

RE-MYSTIFYING THE WEST: HYBRIDITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN JIM JARMUSCH'S *DEAD MAN*

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Abstract

The paper intends to examine the ways in which the American West has undergone a cinematic transformation with the advent of counter-cultural western movies that criticize and often dismantle American imperialism and expansionism. The paper makes the argument that the American West has arrived at a new stage in its mythology, namely that it has been re-mythologized as a locus of Eastern spiritual awakening. The western of the 1990s' decade embraces a rebirth of spiritualism through the genre of the "acid western," typified in this paper by Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995), a film that showcases the return of the West as a cultural frontier that must be re-assimilated instead of rejected. Given its symbolic title, *Dead Man* is not so much a Western as it is an Eastern romance, a rite of passage framed as a journey towards death. The paper will attempt to make its case by tackling the history of anti-establishment cinema, while also basing its argument on the assertions of director Jim Jarmusch, and various film critics who discuss the issue of the "acid western." At the same time, the paper will offer a post-colonial perspective informed by Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, with particular emphasis on Native American identity.

Keywords: *western, frontier, West, Eastern romance, hybridity*

Jim Jarmusch's 1995 feature, *Dead Man*, is a black-and-white arthouse film which has been catalogued by critic Jonathan Rosenbaum as an "acid western" because it takes well-known western staples and turns them on their head, painting a grim and extravagant picture of the frontier myth. In effect, it demystifies the fantasy built around the heroics of survival in the Wild West and, instead, gives the viewer "a crazed version of auto-destructive white America at its most solipsistic, hankering after its own lost origins" (Rosenbaum para. 26). Nostalgia for an unattainable past, coupled with a humorous and often

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grotesque self-awareness, suggests that the western is no longer content with envisioning the beginnings of the frontier, but is more tempted to describe its inevitable collapse. The following paper will attempt to show how *Dead Man* re-contextualizes the myth of western expansion and redefines the existence of frontier people between hybridity and spirituality.

The “acid western” or the “psychedelic western” (as dubbed by Jarmusch) is part and parcel of the 1960s anti-establishment culture that sought to undermine self-aggrandizing American myths, particularly those involving the frontier and the West. The narratives that dominated the American imagination often clashed due to the twofold nature of the rising empire: America thirsted for expansion, while at the same time adhering to strict policies of anticolonialism (Sexton 5). Due to its experience under British rule, the new country considered that its foundational documents, as well as its liberty, would be compromised if they allowed the “colonial model of the Old World” to invade the United States (6). Denying Europe a foothold in the West meant that America had to conquer the land for itself and embed it within the nation, so as not to render it a colony. At the base of such ideological dichotomies stood the need for the country to assert itself and “consolidate its independence from Britain” (6). Hence, in a quest for freedom, America seized the freedom of other nations and peoples, claiming that it was eliminating the European threat. Thus, the West came to signify the battlefield for self-identity. In what would become the famous “Frontier Thesis”, Frederick Turner Jackson posited that

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. (2)

The “perennial rebirth” and “fluidity of American life,” however, is contingent upon the erasure and death of other lives. What happens when this identity collapses due to its own false premises?

This is the question that the new, anti-establishment aesthetic of the 1960s attempts to answer in the form of directors like Monte Hellman, Jim McBride and Dennis Hopper, who were interested in shooting films which criticized the imperialist framework of western narratives. Jim Jarmusch himself aptly calls them “peripheral Westerns” (Rosenbaum para 35-36). Movies like *The Shooting* (1966 – Hellman) are not so much invested in plot, adventures and conflict as they are in the journey through the wilderness. The focus is on the characters’ slow degradation, both mental and physical, as they canvas the West and slowly lose sight of what they set out to do.

In this sense, the “acid western” operates with nonconventional modes of storytelling, ranging from the poetic, to the grotesque and finally, to the surreal. In *Dead Man*, the narrative builds towards a psychedelic journey, the destination of which is the protagonist’s death. If Turner believed the West was a process of constant rebirth which manifested itself on the frontier, Jarmusch’s film seems to be hinting at the opposite; the frontier is a place of death. This death, however, is something the protagonist must learn to accept. In one way, it is the metaphorical death of the modern white man who now seeks alternative ways of living. In another way, it is the death of the West as a romance of American identity.

It should be noted that revisionist westerns like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962 – John Ford), *Little Big Man* (1970 – Arthur Penn) and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976 – Clint Eastwood) have already played with western tropes and broached topics of race and masculinity in American culture, but it is “acid westerns” that dispose with the romance of the morality tale at the heart of the western. This rather cynical tendency brings them closer to their cousins, the Spaghetti Westerns of the 1960s (Acid Westerns para. 1). In any case, justice and goodness are moot points in the world of the “acid western.” In *Dead Man*, they must be transcended or dismantled entirely, because they are relative values which the hegemony employs in order to justify their actions towards others – in particular, Native Americans.

But if the (West)ern romance is dead, is there any other kind of romance that still permeates the narrative of Jarmusch’s film? I will argue that it is the Eastern romance which takes precedence in *Dead Man*, for, at its core, the movie is a re-actualization of a shamanistic rite of passage from the material world to the spiritual one. This is achieved through meditation, consumption of narcotics (like peyote) and ritualistic bloodshed. Native culture is, therefore, a passage to the East, and not the West. The protagonist is asked a series of repetitive questions, such as “Do you have any tobacco?”, although he adamantly claims he does not smoke. He must also undergo a number of trials before he can begin to understand that he is dying. All these tests are meant to prepare him to face and accept his mortality. His irreverent shaman, a Native American called Nobody is a curious figure, a product of both mainstream and counterculture. He is not there simply to guide our protagonist on his journey, but also to tell his own story. A Native of mixed-blood who has been rejected by his tribe and by white society, he stands on the periphery of the West and can offer critical insight from both sides of the frontier. His role and the subversive quality of his discourse will be discussed at a later point in the essay.

Dead Man begins with a quote from famed surrealist painter and poet, Henri Michaux who, ironically, was fascinated with the Orient. His wry adage, “It is preferable not to travel with a dead man,” sets the tone and mood of the film. We are told from the onset that we are going to witness the voyage of a

dead man. The film timely opens with a train ride to nowhere. William 'Bill' Blake, whose poetic name is no accident, travels from Cleveland, Ohio to the strange town of Machine to fill up the vacant position of an accountant. The western settlement, however, is at the very end of the line, meaning that he has reached the last frontier and can go no further than that, or so he thinks.

The dreary pace of his journey is both prophetic and humorous. Bill looks out the window at a narrow, desolate landscape that appears to him both dull and strange. The figures on the train are hyper-realistic, to the point where they seem fantastical. Haggard looking men and women sit in absolute silence, until they happen upon a buffalo herd, at which point, they take up their guns and start shooting through the window. Bill is also ambushed by the train fireman, who proceeds to spook and confuse him. A clear outsider, Blake is overwhelmed by the eeriness of his new settings and its populace (Lombardo 21). With his fancy attire, clean suitcase and round glasses, Bill does not realize that he is, in fact, the strange one there.

Upon his arrival in town, he gawks at the outlandish and distorted world before him. Through it all, he is accompanied by unsettling guitar riffs which give the scene a dreamlike quality. As we follow Bill around town, we also share his feeling of alienation because the sequence is shot in such a way as to appear eerie and uncomfortable. What Jarmusch achieves with such scenes is not only a demystification of the West, but a concomitant re-mystification. The West is no longer the space of adventure and romance, but that of the absurd and the uncanny. The stark lighting and the black-and-white frames emphasize the idea that Bill has stepped into an underworld, a place filled with magic and death. In fact, his first walk through town confronts him with many symbols of death, such as a funeral hearse that blocks his path and the mounted skeletons of dead animals which follow him from house to house.

In a scene reminiscent of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Bill discovers that his place at Dickinson's Metal works has been occupied. Left without purpose, he proceeds to walk around town aimlessly, observing, but not participating in the panorama of the West. What is interesting to note is that Jarmusch's chosen scenery is very industrial and bleak, disregarding the era's optimistic view of technology (Lombardo 21). At the same time, we are given a detailed look into a metal factory, which is an atypical western location. We also see the insides of an office and the humdrum of clerk life, an intrusion of bureaucracy that counterpoints the escapism of the West.

Despite this industrial incursion, the set-up pays homage to the classic narrative of the civilized hero from the North who finds the West wild and untamed. Blake is obviously scandalized by the crude customs of his new residence. Our expectations are both met and frustrated in such humorous scenes as the saloon sequence, which promises an altercation between Bill and the

townspeople, but ends rather anticlimactically with him on the front steps, drinking from a tiny bottle of whiskey.

On this occasion, he meets and helps a young woman who sells paper flowers, but who clearly used to be a prostitute, and she takes an instant liking to him, despite her initial suspicions. The cinematic framing of her face and body are a clear tip-off to the original damsel-in-distress trope; Thel is sweet and innocent, yet also tarnished by the cruel West. She is mesmerized by the “hero” and willing to renege her other lovers for him. However, she is immediately killed off by a jealous fiancé, who discovers the two of them in bed. Bill clumsily succeeds in shooting the fiancé, using Thel’s bedside gun. In the fracas, our hero receives a bullet to the chest, but the “shootout” is awkward, unaesthetic and once again, darkly humorous, because the dramatic confrontation has no emotional echo; Bill has just met Thel and has no connection to either her or her jealous lover.

Like most of the violence in the film, the murders are rendered pointless and absurd, but they precipitate Bill’s real journey towards death. He makes his escape on the jealous lover’s horse and flees town, but he does not manage to get very far due to his wounds. Throughout the movie, he is on the run for his crime. However, Jarmusch suggests that true escape is not achieved through gun fights and heroic stunts, but through immersion in one’s inner life and eventually, one’s death.

When Bill is found and rescued by Nobody, the real journey begins, as the Native duly informs him that he is already a “dead man.” This can be interpreted in various ways; either Bill has already rejected whatever society could offer him and he is dead to the world, or he has lost touch with himself and consequently, might have been dead since we first saw him on the train. In the latter case, it could be argued that by shedding his physical body and accepting his mortality, he actually awakens and stops being “dead.”

Nobody clearly mocks Bill for being a “stupid white man” whose life bears little meaning in the grand scheme of things, and he often speaks to him in his dialect without Bill ever understanding a word. This was a deliberate choice on the director’s part because there are never any subtitles to translate the Native’s speech. Hence, the scenes are directed towards a Native audience only.

That being said, Nobody is still ready to prepare Bill for his journey in the afterlife since he believes Blake is the reincarnation of the poet and painter, William Blake, whose name he happens to share. Nobody is a great admirer of the 18th century poet. He proceeds to quote from the poem “To See A World...”, fixating on the verses:

Some are Born to sweet delight,
Some are Born to Endless Night (Blake 129)

It is difficult not to relate these lines to the fate of the Native Americans, but the poem becomes even more emblematic when we find out more about Nobody's origins. He knows so much about 18th century poetry, for example, because he was more or less brought up in the white culture. He was kidnapped as a child by British soldiers and shipped off to England, where he was paraded as a piece of entertainment to the masses. Hoping to get rid of this painful condition, Nobody tried to imitate the white people and discard his "savage" origins, but the more he imitated them, the more he singled himself out. Eventually, he managed to return home, but he could no longer be a part of his tribe since he was already inured to white culture. They ridiculed him, calling him "He Who Talks Loud, Saying Nothing." He was a cast-out on both sides, a position akin to that of the "tragic mulatto." As such, the poem feels deeply personal to someone born to belong nowhere. Jarmusch stated that he chose to include William Blake in his script because he noticed an affinity between the poet's ideas and Native American thinking (Jarmusch para.4). In any case, Nobody's connection to white culture gives him a double vision which allows him to understand more of Bill than Bill understands of Nobody.

As a Native American, Nobody is an atypical western character. Normally, he would either pose as the friend or the enemy of the hero, but here he is neither. We cannot say he forms a lasting bond with Bill, nor can we say that he wishes him harm. He is a dubious figure which, in white culture would be represented as Mephistophelian, whereas in Native culture, he would be more of a Trickster. We are not certain which tribe he truly belongs to, even though he states he is half-Blackfoot. He speaks various Native tongues, including Cree and Makah (Jarmusch para. 5). Despite the mystery surrounding him, he is a fully-developed, three-dimensional character, neither sanctimonious nor savage. He defies stereotyping and subverts the Western fantasy of the 'wise Indian.' More than that however, Nobody is "nobody" because he encompasses too many identities and too many modes of being, rendering him obsolete both in his own tribe and in white culture. He has become a hybrid who, in Homi Bhabha's conception, underwent "a process of disavowal" through mimicry (qtd. in Kraidy 58). Nobody, for instance, grew up learning about the poetry of William Blake, and thus he often quotes from the poet, pretending he is offering sage Indian advice. His companion, Bill, cannot tell the difference between the English verses and Native folklore, which confirms that Nobody has assimilated white culture perfectly into his own. Thus, by mimicking the colonizer, Nobody managed to disavow his influence. William Blake has become his own poet, notwithstanding the white man's influence. Still, this only underlines the Indian's sense of hopelessness in a world where he can only identify with a dead poet. Nobody represents the new "frontier man," a liminal figure, trapped between different states, unable to remain rooted, but constantly on a journey of self-actualization.

Bill Blake himself is not a stereotypical western hero, since he is divorced of any traditional heroics. In fact, one could argue that he is an empty vessel, neither good nor bad, waiting for spiritual enlightenment in order to acquire a concrete existence. Juan A. Suarez argues that he might have been ‘somebody’ in the white man’s world, but as he adopts the Native way of being and borrows traits from Nobody, he too becomes “the generic Indian pushed to a death space – the space of the holocaust, cultural disintegration, and invisibility” (qtd. in Rice 44). The film’s structure seems to corroborate this interpretation, since there are constant fade-ins and fade-outs, almost as if Bill were slowly disappearing from the world. The repetitive editing might also suggest that the character is not only disintegrating, but also entering a kind of trance. Whether he is meant to wake up from this trance, we do not know, since the movie begins and ends with a fade-out of Bill being transported to “nowhere” (the first time by train to the town of Machine, and the second time by boat to the afterlife). We are thus confronted with a rite of passage which might never come to fruition.

As mentioned previously, Jarmusch re-mythologizes the West as the place of the uncanny and the absurd, but there is also a hallucinatory aspect to the film. We are not sure what is and what is not real. For example, we cannot pinpoint the moment of Bill Blake’s physical death. We are also not sure when Bill accepts the persona of William Blake. The Native tells him he will write his poetry with blood, and as Bill kills more people, he assumes his poetic alter-ego. One is left to wonder who and what he has become. He undergoes Nobody’s trials in order to achieve an understanding of his own death, but at the end of the movie, when he is placed into a funeral barge, he thinks he is sailing back to Cleveland and he repeats that “I don’t smoke” when given tobacco. These ambiguities are also a testament to the movie’s dark humor. Bill’s enlightenment might have been all for naught, Jarmusch seems to say.

Yet perhaps that is the point of the narrative, that death should not have an overarching meaning, but should be accepted as it is. In an eastern paradigm, death is not something one must fight or even understand, but something which one must absorb. As the Persian poet Rumi chants in *Divan-e Shams*:

Die, die, die in this love,
 once you die in this love, you will be all a soul
 Die, die and don’t fear this death,
 because you will emerge from this earth and capture the skies (qtd. in
 Akhtar 151)

This is an idea which ‘Nobody’ abides by because Native American culture echoes the same sense of kinship with death. Yet the white man is unconsciously resisting this mystery. At the beginning of the movie, the train fireman describes to Bill how he will end up in a boat, looking up at the ceiling

while the landscape moves on water. He says, in particular, that Bill will wonder why the landscape is moving, yet the boat is still. The protagonist considers this only the addled nonsense of a crazy man because he cannot see beyond the riddle. The fireman's premonition does not only reflect the timeless, cyclical nature of life and death (a boat on a constantly moving sea), but it also acts as a foreboding, since at the end of the movie, Bill is sent out to sea in a boat, looking up at the sky.

The trials and preparations that Bill undergoes in the movie may be the trials and preparations that all men go through in their last moments before death. What matters to Jarmusch is that this event, which might last mere seconds, can be drawn out beautifully into a cinematic journey. Since the West is a state of mind and its paradigm is the journey across the frontier, the western becomes a suitable medium for the reenactment of a voyage to the afterlife. The journey west becomes a journey east – a circular journey backwards, completing a cycle of life.

This is one reason why *Dead Man* is not an anti-western. It merely reduces the genre to its essence, stripping it of the nostalgia and escapism of the past, but imbuing it with a new sense of mystery. The "acid western" is also chockfull of bizarre instance of humor. The blackcomedy is often at variance with the drama presented on the screen. There are small characters that make outlandish appearances throughout the movie, be they fur-trappers or bounty-hunters. These men and women give the film a quasi-western feel, but their hijinks and antics clash with Blake's sober journey into death. Acts of violence which should be horrific are shot and framed in a ridiculous and clumsy fashion. How then to reconcile the tongue-in-cheek approach Jarmusch employs with the mystical experience of transience? As we mentioned previously, death is not supposed to be taken seriously in the eastern paradigm. That is not to say that death does not matter, but that it is not approached with reverence and fear. It is greeted with warmth and humor, encapsulating the absurdity, the inevitability and the endless *possibility* of death.

To conclude, *Dead Man* is an experimental film which uses the western as a "point of departure" (Jarmusch para.2) to tell a bigger story. Its discourse is both sarcastic and affectionate towards the classical western but, much like 'Nobody', *Dead Man* stands on both sides of the frontier. It recalls the myth of the pioneer man, journeying into the unknown, but it announces that the real journey is within and that this passage requires a different geographical compass.

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