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Source: *MoveableType*, Vol. 2, 'The Mind's Eye' (2006)

DOI: 10.14324/111.1755-4527.017

MoveableType is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

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Deceptive Detection and an Inverted Quest: Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers*

Dir. Jim Jarmusch

Focus Features (2005)

Review by Dominique Jeannerod

Jim Jarmusch's latest film, *Broken Flowers*, is a recycling of the Oedipal quest. The structural affinity between this archetypal quest and the classical detective story has been expressed in Alain Robbe-Grillet's book *Erasers* (1953). Over a half-century later, Jarmusch again links an inverted Oedipal quest, in which the father searches for the son, with a parody of detection, which doubles as the film's narrative technique. The Oedipal theme is announced in the anonymous letter received by the main character, Don Johnston (Bill Murray), in which it is revealed that Johnston has a teenage son who was raised by the unknown mother, the unsigned author of the letter. However, this first level of the classical Oedipus myth—that of a son searching for his father—is rendered more complex in Jarmusch's story. The film additionally adopts what could be called a second-level Oedipal quest: the search of a son by his father. The letter, therefore, places before the viewer two simultaneous storylines—the story of the son searching for the father, which the letter announces but the viewer never sees, and the story of the father searching for the son, which dominates the narrative made visible to us. But from the starting point of the letter, it appears that film is chiefly concerned with the narrative of the invisible film—the story of the son's search for the father. This raises a series of paradoxes by which the author provokes the viewer's unconscious, while the viewer is watching the projection of the visible film.

Divided between an intellectual inquiry and a material one, the investigation borrows from two distinct models within the detective story genre: the armchair detective from the traditional "golden age," and the motorised detective, from the hard-boiled film noir. The division of their detective work respects the code of each specialization. The armchair detective is in charge of deductions and assumptions; the motorized detective demands concrete evidence. But the deployment of both models works to subvert the investigation in *Broken Flowers*. Winston, the next-door neighbor and detective aficionado, displays only the "golden-age" detective methodologies in his encouragement of Johnston's search for his son. The character of Winston has only one narrative function (and it is a parodic one at that), in which he assumes the role of detective, and thus, he becomes the least credible character in the film. His field of investigation is exclusively virtual and leads only to the production of abstract projections of reality, which are represented by the maps he provides for his counterpart, Johnston. Johnston, as the investigator of his own genealogy, also searches for traces, which are merely generic: a typewriter, some paper, or even a color. They are impersonal clues that can only generate suspicion, never evidence. Moreover, although he is functionally in charge of the action, Johnston is already physically and mentally exhausted before setting out for his search.

The film, therefore, of the father's quest for his son is futile. It cannot lead to a meeting, as suggested in the film's beginning when the father departs almost immediately after he learns that his son is on his way to find him. This impossibility for a meeting condemns the storyline of the son's search to remain invisible to the viewer. Jarmusch is careful to leave his plot open, by successively revealing a typewriter, a woman whose son is missing, and in the last scene, the face of a "son" looking through a car window. But the meeting of the two quests is not shown, thereby giving credit to a new interpretation by Winston—an interpretation as contestable as the others, since Jarmusch warned that he was only a parodic investigator—that the son was

only an invention, a narrative device. The visible film thus destroys *in fine* its invisible double upon which it was structured and imagined.