

# A Close Reading of Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes*

By [Artifacts](#) • Jul 19th, 2012 • Category: [Culture](#), [Issue 7](#), [Literary Analysis](#)

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Released in 2003, Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* is a compilation of 11 vignettes that follow the conversations between two to three people as they discuss a variety of mostly insignificant subjects. Collectively, all scenes embody similar character blocking and on screen elements that adhere to a common theme and call attention to overreaching motifs within the visual and contextual nature of the film. Furthermore, the film applies a black and white filter while utilizing a diverse cast of celebrities who appear as themselves. Even though the consumption of a coffee or cigarette between two people can be an effective social lubricant in some contexts, Jim Jarmusch's representation of the two comingled in each scene presents the argument that the consumption of the two only facilitates a specific level of conversation where the ambiguity of the relationships between characters and lack of distraction in the scene creates a social awkwardness that varies upon the presence of coffee and cigarette consumption communally. Also, such scenes indicate an underlying comment upon casual American relationship in society and can act as a criticism upon American work ethic.

As a primer, this essay will operate on the premise that there is no substitute for the social lubrication as a result of sharing a full meal with peers and that the film, in its entirety, is a meta-commentary on how small talk and the complications that surround such conversation and what such problems say about American society. To better focus such an investigation, the research of Rudolf P. Gaudio, "Coffeetalk: Starbucks and the Commercialization of Casual Conversation," can be summarized from his closing statements regarding the study as one: "of casual conversation within the political-economic context of the contemporary United States, where "equality" is a sacred (and elusive) political value and "casualness" refers to an intentional mode of social action that is materialized and commodified in speech, dress, eating, drinking, interior design and other practices." (Gaudio, 685)

Such a notion is embodied within the film's elements of mise-en-scene and the context of conversations where Jarmusch depicts the characters confronting the premise of equality in a casual conversation. Also, an anxiety of the modern man was highlighted in William Ian Miller's presentation "Eating (with) Lords: The Bright Side of Eating is Its Dark Side" where the gesture of food begs for return, along with added politeness between both parties, and thus can create a debt beyond that value of food as the gesture requires less tangible additions upon the value. In connection with the film, the characters are not operating upon such a gesture but the notion of equality or shared social status between the two can create tension where no debt is indicated but the focus upon politeness between celebrities. Lastly, coffee and cigarettes are of little sustenance and are generally regarded as break time habits. Jarmusch emphasizes this notion as he begs the question of why any of us even attempt to initiate a conversation based solely on aesthetics and politeness.

The first scene of this closed reading is titled "Somewhere in California," an allusion to the cultural climate of celebrities in the state, where the two characters, Tom Waits and Iggy Pop, are both noted as published musicians. However he notion that Tom Waits is a doctor gives him somewhat of a moral high ground as he appears to be offended late in the conversation and thus violates the

“sacred” notion of equality in casual small talk (Gaudio, 685). Specifically, an investigation of the on screen elements and the form of the frame throughout the scene highlights criticisms and insights of the director as he operates nearly exclusively in his auteur style. The establishing shot here illustrates Iggy Pop as initially weary and somewhat confrontational with the setting of the dim lit diner-like atmosphere. As Iggy grimaces and comments that Tom’s work isn’t in the jukebox, along with a disco ball accenting the lighting, one can perceive that the setting calls attention to the American work ethic where creative expression is given little thought. Also, the use of a checkerboard (black and white in color), which appears in each and every scene, lends itself to the difference in personalities between the two characters and offers a self reflexive insight into the film being black and white itself. As for the frame presented, most shots that occur during the conversation appear as an outside subjective perspective with eye line matches that lack a directional eye contact to indicate a participating party. This presents audience with visual stress as if one is thrown into the perspective of a character in the scene without any possibility of interaction. Also, the crane shot of Iggy pouring coffee is the indication of distance and removal from the conversation and is thus a comment on the lack of focus of the conversation and continues into the close up of their hesitant handshake and further highlights the physical void between the characters and thus their respective persona’s that appear not to mix at all. All such elements operate to create empathy with Iggy’s character where his intentions are generally viewed as innocent.

Moving onto the verbal content in the scene, even though Iggy’s intents are innocent, he continues to marginally offend Tom Waits. The first instance occurs when Tom is offended by the fact that Iggy merely ordered a coffee for him. Within contexts, it can be acceptable to order for your company, but given Tom Waits mindset of a moral high ground it is apparent that the implications of a meal are afoot even though no real food is served, somewhat against Miller’s notions of debt. This offensive attitude is broken when the two attempts to resolve the tension and Iggy goes on to say, “We are the coffee and cigarettes generation... 1950 was the coffee and pie generation,” (Jarmusch, “Coffee and Cigarettes”). Including such comments reveals indirect commentary on the modern American work ethic where as it has become problematic to focus solely on work and little leisure. To support the claim, included is Womach’s work where despite that analysis of the cigarette market indicates a recent decline over the last 30 years, “peak of 640 billion in 1982” and the “consumption of 430 billion pieces in 2002” is higher than that of 1950, a difference of about 100 billion pieces, and indicates the vast influence the cigarette has on that specific generation (Womach, CRS-19). Further more, Lane’s research on smoking behavior and caffeine intake highlights that “ad lib smoking behavior is not affected by changes in daily caffeine intake ... any effects are probably due to sensory and motor cues or to other aspects of coffee-drinking behavior,” and thus gives weight to the argument that coffee and cigarettes are characterization of a generation as simple behavior of the people is responsible (Lane, 411). It is thus the behavior that creates such a general statement upon a generation and Jarmusch’s work goes on to highlight that people are characterized much more strongly on what they do instead of what they say, as what they have to say does little good in this scene.

The next scene up for analysis is titled “Delirium” (drawn from the Bill Murray’s state of delirium in the scene) where Jarmusch departs from the formula of coffee and cigarette consumption in diner-like settings and portrays the RZA and GZA of the Wu-Tang Clan offering up health advice to Bill Murray. The setting and form of frame is first to illustrate such a departure as this scene is the only scene with use of mirror which supports new physical and cognitive perspectives in film as the director indirectly asks us to question the norms of the rest of the film and thus society. It also acts to fill the physical void present in other scenes; a notion that lends itself to the fact that RZA and GZA have the strongest relationship in the film as friends and colleagues. Also, the use of reaction/shot eye-line matching along with use of medium shots indicate the subtle elevation

from casual conversation to semiserious advice giving. More over, an elegant teakettle with small glasses in middle of checker table, a visual motif through each vignette, is in place instead of coffee and represents the contrasted ideals of the rappers compared to the norms of the film. Last of the on screen objects, the bag of items given to Bill Murray is a visual metaphor for advice given. However, the ambiguity of the what the bag holds provides visual commentary for the issue within the scene that Bill Murray continues to indulge in his pot of coffee and smokes a cigarettes even though he is given advice not to.

The topic of health isn't new within the film, but the topic of good health through the use of abstaining is new. Furthermore, with the example Bill Murray blatantly ignoring advice given to him, the director is commenting on how the work ethic of the average American can be too strict as people continue to do what is consciously known to cause harm. Brian Wansink's work supports how norms of society influence behavior as he concludes his research on undergrads and their bias upon portions as, "No one is immune to serving-size norms – not even 'intelligent, informed' people who have been lectured on the subject ad nauseam," (Wansink, 70). Bill Murray is given weak advice but the general thought behind such ideas are logical enough to agree with yet he continues to indulge out of the pot. The fact that he continues such behavior and consumes out of such a large container can be a criticism of the American worker and the goal to do/consume what ever it takes to get work done despite real warnings apparent in everyday life in the media and from out peers. Furthermore, such comments have the trajectory to describe how human nature has changed and has become largely problematic for both the individual and the world he/she lives in. Lastly, the use of rappers departing from the norms of the film is more than the meta-theory commenting on the mirrored reality of such a ideals, but also operates to confront the imperfections within everybody as they exist as individuals to themselves but are seen as a part of group when viewing from a wider perspective.

In closing, it is apparent that oral fixations and the stimulus of food in the mouth can invoke greater conversations as the satiation of coffee and cigarettes occurs quickly and thus conversation suffers. While all characters meet in neutral locations, the conversations throughout are not equal in neutrality, as hostility exists in the "Somewhere in California" scene. However the general outcome of the "Delirium" scene is consistent with the physical and contextual neutrality in the conversation. Overall, the director utilizes this variance to suggest that neither extreme is acceptable and that balance should be achieved instead. Moreover, the lack of serious or genuine conversation appears to be the result of the general connotation that coffee and cigarettes are the products of break time habits and thus an inhibitor; where meals are shared amongst those closest to us and we are thus more trusting of having a deeper sense of communication.

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