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The Last Samurai. Transcultural Motifs in Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*

Abstract

Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai by Jim Jarmusch is a film combining cinematic traditions of USA, Europe and Japan. Jarmusch's work can be example of contemporary culture trend named by Wolfgang Welscha transculturality. According to his theory the identity of the man is dependent on foreign elements absorbed by the culture in which he lives. Two main inspirations for the director are samurai tradition and *bushido* code on one hand, and tradition of gangster film on the other. Despite the culturally distant origins of these elements, Jarmusch is able to construct a coherent, multi-level narrative, at the same time maintaining distance towards American traditions. Referencing works by transgressive directors (J. P. Melville, Seijun Suzuki) Jarmusch becomes the spokesperson for the genre evolution and its often far-fetched influences.

Ghost Dog (1999) is a collage of various film motifs and traditions. Jarmusch combines the tradition of American gangster cinema and Japanese samurai films. The shape of the plot refers to the Blaxploitation cinema, and direct inspiration, expressed by specific quotations, are the gloomy crime novels by Jean-Pierre Melville, as well as brutal and black humour-filled *yakuza* movies by Seijun Suzuki. All this is spiced up with references to Japanese literature and *zen* philosophy. In an interview with Janusz Wróblewski director commented on his actions:

I mix styles up in order to get distance. Not in order to ridicule the hero. And why does the gangster style dominate? I will answer indirectly... I like music a lot. Especially bebop and hip hop. There is space for a quotation in it, for a jump, which for the uninitiated sounds like grinding. Music similarly like my films resembles a code, which a sensitive recipient is able to put together ("Don Kichot z Nowego Jorku" 2000: 51).

At a first glance Jarmusch's work is a postmodern play with conventions of cinema. Director of *Ghost Dog*, not unlike a few years later Quentin Tarantino in *Kill Bill* (2003), takes inspiration liberally from Japanese cinema. However, in contrast to his fellow filmmaker, he is not satisfied with only brutal and exotic entourage. Jarmusch discreetly hides certain cultural tracks which point the spectator to a whole range of concealed meanings and associations.

It is possible to make this reconstruction in many dimensions, both in the appeal to the old cinema, and to aspects of American culture or multiculturalism. Thanks to such a game with the spectator/reader, the text-film requires complementing [...], and encourages co-forming the identity of the protagonist (Hańderek 2013: 69).

Jarmusch's work fits into the course of contemporary culture named by Wolfgang Welsch transculturality. According to his theory the identity of man is dependent on foreign elements absorbed by the culture which he lives in.

Cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other. Lifestyles no longer end at the borders of national cultures, but go beyond these, are found in the same way in other cultures (Welsch 1999).

This way elements until recently regarded as exotic become an integral part of lives of a contemporary man.

According to Welsch the concept of transculturality is spreading not only on the level of macro-culture, but also on an individual level. People become cultural hybrids formed not only by their own homeland, but also other countries. "It belongs among the mustiest assumptions that an individual's cultural formation must be determined by his nationality or national status" (Welsch 1999). In the light of these views *Ghost Dog* appears as an audio-visual illustration of Welsch's concepts.

The protagonist of Jarmusch's film is an Afro-American hitman living according to principles of *bushido* and considering himself as a contemporary *samurai*. The ethos of Japanese knights turned out to be unusually

attractive for the Western culture, becoming a symbol of the Land of the Rising Sun quickly. A sudden increase in the popularity of the Japanese cinema in the 1950s made film stories about masters of sword (*jidaigeki*) widely known and appreciated. In the USA resemblance of this genre to western was quickly noticed which resulted in a few Hollywood remakes of popular Japanese films: *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) by John Sturges (based on *Seven Samurai – Shichinin no Samurai* by Akira Kurosawa, 1954) or *The Outrage* (1964) by Martin Ritta (based on *Rashomon* by A. Kurosawa, 1950). In later years Americans started exploiting samurai attributes as a way to enhance “B” class action films. One can quote such titles like *The Hunted* (1995) by J. F. Lawton and *Blind Fury* (1989) by Philip Noyce. Using samurai or *yakuza* in the plot served as a pretext for introducing the striking and brutal exoticism making clichéd story plots more attractive. More seriously the subject was treated by the creators of *The Last Samurai* (2003, dir. Edward Zwick). They attempted to introduce the Japanese warrior ethos to the Western spectator, but in spite of this the film remained mainly an epic show.

In Japan samurai films (*ken-geki* – drama with swords) were being produced from the very beginning of existence of film industry in this country. They were produced in companies based in Kyoto. These films were modeled on numerous *kabuki* theatre plays devoted to samurai. The action took place in feudal days, most often in the Tokugawa era (1601–1868). The protagonist was usually a hurt and declassed samurai who avenged his injustice, but has always been faithful to the code of honour – *bushido* (literally translated as “road of the warrior”). The first great director of samurai films was Sadao Yamanaka, author of *Sazen Tange and the Pot Worth a Million Ryo* (*Hyakuman ryo no tsube*, 1935) and *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (*Ninjo kami fusen*, 1937). The films became models for later samurai cinema, both for adventure, as well as drama genre (Kletowski 2005: 133).

After the World War II production of historical films was banned by occupation authorities since they could be associated with feudal-militaristic spirit. After occupation ended in 1950s, historical cinema enjoyed a period of great popularity. It was characterised by confronting the beautifying image of bygone eras, undermining social and moral norms, displaying a variety of psychological traits of protagonists. Among others, directors like Akira Kurosawa (*Seven Samurai*), Kenji Mizoguchi (*Legend of the Taira Clan - Shin heike monogatari*, 1955) or Masaki Kobayashi (*Rebellion – Jôichi: Hairyô tsuma shimatsu*, 1967) won the worldwide fame of masters of samurai cinema.

In 1960s and 1970s the genre plunged into a gradual process of commercialisation. Samurai became heroes of brutal B-class films. On the threshold of 1990s it seemed that artistic samurai cinema had died once and for all. Two great historical frescoes by Akira Kurosawa were supposed to be epigones of the genre: *The Double* (*Kagemusha*, 1980) and *Ran* (1985).

Unexpectedly, at the turning point of the 21st century a few films confirmed the return of the samurai genre. Such films like Takeshi Kitano's *Zatoichi* (2003), Yoji Yamada's *Twilight Samurai* (*Tasogare Seibei*, 2002) or Yoriyo Takita's *When the Last Sword is Drawn* (*Mibu gishi den*, 2003) constituted a contemporary version of *ken-geki* which allowed more space for a wide social panorama of late feudalism Japan (Bobrowski 2012: 140).

It might seem that mixing a samurai genre with a story about a black killer fighting against Italian mob would result in a rather peculiar B-class work. However, the use of Japanese warrior tradition in *Ghost Dog* is a carefully thought over process. The sequences in the film start with quotations from *Hagakure. Book of samurai*. The book, written in 1710 by Tashiro Tsuramoto, is a set of reflections of a hermit called Yamamoto Joho (1659–1719). He used to be a clan member of Nabeshima Mitsu-shige. After his master's death he lived in a remote place and spent the rest of his life codifying the rules of conduct of warriors.

Ghost Dog treats this book as a source of principles, according to which he lives. Quotations are present in the body of the film from the very first to the last scene, commenting and complementing the scenes. Criminals following a specific moral code are not something new to cinema. Jarmusch merely replaced the vendetta law or "honour of the thief" with *bushido* code. Living in global world the protagonist of the film simply chooses one of the available models of behaviour.

The story about an Afro-American who lives according to the code of samurai, faithfully reconstructing the model described in the book and accepting mentality of the "East" more and more firmly, becomes an excellent illustration of mutual influences and tangle of cultures. The character introduced by Jarmusch, based on a book *Road of the Samurai*, chooses his cultural patterns by himself, drawing from the possibilities given by the contemporary open form of multiculturalism (Hańderek 2013: 59).

But the samurai code is not only an exotic plot element and the thorough psychological construction of the protagonist only proves it. *Ghost Dog* turns out to be a perfect samurai. This not only includes his ability

to use the sword or loyalty to his master, but above all – his attitude towards the world surrounding him and the concern about spiritual development.

Ghost Dog spends his free time on meditations, fencing practice and reading. He takes human relations very seriously, too. His friendship with the French speaking Haitian Raymond belongs to most beautiful in the entire film. Men are able to communicate in spite of the language barrier. There is a strong bond between them and they consider themselves good friends. They don't know too much about each other, but this doesn't stop them from feeling mutual respect.

Another close person for Ghost Dog is Pearline, a smart ten-year-old girl carrying books in her lunch box. The girl is a keen devotee of literature. They hold philosophical conversations about life and Ghost Dog teaches her his way of seeing the reality. Just before dying he hands Pearline his copy of Hagakure, making her the heiress to the samurai code.

These motifs prevent the main character from being perceived as a cold-blooded murderer and a loner. A new image emerges in these few scenes – one can see how great an importance he attaches to the spiritual and emotional development.

In the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), when after several dozen years of ceaseless wars came peace in Japan, the samurai were required to do much more than just triumphantly return from victorious battles. The real warrior was a practicing Buddhist and required self-control and constant improvement from himself. Thus, taking part in various sophisticated forms of art was a frequent activity, like writing poetry, arranging flowers or painting. The samurai frequently visited performances of No theatre and regularly held tea ceremonies (Hall 1979: 187).

To Ghost Dog physical existence is not of paramount importance. This attitude helps him feel every moment deeper and appreciate even small and fleeting things. He rejects the past and does not care about future. Buddhism Zen, religion adapted by the society of Japan, rejected the concept of afterlife. The follower of Zen Buddhism didn't go to heaven, hell or purgatory, but turned into e.g. four elements (Tubielewicz 1980: 70). The perfect samurai was not afraid of death. Dying for somebody or something he recognised as worth sacrificing his life for, appeared as divine behaviour. Beautiful death (e.g. defending one's honour), constituting the content of a traditional Japanese religious system, was indeed a victory, because it freed from absurdities of earthly existence. Paradoxically, life fully manifested itself in death.

There appeared a specific celebrating of suicide in Japanese tradition – *seppuku*. At first it was only a way of avoiding captivity, but with time its status changed. It proved bravery and faithfulness of the samurai, even in the situation of a lost fight. When the samurai class gained more independence, *seppuku* became its privilege. Dozens of schools taught how most effectively to hold this ceremony (Szymankiewicz 1997: 21). *Seppuku* consisted in splitting one's intestines open. However, it was such a cruel death, that the ritual was later modified in order to spare suffering. It was allowed to decapitate the samurai, when he had already cut his stomach open. Lack of attachment to life and fear of death made the samurai an extremely tenacious and dangerous opponent. Adhering to principles of *bushido*, Ghost Dog became the most effective soldier of the mafia. Following orders of Louigo, a second-rate gangster that once saved his life, became his purpose of life.

In medieval Japan the overlord – vassal system started to develop after the collapse of the imperial authority at the beginning of the Kamakura age (1185–1333). In this period local magnates started growing in strength and gathered private armies and a big new social group appeared in the process – *bushi* (a warrior; samurai were the most senior *bushi*) (Hall 1979: 69). At first they came from different social layers, but in the Tokugawa period, a 250 years long time of peace, new laws divided the society making social mobility impossible. In this period the class of samurai was fully formed and the rules of *bushido* became something of a national ideology. They turned out to be essential to keep the people of war calm when a long-term peace period ensued. They found their most unabridged summary exactly in *Hakagure*. The Tokugawa shoguns saw great significance in spreading the code amongst samurai, since some of its aspects helped maintain the power. It is worthwhile remembering that Joho and Tsuramoto wrote down the principles of *bushido* almost one hundred years after the last major battles (Szymankiewicz 1997: 13–16).

Ken-geki films contributed to keeping the samurai ethos in contemporary popular culture. Their influence quickly spread to other film genres especially to *yakuza eiga*, Japanese variety of gangster cinema. *Yakuza* films originated from traditional stories about travelling masters of the sword, *ronin* and small crooks. On the other side, they drew strong inspiration from American noir film, both in visual as well as outlook sphere. The Japanese gangster cinema developed after the World War II and was a consequence of pessimistic moods amongst the society. Alienated, unable to find themselves in a post-war reality men became heroes of films.

Their maladjustment results partly from their obsessive adhering to former codes which in the new democratic society cease to have any value (Loska 2013: 171).

Although gangster cinema is a genre created in the USA, Jarmusch is more interested in Japanese-French traditions. Main influences are Seijun Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* (*Koroshi no rakuin*, 1967) and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* (*Le Samourai*, 1967). Jarmusch stressed his worship for the works of both directors on many occasions. "My all-time favourite film killers are the ones from *Le Samourai* and *Branded to Kill*. I quoted these films in a few different ways" (*Jim Jarmusch interviewed by Geoff Andrew* 2014). Director's attachment to these authors is proved by the fact that he included them in a list of his favourite films prepared for a booklet published for a retrospective of his films held in February 1994 in Minneapolis (*On the Road with Jim Jarmusch: Recommended viewing*).

Jarmusch directly quotes *Branded to Kill* in scenes where the hero leaves to fight the gang. They are almost an identical copy of scenes from Suzuki's film. In the first one, hidden in the forest Dog Ghost observes his enemies, waiting for Mr Vargo to arrive. When he finally appears, the protagonist cannot fire a shot since the bird sat on the barrel of his rifle and covered the target. In the second scene taken from the same film is the killing of Sonny Valeria. Ghost Dog shoots his victim through a drainpipe.

Born in 1923 in Tokyo, Seijun Suzuki in years 1956–1967 directed for Nikkatsu (a production company specializing in production of cheap, serial gangster films, modeled on American Western and adventure series) as many as forty-two films. The production company had only started at the time and could not afford production of the very popular samurai films. They decided to focus on contemporary topics, with a special emphasis put on gangster cinema (Desjardins 2005: 145). Members of the *yakuza* – the Japanese equivalent of the mob became main characters. Films produced at that time portrayed gangsters as heirs to the samurai and the *bushido* code. A typical protagonist of *yakuza eiga* of the 1960s was a brave and honourable man. Scenes of them committing crimes were generally omitted.

Lonely and brave members of the *yakuza* were heroes of these gangster series, who betrayed by everyone fought against gangs of criminals, threatening innocent people. Very often the main topic of the film was intertwined with a tragic love story – the hero was usually in love with the daughter of his biggest enemy. This type of films ended with a compulsory bloodbath, in which everyone died – including the brave gangster, who mortally wounded finished his life in the arms of his beloved (Kletowski 2001: 77).

It was demanded of Suzuki that he conformed to the rules, too. However, during ten years he created a few unusually original gangsters films. Heroes of his detective films were rebels opposing standard rules and simultaneously not bearing responsibility for going against their superiors. Two films are regarded as his biggest achievements about a gangster – ronin: *Tokyo Drifter* (*Tôkyô nagaremono*, 1966) and *Branded to Kill*. The first one is a story of a betrayed *yakuza* who takes revenge on his perpetrators while travelling across Japan.

At a first glance Suzuki's film is a cluster of film rolls from American genre cinema. There is a western, a melodrama, and even a musical here – the film is peppered with wistful ballades sung by the main character or constituting background score (Kletowski 2001: 78).

Branded to Kill is a story about a contract killer who after an abortive assault must face an entire elite of mafia hired assassins. Suzuki's protagonist by no means is trapped in a conflict between being faithful to himself and loyal to his master. He is absorbed by completely different things. Firstly, he wants to save his own life by all cost, and secondly his greatest ambition is to become "Murderer No. 1". Moreover, he cannot refuse himself two biggest pleasures – the perverted sex and inhaling the smell of cooking rice. A *yakuza* driven by his own, very down-to-earth desires and enjoying quite bizarre activities was a real novelty.

The aforementioned Suzuki's films were characterized by specific poetics. The director clashed *yakuza eiga* with satire, elements of *kabuki* theatre and pop – art aesthetics. Musical references and ostentatiously artificial decorations in *Tokyo Drifter* or atonal soundtrack, animated interludes and new wave aesthetics in *Branded to Kill* make the films grotesque and surrealistic. The viewer senses a total conventionality of the presented plot and as a result is unable to emotionally commit to the story. Ironic and self-conscious approach not only towards the plot, but also to film form places Suzuki's works close the *Nuberu-bagu* - the Japanese new wave (Richie 2001: 181).

Similarly to his previous films, the plot seems secondary to the way the story of a killer for hire is told. The logic of events and the consequence of conducted plots are unimportant to the director who focuses on a small, seemingly insignificant details, shocking the spectators with violence-filled images (Loska 2013: 177).

The vision presented in Suzuki's films was a world full of violence, chaos and erotic perversion. The director didn't hide his fascination with

the American popular culture, mainly with *noir* films of the gangster genre. Reality of the *noir* film portrayed the disintegration of former values and their total inapplicability to the real life. Suzuki strenuously tracked and stigmatized remains of the feudal tradition functioning in the Japanese society seeing it as a threat to the contemporary man. In the process he criticised films which presented *yakuza* members as honourable heirs the samurai tradition.

After the premiere of *Branded to Kill* Nikkatsu management deemed the film as completely incomprehensible what in consequence led to Suzuki being dismissed. He had not shot another film for nine years. The film was appreciated only a few years after the premiere. Redistribution in cinemas in the West and later video editions caused that the world audience had discovered his production. Suzuki's near blasphemous approach towards many sanctities of the Japanese cinema and an often recurring theme of rebellion against social conventions had a large impact on the generation of film-makers (Takashi Kitano, Shinya Tsukamoto, and Takashi Miike) who in the 1990s shaped Japanese cinematography.

The second inspiration for Suzuki, *Le Samouraï* (1967) by Jean-Pierre Melville, is often compared with the work discussed earlier (Antoniou 2004: 94). A similar vision of the world and a figure of a perfectionist contract killer forced to fight for his life link both films. Protagonist of *Le Samouraï* – Jef Costello (Alain Delon) – has the task of killing the owner of a night club. He fails to stay unnoticed – leaving the room of the victim he faces a club pianist. After a police hunt Costello gets arrested. Mobsters who hired him in fear of being exposed decide to get rid of the killer. Costello doesn't remain passive – he tracks and then kills the man who issued a death sentence on him. Wounded and chased both by the gang as well as the police, he goes to the club where he carried out the previous execution. In the club he points an empty gun towards the pianist and lets police officers shoot him.

Film's action is preceded by a quotation from *bushido* code: *There is no greater solitude than the solitude of a samurai, apart from the solitude of a tiger in the jungle* (in fact the author of this line is the director himself). In *Ghost Dog* there is a similar commentary made to the film plot by use of quotations from the samurai code.

Jef Costello, just as the protagonist of Jarmusch's film, is very much economical with words and secretive. From the very few sentences said by him it is possible to prove little about his motives and emotions provoked by the dramatic events. Interpretation of the ambiguous behav-

iours of the character is left to the spectator. A ceremony of moves with which Costello puts on his hat before leaving and pulls on white gloves before committing murder are examples of such idiosyncrasies. In *Ghost Dog's* life there is place for similar rituals – e.g. prayer or fencing practice. For both murderers a car theft is essential to complementing murder – Jarmusch's character only exchanges huge bunch of keys for an electronic gadget.

Relation to nature is also similar in both films. They both live in a big city, far from the nature and still, while describing them other people use animal metaphors. "Costello is compared to a wolf, not only lonely, but also wounded – that is even more dangerous, because already sentenced to death" (Helman 1990: 187). The hero of Jarmusch's film also has his animal patron – ice-cream vendor Raymond, telling small Pearline about *Ghost Dog* compares him to a bear. This motive is later repeated when *Ghost Dog* encounters two poachers who have just shot a bear.

A bird kept by Jef is an only companion of his solitary lifestyle. It is the only creature towards which he has any warm feelings. *Ghost Dog* breeds pigeons and thanks to their help he can contact his principals. But the birds are much more to him than only a means of communication. A proof is given when the slaughter of the pigeons by gangsters is an impulse to rise against the mob.

Heroes of both films not only similarly live, but also similarly die. Admittedly, bullets that reach them are shot from their opponents' weapons, but their deaths are in fact suicides – they both leave for the final battle carrying guns with empty magazines.

When comparing *Ghost Dog* with protagonists of *Le Samourai* and *Branded to Kill* social alienation of the three is another strong common trait. They all live according to codes, principles of which nobody respects. Even though the rules of conduct they are faithful to are inappropriate to reality, they appeal to them and try to find their own moral path thanks to them.

Behaviour of a man is a continuous proving of some idea. Taking action we are expressing, consciously or not, our attitude to certain values. I mean the world that we choose as adult people, rather than the one imposed by parents or upbringing and tradition. Gangs and mafia structures, based on very specific system of rituals, are an extreme example. Strict codes of honour of samurai or the order of brave Shaolin monks are the opposite side of the same phenomenon. Nowadays hardly anyone decides on such radical choices. People lack codes they would hold on to („Don Kichot z Nowego Jorku" 2000: 53).

The most important values for a samurai were supposed to be loyalty to his overlord and his honour, which the warrior was expected to sacrifice his life for. In later years a frequent subject of Japanese art – literature, theatre, and later film – was the conflict between these two values.

A classic confrontation between duties, constituting a common subject of Japanese novels and films, is conflict between *gimu* – loyalty and obedience to the ones standing higher in the social hierarchy by age or position, and *giri* – loyalty to one's name (Kletowski 2001: 59).

In such a situation Ghost Dog finds himself. He was betrayed, so a revenge is his duty, but it will mean a disobedience to his master. For a samurai the only solution after such a revenge was *seppuku*, protecting warrior's honour in spite of breaking the duty of loyalty. Along with the hero die his principles, methods and customs. Director presents this thought with a quotation from *Hagakure* which appears at the end of the film:

It is said that what is called "the spirit of an age" is something to which one cannot return. That this spirit gradually dissipates is due to the world's coming to an end. For this reason, although one would like to change today's world back to the spirit of one hundred years or more ago, it cannot be done. Thus it is important to make the best out of every generation (cited directly from the film plate).

Ghost Dog's world is a world of passing values. Not only the main character is a believer of old, dying rituals. His opponents make an impression of people being in an uncomfortable time. This is how Jarmusch himself describes the hero: "Prototype of the hero of my latest film is Don Kichot – a dreamer – poet living according to the rules of a different century" („Don Kichot z Nowego Jorku" 2000: 54). Transformations that occur in the postmodern world seem to outgrow the adaptability of the characters.

Quotations and borrowings from non-American traditions break the archaic form of the gangster film building a distance to American myths and letting Jarmusch look at it from an outside perspective.

I would like to integrate differing elements that in some way were important to me – genre films, books, melodies [...]. Ghost Dog is indeed spiked with references; direct – Melville, Suzuki – and less visible [...]. In the film frame the reference creates the context, opens to the huge laboratory from which I draw my cinema. It is not a collage, it is rather a re-creation of the genre [...]. For me the expression "original idea" should not exist. I never believe great lonely concepts that strengthen the idea of the uniqueness of *creation* (quote from J. Jarmusch after Wiącek 2001: 121).

Similarly as in the case of his earlier films when as a starting point he picked traditional genres like western, prison film or road film, Jarmusch combines American tradition with motifs from cinematography of other parts of the world. "The ability to transculturally cross over barriers will guarantee us identity and competence in the long run" (Welsch 1999) Crossing borders of traditional gangster cinema the director becomes a spokesman of the evolution of the genre and its development influenced by elements from different and often distant sources.

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