

Chapter One

An American Genre in Transition

Dead Man as Predecessor to the Twenty-First-Century Western

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In retrospect, *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch, 1995) presents a transitional Western: a late twentieth-century postmodern genre-piece which in its radical aesthetic and philosophical content paves the way for twenty-first-century interventions. Jarmusch's redeployment of narrative structure and conceptual apparatus sets in place a groundwork for radical repurposing of this most American genre for contemporary social, artistic, and political reevaluations. Putting the form "under erasure," Jarmusch mobilizes essential strategies of postmodern literature, painting, and film: irony, pastiche, historical fabrications and nonlinearity to critique the American myth in general, in particular, the key origination saga of Westward expansion. Yet *Dead Man* was on its original release misunderstood by critics. Jonathan Rosenbaum recalls Roger Ebert's befuddlement: "Jim Jarmusch is trying to get at something here, and I don't have a clue what it is" (Ebert quoted in Rosenbaum 2000, 7). However, a cognoscenti of scholars (Moliterno 2001, Rosenbaum 2000, Jones 1996, and Levich 1996) did fully grasp the director's ambitions.

Dead Man functions as a textbook example of reviving the rules of genre only to implode them. To deconstruct Westerns, Jarmusch performs a cinematic "double reading." Significantly, Derrida's double reading as a gesture of deconstruction requires "patient, rigorous . . . reconstruction of a text" (Critchley 2008, 3). If deconstruction is to have "any persuasive force, then it must possess a full complement of the tools of commentary while laying down a powerful, primary layer of reading." Jarmusch must—and *does*—exhibit absolute mastery of the genre's tropes and trajectories before he can undermine them. If postmodernity implies the end of grand narratives (Lyotard 1984, xxiv), then the classical Western's story—the "civilizing" mission of dead white males—must end. "*Dead Man* defines the move west in terms of industrialization and violence. Rather than a push for civilization and taming

of the wilderness (as in the ‘classical Western’), *Dead Man* portrays a world of destruction—of the Native American pre-existent culture and the land—and senseless slaughtering” (Rodriguez-Ortega 2005).

Master narratives of the Enlightenment, notably stories of technological progress, provide the basis for myths of expansion at the Western’s very core. As Lyotard claims, those narratives have lost their legitimizing power. Building on Lyotard’s definition—a form of skepticism about authority, received wisdom, and cultural norms—postmodern thought is part of the legacy of twentieth-century philosophy’s critique of technocratic rationality. As such, it automatically interconnects with postcolonialism, feminism, and poststructuralism; all these critical inquiries are apparent in *Dead Man*.

DECONSTRUCTING MYTHOLOGIES

Deconstruction is *not* synonymous with destruction, nor is it a “theory” to be affixed to texts. Functioning more like a tactical strategy, deconstruction requires responding to and intervening on the specifics of the text at hand. Jacob Levich notes that “Jarmusch flatly rejects the bipolar symbolism of traditional Westerns, most obviously where Civilization and Wilderness are concerned. Far from wallowing in the romantic concept of ‘virgin territory,’ the film depicts a mid-nineteenth-century America in which capitalism has already embraced and transformed the farthest reaches of the continent” (Levich 1996, 40). Yet deconstruction does not “resolve into untruth or relativism but . . . intervenes in the system that first makes possible meaning and . . . difference between truth/falsity and determinism/relativism” (Gunkel 2001, 201). The standard critique of the 1980s culture wars—claiming that postmodernism was a form of multicultural “relativism”—doesn’t hold. This is particularly true in *Dead Man*, wherein a central character is among the most prominent “dead white males” of English literary tradition.

Here, the character called “William Blake” (Johnny Depp) is presented in a manner that reanimates the radical potential of the dead white male’s texts and social, religious, economic, and cultural critiques. That Blake’s words are spoken by the film’s most literate character—Native American outcast “Nobody” (Gary Farmer)—collapses any pretense that canonical literature and the literature of native peoples exist in simple opposition. Mark Dery (1996, 244) explains that “Western systems of meaning are underwritten by binary oppositions . . . Meaning is generated through exclusion: The first term of each hierarchical dualism is subordinated to the second, privileged one.” Binary oppositions, by which meaning is produced and regulated, delimits forms of knowing within what is called Western science . . . Deconstruction,

therefore, constitutes a mode of critical intervention that takes aim at the binary oppositions by which Western systems of knowing, including itself, are organized and articulated (Gunkel 2001, 203). “*Dead Man*’s many gestures of reversal would seem to fit in with this strategy: every positive gesture, as we have seen, is canceled out by a negative one” (Rickman 1999, 398–99). This includes displacement of the wilderness/civilization dichotomy, so basic to the twentieth-century Western’s mythology.

Jarmusch uses the structure of binary oppositions to destabilize the genre, conceptualizing the Western as “an open allegorical form . . . a fantasy world that America has used to process its own history through often stamping its ideology all over it” (Rodriguez-Ortega 2005). Barthes’s semiological definition of myth explains cinema’s cultural work of making “things appear to mean something by themselves.” *Dead Man* responds to this by offering “a counter-ideology that locates violent confrontation and racial erasure at the center of the history of the United States” (Rodriguez-Ortega). Thus, the Western is a powerful example of the semiological function of myth as “*depoliticized speech*.” What is *got rid of* in the Western is certainly not colonialism, but “the historical, in one word: *fabricated*, quality of colonialism.” Myth does not deny things; its function is to talk about them. Simply put, myth purifies issues (Barthes 1997, 269). The effect of this genre understood through Barthes’s semiological framework is that conquest of the West, the civilizing mission of westward expansion, is “natural and goes without saying.”

Part of the spectator’s pleasure in watching the Western, particularly those of the twentieth century’s first half, is the viewer’s assurance of a world marked by clarity; a mythical domain where heroes and villains exist without vagaries. *Dead Man*’s intervention offers instead a strategic narrative marked by its episodic structure and use of fadeouts as a primary form of punctuation. Necessarily, Jarmusch refuses to present a coherent narrative. Rodriguez-Ortega (2005) argues correctly that Jarmusch’s film “does not ‘conceal’ a second meaning under a different surface.” Avoiding the deciphering of myth that Barthes calls “unmasking,” Jarmusch reads the myth in a mode Barthes calls dynamic, passing from semiology to ideology, “connect[ing] a mythical schema to a general history” (Barthes 1997, 267). Jarmusch responds to the “constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics” by exposing those dynamics, becoming a filmmaker Barthes would call “a *reader* of myths” (emphasis mine).

Similarly, Kent Jones notes that “the wide-open landscape has operated throughout the history of the Western—even in the heyday of (1970s) revisionist days—as a kind of ‘depoliticized’ untouchable ‘tabula rasa.’” In Barthesian terms, the landscape has passed from semiology to ideology. “Jarmusch’s landscape, on the contrary, provides a claustrophobic succession

of senseless violence, mediated encounters that lead only to death. Robby Müller's cinematography shreds . . . the grandiose Monument Valley iconography that has dominated throughout the history of the Western genre and offers the spectator an alternative universe in which 'Nobody' has a voice" (Rodriguez-Ortega 2005).

WILDERNESS VS. CIVILIZATION

Wright's analysis draws on Vladimir Propp, Claude Levi-Strauss, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Roland Barthes to map the Western as dependent on four essential binary oppositions: inside society/outside society, bad/good, weak/strong and civilization/wilderness. "[M]yth depends on simple and recognizable meanings which reinforce rather than challenge social understanding. For this purpose, a structure of oppositions is necessary. The Western is structured this way, and, as we shall see, it presents a symbolically simple but remarkably deep conceptualization of American social beliefs" (Wright 1997, 272). Such a paradigm is mappable on a grid wherein only one of three key character archetypes of the genre (Hero, Villain, and Society) can occupy the privileged position of all four binaries. Indeed, only the hero is presented as good, strong, outside of society, and "of" the wilderness.

His ability to deploy *redemptive* violence—the mark that makes his violence noble as opposed to purely brutal—is that he alone is identified with the wilderness.

The hero's identification with the wilderness can be established in various ways, through purely visual imagery or an explanation of his background, his life as a trapper or association with the Indians . . . the minimal requirement for the hero is that he belongs to the West and has no association with the East, with education and culture. . . . The Western hero is felt to be good and strong because he is involved with the pure and noble wilderness, not with the contaminating civilization of the East. (Wright 1997, 285)

Unlike revisionist Westerns that precede it, *Dead Man* features a classic journey across the entire American West, from Blake's train ride from the East into Machine through to his flight to the Northwestern shore; always, he is aided and accompanied by his spiritual guide, Nobody. We last glimpse Blake traveling further west in his canoe, across "the mirror of water," as Nobody calls the ocean (Rickman 1999, 390). This journey, which takes Blake from East to West—in earlier, more traditional Westerns, from civilization to wilderness—is accomplished in the nearly wordless opening sequence. The city slicker in the "clown suit" encounters a progressively wilder cohort of

travel companions and a landscape progressively more decimated. And so “While *Dead Man*’s surface seems to be a somewhat conventional outlaw narrative,” it serves as an allegory “of the soul’s progress from physical death to spiritual transcendence” (Levich 1996, 39).

The sparse story line initially follows Blake from Cleveland to the town of Machine, where he arrives at the satanic Dickinson Metalworks only to learn his job has been filled. Finding solace with flower girl “Thel” (after William Blake’s *Book of Thel*, played by Mili Avital), Blake awkwardly shoots her former lover (Gabriel Byrne) in self-defense, taking a bullet himself after it passes through the murdered girl. His victim, Charlie, is avenged by that man’s father, the proprietor of Dickinson Metalworks. Injured Blake awakes to Native American Nobody attempting to remove the bullet.

The social and moral implications of the journey would, in Westerns of the previous century, be resolved through violence. If only fragilely, order would be restored and civilization embraced. But here is where *Dead Man* veers off the prescribed trajectory:

The point is clinched even before the opening titles roll, through a virtually wordless ten-minute sequence that depicts . . . Blake’s journey from Cleveland to Machine. What we’d expect from the genre is a gradual transition from a settled, orderly East, through a series of progressively more primitive climes, to a full-blown Wild Frontier. Instead, (Blake) observes a succession of blasted landscapes, everywhere strewn with the detritus of westward expansion—abandoned wagons, skeletal remains, and slaughtered buffalo. Later, as he flees northward . . . technology is always a step or two ahead of him . . . Even in a remote Indian village near the Canadian border, a derelict sewing machine lies among the carved totems and dugout Canoes. (Levich 1996, 41)

Dead Man posits no clear line between civilization and wilderness. The end of the line is no “final frontier” but a filthy industrial hellscape. Machine might as well be an urban sweatshop on the East coast, factory noise and grime dominating. Our protagonist has “gone West” only to discover the outermost limit has already been reinscribed within civilization, capitalism, and industrialization. The long-standing myth of nature, untouched by humans, is laid bare as patently false. So the central animal companion of the Western, the horse, is refigured as a locomotive. Of course, then, *Dead Man* opens with the sound and image of railroad technology. Jarmusch draws on philosophical critiques of techno-rationality and the instrumentalist understanding of mechanical formations first articulated by Heidegger, whose ethical critique of technocratic rationality argued that technology reduces everything—including the subject—to a resource that may be optimized. “Within our current technological ‘constellation’ of intelligibility, [o]nly what is calculable in advance counts as being” (Heidegger 1998, 36).

The protagonist undertakes his journey on the promise of employment found in a letter from Dickenson Metalworks. Crispin Glover's train fireman warns in almost postmodern literary fashion, "I wouldn't trust no words written down on no piece of paper." Technocratic rationality has already formulated and framed the world at the end of the line; nothing escapes its enframing. Instead, a world of resources and components is revealed; Blake reaches the factory only to find himself without a position or money. Such a philosophical critique of modernity also implies a critique of capitalism in the presence of the patriarch who runs this company town. "John Dickenson" (Robert Mitchum), in an ironic mash-up of his many Western roles (film and TV), appears with shotgun in hand before his own life-size portrait, a parody of a parody. *Dead Man* imagines the enterprise in the grim style found in filmed adaptations of Charles Dickens's literary portrayals of industrial poverty.

DECONSTRUCTING VIOLENCE: THE LAW OF THE GUN

Jarmusch's most important ambition is to deconstruct the presentation of violence in Westerns. The camera follows fatally-wounded Blake, accompanied by his own reappraisal of Hawkeye's Chingachgook. "Through their journey, (the longtime companions) encounter a gender-perverted version of the pioneer family, a couple of twin marshals, a priest who sells infected blankets to natives in an outpost and, finally, a hired killer. In every instance a violent confrontation occurs" (Rodriguez-Ortega 2005). "Why do you have this?" Blake asks Thel as he discovers her gun under the pillow. "'Cause this is American," she explains. Jarmusch's blistering critique of the genre's gun fetish is more relevant in post-Parkland twenty-first-century America, Jarmusch having sensed the shape of things to come. Every shoot-out is visually downplayed. Inept individuals—most notably our "hero"—are unable to effectively use their weapons. Shooters miss their targets, characters die from out-of-frame bullets they never saw coming. "Every time someone fires a gun in this movie, both the gesture and its result are awkward, unheroic, even downright pitiful; it's a messy act devoid of any pretense of stylishness or existential purity, creating a sense of discomfort and embarrassment in the viewer usually expressed in laughter . . . it's the reverse of the expressionist forms of violence taken for granted in commercial moviemaking ever since *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and recently granted a second life by . . . Woo and Tarantino . . . Jarmusch refuses to respect or valorize bloodshed" (Rosenbaum 1996).

Here, Henry Giroux's 1995 nuanced separation of ritualistic violence, symbolic violence, and hyperreal violence is useful. Ritualistic violence is at the center of genres (like the Western and action-adventure film) wherein

violence appears in a display that is “utterly banal, predictable, and often deeply masculine”; pure spectacle in form, superficial in content. Recognizing that the violence of, say, *Die Hard* is not equitable with the violence of *Schindler’s List*, Giroux presents a second category, symbolic violence, citing Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* as a rewriting of Hollywood Westerns in which “[V]iolence serves as both a spectacle and an ethical referent for exploding the myth of a West in which women are only ornaments . . . (Eastwood) rewrites the traditional and revisionist Western and in doing so raises ethical questions concerning how violence has been mythologized and decontextualized so as to reinvent a nostalgic and utterly false version of the American past” (Giroux 1995).

As a necessary transition to the twenty-first-century Western, *Dead Man* moves beyond *Unforgiven*’s late twentieth-century vision by responding to a third development in cinematic violence, hyperreal violence, typified by the 1990s films of Quentin Tarantino. *Dead Man* offers a political intervention in the genre, deliberately deflating this tendency. Giroux argues that the familiarity and commonality of everyday violence in American culture rendered it a prime target to “commodify, sensationalize, and subordinate to the aesthetic of realism. (While watching), Audiences can gaze at celluloid blood and gore and comfortably refuse any complicity or involvement” (Giroux 1995). Contrarily, Jarmusch takes critical aim at the moral indifference and cynicism of hyperreal violence. In rejecting the reinvented Western formalism of Leone (*The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*, 1966) and Peckinpah (*The Wild Bunch*, 1969), *Dead Man* “renders the cinematic visions of the vicious gun-mediated confrontation of the Western as a symptomatic surface under which occurred the brutal slaughter of natives and the selfish exploitation of the Western land for profiteering purposes” (Rodriguez-Ortega 2005). This strategy culminates in the final shoot-out, drained of all significance and satisfaction as to any expected audience pleasure. The confrontation between hired assassin Cole Wilson (Lance Henriksen) and Nobody is displayed through a high-angle long shot from dying Blake’s point of view, as his consciousness fades away, allowing for the aesthetic of deconstruction to dominate.

DECONSTRUCTING THE WESTERN OUTLAW MYTH

Another essential genre element is the outlaw. With the bounty hunter Cole (whose name suggests the historical gunman Cole Younger), Jarmusch strategically responds to the tendency of audiences to idolize Hollywood’s outlaws and gangsters. We laugh at Joe Pesci’s Tommy de Vito in *Goodfellas*, even as we once shared Little Joey’s awe for the gunslinger Jack Wilson

(Jack Palance) who “was fast on the draw” and “packs two guns” in *Shane* (1953). Contrarily, Jarmusch confronts the audience with a bold dare. If you (like Jimmy Conaway in *Goodfellas*, a film whose gangster characters often reference Westerns) root for the bad guy in movies, I’ll give you an outlaw you *can’t* admire, who isn’t the most interesting character in the film, an authentic outlaw who exceeds two extreme anthropological taboos: the human laws against incest and cannibalism. But *Dead Man* attacks the audience’s attachment to *all* perpetrators of violence, even the hero. When Blake arrives at the missionary’s trading post, he is greeted by a wall of Wanted posters—the 1800’s equivalent of the social media selfie—which he discusses with Nobody. The proprietor-priest (Alfred Molina) requests Blake’s autograph, a wry commentary on the legendary status of violent heroes and the spectator’s investment in that legend. “Blake is a legend now,” sings Nobody as they depart the carnage in a canoe. After killing yet another opponent and taking another bullet as a magnet for “white man’s metal,” our hero merely sighs and informs us of how tired he is of it all. Jarmusch’s work steadfastly refuses to allow the Western audience’s age-old identification with the hero who deploys the same violence as the villain—a violence purified and admired because (in the hero’s case) it is redemptive. As the possibility of redemption does not exist here, *Dead Man* insists that violence is—in art as in life—nothing more than pointless brutality.

THE WESTERN HERO UNDER ERASURE

Jarmusch empties out the category of the cowboy hero, the archetype so central to American mythology. Blake’s relation to violence (under Nobody’s guidance) undermines the requirements of a conventional hero. Blake is devoid of normative masculinity, a concept undone in the very casting of Depp: delicate, soft-spoken, long-haired. Beyond that, the film undermines the genre’s norm, achieved in part through the tone of black comedy and an almost slapstick presentation of the hero’s failure to be heroic. Blake is protected from Charlie Dickinson by Thel, whom he is helpless to protect. This failure to enact the expected “masculinity as brutality” proves to be *Dead Man*’s most fundamental strategy thanks to the protagonist’s passive (rather than as usual for a Western active) character. “He starts out as this blank piece of paper, and pretty soon everyone’s trying to scrawl graffiti all over him . . . Everyone’s sort of writing and projecting things onto him” (Jarmusch interviewed in Stephens 1996). The category of the heroic male is emptied out, imploded, and, finally, erased.

The Derridean concept of erasure helps explain this postmodern dynamic. In *Of Grammatology* (1967), Derrida builds on Martin Heidegger's strategy of crossing out the word Being, then letting the word *and* its erasure to stand: (Being). "Heidegger felt that Being was prior to and beyond signification or meaning, and hence to signify it was inadequate, though there existed no alternative. Derrida extended this practice to all signs" (Rickman 1999, 399). One critic described the film as the longest deathbed scene in cinema; this is immediate and intimately linked with the hero's journey West. "You're just as likely to find your own grave," warns Crispin Glover's fireman, shortly before the opening titles burst forth with words formed from bones. Nobody asks Blake early on: "Did you kill the white man who killed you?" "I'm not dead," replies Blake. He is, of course, wrong about that. Yet only Nobody sees the truth of Blake's Being-toward-Death.

BEING-TOWARD-DEATH

The film's epigraph is by Henri Michaux: "It's preferable not to travel with a dead man." By associating the journey westward with death rather than rebirth, Jarmusch confounds much of the mythology previously essential to Westerns. Instead, Jarmusch chooses "to meditate on the relationship of death to the natural world. One key occurrence is the eerie, poetic, mystical moment when Blake, lost and alone, curls up alongside an accidentally slain fawn" (Rosenbaum 1996). In some ways, the film serves as an existentialist meditation on death. This posits the protagonist (the human being whom Heidegger called *Dasein*—"being-there") as Being-toward-Death, a placeholder for existence already on the way to nonexistence. Human being, says Heidegger, is that being for whom its own Being (and nonbeing) is at issue. Encountering slaughtered buffalo, coffins, burned out villages and teepees, a dead fawn, animal skulls and a bullet near the heart, Blake is in an encounter with his mortality on this journey.

But as Heidegger (1998, 299) notes, Being-toward-Death turns out to "be an evasion in the face of death." Death is *Dasein*'s "ownmost" possibility, that one aspect of existence belonging most fundamentally to the human—a possibility which cannot be outrun, outstripped, or loaned out to another (Heidegger 1962, 307). Yet, Blake spends the entire film on the way to death mostly unaware of this. The "they" (*das Man*) that directs *Dasein* away from understanding her own-most possibility traps the human being in inauthenticity and an evasion of Being-toward-Death. Only Nobody, with the aid of "Grandfather peyote," sees Blake authentically, face transformed into a skull.

A double reading is also key to *Dead Man*'s engagement with Being-toward-Death, where the strategy of visually doubling every landscape and scene serves this function. "A key phrase of Nobody's to describe death—'passing through the mirror'—has a major bearing on the film's structure." Blake's glimpses of various activities during his initial walk through (a freshly built coffin being placed upright, a horse pissing, and a man in an alley getting a blow job) are matched by equally disorienting sights when, close to death, he passes through the Kwakiutl settlement" (Rosenbaum 1996). With the category of the hero under erasure, we are forced to consider the fact that our protagonist is really Nobody.

DOUBLE READING: THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED (NOBODY)

Nobody—displaying the cleverness of Odysseus—is also a wanderer, without a home in his own homeland. As that Greek hero lied to Polyphemus, "My name is nobody." Nobody frames our vision of America from the estranged position of the outsider. This strategy is common through Jarmusch's films beginning with the Hungarian immigrant Eva in *Stranger than Paradise* through the Japanese tourists of *Night on Earth*. This is perhaps *Dead Man*'s ultimate postmodern irony. Relegated to the role of the savage by the genre and moreover rejected by his own people since his "mixture (he is a 'half-breed') was not respected," Nobody is a foreigner in his own land, thus touching on the scandal that Native Americans are treated in this country as if foreigners.

The hero is erased and doubled to reveal the voice that has been silenced. In this way, *Dead Man* offers a form of deconstructive double reading. If the film allows the hero to function as an emptied-out blank space which attracts our projections like a magnet, it also lets one of the key effects of double reading to unfold: those voices silenced, repressed, and covered over by the Western discourse to speak. Farmer's nuanced and charismatic performance presents an admixture of literacy, compassion, aesthetic sympathy, competence, strength, gentleness, humor, and irony. He not only recites Blake's poetry but speaks in multiple native languages on-screen. Flashbacks allow us to experience his brutality at the hand of British soldiers, his capture, captivity, and education. Jarmusch described the multiple native languages of the dialogue, offered without benefit of subtitles for the largely non-Native viewing audience, as a small cinematic gift to Native American viewers who have witnessed themselves mute on-screen muttering "Ugh" and "How" throughout the genre's history.

Jonathan Rosenbaum (1996) agrees that “Jarmusch’s meticulously researched and multifaceted approach to Native cultures—which he respects without ever patronizing, idealizing, or otherwise simplifying—is in sobering contrast to his frightening portrait of white America as a primitive, anarchic world of spiteful bounty hunters, deranged trappers, and generally ornery individuals.” *Dead Man* marks a point of departure from all that preceded it, serving as a genuine transition to the twenty-first-century Western by refusing to reify and idealize the “native.” The film avoids timeworn simplification without collapsing into the “well-meaning” racist tropes of the magical Indian, whose spiritual powers bring salvation to the white man. Jarmusch employs humor and irony to prevent a de-evolution of Nobody’s character à la *Dances with Wolves*.

Ironically, the supposedly inherently spiritual “Indian wisdom” which leaves Blake exasperated and “fed up to here with all this Indian malarkey” is in fact the poetry of the Anglo William Blake: “The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to the crow.” Nobody’s quotation from the *Proverbs of Hell* sounds to Blake (the character, not the author) and to us like “native” wisdom. *Dead Man* functions both as a buddy movie and a road movie of another kind. However, the basic friendship—hard won, genuinely touching—does not relegate Nobody to the comical sidekick role. As a turn-of-the-century postmodern Western, *Dead Man* follows (and departs from) revisionist Westerns of the sixties and seventies. Those films rewrote the history of the Western—and therefore, the United States—by focusing on previously dismissed or repressed voices. Earlier “revisionist” Westerns—*A Man Called Horse*, *Soldier Blue*, and *Little Big Man* (all 1970)—subvert rather than reconsider what went before. *Dead Man* moves beyond the limitations of simplistic genre reconfiguration to offer something above and beyond the mere inclusion of previously repressed voices.

THE POET AS OUTLAW

Several critics assert their confidence that poet William Blake would have liked *Dead Man*, “an art film in Western clothing that seeks to articulate the very Blakean notion of the poet as outlaw” (Levich 1996, 39). Midway through, Nobody advises the mild-mannered accountant on the use of his six-gun. “That weapon will replace your tongue,” he says. “You will learn to speak through it, and your poetry will now be written with blood.” Jarmusch’s investment in taking poetry seriously would reemerge almost twenty years later in *Paterson* (2016), a twenty-first-century Western that perhaps could not exist had not *Dead Man* set a pathway. The transformative power

of poetry is articulated by Nobody, culminating in the visit of the protagonists to the missionary's trading post, a reminder of the relationship of Christianity to both imperialism and capitalism. "The vision of Christ that thou doth see, is my vision's greatest enemy"; Romantic poet William Blake's scathing critique speaks through the Native American's voice. Jarmusch parallels the Vision Quest, a spiritual rite of passage in several Native cultures, with Blake's visionary/mystical understanding of the universe.

Importantly, the exceptional visual beauty of *Dead Man* is related to such subject matter. In a sense, this is simply a film about poetry in which the formal techniques of cinema are deployed strategically so that form and content align. Shot in high contrast black and white, Jarmusch's film often appears to be a sequence of slides, separated by fadeouts and reminiscent of the nature photographs of Ansel Adams. *Dead Man*'s double reading—a reading that reveals what is repressed—offers us a first and second pass through its landscapes.

A signature move for Jarmusch since *Stranger than Paradise*, the fadeout is here used to full effect, as a form of visual punctuation. Well-suited to the spiritual and mystical inclinations of Blake's poetry, *Dead Man*'s ending achieves several postmodern strategic objectives. The slow rhythm (which accounts for some viewers' impatience with the film), was influenced by classical Japanese period movies by Kenji Mizoguchi. In *Dead Man*, even the interstitial tissue of poetry, the empty space between stanzas, the words that are *not* there, are (re)represented. In doing the work of undermining and imploding the Western, the director cannot offer yet another grand narrative. Refusing a seamless, coherent, teleological, logical "story," perhaps the primary postmodern technique of a fadeout demonstrates the work's incredulity toward meta-narratives (Lyotard 1984, xxiv). Jarmusch offers instead something discontinuous, fragmentary, partial, and exceptionally beautiful. As such, *Dead Man* presents a necessary bridge from the twentieth to the twenty-first century by using in his new context the grammar of the genre even now under erasure.

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