



Big Screen Classics

Stranger than Paradise

Stranger than Paradise

Director: Jim Jarmusch
©: Cinesthesia Productions
A Grokenberger Film-Produktion and Cinesthesia Productions production
In association with:
ZDF – Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen,
Das Kleine Fernsehspiel and Christoph Holch
Executive Producer: Otto Grokenberger
Producer: Sara Driver
Producer (Das Kleine Fernsehspiel):
Christoph Holch
Production Manager: Sara Driver
Production: Stephen Torton, Guido Chiesa,
Louis Tancredi, Matt Buchwald, Una McClure,
Tom Jarmusch, Sam Edwards
Screenplay: Jim Jarmusch
Part One (New World) based on an idea by:
Jim Jarmusch, John Lurie
Director of Photography: Tom DiCillo
Assistant Camera (Part One): Paul Gibson
Assistant Camera (Parts Two/Three):
James Hayman
Assistant Camera (Part Three): Li Shin Yu
Loader: Louis Tancredi *
Gaffer/Grip: Frank Prinzi
Editors: Jim Jarmusch, Melody London
Titles: Suzanne Fletcher
Titles Shot at: Cynosure Films
Matching: Tim Brennan
Filmed with: Arriflex Cameras
Black and White by: DuArt Film Laboratories
Music: John Lurie
Music for Two Violas: Aaron Picht *
Music Performed by: The Paradise Quartet
(Viola: Jill Jaffe; *Violins:* Mary L. Rowell,
Kay Stern; *Cello:* Eugene Moye)
Music Recording Engineer: Ollie Cotton
Sound (Part One): Greg Curry
Sound (Parts Two/Three): Drew Kunin
Sound Mixer: Jack Cooley
Sound Editors: Melody London, John Auerbach
Special Help: Paul Bartel
Cast:
John Lurie (*Bela 'Willie' Molnar*)
Eszter Balint (*Eva*)
Richard Edson (*Eddie*)
Cecillia Stark (*Aunt Lottie*)
Danny Rosen (*Billy*)
Rammellzee (*man with money*)
Tom DiCillo (*airline agent*)
Richard Boes (*factory worker*)
Rockets Redglare, Harvey Perr, Brian J. Burchill
(*poker players*)
Sara Driver (*girl with hat*)
Paul Sloane (*motel owner*)
USA-West Germany 1984©
89 mins
Digital

* Uncredited

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Jim Jarmusch is remarkable for having achieved both critical and a degree of commercial success with work that in many respects bears a far stronger resemblance to experimental, 'underground' filmmaking than to either the Hollywood mainstream or the European art-movie. In their own way, his films differ from the tidy, conventional narratives of most commercial filmmaking as much as those of David Lynch. Yet whereas Lynch opts for a surreal, nightmarish weirdness, Jarmusch's work is distinguished by its adherence to slight, elliptical, seemingly inconsequential 'stories' drained of the usual dramatic climaxes – they are only very tangentially linked to traditional American genres – and by a subtle, experimental, modernist play with the formal aspects of cinematic language. Crucially, in terms of the films' influence on other directors and their accessibility to audiences, this latter characteristic never seems arch or academic, since even his more aesthetically austere work is firmly rooted in a warm, amused interest in people; indeed, in terms of their narrative scope, focus and tone, his movies – with the exception of *Dead Man* – are perhaps best understood as the filmic equivalent of a miniaturist's short story rather than of the novel.

Originally, Jarmusch was able to shoot, over one weekend, only the first third of *Stranger than Paradise* – with leftover black-and-white stock given him by Wim Wenders after the completion of *The State of Things* – which was screened as a short at festivals in Rotterdam and Hof, where it received both a warm reception and, in Holland, a critics prize. At this point, further finance was made available by Paul Bartel and the German producer Otto Grokenberger, and Jarmusch was able to complete the rest of the movie, which went on not only to win the prestigious Camera d'or in Cannes, but to attract audiences around the world significantly larger than those usually prepared to watch such experimental, low-budget work (the film eventually came in at around \$110,000).

What is most immediately notable about Jarmusch's film is its narrative style. Structured in three parts (entitled 'The New World', 'One Year Later' and 'Paradise'), it is wholly made up of single-shot scenes (separated by black film) in which the fixed camera either remains absolutely still, or simply pans around a room to follow the characters; there are no dissolves, wipes or cuts within scenes, merely 67 discrete shots (roughly 20 to each 'chapter'), a strategy which makes both for a paring-down of film language and for an elliptical narrative style wholly in keeping with Jarmusch's tendency to 'dedramatise' his films, to focus our attention on those seemingly 'dead' moments usually deemed too unimportant, in terms of plot development, by other filmmakers. The effect at first seems quite austere, an odd combination of minimalist/Warholian 'real time' aesthetics and a more tersely economic approach reminiscent of Robert Bresson and Yasujiro Ozu (both of whom Jarmusch greatly admires), but as the film proceeds it becomes easier to see what Jarmusch's aims are: to concentrate on those unspoken minutiae of human gesture and movement which say at least as much about the characters' emotions and states of mind as would any dialogue or dramatic plot-twist, and to explore new methods of cinematic storytelling. Moreover, in

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Fri 31 Jul 18:10

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Stranger Than Paradise

Thu 9 Jul 21:10; Mon 13 Jul 20:50;

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BFI Inclusion Manager); Sat 25 Jul 20:45

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'flattening' the narrative, he is able to create and sustain, throughout the film, a mood and tone tantalisingly pitched somewhere between poetic melancholy and deadpan, ironic, faintly absurdist humour.

In this respect, the performances – particularly that of Lurie – are crucial. When the film first appeared, some viewers greeted Willie and Eddie's cool, laconic demeanour as evidence of Jarmusch's ultra-hip boho pretensions, an interpretation which fails to take account of the ironic distance he maintains between the attitudes of the characters and the droll perspective of the film itself. Willie's bored, often arrogant, selfish posturing is seen not as a virtue but a weakness, a self-defeating delusion: as his refusal to admit to his Hungarian roots (and name) shows, he is more preoccupied with maintaining a facade of fashionable self-sufficiency than with acknowledging his feelings for others. (The more garrulous, easygoing and boyishly innocent Eddie is ironically rather more mature in this respect, and is visibly delighted that Eva remembers him when he turns up with Willie in Cleveland.) Nevertheless, Eva's invasion of Willie's complacent, self-consciously 'cool' and affected lifestyle serves not only to provoke him into a tentative recognition of the importance of friendship but to remind him of his roots: presumably, he could have got off the plane when he found that Eva wasn't on it, but decided to make a return visit to the old country instead. Not that the trip will necessarily change Willie very much; as Eddie says, seeing the plane take off: 'Oh Willie, I had a bad feeling – what the hell you gonna do in Budapest?' Still, he has at least dragged himself out of the rut of his idle, empty existence.

That, perhaps, is not exactly a hugely dramatic conclusion for a film, but Jarmusch leads us to it with considerable warmth, wit and a subtle poetry. Aunt Lottie and Eddie, in particular, are enormously engaging, amusing characters: the former babbles on in Hungarian, barely bothering to notice whether anyone is in fact listening to her, and repeatedly beats her two guests, who both take a ridiculous pride in their gambling skills, at a card game; Eddie, meanwhile, is so eager to impress Eva that when she announces she is going to Cleveland, he tells her the city is so beautiful she is sure to love it – before admitting that he has never been there. (Of course, when he and Willie finally go there themselves, all they see are characterless suburbs and enormous, ugly industrial sites, just as their later experience of Florida – 'Paradise' – is, as far as we actually see, largely confined to a motel room.) At the same time, however, Jarmusch makes use of Tom DiCillo's bleached monochrome camerawork to often stunning effect, so that a snow-covered Lake Erie and a Florida beach look as bleakly beautiful as each other. Music, too, is used to lend an air of strangeness to an otherwise mundane landscape, with Lurie's string quartet (appropriately echoing the style of the Hungarian composer Bartók) providing a melancholy backdrop to the sometimes dreamlike images on view.

Geoff Andrew, *Stranger than Paradise: Maverick Filmmakers in Recent American Cinema* (Prion 1998)