

Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai

USA

2000

116 min

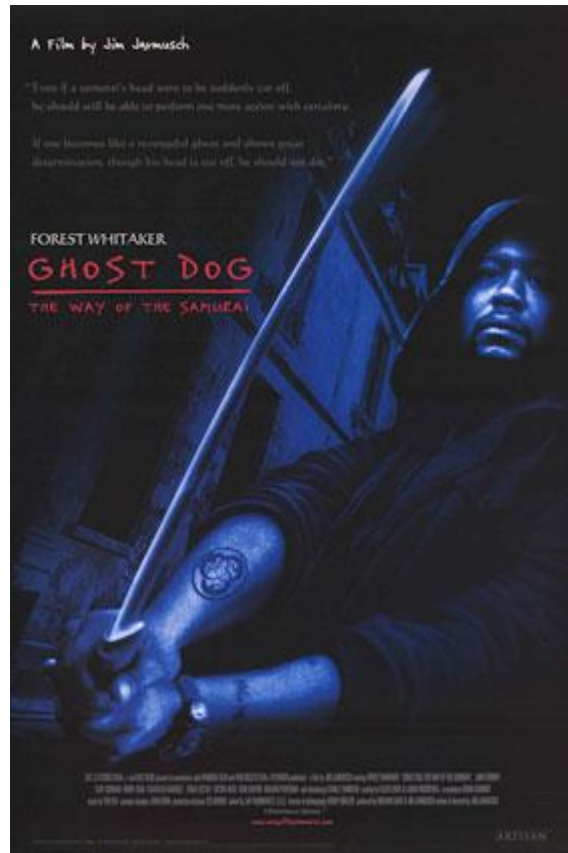
Cert 15

Director, writer and co-producer:
Jim Jarmusch

Cinematography: Robby Muller
Editor: Jay Rabinowitz
Original music by RZA

Cast

Forest Whitaker	Ghost Dog
John Tormey	Louie
Cliff Gorman	Sonny Valerio
Frank Minucci	Big Angie
Richard Portnow	Handsome Frank
Tricia Vessey	Louise Vargo
Henry Silva	Ray Vargo
Gene Ruffini	Old Consigliere
Victor Argo	Vinny
Damon Whitaker	Young Ghost Dog
Kenny Guay	Boy in Window
Vince Viverito	Johnny Morini
Gano Grills	Gangsta in Red



Live by the code. Die by the code.

Following his exploration of the Western epic in *Dead Man* (which is a film I disliked), Jim Jarmusch takes on another set of mythic cultures in *Ghost Dog*, namely the code of the Samurai and the underworld of the Mafia

An audience looking for that action movie will be sorely disappointed. *Ghost Dog* is not your run-of-the-mill contract killer. He lives in a shack on a rooftop. In his spare time, he plays with his trained pigeons and practices with his sword. He can only be reached with a messenger bird. Nobody knows his real name. He's a black man, played by the astonishing Forest Whitaker, and yet he does jobs for the Italian mafia. Why? We find out that a mobster saved his life one day and according to the ancient Samurai code, by which he strictly abides, he is forever indebted to his saviour.

But things aren't so simple. After a misunderstanding occurs during one of *Ghost Dog*'s jobs, the mafia decides it's time to eliminate him. Unfortunately, none of them know anything about him -- there's only the pigeons and the enigmatic name. So they send people with guns searching rooftops and when they trash his abode in his absence, all hell breaks loose

The main reference point for *Ghost Dog* is Jean-Pierre Melville's 1967 film, *Le Samourai*. Jarmusch name checks Melville (another perceived 'maverick' who worked outside the studio system and offered inspiration to a generation of independent filmmakers) in his credits, along with Akira Kurosawa and the prolific Seijun Suzuki.

Interviewed about the selection of Forest Whitaker, Jarmusch said

"I first came up with the very vague idea of wanting to make a story about a killer who, in a contradictory way, we respected. I really loved a certain contradiction I find in Forest, in that he's very gentle and soft and contemplative, and he's a big, physically imposing type of guy.



Writer/director Jim Jarmusch and Forest Whitaker on the set

And I never really saw the balance of that contradiction in the roles he's played, though I haven't seen everything he's done, so I can't say he's never done that before. So that's the genesis of the whole story, and I wrote it for Forest and talked to him before writing it in a general way. He was interested, so I wrote it for him."

The music in the film is clearly important – at one point the beat of the music matches the flap of birds wings. Jarmusch was asked about the music:

"Even before I'm writing, I'm collecting ideas. I have a pretty close idea of the kind of music or who I would like to make the music, and I've been lucky that it's worked out, especially in these last two cases with Neil Young [who scored *Dead Man*] and The RZA. I didn't know them before, unlike John Lurie or Tom Waits or people who are already friends of mine. I didn't know these guys, but it was my dream, and in both cases I got to them and they ended up wanting to do the music. I'm also, I guess, very lucky in that way. Even before I started writing *Ghost Dog*, I was getting a lot of 12-inch vinyl, where they have an album mix and then a radio mix and then an instrumental mix. I was pulling as much instrumental RZA stuff as I could find and making tapes of it, and it was really inspiring me. My dream was to get RZA to do the score, and ultimately that happened.

....when I watch Hollywood movies, one thing that really bothers me is this: The world is so full of interesting, amazing music, so why do all the scores sound exactly the same? It's infuriating to me. I love music, man. Can't you put in some music that has something to do with the film, or is married to the film, or elevates the film? Why is it always the same hackneyed orchestral music that's telling you what to feel at each moment? It seems so timid or limited. That's something I find infuriating."

There can't be too many films that list a 'Philosophical Consultant' in the credits but *Ghost Dog* does – Jim Sotet (who was also credited for Jarmusch's *Night on Earth*, previously shown by WNCC), and there are signs that he earned his keep. While clearly Jarmusch's most accessible and perhaps his funniest film to date, it is still a fluid, intelligent, innovative piece. Questions of social and cinematic history are raised with grace and humour, yet the principal line of action is allowed to rumble along enjoyably.

Ghost Dog is a film more about mood and moments -- the tenderness that develops between Ghost Dog and a bookworm little girl in the park (Camille Winbush); the unlikely but strangely touching friendship of Ghost Dog and an immigrant who drives an ice cream truck (Isaach De Bankolé), who don't even speak the same language. The way Ghost Dog makes car theft look as easy as operating a cell phone (he always picks fancy cars with top quality stereo systems); the dedication with which he practices with a sword we never see him use. The sight of Mafia guys in their sixties wheezing up a flight of stairs to whack Ghost Dog.

Forest Whitaker's sad, eloquently still features, which are brightened by a warm smile more often than you expect -- Jarmusch could not have picked a more soulful actor to play this samurai who seems to belong to no particular century.



Ghost Dog attains high levels of spirituality by practicing martial arts and reading the *Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai*, an 18th century book that established the philosophy of the samurai. Quotes from the Hagakure are presented intermittently on the screen throughout the film.

While this seems to interrupt the narrative, it actually provides a philosophical context to interpret Ghost Dog's actions

However the film does have faults – no credible reason is given for the contract placed on Ghost Dog, despite his impeccable record and the film is a little long.

Is it pretentious? At times, but it's also wildly compelling and holds your interest with ease. The script contains some wonderful dialogue while never losing track of the main themes. There are some terrific action scenes, but they never overwhelm the characters. Jarmusch isn't afraid to laugh at his material either: *Ghost Dog* has some truly funny moments without derailing the essential seriousness of the plot.

It really is difficult to pin this film down, which may be one of the reasons why it works so well. Smart, engaging, and strangely cool, *Ghost Dog* defies easy pigeonholing in favour of a complexity all its own. There aren't a lot of films out there that could take on so much and pull it all off with such aplomb. Whatever you may be looking for, this one has it. In spades.

Iain McGlashan