



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 4
Issue 2 October 2000

Article 16

12-16-2016

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S. Brent Plate

Hamilton College - Clinton, splate@hamilton.edu

Recommended Citation

Plate, S. Brent (2016) "Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol4/iss2/16>

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UNIVERSITY OF
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Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai

Abstract

This is a review of *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999).

Jim Jarmusch makes films that reinfuse contemporary United States culture with myths. While postmodern art is accused of making superficial borrowings from many traditions and historical periods, Jarmusch shows how a postmodern pastiche can be accomplished in meaningful, though not uncritical, ways. In his earlier *Dead Man* (1995) he took apart the myth of US western expansion, subverting it to Native American modes of understanding, resulting in the formation of a new myth. In his current *Ghost Dog*, Jarmusch again takes apart dominant paradigmatic myths of US culture, replacing them with reconstructions. Here the myth under attack is the notion that contemporary culture has no myth. Indeed, contemporary US culture, Jarmusch says, has access to many myths in ways never before possible. The problem comes in trying to juxtapose the codes conveyed by these myths.

Ghost Dog is a blend of myths: from nineteenth and twentieth century "classic" literature to twentieth/twenty-first century hip-hop culture, from codes of eighteenth-century Japanese Samurai warriors to an earlier twentieth-century stereotype of Italian-American Mafia, from television cartoons to ancient and modern versions of clans and families. As a contemporary syncretic myth, this new filmic form also highlights the fact that all myths were at some earlier point in history, syncretic myths. The character of Ghost Dog (played exquisitely by Forest Whitaker) presents the Hollywood-racist stereotype of the young African-

American who sleeps through the day and steals cars and kills people at night. The whole stereotype is subverted when it is revealed that Ghost Dog is a great lover of books (*Frankenstein, The Wind in the Willows*, and, most importantly, the 18th century Samurai warrior text, *Hagakure*) and a devotee of the Samurai way. He spends his days communing with animals and two characters who inject large doses of humanity into the film: Pearline (a little girl who shares Ghost Dog's love of books) and Raymond (Ghost Dog's best friend even though Raymond is Haitian and speaks only French while Ghost Dog speaks only English).

Ghost Dog is also, as his name implies and as a further intertextual reference might suggest, an "invisible man." He is invisible on two levels. First, he is a Samurai warrior who has merged his body and mind so well that he can move deftly through the streets without anyone noticing him (the first scene gives a strong suggestion of this). Second, he is also an invisible man – a "ghost" – in the sense that Ralph Ellison's anonymous narrator was: because of the color of his skin. This too is the ingenious filmmaking of Jarmusch, weaving the socio-political with the mythical.

The crux of the film's story hinges on the fact that syncretism is not a smooth operation. The task of translation (or, to put it in current cultural studies terms, "code switching") is fraught with elements that don't translate or switch neatly. Myths come into conflict with each other and cannot be neatly "switched" from one

realm of meaning to another. Ghost Dog (the African-American/Samurai warrior) keeps saying that he is the "retainer" of Louie (a washed-up, has-been, Mafia man) because Louie saved his life several years earlier. From that point on, Ghost Dog has worked within a code of loyalty, becoming Louie's "hit man" for Mafia-related concerns. Yet, Ghost Dog's code is something that even his supposed "master" Louie doesn't understand. There is comedy in this rendition, as no other character quite catches the rhetoric of being someone's "retainer," and the impossibility of code-switching can only end in tragedy. Other Mafia members, for paranoid reasons, end up turning against him and hunt him down. Devoting his life to Samurai warriorship, as he has done, enables him to prevail, at least until inevitable conclusions manifest themselves.

The translations of syncretism are shown for their possibly violent outcomes when two dissimilar things are forced together. But perhaps that is true for the genre of tragicomedy as a whole. As Ghost Dog says regarding Louie, in ways tragic and true: "Me and him, we're from different ancient tribes. And we're both almost extinct." There is an apocalyptic tone in the film: the world is changing, chaos is all around, the old world doesn't hold up any more. A brief reference to Noah building an ark on a rooftop hilariously fills out the apocalypticism

Ghost Dog points to the impossibility of putting old myths in a new culture, yet in the telling of this failure a new myth is born. Image, sound, editing, directing,

and acting all rhythmically blend together, producing an immense overall effect (this is not a movie to be seen on video, but should be seen on the biggest screen possible with the best sound system possible – the soundtrack by RZA of the Wu Tang Clan is fantastic). This film is reviewed with the highest of recommendations for anyone interested in religion, contemporary culture, and the continuation of myth. It is valuable subject matter for a longer essay. Jarmusch is a mythmaker for a postmodern United States.