

Author: Levich, Jacob Source: Film Comment v32n3  
(May 1996): 39-41 ISSN: 0015-119X Number:  
02836113 Copyright: Copyright Film Society of Lincoln Center 1996

Midway through Jim Jarmusch's allegorical Western *Dead Man*, a renegade Indian advises a mild young accountant named William Blake 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."

The line, like much else in this startling new film, is not as obscure as it might at first appear. In context, it's a bold assertion of the transformative power of poetry and, as such, a radical departure from screen norms. Recent movies have rarely deviated from a single, bluntly utilitarian take on poetry: it's all about getting laid. If Postino's postman is confounded by Pablo Neruda's verses until he discovers he can use them to soften up the local *bambina*. *Dead Poets Society* is even more explicit: free-spirited English teacher Robin Williams assures his pubescent charges that the whole point of poetry is seducing women.

Thus the movie industry reduces verse to a sophisticated form of the advertising slogan-the right pitch, smoothly delivered and designed to play on the consumer's half-conscious desires, should result in a satisfactory transaction. In this shabby marketplace of movie-made ideas, the real William Blake-who despised commerce and aimed "to cast aside from poetry all that is not inspiration"-would have reached for his revolver. Or, better yet, his bow of burning gold.

But Blake might well have liked *Dead Man*, an art film in Western clothing that seeks to articulate the very Blakean notion of the poet as outlaw. In a very real sense, *Dead Man* is a filmic rendition of William Blake's life and thought -although, thankfully, director-writer Jarmusch eschews the dime-store Freudianism of the biopic form (picture a glowering Gary Oldman pitying chimney sweeps and having apocalyptic hallucinations while searching for his inner child). Instead, he uses the conventions of the Western genre to construct narrative and visual analogues of some of the thorniest features of the poet's worldview.

The result is a film of remarkable density, shot through with literary references-the sort of thing that was discussed endlessly in downtown coffee houses in the days when Susan Sontag still liked movies. Just beneath *Dead Man*'s surface, a fairly conventional outlaw narrative, lies a visionary allegory of the soul's progress from physical death to spiritual transcendence. And that's not all: its themes include a blessedly unsentimental attempt to grapple with the historical substance of westward expansion-in particular, the destruction of native populations and cultures -and a fresh, unusually perceptive take on what many see as the genre's central thematic concern, the Wilderness vs. Civilization dichotomy.

(Photograph Omitted)

(Photograph Omitted)

From Jarmusch-the hipster auteur best known for quirky, coolly amusing character studies about culture clash, from *Stranger Than Paradise* to *Night on Earth*-*Dead Man* is something new. But while it may not draw crowds at the multiplex, the film's rather hefty agenda needn't scare off Jarmusch fans, nor must it alienate the kind of inquiring urban moviegoers who keep Miramax in business. A slow-paced but hypnotically absorbing movie. It's buoyed by Jarmusch's trademark off-key humor and embellished throughout by an electrifying instrumental score, courtesy of Neil Young. On the visual level, it's simply resplendent: cinematographer Robby Muller works from an exceptionally rich black-and-white palette, and what he does for Jarmusch here is quite comparable to what Kazuo Miyagawa did for Mizoguchi. And *Dead Man* even has star power, in the form of Johnny Depp, who gives further evidence of his gallant -to some, inexplicable-commitment to the offbeat, turning in a subtle performance as reluctant hero Bill Blake, a civilized naïf who learns the hard lessons of the Old West. At the same time, apt use is made of his fragile, almost ethereal quality to elaborate a crucial aspect of the film-that "Bill Blake" may well be the restless ghost of the poet.

*Dead Man*'s ostensible storyline follows a trail blazed by countless Hollywood Westerns. Sporting a loud checked suit that fairly screams "city slicker," Bill Blake rides a westbound train to the end of the line: a town called Machine, where he's been promised a job as bookkeeper for Dickinson Metal Works. He arrives at the plant-as rendered by Muller, it's a dark, Satanic mill indeed-only to find that his job has been filled. Dismissed at gunpoint by mad John Dickinson (Robert Mitchum) and his toadying aide-de-camp, John Scholfield (John Hurt), a penniless Blake finds shelter with comely flowergirl Thel (Mili Avital)-a name that will resonate with anyone who wrestled with William Blake's prophetic books in college (see sidebar).

But Thel is suddenly murdered by a jilted lover, Charlie Dickinson (Gabriel Byrne), who happens to be the industrialist's son. Blake shoots Charlie dead, more or less in self-defense, and finds himself on the lam, nursing a bullet wound near his heart. An enraged John Dickinson hires a team of bounty hunters, "the finest killers of men and Indians in this half of the world"-irrepressibly voluble Conway Twill (an unrecognizable and hilarious Michael Wincott), a taciturn black teenager called "The Kid" (Eugene Byrd), and gunslinger Cole Wilson (Lance Henriksen), an emblematic Man in Black with an unspeakable past. ("He fucked his parents, then he cut 'em up and ate 'em," Twill explains. "He ain't got a goddam conscience:") Pursued by this unlikely trio, Blake flees northward and learns to use his gun.

From here onward, the typical "outlaw" Western would carry its hero through a conventional moral journey from "feminine" conformity to "masculine" criminality, from ego to id, from Civilization to Wilderness. It would reflect deep ambivalence about the social and moral implications of the journey, and seek to resolve it through violence. However tenuously, order would be restored and civilization embraced.

But this is precisely where *Dead Man* veers off the beaten path. To begin with, 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-19th century America in which capitalism has already embraced and transformed the farthest reaches of the continent.

The point is clinched even before the opening titles roll, through a virtually wordless ten-minute sequence that depicts Bill 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, Bill observes a succession of blasted landscapes, everywhere strewn with the detritus of westward expansion-abandoned wagons, skeletal remains, slaughtered buffalo. Later, as he flees northward through the seemingly trackless forests of the Oregon Territory, technology is always a step or two ahead of him: Dickinson's telegraphed bulletins and wanted posters precede him wherever he goes. Even in a remote Indian village near the Canadian border, a derelict sewing machine lies among the carved totems and dugout Canoes.

Dead Man, then, acknowledges no bright line between Civilization and Wilderness, but only a continuous material reality, one in which the substance of nature and the works of man are inextricably intertwined. This is a welcome departure from one of the genre's central conventions, and it makes good historical sense-indeed, it reflects a view of westward expansion with which few contemporary historians would quibble.

Still, the film's intent here is primarily metaphysical. In keeping with Blake's cosmology, Jarmusch wants to suggest that what is material-a category that includes both Civilization and Wilderness-is neither "real" nor desirable. So the role of Dead Man's hero is never to mediate or choose between polar aspects of the world around him, but to find a way of transcending the physical world altogether. Bill Blake's mission, should he choose to accept it, is to find a way into what William Blake called "the real & eternal World of which this Vegetable Universe is but a faint shadow."

To this end, Bill Blake finds a spiritual guide along the trail, an eccentric British-educated Indian named Nobody (Gary Farmer) who encountered William Blake's poetry as a child and saw in it a stunning elaboration of his own mystical beliefs. (In one of those original insights that seem obvious once you've been exposed to it for the first time, Jarmusch parallels the "Vision Quest"-a spiritual rite of passage in some Native American cultures-with Blake's visionary understanding of the universe.) Nobody believes his mysterious traveling companion is none other than the ghost of the great poet, and sees it as his mission to guide this restless spirit "across the mirror of waters" to another plane.

Nobody, however, is hardly one of those warm and fuzzy spiritual gurus familiar from *Dances With Wolves* and similar New Age Westerns. He frankly hates white men, and the reason for his hatred is implicit throughout the film. Although *Dead Man* contains no melodramatic portrayals of the victimization of Native Americans, the mise-en-scene is littered with evidence of genocideruined teepees,

abandoned villages, and charred corpses-and Nobody speaks matter-of-factly of the distribution of smallpox-infected blankets by smiling white traders. So it's not a complete surprise when this superficially affable Indian reveals his vision of Blake's destiny: "You were a poet and a painter, and now you are a killer of white men." If Bill Blake is to make it back to the world of the spirits, Nobody believes, he must leave a trail of white corpses in his wake. His poetry will now be written with the blood of lawmen, merchants, and missionaries.

To Nobody, the outlaw is a poet. To William Blake, by contrast, the poet was an outlaw, committed to the pursuit of vision in defiance of human law, conventional morality, and received knowledge ("The Philosopher is Dependent & Good," he wrote, "the Poet is Independent & Wicked"). By making his hero the mortal enemy of established authority and the natural ally of Native American resistance, Jarmusch taps into a side of Blake too often ignored by academic critics (though not by the radicals of the 1960s). Jarmusch's Blake is not just a harmless dreamer; he's the fiery poet who championed revolution and purifying violence, who assailed willful ignorance and hypocrisy, who furiously denounced slavery, poverty, commerce, and the Church.

This Blake cannot easily be reduced to a set of New Age truisms about spiritual transcendence; nor can he be shoehorned into any critical scheme that uniformly blames canonical "Dead White Males" for the production of oppressive ideologies. (Indeed, the film's title may be meant as a satirical jab at the very notion of William Blake as DWM). This, rather, is one dead man who saw poetry as visionary truth, immensely powerful, subversive, and potentially life-changing. It's the way many of us used to feel about cinema. To his great credit, Jim Jarmusch still does.

(Photograph Omitted)

Author Affiliation: Jacob Levich is Movies Editor of iGuide, the online service of News Corp.

FirstSearch(r) Copyright (c) 1992-2006 OCLC as to electronic presentation and platform. All Rights Reserved.