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**Jim Jarmusch  
Symposium**  
Introduction

#### Broken Flowers

feature with Interview  
-take 1 by Kristi Mitsuda  
-take 2 by Chris Wisniewski  
-take 3 by Jeff Reichert

Permanent Vacation  
Stranger Than Paradise  
Ghost Dog  
Year of the Horse  
Dead Man (take 1)  
Dead Man (take 2)  
Dead Man/Ghost Dog  
Mystery Train  
Night on Earth  
Down By Law  
Coffee and Cigarettes

#### Spotlight on JUNEBUG

Phil Morrison  
(director of Junebug)  
-Junebug review  
by Kristi Mitsuda

#### Shot/Reverse Shot:

Horror Smackdown  
The Devil's Rejects  
Nick Pinkerton vs.  
Brad Westcott

#### New Releases

-War of the Worlds (take 1)  
-War of the Worlds (take 2)  
-Land of the Dead  
-Batman Begins  
-Shake Hands with  
the Devil  
-Forty Shades of Blue  
-Heights  
-Searching for the  
Wrong-Eyed Jesus  
-Charlie and the  
Chocolate Factory  
-Dark Water  
-The Beat That My  
Heart Skipped  
-The Bad News Bears  
-2046  
-Grizzly Man  
-Keane

#### DVD Reviews

**RS on indieWIRE**  
updated weekly

**blog**

**issue archive**

**article index**

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THE NEW MAGAZINE OF FILM CULTURE



## Dead Space

Vicente Rodriguez-Ortega on *Dead Man*

*Dead Man* opens with the sound and image of the technological beast: the railroad. Immediately, William Blake's (Johnny Depp) disoriented face stares at the spectator. He sits shyly in a train car, looking around, lost in a space he does not recognize as his own. Clad in Eastern clothes, he travels from Cleveland, Ohio, to the Western city of "Machine"—at the end of the railroad line—to fill an accounting position at Dickinson Metalworks. The sequence is punctuated with a series of fade in/out, recurrent shots of the train's wheels and successive symbolic images that mark the transition from East to West: a destroyed wagon, the Rocky Mountains, an abandoned "Indian" camp, a deserted Monument Valley. Suddenly, Blake sees himself surrounded by a bunch of bearded buffalo hunters defiantly waving their Winchester rifles. Neil Young's eerie guitar score heightens an uncanny sense of discomfort. The train's coal shoveler (Crispin Glover) strikes up a conversation with Blake and announces the lack of value in the written word—Dickinson's letter—in the hellish world he is entering. He then describes with visionary accuracy the scenario of death Blake will encounter in the end of the narrative. Blake is stigmatized as a "Dead Man" by the very act of embarking West. Suddenly, the thunderous sound of rifle bullets interrupts their conversation. The hunters are slaughtering buffalo from the train even though they will never profit from the animals' death. They kill as a mere distraction.

After a fade to black, the train arrives at "Machine," an industrial pandemonium presided by buffalo carcasses, coffins, mud, pissing horses, wandering pigs, a prostitute blowing a gunslinger in the open street, and a wary-looking lady desperately cradling her baby. The gigantic chimney of the Dickinson Metalworks factory, vomiting a column of smoke, looms over the town.

Jarmusch sets it straight from the very beginning: *Dead Man* is a Western precisely because it *is not*. The film positions itself against the ideological and formal constructions of the genre. It revisits and revises the genre's scenario to transform it aesthetically and re-evaluate several of the politically constructed values that have rendered a fictional world as factual in the making of a nation—namely, the United States.

It could be argued that the revisionist westerns of the early Sixties and early Seventies act as precursors of turn-of-the-century postmodern westerns such as *Dead Man*. They brought to the fore a series of concerns that reacted against traditionally unproblematic conceptualizations of the United States. With the anti-hegemonic counter-culture of the Sixties, the concern for ecology, the dividing shock of the Vietnam War, and the questioning of the political system after Kennedy's assassination—"America had lost its innocence." Dissent was freer to proliferate in the Hollywood production system than in previous decades. As a result, a series of films rewrote the history of the Western—and, therefore, the United States—by redrawing previously dismissed or repressed voices. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, *Jeremiah Johnson*, and *Little Big Man* are all products of this shattering moment of national interrogation and political conflict. Filmmakers had not only gained consciousness of the very formal mechanisms that supported the idea of the western, they also aimed at subverting the set of meanings



that accompanied the specific grammar of the genre.

In the late Seventies and Eighties the production of westerns declined to the point that several critics affirmed the death of the genre. Kevin Costner's Academy Award-winning *Dances with Wolves* brought the genre back to the center stage of mainstream production. In addition, other contemporaneous films explored the possibilities of generic innovation or revisiting within the western genre. Films like *Lone Star*, *The Ballad of Little Jo*, *Unforgiven*, *Posse*, *Smoke Signals*, *The Quick and the Dead*, and *Bad Girls* focused on issues of gender and race that had been previously dismissed or silenced. The "repressed" came back with a voice of their own, and the western has become an allegorical space for political intervention springing from the margins.

*Dead Man*, as a Western, imitates and appropriates formal mechanisms and ideological values of previous works only to retool them in a complex universe that aims to go beyond them. The monumental landscape of the classical Western is reimagined as a gloomy violence-emptied "no man's land" where people wander in a futile pursuit to delay their inevitable ultimate demise. It acts as an allegorical space that reflects and refracts the several manners and degrees in which the conquest of the West is rendered as a vicious brutality. Jarmusch reworks the meanders of cultural memory of the Western genre to recuperate those voices that had been silenced—most remarkably the natives' voices—but refuses to pigeonhole them in a straight factual fashion. Jarmusch's storytelling functions through the revisiting of the past to intervene in a present that has been partly constructed through the myth-to-fact transformation performed by Hollywood, appropriating several key tropes, icons and formal devices of the western to rearticulate them in terms of its radical politics.

*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. The "law of the gun" only leads into the repeated butchering of other human lives for no other reason than hopeless survival in a world that has already condemned the individual to die by his/her very presence inside it. The overcoming of difficulties and dangers that leads into the final resolution of a conflict and the stabilization of the pioneer's lifestyle is denied. Blake will not prevail but die. The hero aid others through his ultimate sacrifice or learn anything from his journey. He is already *dead* from the beginning. He will only learn to kill, leaving a trail of bodies along the way to his announced death.

After being fatally wounded in "Machine," William Blake embarks on a journey through the woods of the Northwest with a Native American named "Nobody" (Gary Farmer). Through their journey, they encounter a series of inhabitants: 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. All shootouts are downplayed visually—they happen as though they would not. These inept individuals seem unable to use the weapons they carry, encountering death through an out-of-frame bullet they never see coming. As Jonathan Rosenbaum explains in his *Dead Man* BFI monograph: "Every time someone fires a gun at someone else in this film, the gesture is awkward, unheroic, pathetic, it's an act that leaves a mess and is deprived of any pretense at existential purity, creating a sense of embarrassment and overall discomfort in the viewer that is the reverse of what ensures from the highly aestheticized forms of violence that have become de rigueur ever since the heyday of Arthur Penn and Sam Peckinpah (...) recently revitalized by Tarantino."

The final confrontation between Cole Wilson (Lance Henriksen)—the hired assassin—and Nobody, the climax in classical Western or "hyper climax" in the "Spaghetti," is shown through a high-angle long shot from Blake's point of view, as his consciousness fades away in the last seconds of his life—it's in slight slow motion, devoid of palpable drama. Jarmusch fulfills a double purpose with the



downplay of this final confrontation: on the one hand, the film reinforces the overwhelming sense of unavoidable death that pervades the whole narrative—no one remains alive—and, on the other, he complies with the generic convention of the final shootout between hero and outlaw only to remind the viewer of its utter meaninglessness.

*Dead Man* critically rejects Leone's and Peckinpah's violent hyper formalism and 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. Furthermore, as Rosenbaum points out, Jarmusch positions himself in direct confrontation with other contemporary filmmakers such as the Coen Brothers and Quentin Tarantino. He renders the brutality and senselessness of violence precisely by rejecting the "operatic" and bloody aesthetics that informs the work of those filmmakers. Not accidentally, Cole Wilson, before crushing the bald skull of one of the murdered marshals, states, "It looks like a goddamn religious icon." Jarmusch, unlike others, does not utilize violence to glorify or aestheticize it but to expose the flip side of the "America," the fictional construct the Western genre decisively helped to construct throughout the 20th century.

In *Dead Man*, excess exists in relation to the historically stabilized types of the western genre. Cole Wilson functions as the archetype of the classical Western's legendary gunslinger that everyone fears and respects. However, we learn that his legendary status has been partly achieved because he "fucked his parents, cooked them, and ate them." Later in the story, he shoots one of the hired killers that accompanies him in his pursuit of William Blake and eats him calmly. Jarmusch depicts the killing with an out-of-frame sound of a gunshot as the image fades to black, followed by a long shot of Wilson devouring what appears to be a human arm. We contemplate his eating ritual for a fairly extended period of time. The legend has become a cannibal in the same way the culture of the "White Man" cannibalized and destroyed the pre-existent native cultures. The "other" violence of the Western is exposed. The film takes as a point of departure the established generic type to reject Hollywood's teleological world and emphasize the senselessness of murder and destruction that informed the conquest of the West. *Dead Man* must remain identifiable—legible—as a Western precisely because it acts as a tool of historical intervention.

Jim Jarmusch conceptualizes the Western film in the following terms: "kind of an allegorical open form...a fantasy world that America has used to process its own history through—often stamping its ideology all over it." Understanding *Dead Man*'s episodic narrative and its lack of causal linking between scenes in allegorical terms, helps to re-frame Jarmusch's intervention in the western genre within a radical version of history that rejects closure and progress and sides with discontinuity and fragmentation. Jarmusch's film does not "conceal" a second meaning under a different surface; on the contrary, it blatantly conceives of an alternative western universe, dressing itself as one to debunk its defining myths and lay its body bare. *Dead Man* takes the "allegorical open form" that Jarmusch defines to stamp a counter-ideology that locates violent confrontation and racial erasure at the center of the history of the United States. As Kent Jones remarks in *Cineaste* the wide-open landscape has operated throughout the history of the western—even in the heyday of the revisionist days—as a kind of "depolticized" untouched "tabula rasa." Jarmusch's landscape, on the contrary, is a claustrophobic succession of senseless violence-mediated encounters that lead only to death. In this sense, Robby Müller's cinematography shreds into pieces 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.

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