

# Analysis of 'down by law' - independent film directed by jim jarmusch

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Independent American cinema has often been regarded as a form of response, and even resistance, to common tropes and expectations established by larger film studios that have dominated Hollywood for many years. In 'Against Hollywood: American independent film as a critical cultural movement' Sherry B. Ortner writes: "The simplest place to start is to say that an independent film is defined—to varying degrees and in varying ways—as the antithesis of a Hollywood studio film". This same view is also outlined in more detail by Christine Holmlund in the introduction to Contemporary American Independent Film: From the margins to the mainstream, where she states: "In the teens, ethnic, sexploitation, documentary, and avant-garde films made by independents provided welcome alternatives to output from the 'Big Three': Edison, Biograph and Vitagraph". Independent films have, therefore, often been defined in direct contrast to the mass-produced standards of large studio firms, leaving a lasting impact on the processes and approaches by which independent filmmakers choose to distance themselves from their Hollywood counterparts. In an attempt to produce successful films targeted at a potentially more niche audience, independent films have often tackled subjects and themes in a manner that was seen as unmarketable, unpleasant or even offensive to general audiences. Ortner reaffirms the influence this movement has had on the wider independent film community: "The value of independence from Hollywood (and ultimately from the necessity for pleasing an American public that has been programmed with Hollywood values and expectations) is repeated over and over in the public representations of the independent film community". Down by Law (1986) by

Jim Jarmusch is an example of such subversion of conventional Hollywood expectations and clichés to produce a film of unique quality, skilled cinematography and standout performances. Jarmusch manages to both uphold certain expectations of the independent film community, a community where he is regarded as a major proponent, whilst also adopting the more commercial elements of the traditional large Hollywood blockbuster film in order to subvert conventions and expectations and draw attention to the limitations of systematized cinema viewing.

As *Down by Law* begins and subsequently presents to its audience the first shots of the film, near-instantaneously we begin to see the process of establishing a clear expectation of genre as the steady movements of the camera across cemeteries, dilapidated housing and still bayous by cinematographer Robby Müller become the first images presented to the film's viewers. The camera pans laterally over the barren, black and white Louisiana landscapes in a tracking shot to a stripped-down soundtrack curated by John Lurie which heavily features performances by Tom Waits (both of whom play key roles in the film as Jack and Zack respectively). This early audience exposure to a classic noir image and their subsequent formation of genre-based expectations is what Jarmusch will continue to play with as the film progresses. The details and stylistic choices within the opening sequence, for example, is a conscious mirroring of common characteristic found in mainstream Hollywood films and is described by John Hartzog in Magill's *Cinema Annual* as "the film convention of establishing the setting and characters before the credits", wherein the filmmaker attempts to create a type of enticing "introduction" for the film's story and

its characters. Jarmusch, however, uses this technique as a means to poke fun at this mode of filmmaking by focusing on the more unpleasant locations dotted around New Orleans for an exceedingly long period of time before finally presenting his characters to the audience. The panning establishing shots paired with atmospheric, dirty blues music provide the beginnings for the development of audience anticipation surrounding the film's style and tone, that being one that is based heavily in the genre of noir, accompanied by a laid-back yet slightly sinister and austere atmosphere.

Another interesting element within the Down by Law establishing sequence is Jarmusch's careful manipulation of sound editing and music. The film initially opens with the song "Jockey Full of Bourbon" sung by Waits whilst scanning the landscapes, and this editing choice that consciously pairs scenic shots in the film with music remains mostly unchanged as the film progresses, however when we are presented with characters within the film, often there is no music present and the sound remains largely diegetic. The music fades gently or cuts altogether as soon as characters begin to engage with one another or with their surroundings. It is in these scenes where we begin to see Jarmusch's choice to distance the performances of the actors from the use of non-diegetic sound, even during scenes of heightened emotion and suspense, notably a common cliché of larger Hollywood films, particularly those focused within the genre of crime or drama which Jarmusch references and mimics frequently throughout the duration of Down by Law. The music only appears once again during this sequence as the female companions of the film's leads dramatically open their eyes.

Shot in the classically elegant, high-contrast, Chiaroscuro lighting commonly associated with noir films, Bobbie (Billie Neal), Jack's prostitute, opens her eyes ending the uncomfortable silence of the shot, triggering the music once more and cutting to the next tracking shot (now played in reverse direction across the screen). This editing choice is repeated once again when Laurette (Ellen Barkin) opens her eyes, finally ushering in the credits. Hartzog writes of this decision: "Feigning film noir realism, Jarmusch makes the audience very aware of watching a film. Instead of the standard crosscutting to introduce parallel lives of characters, he uses the traveling shots to take the viewer through the city [...] When the two women open their eyes, so does the audience". This does not mean that Jarmusch has finished commentating on film conventions. In his decision to cut to the black screen, clearly indicating the beginning of the credit sequence, Jarmusch is careful to add clichéd sound effects of police sirens and barking dogs.

The sound effects themselves increase in volume gradually as the credits pass and reach their peak as the title finally appears. This is perhaps a jab by Jarmusch at the on the nose title of *Down by Law*, particularly as it pertains to the film's core subject matter of incarceration and prison escape. Once again Jarmusch is careful to remove the sound effects as soon as we see characters reappear on screen, at last signaling the beginning of the story. Hartzog defines Jarmusch's approach as "a parody" of more predictable narratives derived from mainstream American movies and this becomes increasingly evident as we see Jarmusch continuing on his path of employing traditional cinematic conventions whilst also making sure he is creating

some form of commentary on them in order to present audiences with a new perspective on cinema viewing and the enforced normativity of filmmaking in Hollywood.

As the film progresses, we begin to piece together the general plotline of *Down by Law*, which concerns itself with the connection between three incarcerated men, their escape from prison into the picturesque Louisiana bayous and their eventual separation from one another. This is perhaps where we can begin to understand the extent of Jarmusch's manipulation of audience expectations as the narrative appears to be, at first, deceptively stereotypical and in line with clichés found in older noir films. We are first introduced to Zack (Tom Waits) a local radio DJ who is unhappy with his current state of living and, after a moment of heavy-handed foreshadowing where he declares " We can't live in a prison forever", is forcibly removed from his apartment by his unhappy girlfriend (Barkin). Zack is then asked to drive a vehicle to a specific location in exchange for money, an offer he is desperate enough to take and one which leads to his arrest as police discover a body in the trunk of the Jaguar. Jack Romano (John Lurie) is a pimp who is fooled by a rival (Rockets Redglare) into meeting a prospective future prostitute in a hotel room, only to find that she is very much underage and that the police are on standby, ready to arrest him. These two characters are initially not presented in any manner that feels particularly unique or unorthodox and, in fact, their dialogue and choice of phrasing reinforces this as it bears a superficial resemblance to the stock dialogue of criminals and lowlifes in noir films: " pretty little thing aren't you?" and " I heard you're

looking for someone to take care of you [...] to treat you like a lady” Jack states in a dry delivery which borders on sardonic at times, a choice that may be an intentional one by Jarmusch as a means to draw attention to the recycled catchphrases and terminology of Hollywood crime or drama films. Zack also uses catchphrases like “ buzz off!” and “ what’re you looking at?” in a manner that feels almost cartoonish, again reinforcing the idea that Jarmusch is mocking these conventions. The adoption of this vernacular by the characters is important to note as the film is a very dialogue-driven one thus giving this component further importance in the presentation of the narrative and formation of expectation for audiences.

The aspects of the plot which bring together Jack and Zack as victims of a fraudulent system also displays what Juan A. Suarez describes as the common “ thematic concerns” and “ city confidential” nature of the commercialized Hollywood noir film. The presentation of the “ paranoid” state of the New Orleans streets and the haphazard doling of justice are stereotypical concerns of the 1940s and 50s noir genre and this is once again reinforced to audiences through the pairing of theme with tactical mise-en-scène such as lighting and shot composition, making it practically unmissable. The genre of the film as a noir crime is made clear in the scenes prior to Jack and Zack’s incarceration under false pretenses, however a dynamic shift begins to occur when they meet Bob (Roberto Benigni), a loud and enthusiastic Italian man arrested for killing a man in self-defense. Bob is enamored with American culture. He discusses movies and recites poetry from American poets in butchered English to his irate cellmates and

suddenly the more serious tone of Down by Law is undercut and a progressive shift occurs that transforms the film into a drama/comedy due to Jarmusch's implementation of this figure of absurdity into the solemn situation which the other two men find themselves in, creating a destabilizing effect that permeates through the entire film that subverts audience expectation of the film which they may have formed previously from visual and narrative cues laid out by Jarmusch and Müller. Bob as comic relief remains one way in which the contrast between noir and comedy becomes clear, as his command of the English language results in comical outbursts such as " I am a good egg" and " If looks can kill, I am dead now" that play off the previously discussed stereotypical phrasing adopted by Jack and Zack, drawing attention to their unoriginality and banality.

In an iconic scene within the film, Jarmusch manages to completely disrupt his pre-formed narrative and the expectations he has planted for audiences to pick up on and invites the new shift in genre into the rest of Down by Law. This scene becomes the unexpected moment of understanding and bonding between the three men as they play cards and slowly begin to chant " I scream. You scream. We all scream for ice-cream!". The nonsensical chant takes up nearly two full minutes of the film and causes a commotion in the prison cells, only for the trio to quickly cease chanting when they see the guards coming to reprimand the prisoners for their behavior. The characters here are revealed to be as equally meek and juvenile as one another and this moment of desperate release of tension and solemnity becomes the first instance of solidarity between the men and creates the foundation for the



buddy comedy tone that follows as the movie progresses. Roberto's naiveté and inability to read the situation and his companions is not the only way Jarmusch actively dissolves the audience's perception of the film as a gritty noir.

Jarmusch paces the film in a way that is unconventional for a crime drama and chooses to omit certain scenes within the film that would normally be integral to Hollywood crime/drama films – the action scenes. There is a strong feeling of languor and lethargy every time we see the characters on screen and this is only emphasized as the film progresses by the editing and filming choices put forth by Jarmusch and Müller. Suarez dissects Jarmusch's editing choices when stating: "As is habitual in Jarmusch, quite a bit of screen time is devoted to nondramatic events that do not seem to advance the plot: moments of trivial dialogue or silence, when characters simply sit and ponder. And at the same time, potentially dramatic events [...] take place off-screen and are insinuated by means of ellipsis". This is a way for Jarmusch to draw inspiration and visuals from the films he appreciates whilst remaining independent of their shallow nature as "they are not engaged in a sustained manner" throughout the duration of the film and are instead kept at a purely visual or superficial level and then critiqued heavily.

One notable example of such a scene is one where Müller films the trio after escaping the prison, which is never actually presented to audiences on screen. Audiences witness the three men racing through the atmospheric, marshy bayous with the police never truly seen, although they can be heard in the sirens and barking that linger in the distance thereby remaining a

looming presence. The action is not the point of these scenes, however, making these omissions all the more valid as audiences begin to understand that Jarmusch's concerns do not lie with the formulaic narrative of a systematized Hollywood crime film, as expected by audiences through their exposure to the first few scenes of the film, and the intentions instead lie with the directionless and poetic nature of the Louisiana landscape and the " fairytale structure" of it that forces a trio of downtrodden and disillusioned individuals to " find a part of their lives, their souls that they have lost somewhere along the road they picked on to travel to their respective dreams". This philosophy appears to be only further punctuated by the ambiance created through Müller's sweeping, slow shots of the bayous which depict them as a kind of " dream space" and a " fairytale" as was explained by Jarmusch himself. Müller is also careful to avoid any excessive changes in camera positioning, angle and composition throughout the escape shots, opting instead for tracking shots and long takes. This paired with Jarmusch's reluctance to feature many cuts during scenes only adds to the surreal, sluggish effect of the bayou sequences. Müller's cinematography has previously been described as having " a certain kind of magic or poetry to whatever he shoots" by filmmaker Steve McQueen, who also stated in a New York Times article by Nina Siegal: " I compare him to a blues musician in a way. He plays just a few chords and he conveys what he needs to convey". It is with this approach and vision that Müller composes these outstanding, minimalistic sequences that stand in a surprising contrast to some of the more formulaic dialogue and interactions of the characters earlier on in the film.

Down by Law is a film that demonstrates Jarmusch's great efforts in honoring the classic styles, motifs and atmospheres of films emerging from Hollywood's golden age, whilst still allowing himself to use visual cues and mise-en-scène of his preferred genres as a means to manipulate the conventionalized expectations and anticipations by viewers to further the commentary he seeks to make on the superficial nature of the big budget blockbuster film. Dave Kehr of the Chicago Tribune once noted: " Jarmusch's whole method consists of reversing expectations [...]He has formulas, he has methods, he has dramatic ideas and structural devices he knows how to impose" and with this in mind, it becomes clear how the potential of traditional drama or crime sequences provide the foundations for the subversive developments that are so important to American independent films.