and optical specificities to the cultural context in which the movie was shot, we may contend that for Jim Jarmusch, at a relatively young age, the fascination with emptiness, lack of signification, and a world escaping one's perception and comprehension is linked to the creative freedom of the late seventies and the punk movement.

Divorce From the World

Even if in later films Jim Jarmusch goes back to the use of the reverse shot, he still does not immerse the spectator in fiction. He uses a certain number of devices that make the screen into a border for the spectator. The lateral tracking shot creates a surface that is parallel to, and a metaphor for the screen: in *Stranger than Paradise* it is the iron shutters of shops, in *Down by Law*, the facades of wooden houses. This irreducible distance breaks the vision-action links or sensory-motor links, as described by Gilles Deleuze in the *Movement Image*.¹⁷ We may either see this as a crisis in an idealistic cinema where action and vision go hand in hand, as Gilles Deleuze does, or, like Stanley Cavell, as the accurate reproduction of our condition within the world—we cannot act on it, and images reveal all that can be seen.¹⁸

With the lateral tracking shot, we are again located outside the screen as a border, which becomes a surface (analogous to the one of the houses or the iron shutters) that glides, at a distance, out of our reach (and most of the time, out of the characters' reach.) This time, Jarmusch offers a form of counter-shot, but it is not aimed at filling the gaps or at hiding the apparatus: he shoots the scene with a 180° turn. This camera movement is normally prohibited as it creates a strong sense of disorientation for the viewers. Normally, for example when you shoot a football match, if the red

¹⁶ Marc Augé, *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, La librairie du XXe siècle, Paris: Seuil, 1992.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, London: A&C Black, 2001, 208.

¹⁸ A "film takes our very distance and powerlessness over the world as the condition of the world's natural appearance. It promises the exhibition of the world in itself. This is its promise of candor: that what it reveals is entirely what is revealed to it, that nothing revealed by the world in its presence is lost." Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1979, 119.

team is on the left, and the blue one on the right, you should not edit shots from the other side of the pitch, otherwise the spectators will not understand the game. However, in *Mystery Train* (1989), for example, we see Luisa walking beside a fence (another metaphor for the screen border), from the right to the left. After a cut and a 180° reverse shot, we see her walking in the other direction, as the camera and our Eyes are situated on the other side of the fence/border (43:23-44:33).

In a way, Jarmusch's breach of the 180° rule is a means to represent the aimlessness of his characters: to that extent (and to that extent only), it resembles the ending sequence from *Tout va bien* (Godard, 1972), in which the camera laterally tracks a row of tills in a supermarket (1:22:00-1:30:00). What customers are doing at the tills is always exactly the same. At some point, left-wing activists run towards the camera but stop short just before the tills: as if this border were impossible to cross. The camera just goes back, with the same lateral tracking shot, only in the other direction. In Godard's film, the closure in a space where an infinite and repetitive drudgery occurs is a satire of mass consumption and the capitalist system. In Jarmusch, the criticism is far from being that clear: as in Godard's film there is no direction, nowhere to go but instead of simply going back and forth, the camera turns around the characters and shoots them from the opposite side, in a subtler comment.

This technique distances us from the fictional world, allowing us to cross it (for a perplexing moment we entertain the idea that we could be immersed in the fiction) only to recreate the same fixed distance between the Eye and the world. It works as a kind of joke made at the expense of the spectators and the characters: even those who believe they are walking straight on (literally or metaphorically) are not: as it turns around them, the camera derides this idea. The same irony occurs when the purposeful Japanese tourists reach one attraction in Memphis (the Sun Studio) while they are actually aiming for another (Graceland) (10:19).

Art: From Absorption to Watchfulness

With the tracking shots, a misshaped suture becomes less disturbing (even if we feel the screen's border); the perturbation returns with the 180° editing that turns the world around on itself. Even if the world is complete, in films such as *Mystery Train*, mapping it becomes complex, and when one place appears where another should, we get the impression that no understanding can rightly account for our experience, which is a typical resistance to symbolisation or, in other words, an emergence of the Real into one's life.

Lateral tracking shots and perpendicular streets leading our Eye to the depth of the other side of the screen remain a relatively stable solution to negotiating the dialectics of immersing the spectators or excluding them, holding the fictional world at arm's length. The spectators are sheltered in what Edward Hall calls the far phase of the personal distance.¹⁹ In this solution, the perpendicular streets are there, but no character or camera-Eye could see them. This also occurs in later films such as *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2011) where the two heroes cruise around a distant Detroit. This could have been an immersive and self-sufficient fiction, but contemplating it sufficed for the participation of Jarmusch's spectators.

In a rather little-known film, *The Limits of Control* (2009), Jarmusch daringly reconfigures the

¹⁹ Edward Twitchell Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, New York: Anchor Books, 1990, 120.

surface vs depth or border vs immersion dialectics. The fictional world is no longer quietly held at arm's length, but at once all around and entirely impossible to understand. The spectator never really knows what the hero's aims are. Lone Man (Isaac de Bankolé) seems to be a secret agent hired by people whose goals are either abstruse or coded; even if the mission he is given is progressively revealed, it keeps some opacity to the very end. We can neither know how Lone Man feels nor work out how the mission is progressing on a daily basis: why is he given keys? Or match boxes? How does a postcard of a minor tourist attraction appear on his path while a small-scale model of the same attraction decorates his room? If Lone Man unflinchingly performs a series of actions that remain obscure for us, he still needs a mediation to transform what he sees; this mediation occurs through art.

As a hired gun, his "gaze" is linked to action: when watching, he is looking for clues or else trying to recognize the people who can give him information. Watching is a constant activity: he gazes through the window of a taxi, observes the Madrid streets from a café (where we get the impression that the waiter is interrupting him). All this time, the apprehension of the outside world is kept at a distance by the Eye. There is little interaction or significant action or conversation. The main character is aloof from the spectator in the same way as the walking characters in *Permanent Vacation*, *Stranger than Paradise* or *Mystery Train*. Sometimes the screen surface is foregrounded by high-angle frames in which the character's skin is a dusky surface and the entire image feels painterly.

The scenes in which he visits the Reina Sofia art museum offer very striking editing, and completely upset our perception of the screen border. On each of his three visits to the museum, Lone Man stops in front of one painting that catches his attention. Thematically speaking, these paintings are related to his own life: they provoke intense contemplation. When he stops in front of Juan Gris's *Violin* (1916) (18:28-19:01), first we see painting and viewer in profile view: it thus defines "the axis of action,"²⁰ on one side of which a conversation is normally shot. The *mise-en-scène* turns what happens between Lone Man and the Work of Art into a form of communication (one of the very rare ones that occur in the film). In the following shot, the angle on the painting remains oblique as advised by editing manuals. But the reverse shot on Lone Man becomes completely frontal: it coincides with the "axis of action," and so do all the other shots of the painting and its viewer. As a result, everything happens along the same axis; the rest of the space (the museum surroundings) is irrelevant. Furthermore, the character is completely static, which reinforces the symmetry between him and the painting. The camera zooms both on *The Violin* and on its viewer as if they were being hurled at each other.

According to Jacques Lacan, and as extensively explained by Slavoj Žižek, the Eye is on the side of the subject, whereas the object "returns the Gaze"²¹: here the "f" holes of the violin are the counterpart to the dark eyes of the character. The escalating visual tension shows that something makes sense for Lone Man. The distance will eventually cease to exist, the surface of the painting and the face of the viewer being one and the same. At this point, the gaze (that requires a minimal distance) is impossible: the sequence is over. This moment of sudden truth also relies on the

²⁰ Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 8th edition, New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2008 (1979), 231.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, "I Hear You with My Eyes," in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek, Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1996, 90.

protracted shots of the character's face. According to Gilles Deleuze's theory of faciality,²² his face is like a wall with holes (the eyes) that swallow up signifiers, here, the painting.

Narratively speaking, the contemplation sequence at Reina Sofia has its realization in the prediction by a minor character, that "the violin [would] find [him]" and announces the moment when Lone Man is met by a man carrying a violin. For the spectator it is impossible to understand how Lone Man and this character meet: they do not use mail or phone. Their encounter depends on codes, on idiosyncratic habits, such as eating pieces of paper. Should the filmic grammar be respected in relation to the painting, this would add an extra layer of strangeness to the unfolding of the movie. But here we are pulled into the screen and, at the reverse shot, hurled back into our seats, all the more so since the music intensifies as the scene progresses. In the frontal reverse shots, the system of suture does not apply: the world escapes in the direct contact between the gaze and the object that becomes all important, a "*point de capiton*"²³ that sucks in everything we thought we understood and expands into an illumination that mobilizes the fictional world, leaving us bewildered or in awe.

On his second visit to the museum (24:00-24:40), Lone Man sees a nude reclining woman by Roberto Fernandez Balbuena, *Nude* (1922). It creates a very complex relationship with the rest of the fictional world. First it echoes overhead shots of himself with his arms folded under his head, second it announces magically the presence of a naked woman in Lone Man's apartment. Here the intensity of viewing reaches the point where the image is blurred: there is no distance left at all. Later on in the film (27:18-28:17), the same device is reversed as his vision of Madrid from the top of Torres Blancas takes on the same intensity and the same grammar of shots (frontal shots with zoom and blurring) and is continued by the vision of a painting in nearly the same place by Antonio Lopez, *Madrid desde Capitan Haya* (1987-1994).

Jarmusch multiplies variations that reveal intricate links between understanding/seeing the world and intensely contemplating works of art. Every time the directly frontal gaze of the character towards the painting destroys any perspectival notions, we are, through the eyes of the main character, attracted to the screen, stuck to its surface and maybe even allowed to pierce it, in an intensity where the work and the world coincide. We are transfixed by the inexplicable truth of the gaze and the work of art; we have no place to stand, no place to hide. With hindsight, this is the most daring game that Jarmusch's cinema has played with the spectators' apprehension or perception of the screen border. Subsequent films provide a more immersive fictional world or a more complete filmic world. *Paterson* (2016) continues the theme of understanding or relating to the world through art.

The Inclusive Space of Poetic Inspiration

²² G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi Continuum, 2003, 199. See also; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux, Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, 2; Collection Critique, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980.

²³ Lacan uses the metaphor of a quilting point or more literally of an upholstery button; the "*point de capiton*" is an anchoring point that fixes together the signifier and the signified. "It's the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively." Lacan, *RSI*, 267-68.

Here the outside world is not opaque as in *Stranger than Paradise* nor needs to be mediated through an external work of art as in *The Limits of Control*, but it is accessible: the character himself produces art since he is a poet. The world around him, that he looks at and listens to enquiringly, is a source of inspiration. An insert on a small box of matches at breakfast is the beginning of a slightly cheesy love poem including the sentence "I the cigarette, you the match." The poet works as a bus driver, which implies long hours, represented by jump cuts. His thinking about his poems leads to mental images, which are so inserted in the poetic activity that they no longer break the flow of the film: for example, we accept the recurring independent shots of the bridge over the iconic Passaic waterfalls.

As in *The Limits of Control*, the world the hero evolves in is littered with significant micro-events. However, it was a paranoid world full of clues and "suspicion" for the hired gun, as Blonde (Tilda Swinton) said, but for the poet here, the world acquires meaning through watchfulness, heightened sensitivity and awareness of one's surroundings. Poetic observation leading to writing is, at first, shown thanks to closeups both on the attentive and contemplative poet and amply justified reverse shots on his surroundings. Then, progressively, independent shots crop up, that are unmatched but a continuation of the poet/bus driver's gaze. The polished windscreen of the bus reflects the city sky and the neoclassical building as the bus slides by in a slow lateral tracking shot. The beauty of the image is startling, but in keeping with the poetic concentration of the driver moments earlier. The slight breach in suture is also a cutaway shot, creating a sort of relief from the confined space of the bus. However, the ending and its exaggerated sense of fate tends to lay bare the apparatus. Up to that point the saturation of the place with both poetry and signs had been building up. The film slowly transforms into a fable where everything is significant. It is a world where there is no randomness, a world riddled with coincidence. The film loses its claims to verisimilitude; for example, when Laura mentions "twins," they start to appear everywhere in the film. This way, the film verges on surrealism as Objective Chance Encounters (the co-presence of things that defies or ignores causality) reign supreme. The question is when do we, spectators, start quivering in our seats? When do we cringe? Is it when the little girl who sits writing is a poet, with a "secret notebook" like Paterson, and has a twin? The double image brings us on the verge of the uncanny. Except that the conspiratorial wink from the girl, and the close up on the "secret notebook" turn our unease into a private joke between Paterson and the viewer, since logically the little girl cannot be aware of it. It feels like a direct address that may shout "this is a film" for some spectators and pull them out of the fictional world. So does the appearance, out of the blue, of a laconic fellow poet (1:41:08-1:46:27) just after the "secret notebook," the unique copy of Paterson's poems has been shredded to bits by his wife's dog (1:33:00). At the moment when the way the hero relates to the world (his way of understanding it) has been shattered, his gaze made blank, his gait lifeless, another poet – somebody with the same take on life – gives him a blank notebook and restores his relation with the world.

Justified by Genre

Two other films also step away from the demands of realism: one deals with vampires, the other with zombies.

In *Only Lovers Left Alive*, generic conventions naturalize the absence of consistency of the

space. To begin with, music takes the lead in the opening credits and this sequence, like others in the film, borrows the aesthetics of a video clip. Editing and camera movement are synchronized with the steady beat of a version of Wanda Jackson's song "The Funnel of Love," originally released in 1961, which has been "remixed, slowed-down, and feedback-dosed to give it a seductive drugginess as the two [heroes] awaken in spacey unison."²⁴ There is no pretence that this will open for us a unique and unified fictional world whose space would have physical properties similar to the ones we live in. The sensations attached to the timbre of the music, the fuzzy chords and the screeching voice envelop the listener in a mantle of sound, together with the lyrics which tell us that we are indeed "in the funnel of love," where we are "spinning around and around," and the camera follows suit. From an overhead angle on a spinning turntable, it smoothly cuts with the same overhead angle and starts spinning quietly to reveal a female figure lying supine in an oriental décor, then smoothly cuts with the same spinning movement on a male figure also lying supine in more occidental settings. There is no way that we may place the turntable anywhere in the world of fiction, but all this is made acceptable by the fact that we are still in the opening part of the film and that the music has more narrative power than the rest at that point. The improperly sutured space finds a generic and narrative justification. We fluidly suspend any disbelief and prepare to go into, if not the funnel of love, at least into the groove of the film's style and atmosphere.

In the following sequences, parallel editing shows the two characters in different places, an American city (Detroit) and a Maghreb one (Tangier): the spatial logic is now established and for a while there are no disruptions in the consistency of the space nor in our immersion in the fictional world that now feels complete. We also learn that the characters are vampires, meaning that non-realistic features are allowed. For example, Eve's speed-reading books translate into numerous jump-cuts that are fully justified by her supernatural powers.

In the same way, when the vampires feed, drinking a very precious glass full of human blood, the ceremony ends in an ecstatic direct address (23:25-24:00). Looking directly into the camera is a sign of their losing control. This is a description of their mental states: we are focalized through them. Jarmusch uses an irregularity in the apparatus to create a special meaning that does not aim at unsettling the viewer, yet the screen borders flutter for a second before the film goes back to normal. As opposed to *The Limits of Control*, here, for the vampires, understanding the world is unproblematic, as they are more or less all-knowing. They may take planes across the world and read whatever book they want, use modern or old-fashioned equipment. But there are two parallel worlds, theirs and that of the normal humans they see as "zombies." Their world is quietly present yet as aloof as the Detroit city lights floating in the distance.²⁵

A Meaningless, Forsaken World: Fictional Fracking

In stark contrast with *Only Lovers Left Alive*, making meaning of the world in *The Dead Don't Die* (2019) is no picnic, neither for the spectator, nor for the actors, especially as apparatus and generic conventions are laid bare in various places, cracking the fictional world in a number of places.

The Dead Don't Die is a tongue-in-cheek, highly referential and reflexive zombie film with a heavy

²⁴ Howard Hampton, "Spooky Action at a Distance," *Film Comment* 51, no. 1 (February 2015): 47.

²⁵ Céline Murillo, *Le cinéma de Jim Jarmusch: Un monde plus loin*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016, 38.

political undercurrent. Zombie films may be considered as a subgenre of horror movies, characterized by cannibalistic reanimated corpses. Jarmusch's movie harks back to the traditional George Romero *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) which uses very slow zombies with a consumerist drive²⁶: these "shopping-mall-bound corpses ride escalators in an endless loop and wobble listlessly to Muzak."²⁷ The only serious element is the consistent anti-capitalist satire eloquently expressed by Hermit Bob (Tom Waits), who remarks that the undead are "still hungry for more stuff" in accordance with Robin Wood's analysis of *Dawn of the Dead*: "The zombies instead are a given from the outset; they represent, on the metaphorical level, the whole dead weight of patriarchal consumer capitalism."²⁸ Here, Jarmusch goes back to reflecting on absence of, or resistance to, signification. The zombie disorder is not the result of a zombie master with a consistent plot, but "simply caused by (dis) order,"²⁹ here taking the form of "polar fracking," that upsets the circadian rhythm.

Going back to psychoanalytical theory, the horror connects the I, the subject, with the Thing, that is unknowable, and part of the subject's inner realm. In Žižek, who reworks at the same time Kant and Heidegger, "the 'Thing-in-itself' is therefore strictly *ontic*, it is the part of the ontic (of "innerworldly" entities) that must fail to appear"³⁰ within physical reality. However, gruesome horror extensively "appears" in the film and makes the film reflexive and unstable. The horror starts with murders first attributed by the general public to "a wild animal or several wild animals." These characters see the murders as abject in the sense given by Julia Kristeva: "by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder."³¹ As such, these murders are put away beyond the pale of humanity.

One police officer is the first character to give another explanation, one that uses the knowledge of horror fiction: Ronnie Peterson (Adam Driver) declares calmly: "I am thinking zombies." Zombies, being located at the frontier between human and non-human, are a way of renegotiating our rejection of the horror, be it the Real or the Thing when it appears³² in the realm of (diegetic) reality. For some characters, like Mindy, the female police officer, *Zombies* break the power of speech³³ and action: she, as she should in a classic horror film, is transfixed, vomits, cries and screams, and is generally unable to act rationally.

²⁶ Richard Brody, "The Dead Don't Die," Reviewed: Jim Jarmusch's Fiercely Political Zombie Comedy," *The New Yorker*, 17 June 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row>.

²⁷ Josh Levin, "How Did Movie Zombies Get so Fast?," *Slate Magazine*, 19 December 2007, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2007/12/how-did-movie-zombies-get-so-fast.html>.

²⁸ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 105.

²⁹ David Roche, "Resisting Bodies: Power Crisis / Meaning Crisis in the Zombie Film from 1932 to Today," *Textes et contextes*, no. 6 (1 December 2011): 10, <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=327>.

³⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Radical Thinkers 36, London & New York: Verso, 2008, 219.

³¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Léon Roudiez, European Perspectives, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, 12–13.

³² Stefan Gullatz, "En-Gendering' Philosophies of Horror: A Zizekian Perpspective," *Offscreen* 19, no. 5 (May 2015), <https://offscreen.com/view/en-gendering-philosophies-of-horror-a-zizekian-perpspective>.

³³ Benjamin Noys, "The Horror of the Real: Žižek's Modern Gothic," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 4, no. 4 (2010), <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/issue/view/19>.

If, as Lacan says, truth is structured like fiction,³⁴ it is quite logical that Ronnie (Driver) should search solutions in imaginary creatures and fictional works. This naturalizes the existence of Zombies in the diegetic reality. For some characters, they are no longer unknowable, unthinkable, unrepresentable. They are threatening but not horrifying to people like Ronnie or the attendant of the gas station who sells and collects horror films and books and memorabilia. Horror fiction is part of these characters' horizon of expectation.³⁵

In the same way, the characters are deemed competent to deal with zombies and the spectators no longer need the pretense of suspense nor of the closed space of fiction nor the stability of the character to remain interested. Jarmusch rejects the traditional Aristotelian conception of drama that relies on the illusion that we are watching an action that is taking place.³⁶ First the fiction slightly cracks as Ronnie declares in a Pirandellian manner that he knows the film's theme song and the ending. If characters believe that they are in a film, it becomes (rather) logical to use film for their own knowledge, but also, it all becomes extremely unstable: if actors know they are in a film, how do they continue acting? When one mentions later that he knows the theme song, who is talking? Is it the actor or the character or a superimposed persona, "Driver playing Ronnie"? This instability points to the fact that we, spectators, are watching a film.

The first instances of reflexivity and reference to Zombie film as a means to deal with the problem crack the fiction. In addition, the exaggeration of gore, namely close-ups on eating intestines and organs (30:15), prevents us from getting used to what is going on. But this gradually creates a new norm, a generic shift. We accept the conventions that the film has set for itself. The crack is patched up as the film continues on this premise. Yet stability is lost the moment when the Scottish accented undertaker (Tilda Swinton) takes off in a spaceship, radically breaking genre convention. The fiction is eventually completely cracked or even "fracked" when the two main characters bicker because one had less access to the scenario than the other.

This may remind us of Brechtian distancing, which demands that the spectators reconsider what they have taken for granted and look at the world enquiringly. But here, as opposed to what Paterson does in *Paterson*, it is not to make meaning, but to reveal the lack of. The "fracked" fiction reveals, as in Jarmusch's first films, absence of meaning and emptiness. Richard Brody from the *New Yorker* notes: "Jarmusch transmutes the long-term fantasy of environmental horror into the real-life and immediate horror just below the surface of daily life – and the inescapable doom that it entails into a vision of the emotional and spiritual void at hand."³⁷

Conclusion

Until the aptly named *The Limits of Control*, Jarmusch never completely allowed his spectators to enter the realm of fiction and definitively cross the screen border. Not giving in to what Daniel Dayan

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, Theory and History of Literature* ; v. 2, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, 22.

³⁶ Alain Chevalier, "Pour le regard inconfortable et productif de Galilée. Distanciation et critique de la représentation chez Brecht et chez Bourdieu," *MethIS*, 1 January 2008, 131, <https://popups.uliege.be:443/2030-1456/index.php?id=248>.

³⁷ Brody, "The Dead Don't Die."

calls the Tutor Code of mainstream cinema, Jarmusch, instead, wished to exhibit the voids, the decentred subject and the apparatus. Initially, he allowed himself to do so first by cornering the spectator and second by abandoning the shot reverse shot system, and thus the system of suture. At that point, the spectator was more often than not locked outside the fiction on their side of the screen border. Then Jarmusch proceeded to establish the two parallel lines of the screen and of the surfaces of the fictional world through an extensive use of lateral tracking shots. This way, spectators cannot act on the world and may even be "divorced from the world." Still, without giving up the decentred subject and the spectator left on the other side of the screen, Jarmusch shows us how images can be a way of apprehending the world. Viewing becomes acting and understanding. He leads us and his character to gaze at paintings that return our gaze and pierce the screen. Understanding the world does not cancel the screen border: on the contrary, it allows us to feel it more directly by creating dramatic inroads through it. In *The Limit*, Jarmusch stages a character who understands the world through art. In his later film *Paterson*, he thematises this grasping at the world by having a poet for the main character, making the film flow far more fluid than previous ones. Later, as if playing a subtle trick on us, he uses, in two films, genre conventions that give him a lot of freedom and enable him to have jump cuts, illogical matches without the spectator batting an eyelash. Both films are in the realm of horror: they deal with death and the undead, the unknowable, the thing. But far from maintaining a mystique of invisible horror à la H.P. Lovecraft, they bring bare the very notion of horror, deconstructing genre and narrative, leaving us with only a derisive void.

This survey, from Jarmusch's early ultra-low-budget debut films to his latest, shows that the question of the screen border transforms itself until it becomes nearly completely included into the narrative and generic levels. It reveals how enmeshed this topic is with the question of making meaning of the world. And it brings us full circle, from void to void, with fleeting moments of marvellous insights passing by, through creation and contemplation.