'Ghost Dog' delivers atmosphere, lacks direction

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Talk is cheap and viewers don't get a lot from Ghost Dog, the samurai warrior-assassin-car thief in the movie by the same name.

Instead we get music videos, which serve as glimpses into the life and samurai philosophy of this hired gun, as he inhabits the streets anonymously, like a shadow or an idea, stealing a car here and shooting a Mafioso there.

Instead of being revealing, the glimpses are like those from inside a passing car at night; we witness them, but they quickly disappear, too subtle and too quick to draw us in.

"Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai," from independent film maker Jim Jarmusch, juxtaposes the moral codes of the Mafia and the samurai warrior.

Ghost Dog, played by Forest Whitaker, best known for his role as the British soldier/hostage in "The Crying Game," is an assassin who lives in a homemade shack on top of a roof and sleeps with several dozen pigeons fluttering about him.

In addition to effortlessly stealing BMWs and Cadillacs with a computerized device, he works for Louie, a small-time mobster, to whom he has pledged his eternal loyalty after Louie rescued him from being beaten in an alley years ago. Ghost Dog receives his assignments from Louie by carrier pigeon and this time the assignment is to whack Handsome Frank, a "made" man.

When Ghost Dog shows up to do the job, Louise, the daughter of the family's head, who also happens to be Frank's lover, is present and witnesses the hit. The detached young woman hardly blinks an eye, instead giving Ghost Dog a copy of "Rashomon," a paperback that becomes a symbol of the passing on of samurai values.

Upon hearing his daughter was present, Louise's father informs Louie that Ghost Dog must go. Louie explains that he is no ordinary assassin and that he presented himself to Louie four years after the alley attack but the family is undeterred. It's Ghost Dog or Louie.

After Louie informs him of this, noting that they'll probably both be killed anyway, Ghost Dog takes matters into his own hands, killing most of the family, including Louise's father, while she watches cartoon animals clobber each other to sound effects, from the other room.

Besides bumping into the occasional kindred spirit, like Louise, Ghost Dog finds camaraderie in a French-African immigrant who speaks no English and sells ice cream from a truck in the park. Although the two men cannot communicate verbally, they possess an intuitive understanding which has them saying the same things, in different languages, simultaneously.

One of the few times Ghost Dog shows any emotion whatsoever is when he sees a handgun tucked into the belt of the wide-eyed ice cream vendor, which he confiscates.

In the end, the struggle between the family and the samurai comes down to a western-style confrontation between Louie and Ghost Dog and between each man and his respective code of honor.

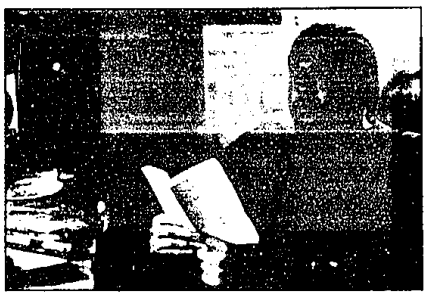
What's missing from this film is context. There's no sense of time or place. And more importantly, there's no real sense of why Ghost Dog has chosen to embrace the rigid ideals of the samurai code and isolate himself from society.

There are hints, however.

Ghost Dog nods in acknowledgment to his counterparts, gang members and rappers in the park, but he does not consort with them. There is little doubt left in viewer's minds that racism was a significant factor leading up to Ghost Dog's choice of violent occupations. Whitaker gives a memorable performance, appearing humbled and haunted by the grisly occupation he has been forced to perform.

What this film delivers in atmosphere, it lacks in direction. We need to know more about what happened or didn't happen in Ghost Dog's life that brought him here.

Or we need to know more about how the samurai philosophy fills the gaping holes of society with bravery, loyalty and discipline. Without either, we're somewhat bored in a film that is soulful but slow, moody but detached from its audience.



ABBOT GEMMER

Samurai way: *Forest Whitaker is Ghost Dog, a contract killer who lives by the 18th century warrior text "Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai."*

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