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Melancholic Modernism in Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive*

Abstract

The essay explores Adorno's notion that modernist art is a dialectic between the ideal and the spleen in relation to Jim Jarmusch's 2013 film, *Only Lovers Left Alive*. The film tracks bohemian vampires who map onto the idealist and splenetic as modernist aesthetes, setting a mood of gothic melancholy. Retreating from modern capitalism and consumerism—the zombie world in the film—the characters illustrate the film's succession of binaries in an attempt to retain their purity and manage their concomitant melancholy. Ultimately, they must compromise, and their pragmatic negotiations are telling. The essay explores these concepts concerning the main characters, Adam and Eve, the prominent locations Detroit and Tangier, and the main dialectical concepts of the splenetic and the ideal. Jarmusch's film extends Adorno's insightful pairing and updates it for an artistic and social milieu quite different than the one that Adorno wrote from, while Adorno's concepts draw out the philosophical content latent in the film. Melancholy is expressed as a necessary condition for an adequate post-industrial aesthetic, but it is insufficient for aesthetic survival.

Keywords

Melancholy, Modernism, Splenetic, Theodor W. Adorno, Jim Jarmusch

Post-industrial capitalism generates a melancholic life, especially for those enmeshed in the arts. We vacillate between beauty and rawness and have misgivings about the pleasures we can draw from them. All of which deepens our melancholy. Melancholic bohemianism can be detected since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Theodor Adorno's approach utilized the dialectic

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tical pairing of the 'spleen' and the 'ideal.' According to Adorno (1997, 93), "Rimbaud's postulate of the radically modern is that of an art that moves in the tension between *spleen et idéal*, spiritualization and obsession with what is most distant from spirit. [...] That these elements are at present stubbornly played off against each other is a symptom of the regression of consciousness."

Art is classical and beautiful in the 'ideal,' but this view is no longer sufficient in modernity. Art is suffused with the 'spleen'—with roughness, vitriol, distortion, anger, resentment, etc. For instance, even in the performance of Romantic era piano works, the tendency to play pieces "smoothly" by maintaining a beautiful tone must be resisted, and the "spleen" of the works brought out with energy, "even fierceness" to prevent the artworks from falling into the aesthetic banality of the culture industry.¹ Adorno presents a melancholic modernism when he focuses on the sensuous recovery of aesthetic pleasure that "ever since Baudelaire the dark has also offered sensuous enticement as the antithesis of the fraudulent sensuality of the culture's façade. There is more joy in dissonance than in consonance. [...] Negation may reverse into pleasure, not into affirmation" (Adorno 1997, 40). It is interesting—maybe even surprising—that Adorno, although perceived as somewhat stodgy regarding anything associated with fun, grounds his aesthetics in joy and pleasure. However, it must not affirm the banal aesthetics of the culture industry; it must establish itself in the dark, in negation.² This aesthetic modernism generates melancholy through an endemic focus on the negative, *splenetic*³ elements of art making, refusals in a world dominated by market values, and the continual onslaught of cheap entertainment. The artist's role is necessarily melancholic, for even what is best in popular entertainment ends up in the trash heap of global capitalism as the entertainment industry forges onward. In a crucial reversal, the entertainment industry—a significant branch of capitalist production—offers uplifting positivity but destroys all in its wake: environmentally, culturally, socially, and aesthetically.

¹ See Barry 2009, 82.

² Of course, Adorno is thinking about music here, and possibly his own compositions. Adorno composed music from his youth and consistently throughout his life. See Rose 1978, 110-111.

³ I use the term 'splenic' although most commentators use 'spleenish' (see Bernstein 2003). 'Spleenish' is good and carries with it the connotation of "fretful" (The Free Dictionary) working one end of an Adorno influenced modernism, but 'splenic' carries the sense of "given to melancholy" (Merriam-Webster).

Conversely, the splenetic modern artist offers darkness and dissonance, but rather than merely destroy, the negativity seeks to preserve and retain what is best in the arts, finding joy and pleasure in a rebuilt aesthetic culture and a bitter hope for a better world. Lastly, Adorno recognized that artworks would not be fully “autonomous” as aesthetically isolated from society. A work will always be somehow enmeshed in society and thus the culture industry,⁴ although a degree of dissonance provides a reason to consider it to that extent free. This enmeshment is part and parcel of the aesthetic melancholy.

This intersection is precisely the melancholic modernism we find in Jim Jarmusch’s 2013 film *Only Lovers Left Alive*.⁵ Through a series of binary relations, Jarmusch embeds a pattern that aptly illustrates the dialectical tension between the spleen and the ideal. A typical Jarmusch film, it embeds hallmarks of his style of cinematic modernism—a preference for mood over solid narrative, an ironic point of view, a fascination with humorously presenting tragic situations, and a robust and specific sense of urban location. Unlike most of his previous films that hewed closer to ordinary situations,⁶ *Only Lovers Left Alive* plays on the supernatural as the main characters are vampires struggling to maintain themselves in a world of ‘zombies,’ their term for ordinary people living in post-industrial capitalist America.⁷ Despite their need for fresh and pure blood, the vampires are our heroes, and the film takes their point of view. The vampires are the preservers of the artistic legacy of the West, marginalized to such a degree that they hide from society and come out only at night to stay alive and nurture their artistry and aesthetic sensibilities.⁸ This marginalization is symbolically fixed by ‘Kit’ (John

⁴ On Adorno’s very complicated views on the autonomy of art, see, for instance Wilson (2007, 43-57), and Thomson (2006, 40-82).

⁵ The film title was borrowed from the 1964 counter-culture novel by Dave Wallis. Nicholas Ray briefly considered adapting it to film in the 1960s but nothing came of it. Jarmusch was Nicholas Ray’s assistant as a film student in New York in the 1970s. Jarmusch’s film has nothing to do with the novel except sharing a title.

⁶ Most of Jarmusch’s films are adaptations from the ordinary flow of life, albeit in a quirky fashion compared to mainstream filmmaking. *Dead Man* (1995), often categorized as an “acid western,” might be another outlier. Jarmusch would pick up the zombie theme again in 2019’s *The Dead Don’t Die*.

⁷ ‘Zombies’ is a term used frequently by Adam in the Detroit sequences and generally references Americans. I am not aware that it is used in the Tangier scenes. This would correlate well with a long-standing cinematic use of ‘zombie’ for consumers in a mass society, one of Jarmusch’s targets in the film.

⁸ Like many of the tropes in the film, this also functions as something of an in-joke, or inter-textual reference if you prefer. Jarmusch himself is known to be something of a night person, inhabiting New York after hours.

Hurt), an elderly vampire who was/is Christopher Marlowe and secretly wrote Shakespeare's works. It neatly establishes a pre-industrial artistic lineage while signifying the modernist aesthetic complex of producing groundbreaking work and shrinking from the kind of public recognition that would soon become artistic branding in the culture industry. This feature frequently occurs throughout the film, so the hipster shunning of commerciality and recognition is a reinforced and important aesthetic theme. The character of Kit primarily functions to establish these themes, with a typical Jarmusch wink, for the main characters are Adam (Tom Hiddleston) and Eve (Tilda Swinton).⁹ We find Kit with Eve in Tangier, looking to score pure (uncontaminated) blood—"the good French stuff"—and they provide an anchor to the central situation, which is the melancholy of Adam, who is spiraling (again, it seems) toward suicide while he works on his music in an old house in a decimated section of Detroit.

Adam is a powerfully *splenic* artist, and he seems to represent one of the most apparent stand-ins for Jarmusch in his film work. He plays electric guitar (among other instruments), and Jarmusch plays the guitar for him on the soundtrack with his band Sqürl. Further, Adam's house is a museum filled with old instruments, outdated technologies, and framed photographs of Jarmusch's aesthetic heroes—from Iggy Pop and Joe Strummer, to, at the very center of the wall of photographs, Adorno's exemplar of modernist bohemia, Charles Baudelaire. Although Adam's dissonant music evokes the electric thrash of angry bands like The Stooges and The Clash, it also has an ethereal, almost trance quality. As everything occurs at night, there is a hallucinogenic mood fostered by the cinematic ambiance and soundtrack. The trance-like but distorted sounds of Adam's/Jarmusch's music are splenic in its dissonance—its refusal to adhere to commercial and popular music styles that would sell—and its melancholy. Adam describes his recent work as "funeral music." Further, he collects relics from the artistic past—old guitars, amplifiers, etc., along with the photographic preservation of great artists already mentioned. His curation of the aesthetic past is a pure evocation of modernist melancholy.

Furthermore, he must preserve it because it is being lost and forgotten. Awash in the zombie world of capitalist consumerism, that which best represents splenic arts¹⁰ will be lost unless those who know better act now to

⁹ Obviously we have a biblical reference to an original couple. However, Jarmusch told an interviewer that the original inspiration was from Mark Twain's *The Diaries of Adam and Eve*. See Trakin 2014.

¹⁰ There are more than just the splenic arts that are preserved, since it's a collection curated by Jarmusch and his own idiosyncratic tastes. As with many of us, the highly

prevent complete memory loss. Nevertheless, for all that, Adam is losing the will to battle against the overwhelming power of the culture industry.

With Kit's blessing and encouragement, Eve leaves Tangier to comfort her husband.¹¹ She discovers that Adam is again contemplating suicide. Eve functions wonderfully as the ideal of Adam's spleen. While she also curates splenetic works—she is seen packing her suitcase with David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, a book on Jean Michel Basquiat, etc.—her influence is calming, upbeat, and positive.¹² They are the two poles of romantic art; he leans heavily toward the dark, gothic, dissonant, and funereal; she leans toward the prepossessing, soothing, and sustaining. As she packs for her trip to see him, the camera lingers on her as she lovingly regards a plate in an art-book—Lorenzo Ghiberti's image of the creation of Adam. Eve has a soothing effect on Adam and reminds him of his many outstanding contributions to the artistic legacy of the past. She comes to offer love since the splenetic may not be enough to keep him alive. If it is true that only lovers are left alive, Eve represents the ideal to soften the harshness of Adam's dissonant and splenetic aesthetic. Adam and Eve's relationship represents a binary between the ideal and the spleen, establishing a dialectical interplay. Adam shifts in Eve's presence, and the implication is that the spleen, without the ideal, is insufficient.

The dichotomy between the spleen and the ideal fits into Jarmusch's strong location-expressions and settings. Eve travels from Tangier, an exotic and sensuous location for many film watchers in the northern countries of Europe and the Americas. Jarmusch certainly shoots it that way. It sets up the contrast for the all-important impression of Detroit—the splenetic epicenter of post-industrial capitalist decay. Jarmusch was originally from Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, a suburb of Akron and only a short drive to Cleveland, across Lake Erie from Detroit. All these cities are part of the industrial boom of early twentieth-century American capitalism. The Henry Ford-inspired assembly line that revolutionized production created a continuous stream of affordable, identical products intended not for the elite but for the mass con-

commercialized music and art of our youth often gets a pass. This contradiction of aesthetic taste, while not logically consistent, is deeply human and widespread.

¹¹ Married for hundreds of years, the two do not always live together. This is not explained. Maybe it doesn't need to be. It also appears that they have been married three times. This is also not explained.

¹² If we just focus on those two artists, they are possible stand-ins for Adam in that they are troubled artists who clearly needed help to avoid their tragic outcomes. This is not a perfect analogy but elements of both Wallace and Basquiat are easy to map onto Adam.

sumption of the population. It represented the power and pride of American manufacturing for nearly a century. After a series of violent labor battles, they also represented the avenue to financial security for working-class Americans who built steel, tires, and cars for an upbeat, growing America. It also famously was the model for Motown music that utilized an assembly line approach to musical production. However, that confidence collapsed quickly in the latter half of the twentieth century. Cities like these across the country fell into economic recessions exacerbated by American racism and urban neglect. Detroit is one of the most iconic cities for twenty-first-century appraisals of this phenomenon.¹³ Systematic, oppressive racism plagued the area resulting in racial and political riots in the summer of 1967.¹⁴ Financial opportunism fanned white fears by coaxing the white population out of the city into even-more-racially-segregated suburbs.¹⁵ The city lost its tax base as the middle class fled, just as auto executives in those segregated suburbs cut union jobs and closed local factories to exploit cheaper labor in Asia and Latin America.¹⁶ Detroit became the *abject icon* of American capitalist life. No one wanted to see it; they only complained about it if they had to. Although paradoxical, the ‘abject icon’ is an apt expression for Detroit as the *iconic unseen*. Because Detroit had also elected an African American mayor by 1974, it became a convenient excuse to scapegoat all its problems on the black population and the city’s stagnancy in black leadership. Detroit became the great abject city of America: no one wanted to talk about it, no one wanted to visit it, and no one wanted to help solve its problems because they were precisely the core problems of America. By ignoring Detroit or explaining it away with flimsy excuses, America pretended there was no racism and nothing wrong with capitalism. The “selling” of capitalism thus shifted to burgeoning suburbs and previously undeveloped cities in the American South that could function as signs of the ever-positive rewards of a system predicated on infinite growth. Detroit was shoved to the side as its factories aged, its population dwindled, and its services rendered more and more challenging to deliver. Detroit became the ultimate destination for a splenetic filmmaker like Jarmusch.

The film is not merely set in Detroit. It lingers over the city. Just as Adam is the main focus of analyzing the human artist in melancholic modernism, Detroit is the main focus of analyzing the urban aesthetic in melancholic

¹³ See Fojas 2019, 205-222.

¹⁴ See Berlansky 2013.

¹⁵ See Sugrue 2005.

¹⁶ On the industrial and economic decline of the Midwest, see Broughton 2015.

modernism. After Eve arrives, Adam takes her on a city tour at night. While there is a list of sites one would expect of Jarmusch—references to Motown Studios, musician Jack White’s childhood house—the camera examines the ruin and decay of quintessential urban blight. We see the decrepit Packard plant, the abandoned and decayed Michigan Theater, fields gone from developed housing and industry back into actual wildlife refuges in the middle of the city with foxes, coyotes, deer, etc., returning to an area they were pushed out of 100 years ago. All of this builds the film’s overwhelming sense of melancholy. Here is a city that is a museum of loss, an urban expanse drenched in the sadness of irretrievable past glory and current loss. The portrayal of Detroit in this melancholic way also occurred in the middle of the debate about how the city was portrayed. Detroit was getting several thousand visitors a year worldwide for the sole sake of touring its decayed buildings. Organized photography tours were typical. So spectators could witness the decaying landmarks of American capitalism first-hand. The ethical problem of so-called “ruin porn” tours was peaking at this time, and Jarmusch’s film is situated near that form of viewing.¹⁷ However, I would argue that the film is a much greater engagement of the city rather than simply gawking at Detroit’s decay as the dystopian edge of the coming centuries. Jarmusch, as a fellow native of the industrial wasteland of the Great Lakes area, is a Detroit ally in his wistful melancholy of the past power and current destruction of the area.

The melancholy of Adam and Eve is countered by the appearance of Eve’s sister Ava (Mia Wasikowska), who blows in uninvited from Los Angeles, the center of aesthetic capitalism. Ava is upbeat but clearly in a forced way, expressing fake positivity and wanting to have a good time. She is not melancholy but riding the high of contemporary nightlife. She is fun, but this barely masks her superficiality and desire to exploit everyone for whatever she wants. She selfishly drinks her way through Adam’s blood supply, watches campy vampire television from the 70s, and ultimately kills Ian (Anton Yelchin), Adam’s link to the zombie world and vintage collections, by sucking his blood after a night out. Ava embodies the commercialized aesthetic “fun” that Adorno counsels against, contrasting with Adam’s melancholy aesthetic. As Adorno notes, “[o]nly in memory and longing, not as copy or as an immediate effect, is pleasure absorbed by art” (1997, 14). Adam extends into the twenty-first century this melancholic approach which utilizes aesthetic pleasure as a survival strategy counterpoised against Ava’s fun. For Adorno,

¹⁷ See Scarbrough 2016.

fun is the antithesis of aesthetic pleasure, forming its simulacrum within the culture industry.¹⁸ For what counts as a 'plot,' if we should even use that word for a Jarmusch film, Adam and Eve kick out Ava as she shouts, "you're condescending snobs."¹⁹ They then dispose of Ian's body by dumping it into an acid bath among the ruins of Detroit and flee back to Tangier before the possibility of discovery.

Ava is the vampiric shadow of Adam and Eve, while Adam and Eve preserve the aesthetic heritage of Western art. Ava is awash in camp, bored by high art, and synced to the glamour of the culture industry. Ava is a classic exploitative vampire sucking dry the lives of those around her and thus represents capitalism if capitalism was something like a rich trust-fund child hell-bent on experiencing the high of constant pleasure for all immortality. We also see the split in contemporary artistry between the melancholic and the blithesome. Ava's 'fun' is the dialectical other that helps to define Adam's artistry and, by extension, Jarmusch's film as an artwork rather than a mere product of the culture industry.²⁰ That Ava is based in LA, Adam in Detroit, and Eve in Tangier, is significant. LA is not shown. It does not need to be. It is the entire over-idealized world of art production. If Ava is Eve's little sister, she overdoes the positivity one finds in Eve. She does not have enough, or any, of Adam's splenetic disgust to be taken seriously.

Moreover, while there is a vital element of pleasure in even Adorno's stern aesthetics, it is anything but the kind of moronic fun-all-the-time Ava represents. In Adorno's words, "Negation may revert into pleasure. Never into affirmation" (1997, 40). Adam and Eve sometimes seem like parents to the hundreds-year-old child-teenager Ava. Jarmusch's film, then, situates Ava as the aesthetic hedonist who does not have enough sense or concern for others to worry about preserving heritage or the melancholic disturbance to create something aesthetically important. She is simply the consumer who cares for nothing but the next act of consumption. After killing

¹⁸ See Weitzman 2008, 185-202.

¹⁹ Here Jarmusch inserts a critique of the film itself—its valorization of high aesthetic melancholy can be seen as little more than boring condescending snobbishness from the standpoint of Ava and the rest of the consumer world. The film's preciously curated intertextuality and cultural referencing "demand a certain cultural knowingness from the audience, but, at the same time, they knock down icons like ninepins" (Lane 2014).

²⁰ As Adorno notes, "Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. [...] Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of" (1970, 3). I interpret Jarmusch's film artistry as also developing out of the culture industry's version of popular film.

Ian, she moves on. She leaves Detroit, like American capitalism. Like the LA she came from, she is a little rootless and hungry for whatever else is next on the menu.

Adam and Eve cannot now stay in Detroit, the murder scene. They, too, have to move on. It is not merely the capitalist machine that destroys and relocates for its subsequent exploitation—like Ava—but also the melancholic artist cannot continuously be fed from the desiccated remains of the post-industrial American wasteland. Eve brings Adam to Tangier, and though the film's final scenes are filled with Kit's death and the desperate search for blood to stay alive, the cinematography has a different kind of beauty than what we were given in Detroit. There may be a peculiar melancholic sweetness in places older than the American post-industrial melancholy that Jarmusch is indicating here. Older places have cycled through the rise and fall of the centuries. Tangier provides the warm ideal to the splenetic Detroit. The shots of Adam and Eve in Tangier show our heroes strung out and desperately needing a fix of blood, but there is a calmness, softness, and integrated beauty in the background and neighborhood. The soundtrack in Tangier pushed the dissonant electric guitar into the background—although still present—and highlights a kind of modernist lute playing, thus shifting the mood to the less splenetic and more ideal.²¹ Eve uses their remaining cash to buy Adam a beautiful oud, and a performance from Lebanese singer Yasmine Hamdan entrances them:

Adam: This girl is fantastic.

Eve: I'm sure she'll be famous.

Adam: God, I hope not. She is really too good for that.²²

The exchange embeds Jarmusch's melancholic modernism in its refusal to identify quality with popularity. Its hipster attitude that art—or filmmaking—can maintain its integrity only outside of the culture industry is not something new for us, but certainly, it is something we, as an audience, look for with ongoing support. Jarmusch's film exhibits the melancholic modernism that Adorno articulated mid-twentieth century. But it also operates in a different milieu, one in which the filmmaker and his audience have

²¹ The soundtrack embeds the same binary: the splenetic guitar is played by Jarmusch, the more ideal lute is played by Jozef van Wissem, who "wants to make the lute sexy again." See Dollar 2014.

²² I am also intrigued by the choice of a Lebanese singer in the Tangier finale. Although most likely coincidental, Metro Detroit has a very large Lebanese population.

emerged from the culture industry, raised as children and teens with attachments to artists and artworks that were simultaneously consumer products. Jarmusch's melancholic modernism navigates this semi-autonomous domain through his idiosyncratic style alternating between the serious and the lighthearted, moral poignancy and ironic humor, between the spleen and the ideal.

True to form, Jarmusch's film remains within the indie film genre that orbits outside the mainstream film industry. Adam and Eve are themselves outside the mainstream formulation of vampires—they are less to be feared than the zombies—ourselves. They are the preservers of the aesthetic heritage that Adorno gestured toward. Jarmusch and his key characters maintain the uneasy dialectical balance between spleen and ideal that Adorno identified in the nineteenth-century bohemian reaction to capitalism. However, that alone is not fully sustainable. Adorno seemed to reserve aesthetic pleasure for particular challenging works from the fine art tradition. Jarmusch extends his aesthetic reach not into Schoenberg but instead toward *The Stooges*. In this point, Jarmusch occupies a melancholic aesthetic diverging spatially and temporally. He grew up in a different milieu, and his characters seem to struggle not so much with an Adorno-inspired purity as much as a pragmatic negotiation with popular culture. Adam and Eve navigate the sensuous as they attend White Hills in the Detroit bar or Yasmine Hamdan in Tangier. The final scene shows a spent Adam and Eve searching for victims to bite to stay alive. Their aesthetic purity gives way to a pragmatic realization: to stay alive as a vampire, that is, as an artist, one must sometimes draw blood. "So fucking fifteenth century," they despair about their need to sink their fangs into victims. They spot a beautiful young couple kissing in the moonlight of Tangier. They vow not to kill them but only to "turn" them—to keep them alive as fellow vampires. The camera flips perspective at the very end, rather than focus on the victims, and it steadies as Eve and Adam approach the lens with mouths open and fangs out. It seems clear that we have watched the film, and now we, the viewers, will be turned from zombies into fellow vampires, doomed to melancholic modernism. There are worse fates in the twenty-first century.

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