

“Strangers” in Jim Jarmusch’s Films: Exploring the Imagery and Identity

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Abstract: This study delves into the portrayal of "strangers" in the films of Jim Jarmusch, offering insights into the complexities of contemporary urban life and the existential journey of individuals navigating fragmented landscapes. Through an analysis of Jarmusch's cinematic works, such as *Stranger Than Paradise*, *Only Lovers Left Alive* and *The Dead Man*. This research examines the evolving desires and challenges faced by various groups of "strangers," from immigrants to wandering intellectuals. The exploration encompasses themes of identity, belonging, and the search for meaning in a rapidly changing global context. While acknowledging the limitations of focusing solely on Jarmusch's films, the study underscores the need for future research to expand beyond this scope to encompass a broader range of cinematic works and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Jim Jarmusch, Strangers, Identification, Living Space, Space in Decline

1. Introduction

As an industrialized and urbanized society develops, plenty of migrants move into developed areas from developing ones, thus these “strangers” spreading across cities, such as sheds and rural-urban fringe areas. These strangers fail to assimilate into shaping image and developing culture[1]. For this reason, what emerges amid such cultural conflict and integration are a raft of works in the art forms of film, poem, novel, and the like, to express the surviving plight facing these “strangers”.

Jim Jarmusch, a pivotal figure in contemporary American independent cinema, because of his diverse family and immigrant heritage, frequently explores the theme of "strangers" in his films. These strangers inhabit worlds characterized by dilapidated streets, aimless travelers, absurd life scenarios, and a distinctive black-and-white aesthetic. In his film universe, strangers represent non-ignorable imagery, for they take a leading role running through most of his films[2]. He delve into the determination and inevitability driving these characters to perpetually embark on new journeys. This inevitability is fueled by a persistent sense of nihilism as they move from one space to another, reflecting a deeper existential quest[2]. In light of this situation, his films explore four aspects surrounding strangers, including stranger identification, old and new living space, and real life. By doing so, his work provides a nuanced exploration of the stranger's experience, highlighting their perpetual state of flux and their search for meaning in a fragmented world. This article aims to analyze the creation of "strangers" imagery and character identity in Jim Jarmusch's films through case studies. Additionally, this article will examine the social commentary embedded in Jarmusch's films, particularly in the context of globalization. Through these analyses, the article seeks to uncover the

deeper meanings behind Jarmusch's portrayal of strangers and their perpetual journey through transient landscapes.

2. The definition and development of “stranger”

Since industrialization and modernization began, people have flocked from rural and developing regions to cities and developed countries for employment. In these new environments, they face challenges related to cultural identity and integration. This immigration phenomenon is a common aspect of global urbanization, often leading to the "stranger" of these urban residents' identities[3]. Table 1 illustrates the upward trend in the number and proportion of international immigrants from 1970 to 2020.

Table 1: International immigrants number and proportion between 1970 and 2020[3]

Year	Number of international migrants	Migrants as a % of the world's population
1970	84 460 125	2.3
1975	90 368 010	2.2
1980	101 983 149	2.3
1985	113 206 691	2.3
1990	152 986 157	2.9
1995	161 289 976	2.8
2000	173 230 585	2.8
2005	191 446 828	2.9
2010	220 983 187	3.2
2015	247 958 644	3.4
2020	280 598 105	3.6

Source: UN DESA, 2008; UN DESA, 2021a.

Note: The number of entities (such as States, territories and administrative regions) for which data were made available in the UN DESA international Migrant Stock 2020 was 232. In 1970s, the number of entities was 135.

“Strangers” refer to an intrusion from one group to another, which means changes in location and move in space. As a film imagery, “strangers” have long been preferred and explored by Western directors. For instance, varied descriptions of “strangers” have been made by considerable directors, such as Luchino Vescanti, Béla Tarr, Theodoros Angelopoulos, and Andrei Tarkovsky. It can be drawn from countless film and television works that, in terms of recognition, “strangers” are anxious about their identities; In terms of action, they are wandering and drifting physically; In terms of their living space, they undergo a space-time shift accompanied by physical wander. As a literary subject, drifters are living in strange lands, from ancient Greek myths, Odyssey, Don Quixote to Bloom’s modern wandering in Ulysses; With drifters an object observed by philosophers, Heidegger noted that “All humans are strangers on earth”[4]. Leaving one's hometown often evokes a profound sense of loss. Directors who focus on themes of estrangement, such as Kiesłowski drifting from Poland to France and Andrei Tarkovsky drifting from Russia to Italy. As strangers, these directors experience complex emotions and enduring homesickness for their native countries.

3. Strangers Identity in Jim Jarmusch's Films

3.1. "Strangers" Abandon Their Original Identities

In his book *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Zygmunt Bauman points out the embarrassment and ambiguity facing strangers' identity - *"Strangers rise to combat such tacit confrontation as well as the cooperation dragged down by the conflict between friends and foes. This confrontation forms social life and the basis of all differentials piecing together and maintaining such life. For this reason, strangers will impair the social life. All of this can be attributed to the fact that strangers are neither friends nor foes, or that they serve as both friends and foes. Possibly, this is because we do not and cannot know what is going on[5] ."* In Bauman's description, strangers can neither become friends with folks in their hometown, nor ally with locals. These strangers hang in the air their identities. However, identity is essential for one to determine his position in social relations. Abandoning their original identities means giving up their positions in society. That is true for how strangers are described in Jarmusch's films. Free from the bind of traditional social relations, they don't even need to maintain the most basic family relations. For example, in *Stranger Than Paradise*, the hero Willie, a Hungarian immigrant residing in the United States, thinks he has successfully integrated into the United States society and discarded his original Hungarian identity of his free will. However, through her inquiries about his life, it is evident that Willie's so-called integration into American society has only led to a state of emptiness and boredom. This sense of emptiness is a common feature among the strangers in Jarmusch's films. Pursuing spiritual goals, they abandon their original identities and embark on continuous journeys, ultimately sinking into the depths of nihilism.

3.2. Cultural Barriers Arising From Strangers' Turning Into "Outsiders"

For "strangers," characterized by a sense of detachment, integrating into a new environment proves challenging as they struggle to engage fully in the present. Confronted with a new place, these individuals often experience identity anxiety as they navigate their sense of self in unfamiliar surroundings. This is also a conflict between their existing cultural background and accepting new culture, which is the reason for cultural barriers and the main factor for "strangers" turning into "outsiders"[6] [7] .

The *Dead Man* tells the story of, in the late 1800s, the meek accountant Blake leaving for the most remote frontier in the western United States on business. He, lost and heavily wounded, encounters an aborigine abandoned by his tribe named Nobody. In the face of Nobody's support, Blake is reluctant to accept it due to his resistance to Native American tribe's culture. As events unfold, Blake develops an interest in the strange tribe culture and even grows a sense of security. Then, he is willing to reach out to Nobody and learn tribal culture, whereas he finds it hard for cultures to blend with each other. Although Blake develops an appreciation for the Native American culture, the stark contrast between his upbringing and theirs hinders his full assimilation. This internal conflict propels Blake on a spiritual quest for self-discovery, culminating in his transformation into an "outsider" existing on the fringes of both cultures[8].

4. Limitations on Strangers' Original Living Space

Bauman posits that globalization fosters mobility among strangers in a post-modern world, characterized by an abstract "flowing" state with advantages in time and instantaneity[9] [10] . In Jarmusch's films, such "mobility" described by Bauman takes forms of "immigration", "travel", and "wander", which derive from resource shortage and living situation deterioration in strangers' original living space.

4.1. Necessity of Flow

Strangers' flow is necessary for triggering a stronger desire for changes in the face of their frustration about the current life. Thus, the only choice is flow. As Gordard writes in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (History of Cinema), he paints life as a non-stop journey - "The destination is nowhere or maybe anywhere. Holding a wish, people, like fanatics, are always on the run tirelessly to settle down." In Jarmusch's films, the longing for the future often manifests as a subconscious embrace of existential emptiness, driving characters to embark on perpetual journeys. Amidst spaces that mirror their sense of alienation and disconnected personal ties, only drifting offers a temporary escape from solitude.

4.2. Materialization of Flow

4.2.1. Flow Between Nations - Stranger Than Paradise

Stranger Than Paradise, Jarmusch's second full-length film, tells a story of Hungarians leaving their depressed hometown. In this film, heroine Eva leaves Hungary for New York and Cleveland. Eventually, after a discussion with his cousin Willie and his friend, they decide to depart for Los Angeles. At the beginning of this film, with a plane beside a run-down airport, Eva, a skinny and small girl, stands at the corner of the film picture, who seems to be thrown outside. Thus, an unspeakable sense of separation is produced. Shot focuses on Eva, who is leaving with a loudspeaker in her hand, followed by a camera down a dilapidated street. Sense of decline grows stronger with images in black and white. Against the backdrop of Eva's loudspeaker blaring "I Put A Spell On You," the juxtaposition of her solitary presence and the gritty urban setting underscores the profound emptiness and disconnection experienced by strangers traversing.

4.2.2. Flow Between Cities - Permanent Vacation

In Jarmusch's full-length debut novel *Permanent Vacation*, hero Paker is typical of "wanders", who wanders through streets and lanes in the U.S. aimlessly. The whole story is unfolded in such a stiff and monotonous space structure.

The image style in *Permanent Vacation* shows Jarmusch's three creation signs of describing "strangers wandering in a strange land". Firstly, a long, low-angle take and a fixed shot bring out an immersive sense of depression. A long, low-angle take follows the film hero along dilapidated streets in cities, while a location-fixed camera runs a long-time shot on him in a small space. These shooting methods are employed to present the hero's stagnant life, lack of action motive, and no desire for communication [11]. Secondly, Jarmusch's films are characterized by sparse dialogue and plentiful monologues. While dialogues typically serve to exchange information, his protagonists often struggle to communicate effectively, either remaining silent or using inadequate words. As a result, conversations in his films are marked by awkward pauses and unspoken tension. When verbal communication fails, characters often resort to monologues to express their inner thoughts and desires. Thirdly, the core element in Jarmusch's films is the problem of human wander and immigration. At the beginning of the film, all the time, the hero delivers the message "I am tired of the current life, and I am about to leave." Sometimes, luggage, rail stations, and conveyor belts in airports appear on the scene prior to the characters' presence and mark the beginning of wandering.

5. "Strangers" Are Facing Shocks of New Living Space

5.1. Urban Space in Decline

Decay is a result of perception, while cities represent locations in space. From Jarmusch's debut *Permanent Vacation* (1980) to *The Dead Don't Die* (2019), in terms of cities, underdeveloped US

cities are chosen, such as Detroit, Memphis, and Cleveland; In terms of locations, dilapidated streets, hotels, prisons, and the like, keep reappearing. Through employing scanning panning photography, those cities in the state of devastation are magnified by Jarmusch, showing the inner portrayal of characters.

Only Lovers Left Alive looks back at the present decay that seems prosperous from the perspective of the past. As the automotive capital in the past, Detroit is dilapidated and inanimate in Jarmusch's lens. For Adam and Eva, seeing the fragility of this city is like reviewing their lives, which move ahead toward decline from prime. Jarmusch skillfully captures not only the inner emotional landscapes of his characters but also the tangible existence of the cities they inhabit. By intertwining the mental states of the characters with the deteriorating state of the urban environment, he conveys a message: the decay of home reflects a profound sorrow inherent in human existence. In essence, the portrayal of urban space decline in cinema serves as a profound exploration of the human condition. Urban decay becomes more than just a backdrop. The existential sorrow felt by characters like Adam and Eva resonates deeply with audiences, highlighting the universal experience of grappling with impermanence and loss[12].

5.2. Desolated, Vast Nature Space

In nature, space is unceasingly flowing, turning into a lost land lack of law restriction and civilization. In Jarmusch's films, wastelands in the cracks of urban space carry unspeakable metaphors.

In *The Dead Man*, such desolated and vast natural space is reflected in a most intuitive way, which space can be divided into two layers. The first layer symbolizes a civilized space dominated by white settlers, driven primarily by the pursuit of capital during the 19th-century Golden Rush and racial immigration in the United States. Here, the protagonist, Blake, finds himself employed, yet ultimately unable to reconcile with the values of this world, leading him into the second layer. In the second layer, Blake enters the primitive space inhabited by Native Americans, where he encounters a character named Nobody. This space is depicted as one where the encroachment of diverse white settlers threatens the indigenous way of life, highlighting the clash between cultures and the erosion of traditional territories[13].

6. Discuss the practical significance of "stranger"

In the 1990s, rural-to-urban migration surged as rural residents sought better livelihoods in cities, taking up jobs such as peddlars, barbers, waiters, and factory workers. Driven by economic necessity and the dwindling resources in rural areas, many relocated to support their families. Despite their aspirations, the lack of education often relegated them to low-status positions, perpetuating their marginalization in the urban hierarchy. Concurrently, "flowing intellectuals," young university-educated individuals, sought professional growth and elite status in the cities. These intellectuals represented the evolving cultural landscape and societal aspirations, but they often faced disillusionment in the competitive urban environment. Their efforts frequently went unrewarded, leaving them struggling with self-identification and social mobility, and feeling disconnected from their hometowns upon return.

Meanwhile, urban dwellers who grew up in cities also faced challenges. They experienced alienation and emotional disconnection, leading to feelings of helplessness and spiritual wandering. Despite the perceived freedoms of urban life, a pervasive sense of indifference and loneliness made them feel like outsiders in their own homes. This existential emptiness prompted a deeper contemplation of life's meaning and value, highlighting the complexities and paradoxes of urban living and identity formation. The struggles of both migrants and urban natives underscore the broader social and emotional impacts of rapid urbanization and societal transformation.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the portrayal of "strangers" in Jim Jarmusch's films offers a poignant reflection of the complexities inherent in contemporary urban life. As society undergoes industrialization and urbanization, giving rise to a diverse array of individuals struggling to find their place amidst cultural conflict and integration. Through his films, Jarmusch delves into the existential journey of these strangers, exploring themes of identity, belonging, and the search for meaning in fragmented landscapes. "Strangers" have been a wide variety of groups, instead of individuals. From immigrants and workers at the beginning to current youngsters wandering in cities, strangers' desires have changed from food and clothes to a richer mental will. It also epitomizes human development. Today's world witnesses rich material life yet apathy among people, which requires constant exploration in a fast-changing global context. Simultaneously, it represents a root cause of why "strangers" face a shackle on their spirits.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. The focus on Jarmusch's films may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cinematic works or cultural contexts. Future studies could expand upon this research by examining the portrayal of "strangers" in a broader range of cinematic works and cultural contexts.

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