

Smug and rather pointless

By Joanne Laurier
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Coffee and Cigarettes, written and directed by Jim Jarmusch

Coffee and Cigarettes is a series of 11 vignettes apparently connected only by their characters' coffee-drinking and cigarette-smoking. Besides the items mentioned in the title, overhead shots of tabletops patterned as chessboards recur in each of the sequences. Coffee and cigarettes act as props, stimulants and potentially—as toxic substances—the fatal checkmates in life's "cosmic board-game." A film about "coffee and cigarettes" in 2004. What can one say?

American independent filmmaker Jim Jarmusch wrote and directed the movie, whose opening segment with actor Roberto Benigni and comic Steven Wright was originally composed as a sketch for the TV show "Saturday Night Live" in 1986. Over the next 17 years, Jarmusch created 10 additional mini-films for his "Coffee and Cigarettes" project.

The director's filmography includes *Ghost Dog* (2000), *Dead Man* (1995), *Night on Earth* (1991), *Mystery Train* (1989), *Down by Law* (1986) and *Stranger than Paradise* (1984).

In his review of *Ghost Dog*, David Walsh of the WSWs characterized the director's work in this manner: "Jarmusch has always struck me as one of those extremely self-conscious directors, far more concerned with establishing his status in the film world than in contributing to an understanding of modern life.

"The 'Jarmusch touch' largely involves presenting various forms of eccentric behavior in unlikely settings and adopting a superior attitude toward the resultant goings-on. The spectator is invited to share in the amusement—up to a point. It will be found that the director and his entourage are somehow always one step ahead."

Unhappily, in *Coffee and Cigarettes* we are once more exposed to the "Jarmusch touch." Hip, innocuous

dialogue—punctuated by self-referential details—and private jokes are the film's staples. A first-time Jarmusch viewer will no doubt miss many of the references.

An early segment features Joe Rigano and Vinny Vella, who both played aging gangsters in *Ghost Dog*. They argue in a room with a photo on the wall of Henry Silva, veteran crime-film actor and another colleague from *Ghost Dog*. One of the sequences is decorated with a picture of screen actor Lee Marvin. A little web surfing reveals that Jarmusch founded a campy club called the Sons of Lee Marvin. Another vignette has RZA of the Wu-Tang Clan hip-hop band sporting a *Ghost Dog* cap. Like the child's game of finding hidden objects in a drawing, the film offers Jarmusch aficionados plenty of opportunities to spot the myriad in-jokes and feel pleased with themselves.

Offbeat juxtapositions are another Jarmusch specialty, most notably here in the comments on music and medicine (musicians Tom Waits and RZA are practitioners of both)—or the issue of music and science. In one segment, Jack and Meg White of the rock band White Stripes discuss electricity pioneer Nikola Tesla (1856-1943), a conversation that provides one of the movie's recurring lines: "He perceived the earth as a conductor of acoustical resonance." (Thomas Edison electrocuted an elephant to disprove Tesla's alternating current theories.) While there is a profound connection between art and science, it finds expression in Jarmusch's film only as a party trick.

The movie's second skit shows Steve Buscemi waiting on director Spike Lee's real-life siblings, Joie and Cinque. Buscemi theorizes that Elvis Presley had an evil twin who was responsible for the racist remarks attributed to the King. In the vignette called "Cousins," Cate Blanchett, the movie star, tries to appease down-on-her-luck Shelley, a jealous, bohemian cousin—also played by Blanchett. In "Cousins?," Alfred

Molina plays an individual who has taken great pains to document a family connection to another man (fellow British actor Steve Coogan), in a semi-comic episode that states the obvious about celebrity.

In “Delirium,” Bill Murray plays himself hiding out as an eccentric waiter serving herbal tea to two hip-hoppers. The last episode features Andy Warhol actors, Bill Rice and Taylor Mead, reminiscing to Gustav Mahler’s classical art song, “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen” (“I Have Lost Track of the World”).

Mahler’s song title seems all too appropriate. *Coffee and Cigarettes* leaves the viewer with the feeling that Jarmusch has definitely lost track of the world outside his clubhouse.

The film has drawn much acclaim from critics who praised it—for example, the *Washington Post*’s Michael O’Sullivan—for its “self-conscious banality and surreal pointlessness of its dialogue.” Jarmusch is described in glowing terms as “the master of minimalism,” “the sultan of strange encounters” and—in this truly remarkable accolade bestowed by the *Village Voice*—“the Dylan among America’s current generation of spitballing-structuralist indie auteurs.”

Although some effort has gone into creating the look and tone of the film—Jarmusch remarked that the film was photographed “in black (coffee) and white (cigarettes)” —neither the individual fragments nor their totality offer more than a few trivial witticisms. The height of the film’s social concerns is reached when Blanchett says: “Isn’t it funny how when you can’t afford something it costs a fortune, but suddenly when you can afford it it’s, like, free?” Actor Molina introduces a modicum of much-needed humanity, but in general, characters reference less the insightful and more of what Jarmusch thinks will appeal to his intimates in the industry and milieu. Although *Coffee and Cigarettes* is devoted to presenting a variety of encounters between people, there are hardly any convincing or moving interactions.

The film’s final moment—a voice-over: “And now for the news”—seems to sum it all up. Though great questions emerge that urgently need to be addressed on some level by the conscientious artist, Jarmusch is smugly and disinterestedly looking the other way. Saying nothing important is elevated to the level of a virtue. In the process, whatever problems of artistic

form and sensibility the director wants to introduce—such as the intricacies of mood and music—are inevitably confined to the largely irrelevant.

In an interview with *indieWire Weekly*, the director states: “I think our lives are made up of little moments that are not necessarily dramatic, and for some odd reason I’m attracted to those moments.” The viewer of *Coffee and Cigarettes* should substitute “our lives” with “my life” in the first part of Jarmusch’s sentence, and “attracted to” with “preoccupied by” in the second to get a clearer idea as to what motivated the director to waste time and talent when life calls for so much more.

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