

"Jim Jarmusch's Flying Ghost Language: 'Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai'
by Roberta Imboden

The strangely catchy, but haunting music surrounds us in the darkened theatre as we watch the lone bird fly across the sky. This bird seems to have special significance since we follow its trajectory for quite some time. It will fly many times across this empty sky over what appears to be a rather dingy section of a city near the waterfront. The feathered path of this aviator will soon become clear, but what this pigeon, or dove, if we wish to be more poetic, signifies will slowly reveal itself in this Jarmusch film.

The trajectory of the bird becomes clearer when we see it land on the roof of an old building where Ghost Dog, played by Forest Whitaker, lives with his aviary of pigeons. The other end of this journey becomes obvious when the bird arrives at the lodgings of an aging member of the Mafia. The bird is a carrier pigeon, the bearer of messages from Ghost Dog to the Mafia man. In fact, this is the only means of communication between these two so different people. What we now realize is that the bird's flight over this bleak landscape is the flight of language through the sky, the concrete, feathery language of Ghost Dog, who sees himself as the last member of an ancient tribe, the Samurai. The virtual, abstract, e-mail, www world of the present, the world where language becomes less and less incarnated, undergoes a kind of re-incarnation in the flight of this flesh, feather and blood creature whose wings carry it across empty space. It flies across a nothingness, an abyss; it is the word on the wing, the flying word that arises from a roof top.

This flying incarnated word of the present moment operates in strange tandem with the written words of a text that has become the spiritual guide of Ghost Dog. The text, Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai (1), written in eighteenth century Japan, contains words on the page that Ghost Dog reads, written words of a past so distant from the New Jersey surroundings. And yet, upon closer perusal, the carrier pigeon bears an interesting relationship with the Samurai words that are carriers of a code of living, of conduct that has been influenced by Zen Buddhism. When the words of Hagakure cover the screen, as they often do in this film, we who are surrounded by the darkness of the cinema, as well as by the darkness of the screen, read, "Form is emptiness. All things are provided by nothingness". Just as these words arise from the emptiness, the nothingness of the spaces of the white page, of the darkened screen, the words of the pigeon fly across a nothingness. The living word of the pigeon arises from this unusual aviary to scale emptiness toward a world that gradually appears to be as antiquated as is the world of the Samurai, the world of old Mafia bosses who have their meeting quarters in the back of a Chinese restaurant.

Soon after the faithful pigeon returns to Ghost Dog with a message from the Mafia man named Louie, Ghost Dog eats the message. "Food for thought"

comes to mind, but more important is the idea that the language of this bird is truly something that has been incarnated. We have no idea what Ghost Dog is thinking when he takes his unusual communion of thin white paper with the small coded words of the Mafia scribbled on it. We only know that his action has the code of another ancient Way written on it, albeit it in a rather humorously blasphemous way. But then, this is Jarmusch.

Then something truly lovely occurs. (2) Ghost Dog frees all his trained pigeons from their large aviary cage and allows them to fly back and forth over his roof top. Free - flying language! These pigeon texts fly in formation as Ghost Dog begins to wave his hands. Soon it seems that this scene becomes transformed into a form of flying symphony. Ghost Dog conducts as these air borne creatures of feathered language are metamorphosed into musical codes that fly the air waves. We hear no sound, but then, we also hear nothing when the lone flying bird carries a message. Everything is accomplished in the silence that Ghost Dog has somehow instilled into his way of living, the Way of the Samurai. Like the Zen monks who influenced the Samurai, Ghost Dog lives within a stillness. He seldom speaks. His language is that of disciplined silence, the absence of words that have been informed by the words of ancient monks, ancient Zen masters. He seems to have mastered the art of a language that is filled with space, with shadow, with abysses into which to free fall is to fall seemingly into the unnamable(2), the source/non-source of all language. Ghost Dog has journeyed toward the silence of the gods. It is this soundless sound that he joyfully conducts on his roof top aviary.

We learn the reason for these flights of the carrier pigeon to be the result of the Samurai code of honor. Years ago, Louie, the Mafia man, had saved Ghost Dog's life in an armed robbery. Consequently, Ghost Dog, according to the Samurai code of honor, as Louie's retainer, has vowed to come to Louie's aid if ever he is needed. Thus, we learn that the flying signifier of language, the loyal pigeon of Ghost Dog, carries a message every morning to Louie. Words of honor cross the void of sky every morning. But one day they carry the message of death when Louie sends his message: one of their mob members has violated their code. He has been having an affair with the boss' daughter. Consequently, he must die. Samurai words on the screen allude to this situation by saying, "every day, one should consider oneself as dead." Hagakure also says, "The Way of the Samurai is found in death(Hagakure17)". The bird, signifier of the word, seems to carry an ancient message. Perhaps it has flown across centuries.

But Jarmusch now introduces another form of language into his film. Whenever Ghost Dog prepares for a hit he plays a disc of the violent words of rap. Music pours out of the radio where Ghost Dog has placed a disc. (3) This is one of the many hip hop discs(3) that he plays, the hip hop that speaks of the violently desperate code that pervades the ghetto, the home of Ghost Dog.

The pigeon flies those airways in a very concrete manner, the pigeon of Ghost Dog, the man from this hip hop world who has become a kind of silent ghetto guru. When he walks the streets, the young men salute him, greet him with, if it is possible to say, a samurai type of greeting. Some of them may be hip hop artists. Their words now fly beside the feathery body of Ghost Dog's carrier of the word in the sky. R.Z.A's hip hop is creating a music, one very different from the silent music of Ghost Dog's flying symphony of pigeons, but a music that in its performance, also leads toward pure sound, toward silence, toward the beginnings of language. The reason for hearing this trajectory toward silence is that voices of pure sound often live in the spaces between, before and after the hip hop words. We hear not only "we wa wu", but also a lyrical, "ahhhhhhhhhhhhh", as well as repetition of music, repetition without words. Furthermore, many of the songs are sung so quickly, the words condensed to such an extent, that without intense attention upon our part, the words move beyond language toward the pure sound that Derrida says precedes the cosmic area of the first all burning, the first holocaust, the beginning of the universe. The souls of these hip hop speaker-singers burn. Their words catch fire(4)!

Jarmusch then places us in another situation of experiencing language, the absence within language. Ghost Dog sits on a bench in a park eating an ice cream cone from the Ice Cream Palace when two things happen. A young girl, perhaps ten or so years of age, and a dog approach him. As she sits on an adjoining bench, the dog places itself directly in front of Ghost Dog and commences to give him a fixed stare. Ghost Dog, seeming a bit unnerved, says to the dog, "What!" The little girl notices and says that the dog wants something from him. Ghost Dog responds by saying that it wants his ice cream cone. The little girl knowingly says, "I don't think so." We feel that she understands the unspoken words of the dog, that somehow she has learned how to listen to the silent word. We sense that she is as adept, or even more adept than is Ghost Dog at living within the silences, the darkneses, the abysses of language. Is this dog with the knowing stare another form of our Ghost Dog? Louie, the Mafia man, has said of Ghost Dog that in his ability to do a job for him he is like a ghost. Ghost Dog performs a "task", then vanishes. Louie sees Ghost Dog as a person who is full of absence, spaces in the night, a person who is more ghost than an incarnate human being. In other words, the very person of Ghost Dog resembles his world of language - he moves beyond sight as his language moves beyond sound. In similar manner we wonder if this dog who seems to wish to deliver a message to Ghost Dog is from a world of ghosts himself.

Soon we learn at least one reason why this little girl is so adept at language. She loves to read. Ghost Dog asks her what she carries in her lunch box. When the girl answers that it is filled with books, Ghost Dog is surprised and delighted. Here is another carrier of language, the word, that of written literature. But instead of having a sentence attached to her leg as she flies through the skies, she carries several books with her everywhere she goes - from school - to the park - and home.

Ghost Dog then gives the little girl a book to read, one that he had been given by the young daughter of the Mafia boss, the woman who was having the affair with the man whom Ghost Dog was instructed to kill. Jarmusch's use of Rashomon(5), Ryunosuki Akutagawa's book of six short stories, at first may seem to be simply his desire to use another Japanese text. But further perusal makes us realize that once more Jarmusch is exploring language. In the first story, "In a Grove", a murder takes place in the Japan of the samurai period. Six different persons tell the story of the murder in six different ways. The police must listen to six different tales about the same event. We never really know which tale is "true", but what Akutagawa introduces to us is the darkness of unknowing that arises from language, the darkness that opens us to the abyss of doubt. Then, if we are valiant and persistent, perhaps this darkness will open toward a flash of the seeing of the invisible within the visible, perhaps toward the seeing of the ghosts of language that strange dogs bring to us in the park as we are eating our ice cream cone.

The scenes between Ghost Dog and Raymond, the French speaking ice cream vendor, whose trailer truck belies the irony in the name Ice Cream Palace are vintage Jarmusch. Neither ever speaks a word of the other's language. But nevertheless, a communication occurs that allows Ghost Dog to refer to Raymond as his best friend and there is no reason to doubt that Raymond's sentiments are not the same. They enter into the darkness of the other's language in a kind of blind manner, but nevertheless, emerge with an understanding of what the other is saying. Raymond will speak in French. Ghost Dog appears to understand nothing, but will answer with words in English that are a translation of what Raymond has just said, a translation that is an answer to Raymond's words. It is as if each enters a darkness where a candle flickers. To know how to pick up the candle is to learn how to read the invisible text of the other, to read the text of the other's mind.

Toward the very end of the film, Jarmusch implies that what is needed to begin to see a the candle light of understanding is a sense of love. In this case, the friendship between Ghost Dog and Raymond is deep enough that they begin to understand each other. Instead of one of them simply repeating what the other has just said, they begin to directly respond to one another as if they were speaking the same language. (4) When Ghost Dog reads from Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai, he reads about "break[ing] right through to the other side". The text is talking about making a decision, but it can easily apply to what happens within the friendship of these two men. Friendship is that which has led the two men out of the darkness of language's fissures and into the world of immediate communication.

We hear Ghost Dog read another passage from his Samurai text. It speaks of the world as being a dream and that when we have a nightmare we shall know that it was only a dream. This ancient wisdom must be some solace for Ghost

Dog when he returns to his roof-top home to find the massacre of his pigeons. Amidst the sad bodies of these feathery carriers of the word are the strewn pages of all his books, among them, the Hagakure. The Mafia hit team came to kill the means by which Ghost Dog communicates with the world - language. The link between the bodies of the birds and the torn books is obvious.

The Mafia has committed this murder because Ghost Dog, under the orders of Louie, had shot one of their own. Ghost Dog now moves into being a full blown hit man as he plans for the execution of all the members of this small Mafia group, with the exception of Louie. Since Ghost Dog not only loves his birds, but also adores his books, loves the act of reading texts, he must seek revenge. For him the killing of language is murder and since he is a Samurai, he must kill those who killed the word, both the living and the written word, that of Hagakure. The camera focuses upon the body of a bloodied pure white pigeon, what we would also call a dove. Memories of the traces of what literature tells us about doves fills our minds: peace, love, wisdom. Within a religion that Ghost Dog does not follow, but we assume has been the background of the Mafia, images of the Holy Spirit, or the Holy Ghost as it used to be called, begin to appear before us. So many traces of things follow this white dove into our film that we cannot ignore them. Such traces help us to understand better the murderous actions of our "Holy" Ghost Dog (he does pray his Zen prayers every day) as he systematically shoots all the Mafiosi, except Louie to whom he owes his life.

We understand the full power of the word for Ghost Dog when we see a pigeon flying across the night sky - the carrying of the word through the blindness, through the darkness. Eventually we see that this one bird has been spared the massacre. We surmise that it was saved because of its feathery passage across the dark space. It was bearing the power of language across the air-ways.

The final scene with Ghost Dog and his friend Raymond immediately precedes what Ghost Dog will refer to as a scene from High Noon. Raymond warns him that a man is looking for him. He is worried and arms himself. Interestingly, Ghost Dog takes the gun away from Raymond. He is not to involve himself in violence. But Ghost Dog knows that Louie has come for him, come to shoot his loyal retainer down in the street. Warning Raymond and the little girl to take cover, Ghost Dog walks out of the park toward the middle of the street. The church bells begins striking as Ghost Dog crosses the park. It will strike twelve times; it is high noon. But we feel that this church tower clock is doing more in this film than simply reminding us of another film of honor and power. It seems that the striking of these bells is taking us on a voyage back toward the beginning of language, toward pure sound where all that is heard is a strangely silent ringing(7). Ghost Dog, the lover of the word, both living and written, is seemingly walking back toward the origin of that which he loves. Silence follows the ceasing of the bells. Louie, follower of his own Mafia code, must kill his loyal retainer and Ghost Dog, follower of the Samurai code, must allow himself to be killed. In Ghost Dog's own words, these are two persons, the last, from two

ancient tribes. Hagakure's words give solace. "The Way of the Samurai is found in death. If by setting one's heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way(Hagakure17,18)." Ghost Dog surely has now gained the freedom for which his silent, disciplined life has prepared him.

In the final scene we see the little girl, named Pearline, little pearl, in the kitchen with her mother. She is reading Hagakure, a gift from Ghost Dog. She reads, "the end is important in all things" and something about lunch boxes with flowers. She, like Ghost Dog, a lover of books, language, the word, will carry on the spreading of the word. She will also have the project of sending out language over the air ways in some manner. Her gun has no bullets, but her words will be just as powerful. She will know from Zen the value of space, of the silence within words. She will know the nothingness from which language arises. Furthermore, like Ghost Dog, she too, is a child of the ghetto. She will know the sound of hip hop, the erased memories of which it speaks, the injustices that surround her. But she will understand better than Ghost Dog the words of Hagakure: "to fully understand the present moment - there is nothing else to know, nothing else to do." "There is nothing outside the thought of the immediate moment(Hagakure33)". In other words, she will not attempt to return to another era, but instead, will get the best out of her own generation. Nevertheless, she has been taught by the last member of an ancient tribe. She has a contact with history.

We imagine her walking back in the park to speak to Raymond. Slowly she will begin to speak to him as Ghost Dog did, she in English and Raymond in French. And both will listen carefully to the serious, silent dog that will visit the park - with silent messages from a ghost, that of Ghost Dog, the Samurai warrior from another era who in his own quixotic way understood the present moment. Ghost Dog, we assume, is now in the place beyond the flight of his beloved dove, the great silence that lives in deep space. He has become the ghostly quality, the traces of old words, faces, ideas, places that haunt all language. We shall never again be able to speak, listen or read a word without hearing the powerful, ghostly silences of this guru of the ghetto.

Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai tells us, "The Way is in a higher place than righteousness...the highest is wisdom(Hagakure26)". As hit man for the Mafia, Ghost Dog may not have seemed righteous, but from the point of view of his disciplined stillness, his devotion to a Way, to both the spoken/sung and written word, we expect to find Ghost Dog, along with his devoted pigeon, living carrier of the written word, in the higher place of wisdom. Among the deep spaces of language, the deep spaces of the sky, must surely lie the Way, the Way of Ghost Dog, this ghost who, in Caputo's words, is this specter of something "tout autre", something wholly other, that haunts the world of "the same", this world of full presence. We might be surprised by this conclusion since Jarmusch so often evokes the violent aspect of language: the gun shot, the coup, the cut. But if we

could follow the trajectory of Pearlina's life, we would probably see that it is the violence, the coup, the cut of the Hakurai, of the music of rap, that opens her world to that wholly other.

End Notes

1. Zen Buddhism and the samurai have been closely related since the thirteenth century. Note the monk-like sparseness and discipline of Ghost Dog's way of life and his reading of passages about nothingness. He even prays every day before exercising his samurai prowess with his sword. Confucianism has also influenced the samurai, especially the idea of the warrior and the scholar. Note Ghost Dog's love of reading good literature and his sense of total loyalty to Louie, a kind of father-leader figure. Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai was written in the eighteenth century by Yamamoto Tsunetomo, who was influenced by the Confucian scholar, Ishida Ittei. Hagakure is quoted thirteen times within the film. The translator of this text, William Scott Wilson, states that the philosophy of Hagakure is "intuitive rather than rational". One can "go anywhere by means of simple cerebration". We sense that Ghost Dog intuits every situation that confronts him and that he responds immediately, intuitively. Wilson also notes that the Zen philosophy, in its "rejection of life as an object of special craving had much to offer the warrior". This rejection of life as an object of special craving is that which puzzles those who observe Ghost Dog, especially the mother of the little girl in the park.
2. Ned Lukacher, editor, translator of Jacques Derrida's Cinders, and writer of the introduction, states, "The task of putting into question the name of the name defines Derrida's fundamental project from his earliest work to the present(7)".
3. The hip-hop music has been written for this film by the RZA, hip-hop master of the Wu-Tang Clan. Listen closely and you may hear, amidst the soaring sound, the words, "Ghost Dog". This group composes a synthesis of African-American-Asian motifs.
4. Jacques Derrida, in Cinders, sees every word of human language as being the bearer of cinders from the first all-burning. Reading or hearing these words that carry these ashy embers is the beginning of the creating of a path of sparking cinders that leads to the original holocaust.
5. Jonathan Rosenbaum, of the Chicago Reader, writes, "Roughly speaking Hagakure corresponds to Jarmush's background as a minimalist and "In a Grove" which suggests a multiple understanding of reality, something closer to cubism - introduces the more skeptical perspectives raised by historical speculation".
6. In Dissemination, p.326, Derrida states that "the full force of writing...in one blow [d'un coup], triggers of [a] tale and keeps it in progress;".

Also, "But the pen, when you have followed it to the end will have turned into a knife"(302).

7. Ned Lukacher eloquently expresses Derrida's ideas about the "origin" of language. Language rises like a wave out of its unthinkable origin and comes into the linguistic habitations of human speech...The rising itself is a silent ringing, ...As this wave rises from its impossible distance, mourning becomes telepathy...(17)". In other words, the ringing of the church bells arises from a silent ringing, from the rising of a wave of ancient language that Ghost hears, a language that demands his self-sacrifice. As members of the audience, we, too, hear something from this silence, and a wave of mourning for the mind and soul of this extraordinary person, Ghost Dog, overwhelms us.

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