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*Tangled jungles, blind paths, secret passage, lost cities invade our perception. The sites in films are not to be located or trusted. All is out of proportion. Scale inflates or deflates into uneasy dimensions. We wander between the towering and the bottomless. We are lost between the abyss within us and the boundless horizons outside us. Any film wraps us in uncertainty. The longer we look through a camera or watch a projected image the remoter the world becomes, yet we begin to understand that remoteness more.*

-- Robert Smithson from *Cinematic Atopia*<sup>1</sup>

## **Dead Man** **The Ultimate Viewing of William Blake**

When Jim Jarmusch incorporated his improvisational directorial approach, lean script-writing, minimalist aesthetic and passive characters into the seeming transcendental Western, *Dead Man* (1996), he subverted expectations of both his fans and detractors. The movie was polarizing for critics. During the time of its immediate reception, critics largely, seemed to either love it or hate it. Many people, especially non-European critics, saw *Dead Man* as explicitly ideological and full of itself. It was described as “a

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Smithson, “Cinematic Atopia” in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 141

misguided – albeit earnest undergraduate undertaking,”<sup>2</sup> a “sadistic”<sup>3</sup> 127 minutes, “coy to a fault,”<sup>4</sup> “punishingly slow,”<sup>5</sup> and “shallow and trite.”<sup>6</sup> Jarmusch is also attacked for being “hipper-than-thou”<sup>7</sup> and smug. The juxtaposition of styles and genres bothered some. An otherwise positive review critiqued the “not-always-successful juxtapositions of humor and gore.”<sup>8</sup>

For many it was *Dead Man* as a revisionist Western that became a problem. *Daily News* reporter Dave Kehr writes, “As innovative as the packaging is, the content consists of revisionist clichés that were largely exhausted in such early –’70s anti-Westerns as ‘Little Big Man’ and ‘Soldier Blue.’”<sup>9</sup> Despite Jarmusch’s claim that the film is not a Western and that the genre is merely “a point of departure,”<sup>10</sup> reviewers seemed to harp on that aspect of the movie pretty consistently. Most brazenly in Liz Braun’s article “Western Saddled With Extreme Pretention” where she writes:

Here’s the story:

Native Americans: Hurrah!

Everybody Else: Boo!

The Industrial Revolution (Boo!) will turn us all away from the poetry of nature to the certain spiritual death of mechanization and all that other dehumanizing stuff.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Liz Braun, “Western Saddled With Extreme Pretension” in *The Toronto Sun*, May 24, 1996. Retrieved Lexis Nexus Academic, October 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Arnold, “‘Dead’ and its star take title literally,” in *The Washington Times*, May 17, 1996. Retrieved Lexis Nexus Academic, October 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Mike Clark, “A Slow ‘Dead Man,’” *USA Today*, May 16, 1996. Retrieved Lexis Nexus Academic, October 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Dave Kehr, “Another ‘Dead Man,’” in *Daily News (New York)*, May 10, 1996. Retrieved Lexis Nexus Academic, October 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Galvin, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 25, 1996. Retrieved Lexis Nexus Academic, October, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Steven Rea, “Dead Man: Psychedelic Oater” in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 10, 1996. Retrieved Lexis Nexus Academic, October 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Kehr, 1996

<sup>10</sup> Jim Jarmusch, Interview on [www.nytrash.com/deadman/eadjj.html](http://www.nytrash.com/deadman/eadjj.html).

<sup>11</sup> Braun, 1996

Why, though would a languorous critique of the industrial revolution and our standard view of the Western (including the stereotypes of Native Americans) cause personal attacks and aggressive language in these reviews? Why the slew of negative reviews (with obligatory puns about the movie being dead, audiences nodding off as much as Blake etc.) that feel the need to mention Jarmusch's pretension or hipper-than-thou-ness, the film's sadistic relationship with viewers, and its coyness or smugness?

I would argue that it is more than the deconstruction of the Western genre and the challenging of Americas' denial about our history with Native Americans and industrialism that is at stake here. Because of his approach to the story, the way it is filmed and the emphasis on foreignness for Blake and the audience, the truly taxing aspect of *Dead Man* is that it forces the viewer to watch movies differently. It asks us to do so in an environment that is as unfamiliar to the viewer as Machine, the landscape and the Indian village are to Blake. In the end, could it be that it's because Jarmusch asks audiences to abandon engrained ways of looking at movies that it is so reviled by some? With *Dead Man*, viewers are taken on a journey where cinematic clichés are inverted, fragmented and recombined. This lack of cinematic familiarity on the screen begins to mirror and is doubled by Blake's uncomfortable relationship with his environment. This results in an uncomfortable paralleling and tug-of-war between the actual (audience) and fictionalized (Blake) viewing on and off screen. The movie is doubly allegorical. Viewers read Blake's discomfort on the screen, but also experience a similar level of discomfort as an audience. Their discomfort with the movie puts them in the same psychological space as Blake. Jarmusch does this by creating an experience of mystery,

unpredictability and foreignness for viewers. As Blake's expectations of his environment are challenged, the viewer's expectations of cinematic narrative and character development are not met, making the usually familiar space of the theater seem alien.

Considering this tension, it is possible that the critical reaction could be, essentially a resistance to adjusting expectations of what movies should be and how we watch them. Jay Carr's review is helpful in considering this possibility. He writes, "The trouble is that the characters never become more than cursory emblems of this or that piece of perceived American spiritual failure.... *Dead Man* succumbs to its own smugness, behaving as if it's enough to issue an indictment without bothering to make the case, or to fill the screen with dimensioned characters who matter to us."<sup>12</sup> When parsed, existing prejudices and assumptions about movies can be read between the lines. In seeing the characters as "emblems" that lack dimension, Carr reveals a particular idea about "good" movies. Good movies let us into characters' heads and give us access to their psychological motivations. Good movies usurp the objective and remote qualities of the camera with psychological maps provided by devices such as aesthetic mood shifts, camera proximity or scripted dialogue. In good movies we are guided, in part, via clues into the characters' psyches. *Dead Man* not only does not explain why people do what they do, the main character does not even know himself. In discussing the moral values in *Dead Man*, Carr's word choice "perceived American spiritual failure" implies that he does not agree with Jarmusch's "indictment" and is therefore implicated in that failure – a defensive stance. Finally, by saying *Dead Man* issues "an indictment without bothering to make a

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<sup>12</sup> Jay Carr, "Actors can't bring 'Dead Man' to life," in *The Boston Globe*, May 10, 1996. Retrieved Lexis Nexus Academic, October 2007.

case, or to fill the screen with dimensioned characters that matter to us,” Carr reveals that he believes movies have points or goals and audiences need to be rooting for someone.

What happens if one tries to view *Dead Man* differently? What would it be like to not root for a good guy or try to understand the motives of the characters? If, instead of jockeying between remembering what just happened and anticipating what is about to occur, the viewer takes in each frame as if it’s the only one, Carr’s issues and those of some other critics, begin to disintegrate. If one meditates on the movie and accepts its mysterious and non-linear personality, perhaps the movie Jarmusch wants us to see and experience will emerge. A quote by the painter René Magritte seems especially appropriate here. He wrote:

People who look for symbolic meaning fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image. No doubt they sense this mystery, but they wish to get rid of it. They are afraid. By asking, ‘What does this mean?’; they express a wish that everything be understandable. But if one does not reject the mystery, one has quite a different response. One asks other things.”<sup>13</sup>

*Dead Man* encourages an acceptance of mystery and the fragmented or incomplete. In this way, Jarmusch seems to want us to “ask other things.” The movie is a meditation more than a story that envelops the viewer via familiar patterns or enticement. Mystery by its very nature is difficult to understand. It is distant, shadowy and not of this world.

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<sup>13</sup> René Magritte quoted by Bill Viola in *Reasons for Knocking At an Empty House*, writings 1973- 1994; edited by Robert Violette in collaboration with the author, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), p. 67

In trying to position the film and themselves in relation to it – in trying to solve (or dissolve) the mystery -- many critics seemed to have missed an important point of *Dead Man*, which is the fact that *not* understanding is an important aspect of watching the movie. If, when watching a film, one is not concerned with understanding, remembering and anticipating, what does a person do? He or she might be forced to do nothing. Doing nothing is literally passive. Traditionally, when movie audiences are called passive, it is a social (usually Marxist) critique, meaning that they actually fall too easily into habitual ways of responding to movies. In that context, the passive viewer is a consumer who has expectations of how most movies behave and enjoys the predictability because it requires little effort. The type of passiveness *Dead Man* requires is more akin to meditation or a semi-conscious state. For anyone who has tried to meditate, this brand of passiveness is anything but comfortable or predictable.

When considering that type of passivity, conceptual artist and sculptor Robert Smithson's essay called *Cinematic Atopia* is helpful. Smithson was commissioned to write the article by film scholar Annette Michelson for the magazine *Artforum*. The essay encourages a disembowelment of the predictable in cinema by emphasizing the medium's remoteness and the viewer's non-hierarchical reading. Its language is extreme and, at times, fantastical. It is rhetorical, polemic and poetic. While Smithson was immersed in the gallery scene when Jarmush was still in Chicago, Smithson lived and worked in New York immediately prior to Jarmusch's arrival there. Both experienced clubs such as Max's Kansas City and knew about many of the same artists and filmmakers. Smithson created earthworks (most famously the *Spiral Jetty*), constructed objects for the gallery,

wrote text works and made a film about the *Spiral Jetty*. Curator Lynne Cooke elaborates on Smithson's practice, writing:

The principal vehicles through which he realized his far-reaching ideas involved language, which he deemed a material; a miscellany of sites, beyond the precincts of the museum and gallery, that included abandoned industrial and natural wastelands; and Nonsites, idiosyncratic reformulations of optical mechanisms and protocols that fracture, dislocate, and displace conventional visual modalities to create structural equivalents for sculpture.<sup>14</sup>

Smithson's Nonsites are meant to remind the gallery or museum visitor that the object they view has a companion in the world outside of the gallery. According to Cooke, " 'A thing is a hole in a thing it is not,' the statement [Smithson] attributed to Carle Andre, defines an absence as the form of a desired place, a place of memory and history, a repository for relics salvaged from the past. It had become a mantra for Smithson."<sup>15</sup>

According to Cooke, Smithson had a "voracious" visual appetite that included "a legendary stamina as a cinephile." Even before he made his short film, Smithson was concerned with what Cooke interprets as a cinematic concern with time. In an early sculpture titled *The Eliminator* he used light and black outs to reference the temporal, Cooke elaborates:

For Smithson, however, *The Eliminator*'s brash visual charge was less important than the brief interstices between flashes. These moments, he thought, bleached out awareness and obliterated memory: time was deployed here not merely to undermine optical equanimity but to eviscerate thought. Since, for Smithson, "timelessness is formed in the lapsed moments of perception," *The Eliminator* prefigured reflections frozen by the camera's unflinching lens in many subsequent works.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lynne Cooke, "a position of elsewhere," in Robert Smithson *Spiral Jetty*, edited by Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly with Bettina Funcke and Barbara Schroder, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 53

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p.54

She concludes that Smithson “privileged ... the cut as the principle vehicle for sequencing visual metaphors.”<sup>17</sup> In describing the black outs in *Stranger Than Paradise*, Jarmusch reflects, saying he used them, “Because each scene is a single shot and leaving that image in the memory of the audience for a moment before going on to the next one was something really important to me.”<sup>18</sup> Smithson and Jarmusch’s both have preoccupations with language as artistic medium, finding new ways to represent the temporal and an interest in mimicking the fragmented nature of memory. Both spent their formative years in New York and were aware of or influenced by some of the same writers and artists, including writer William Burroughs, French film, playwright Samuel Beckett and avant-garde composer John Cage.<sup>19</sup>

When considering *Dead Man* and the type of viewing one might need to employ to access its mysteries, Smithson’s essay *Cinematic Atopia* is appropriate both thematically and contextually. Jarmusch’s history of including passive characters in his movies; his often static camera that does not tell the viewer where to look; and his employment of black outs between scenes mirror Smithson’s ideas on cinema and viewing. The idea of non-hierarchical viewing – a meditative, passivity -- is a major area of overlap. For Smithson, the groundlessness and uncertainty between viewer and film, means the viewer, "... would not be able to distinguish between good and bad films, all would be

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p. 66

<sup>18</sup> Jim Jarmusch, interview with Peter Belsito (1985) in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, ed. Ludvig Hertzberg, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 35

<sup>19</sup> This information is in Cooke’s “a position of elsewhere,” p54 and “Stranger in Paradise” by Joan Shapiro, p.59 and “Jim Jarmusch” by Danny Plotnick, p. 143, in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, ed. Ludvig Hertzberg, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001)

swallowed up into an endless blur. He would not be watching films, but rather experiencing blurs of many shades."<sup>20</sup> Jarmusch talks about taking in the world in this way at times, saying, "I like being displaced... But what I like to do is lie down in the early evening, just for half an hour anywhere I am, and listen to all the sounds I can hear. As if I were listening to music. And being attentive to things very far and very present, and when you hear voices and they're speaking a language you don't understand, it's really beautiful. I love that."<sup>21</sup> In the end, there is a democracy of looking that Smithson and Jarmusch champion – a passive absorption that they believe leads to new, more interesting relationships and visions.

Ideas of the ultimate viewer in Smithson's *Cinematic Atopia* and non-hierarchical listening described by Jarmusch thread through *Dead Man*. Blake takes in his surroundings in a manner that is similar to the ultimate viewer. He is largely passive and disoriented. The land and the people around him are, metaphorically a foreign language so discombobulating that he has no point of reference. His resignation to remoteness, however, allows Blake to understand "that remoteness itself." Smithson believed that "space and time are accessed only when the spectator is removed from the normal condition of time-space."<sup>22</sup> In *Dead Man*, Jarmusch seems to say that cinema can be accessed only when the spectator is removed from the "normal condition" of cinema. Fascinated with stories imbedded in other stories, Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* and *The Last Night on Earth* were a reflection of his interest in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with its multiple layers of storytelling. In *Dead Man*, there are also stories within the story.

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<sup>20</sup> Smithson, *Cinematic Atopia*, p. 142

<sup>21</sup> Jim Jarmusch, Shapiro, p. 68

<sup>22</sup> Cooke, p. 68

Jarmusch takes it to another level, creating a story of estrangement and transformation that mirrors Blakes and takes place off screen – in spaces of the theater and the viewer's mind.

When Blake is separated from his normal conditions of Cleveland and a nine-to-five job, the character eventually gains an understanding that grants him a deeper connection to the natural world and to his American Indian guide, Nobody. In the handing over of his fate to Nobody and because of his semi-conscious state, Blake is resigned to viewing his own life as if it is a movie, becoming a metaphor for movie viewing itself. The experience of cinematic atopia is Blake's experience. By emphasizing the remoteness innate to film, Jarmusch presents the audience with a strange landscape as well. The narrative shows Blake entering a remote world. The film itself – its construction and shuffling of cinematic tropes – is also foreign. The result is a dual remoteness both within the story for Blake and in real life for the audience.

Every assumption is flipped in *Dead Man*. It is not just genre at stake here. *Dead Man* holds a mirror up to the audience for its entire 127 minutes. Perhaps this is why it seems sadistic to some. The screen is a reflective object as much as it is an illusionistic window into a picture. Like a photograph framed in glass, the viewer simultaneously sees the image and his or her reflection on the glazing. *Dead Man*, never lets the viewer lose sight of his own visage. Because he can never relax into a comfortable or predictable pattern and the pacing of the movie is slow and plodding, the viewer is destined to watch the very process of looking. This is the case with all movies to a certain extent, but rather

than trying to diminish the reflection in the glass, Jarmusch emphasizes it. This emphasis keeps the audience at a distance. They are not able to totally suspend disbelief and enter the image. Jarmusch, consequently, magnifies the remoteness of film as a medium by treating it as an object in space rather than an illusionistic window that mimics reality. This process also highlights film's inability to recreate reality, including its limited abilities to record the internal workings of the mind/heart, deliver foreign locales as if they are familiar, and to inhabit temporal authenticity.

Film's limitations are, consequently, accentuated. This results, according to Smithson, in an entropic playing field:

It could be described as a cinematic borderland, a landscape of rejected film clips. To be sure it is a neglected place, if we can even call it a "place." If there was ever a film festival in limbo it would be called "Oblivion." ... Not one order but many orders clash with one another, as do "facts" in an obsolete encyclopedia.<sup>23</sup>

It is no small feat of courage for Jarmusch to embrace cinematic limbo and ask his audience to float in oblivion. Instead of seducing audiences into understanding another place, he emphasizes its foreignness and its "awayness." By creating a situation between viewer and movie that mimics the one between Blake and his landscape, Jarmusch, makes the cinema foreign to us. This is one reason he shot *Dead Man* in Black and White, saying, "the story is about a man who takes a journey which carries him further away from anything familiar. Color, particularly in landscapes, connects us with things due to our familiarity with their tonal values, and this would have undermined a basic

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<sup>23</sup> Smithson, *Cinematic Atopia*, p. 139

element in the story.”<sup>24</sup> It is in the cinematic foreignness – not through scripted psychological revelations – that we relate to Blake. Everyone in the theater both fictitious and real is an outsider navigating unfamiliar terrain. What at first seems to be a pastiche turns out to be a cinematic subversion aimed at film and its audiences.

*Dead Man* is truly the "wilderness of elsewheres" Smithson attributes to film. The ethereal blacks, whites and grays; the interweaving of genres (comedy, western, buddy movie, spiritual quest); and the placing of high and low on the same plane (sacred rituals share the same plane as pop culture icons like Iggy Pop) shuffles the familiar into an alien filmic topography. Like Smithson's atopia:

... orders and groupings have a way of proliferating outside of their original structure and meaning. There is nothing more tentative than an established order. What we take to be the most concrete or solid often turns into a concatenation of the unexpected. Any order can be reordered. What seems to be without order, often turns out to be highly ordered. By isolating the most unstable thing, we can arrive at some kind of coherence, at least for awhile. The simple rectangle of the movie screen contains the flux, no matter how many different orders one presents. But no sooner have we fixed the order in our mind than it dissolves into limbo.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, *Dead Man* quickly proliferates “outside of [its] original structure and meaning.” It initially appears to be a Western with all of the audience expectations that accompany it, but soon begins to multiply like an alien life form trying on genres and moods. The Western is fragmented and joined by vaudeville, early silent film, the buddy movie, the road movie and the mystical mood of early landscape photography.

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<sup>24</sup> Jim Jarmusch, Interview on [www.nytrash.com/deadman/eadjj.html](http://www.nytrash.com/deadman/eadjj.html).

<sup>25</sup> Smithson, *Cinematic Atopia*, p. 140 -141

Jarmusch uses the movie's most "unstable" element – Blake's disoriented point of view and passivity -- to cohere these disparate elements. Blake's "camera shots" of his surroundings become more prevalent as the movie progresses. He sees the world as strange and his relationship to it is precarious. Through Blake's viewpoint we see the people as strange (as on the train). Later, it is his point of view that transforms the black and white landscape into a mystical, foreign and, at times, aesthetically altered environment. The graduated tones of the forest (an animated Ansel Adams photograph) become spinning skies, painted native people hiding in the woods, and slow panning of silver birches. Blake-as-thread allows for a sense of mystery to interweave through a series of vignettes that range from profound to ridiculous. Like Smithson's cinematic atopia, Jarmusch's *Dead Man* allows "the elsewheres to reconstruct themselves as a tangled mass."

In *Dead Man*, Smithson's elsewheres are multiplied into three realms. Strangeness simultaneously seeps into the theater through the sites on the screen (the literal presentation of other places in black and white), the main character's disorientation and shifting relationship with these surroundings (the point of view of a foreigner – the most unstable thing) and the centrifugal fragmentation and inversion of moviemaking's cultural and historical landscape (the "concatenation of the unexpected"). For the audience Jarmusch's unexpected layering of filmic, cultural and political metaphors disorients. If we begin to think *Dead Man* is a Western, he brings in a Native American who can read poetry in English (when at least two of the white characters make it clear they are illiterate). If we see hints of a spiritual quest, Jarmusch incorporates vaudeville/slapstick scenes (Like when Blake asks where the Dickenson Metal Works office is as a sign

reading “office” with an arrow hangs over his head). If we get comfortable with *Dead Man* being a comedy (Iggy Pop in a dress making possum beans), then Jarmusch inserts a hail of clumsy violence (as when Nobody slits Big George’s throat and accidentally shoots Salvatore “Sally” Jenko). The mystical is often paired with the crass or slapstick as when Conway the bounty hunter says in one breath, “Do you ever wish you were the moon? Geeze my Henry’s cold.” and then realizes his fly is open. Or when Jarmusch admittedly treats Blake’s final scene with a light touch, saying:

Does [Blake] make the realization that he’s going to die? I didn’t want to make that obvious. In fact I tried to throw it away at the end. The last piece of dialogue before he’s shoved out into the ocean – there are jokes in there. “Now you have to go back to the place you came from.” “You mean Cleveland?” I didn’t want a heavy-handed scene.<sup>26</sup>

In *Dead Man*, like Blake, viewers rarely know what is around the corner or how to position it in relation to what happened before.

According to Jarmusch, *Dead Man* is essentially a road movie that focuses on two people from different cultures and their relationship with each other, elaborating in an interview, “... on the surface it’s a very simple story and a simple metaphor that the physical life is a journey that we take. And I wanted that simple story, and that relationship between these two guys from different cultures who are both loners and lost and for whatever reason are completely disoriented from their cultures.”<sup>27</sup> For the audience to understand the characters and their world, however, it is vital that viewers “wander between” the same “towering and bottomless” world of viewing that Blake inhabits. One source of

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<sup>26</sup> Jim Jarmusch, “End of the Road,” by Scott Macaulay (1996) in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, ed. Ludvig Hertzberg, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 151

<sup>27</sup> Jim Jarmusch, “A Gun Up Your Ass,” by Jonathan Rosenbaum (1996) in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, ed. Ludvig Hertzberg, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 161

remoteness for Blake is his inability to comprehend the cultures and landscapes he encounters. For the audience, it is familiar symbols and tropes being treated in an unfamiliar way that creates remoteness. In this way audience and Blake journey away from the familiar together, experiencing detachment both on and off the screen. Blake's injury disorients and innervates, consequently, he is unable to determine the best course of action, becoming a spectator. In order to stay with *Dead Man*, audiences need to take their lead from Blake's passiveness. In following as the "ultimate viewer" of Smithson's cinematic atopia, we can become comfortable with the strange filmic combinations of *Dead Man*.

A poetic (versus narrative) approach is another way Jarmusch subverts expectations and lends otherworldliness to the movie. Much like his second movie *Stranger Than Paradise*, the blackouts form a rhythm. That rhythm is based organically on the scene length. The metaphorical breath of the film's "language" determines its rhythms, much like modern poetry. In *Dead Man* the white spaces on the poem's page are transformed into black outs between scenes. The director says his interest in formal structure in film comes from "really liking literary forms." He continues, "Poetry is very beautiful, but the space on the page can be as affecting as where the text is. Like when Miles Davis doesn't play, it has a poignancy to it. I was interested formally from literature and musical structures."<sup>28</sup> This structure gives the movie's scenes a variety of lengths that range from Nobody remembering his childhood in a long ride through the forest to the very brief scene where Blake wakes up for about thirty seconds to see Nobody wearing

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<sup>28</sup> Jim Jarmusch, "Jim Jarmusch Interview" by Geoff Andrew (1999) in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, ed. Ludvig Hertzberg, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 178

his hat. Jarmusch actually incorporates poetry into the script as well. Lines from the real William Blake's poems are included. Sometimes they are attributed to him. At others they appear as American Indian proverbs as when Nobody says, "Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead."<sup>29</sup> The structure and language of poetry combine with visually symbolic elements such as bones, coffins, flowers and horizons to lend a literary sub-stratum to *Dead Man*.

Romantic literary scholar Fred Botting writes that poetic language "both presents and displaces the possibility of representational stability."<sup>30</sup> In *Dead Man* what is presented is remote and mysterious in its incompleteness. The poetic destabilizes in order to redefine. As Adrian Martin writes in a review, "As in dreams, Jarmusch imbues even the simplest sights, sounds and gestures of his tale with an uncanny resonance – an intoxicating mixture of awe and dread. No amount of rational interpretation can dispel, or fully account for this mood; *Dead Man* is deeply secretive, and powerful precisely because of its mystery."<sup>31</sup> Pregnant with what is not said and splicing together disparate elements, *Dead Man* mirrors what Smithson describes as "a cinematic borderland, a landscape of rejected film clips." Signifiers are stripped of assumed meanings, destabilizing the familiar. In *Dead Man*, this is most obvious with the treatment of the hero, but also applies to all of the sub-themes of the movie -- "history, language, America, indigenous culture, violence and industrialization"<sup>32</sup> -- that Jarmusch enumerates. By simultaneously treating the film as an illusionistic window into a story and an object in

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<sup>29</sup> Jim Jarmusch quoted by Rosenbaum, p. 157

<sup>30</sup> Fred Botting, "Virtual Romanticism" in *Postmodern Romanticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. ?

<sup>31</sup> Adrian Martin, in *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia), April 27, 1996. Retrieved Lexis Nexus Academic, October, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Jim Jarmusch, Macaulay, p. 149

space, *Dead Man* knocks its own medium off kilter by emphasizing its innate “plastic” qualities.

From the beginning, Jarmusch prepares viewers to shift their thinking to a state that is at ease with the poetic and plastic destabilization of cinematic expectations. In the train scene, a monologue by the man who stokes the train’s fire (played by Crispin Glover) reflects Smithson’s observations about film. Glover’s observations also foreshadow Blake’s disoriented and passive journey through a remote and foreign landscape:

Look out the window. ... Doesn’t this remind you of when you’re in the boat and then later that night you’re lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head was not dissimilar from the landscape, and you think to yourself, “Why is it that the landscape is moving, but the boat is still?”

Jarmusch is warning audiences that *Dead Man* holds the potential for the viewers to get “lost between the abyss within us and the boundless horizons outside us.” There are other parallels between Smithson’s atopia and *Dead Man*. Smithson writes, “Going to the cinema results in an immobilization of the body. Not much gets in the way of one’s perception. All one can do is look and listen.”<sup>33</sup> In viewing, Smithson emphasizes the idea of otherness and confusion where reality is difficult to locate. Glover’s character establishes the movie’s foreignness by doing the same thing. In this scenario the person viewing is stationary, but the world moves as if it’s a movie. Memory and cognition (“the water in your head”) conflate with looking “look out the window,” “looking up at the ceiling” and the relationship between internal and external landscapes. It is this type of internal/external disorientation that causes Blake to follow the Native American character

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<sup>33</sup> Smithson, *Cinematic Atopia*, p. 138

Nobody. Once he is shot and in uncharted territory Blake often cannot trust what he sees or does not understand the full implication of what is laid before him.

Prior to giving himself over to Nobody's care, there is only one moment in the movie where Blake tries to change his fate. It is immediately after he arrives in Machine and "insists" on being heard by Dickenson and speaks of a letter "confirming his position":

Blake: I have here this letter that confirms my position here.  
 John Scholfield (office manager): This letter is postmarked two months ago ...  
 Blake: I'm sorry, I think there's been some mistake.  
 Scholfield: Look Mr. Black  
 Blake: Blake  
 Scholfield: I'm a very busy man and Mr. Dickenson doesn't pay me for idle conversation  
 Blake: I'm sure he doesn't but this letter confirms my position here. Now I've spent everything I had left after my parents' funeral just to get here.  
 Scholfield: Listen Mr. Black, I've got a lot of work to do here and this ain't my business.  
 Blake: I'd like to speak to Mr. Dickenson  
 Scholfield: I don't think you want to do that.  
 Blake: I insist on speaking to Mr. Dickenson sir.  
 Scholfield: You insist  
 Blake: I insist  
 Scholfield: You insist  
 Blake: Yes I do  
 Scholfield: Well go on there lad, there's the door.

The dialogue and action in this scene are pivotal for three reasons. First, this is the only time he strongly asserts himself verbally. Second, it shows Blake's attachment to documentation and protocol. Third, it sets up a foil for the language of the next scenes where we see Blake with Thel. In the office scene, the word "here" is central to both speakers. In seven consecutive lines it appears six times. "Here" is a fixed, concrete, real thing. It represents a rational observation of a person in space and time.

In the town scenes that quickly follow, the "real" begins to turn to simulacrum. The unfamiliar begins to shift into full-on mystery (Smithson's "blurs of many shades") via

the language and imagery of these scenes. In short, we are at the mouth of a metaphysical rabbit hole. Instead of an insistence on being “here” (in a fixed position), there is an emphasis on “away.” The word “away” suggests, like Smithson’s Nonsites, that the audience think beyond what is on the screen. Thel does not ask Blake to take her to her apartment, but softly asks, “Would you mind walking me away from here?” Also, when Charlie enters Thel’s room, he says, “You know Thel, I never wanted to go away.” These sentences remind us that there are spaces off the screen we are not seeing.

Cooke’s interpretation of Smithson’s “absence as the form of a desired place” is played out through intimations of spaces the screen cannot contain. We are, much like Blake on the train, being asked to look out the window (of the film) and think about the water in our head (our own thoughts and perceptions). Going away is also a euphemism for dying and being here one for living. Jarmusch juxtaposes Blake fight to ensure his job -- something he thought was solid, “here” and real -- with the character entering Thel’s apartment of paper flowers – a world of dreamy aways. The dialogue and the way the last town scene is filmed, foreshadow Blake’s physical and mental shift from life (here) to death (away).

The metaphor of the paper flower and the way Jarmusch films Blake’s flight builds the surrealist bridge that will span the gap between Blake’s faith in defined social constructs and the illogical waking dream of the unpopulated landscape. The way Thel and Blake discuss the paper flowers is a metaphor for Blake’s misplaced faith in words on paper and the social laws that allegedly make those words reliable. Words on paper are black ink on pressed wood. Without social agreements, his letter is as false and unsatisfying as a paper rose:

Blake: These flowers are really something

Thel: Thank you

Blake: You're welcome.

Thel: I made them out of paper.

(places rose in front of his nose)

What does it smell like?

Blake: Paper

Thel: Well it is paper.

The flower is also an analogue for how one thing can simulate another – this might be as when Blake becomes the “killer of white men” or it could be applied to the medium of film. Through film we see flowers but they are only images of flowers. The landscape in *Dead Man* is only an image of a landscape. If you asked someone to smell a piece of film, even if there is a picture of a flower on it, it will still smell like film. Jarmusch emphasizes the false world of film in *Dead Man*, making no pretense to envelope us in familiarity. He *wants* us to remember that we are watching a movie. Film, like Blake’s letter or a written poem, is, in the end, just words on paper.

After Charlie shoots Thel (and Blake) and then is killed by Blake, the accountant gathers his clothes and clumsily falls out of the second story window. When he flees we see the scene shot from below. Blake lands in the mud. For a moment, Blake, mud and flowers mix in a funerary fashion. As he rides away, though, the low vantage point turns the false and ugly into a reflection of the sky itself. As Blake rides away the moon reflects off the mud and the paper roses huddle in its glittery bed. The earth suddenly mirrors the stars – the camera creates this space between the known and the unknown. Blake is framed between these two reflections as he rides away. He is no longer here and the cold hard facts of paper, mud and moon are transformed into jeweled reflections of the sky and flowers. Jarmusch closes the last scene in *Machine* with a falling star that, via animation,

crosses the sky. The falling star is the perfect bookend for animated smoke stack emitted by the factory when he arrived at Machine. In the first Machine scene, Blake faces an industrial site that pumps smoke into the sky. In the second, the distant sky (heaven) and the poetic rendering of the mud and flowers frame his exit, punctuated by the falling star. When these two scenes are compared directly, the transition from the mechanistic society of industrialism to the organic and magical realm of Blake's impending journey reveals itself.

The next scene that features Blake finds him in a barely inhabited landscape with the nomadic Nobody. Disoriented and in pain, Blake is being helped by Nobody who tries to remove "white man's metal" from his heart. As he and Nobody begin their journey west, it becomes clear that this environment is foreign to Blake and he has no way to position himself. On the train and in Machine, Blake defined himself in relation to other things. He is an orphan from Cleveland who is an accountant. His entire identity is wrapped up in these externals. When all of the external trappings of his identity are stripped away, Blake has no way to position himself in relation to the world. Consequently, he cannot even trust his own judgment. As his energy wanes and the remoteness of his environment increases, Blake places himself in Nobody's hands:

Nobody: You are being followed William Blake.

Blake: Are you sure? How do you know?

Nobody: Often the evil stench of white men proceeds him.

Blake: Why don't we, maybe we should? What should we do?

Nobody: The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn from the crow.

Interviews with Jarmusch give us some clues into Blake's passivity. The director has used passive characters before, describing Alli in his first film *Permanent Vacation*

Jarmusch elaborates on the reasons for this device, “His character is not active, he is passive. Even his plans to go away are an expression of that.... It’s important that he is passive rather than active because I wanted people to observe him and his situation. The audience should not be up against what he is up against. I wanted that distance to always be there.”<sup>34</sup> Jarmusch’s black and white film and Blake’s passivity are both, according to the director, devices that create a sense of distance and remoteness in *Dead Man*. Through this distancing, however, comes the potential to access remoteness itself – to experience cinema in a different, more poetic way.

Blake’s passivity is at the core of his perception and is emphasized by his semi-conscious state. For much of the movie (especially the beginning and then the last third) Blake slides in and out of consciousness – he is only able to “look and listen.” These states of semi-consciousness reside between the psychological worlds of reason and the murky waters of the unconscious mind. This limbo mirrors the physical world Blake navigates. It is a sublime netherworld that represents Blake’s physical journey between where he was born (Cleveland) and the shore where he will die. In not being able to stay awake, he is only able to relate to the present moment. These fainting spells are similar to and often correspond with the blackouts Jarmusch uses in *Dead Man*. Jarmusch elaborates further on his use of black outs in *Stranger Than Paradise*:

Rhythmically, those black sections give the film a measured breath and give the audience a moment to think, to digest the scene they have just been watching, even if it is so simple that it doesn’t have to be digested intellectually – it also means that the audience is

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<sup>34</sup> Jim Jarmusch in “A Conversation with Jim Jarmusch” by Ralph Eue and Wolfgang Stukenbrock (1980) in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, ed. Ludvig Hertzberg, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 4-5

robbed of the picture for a moment, which is related to the theme of the film, that something is taken away.<sup>35</sup>

*Dead Man* takes this a step further. Blake actually predicts the black outs of the film by blacking out himself. Often his fainting immediately precedes the black spaces between scenes. When Blake fades he is no longer viewing his movie and when the movie screen goes to black, we are no longer seeing ours. This dynamic accentuates the connection between the experiences of Blake in the landscape and the audience in the theater.

Blake's passing out is more than a physical state and a filmic methodology. It also reflects the Romantic device of the dream state. It is obvious that Romanticism is a factor in *Dead Man*. Jarmusch's main character is the early Romantic writer William Blake and the movie is filmed in the nineteenth century, which corresponds with that literary movement. For Romantic writers the dream state is one that allowed access to the transcendent. For Blake this becomes the case in relation to how he sees. The frequency of his point of view increases and his perspective shifts as his physical strength lessens and his dream state increases. Blake's viewpoint is often vertiginous. This disorientation of Blake is one that Smithson incorporated into his own film. According to Cooke, *Spiral Jetty* "ends with the narrator reading a list of symptoms associated with sunstroke, a condition evoked filmically by the vertiginous spiraling camera movements, as well as by the dazzling image of the sun reflected in the glassy water of the late ... 'Recovery may be slow,' Smithson's voice warns, 'for a long period subsequently there may be loss of memory and inability to concentrate.'"<sup>36</sup> Smithson's emphasis on loss of

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<sup>35</sup> Jim Jarmusch in "In Between Things" by Peter Von Bagh and Mika Kaurismäk in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, ed. Ludvig Hertzberg, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 76

<sup>36</sup> Cooke, p. 65

memory and lack of concentration is uncannily in synch with Blake's experience as the ultimate viewer. Smithson elaborates on this viewer further, writing, "The ultimate film goer would be a captive of sloth. Sitting constantly in a movie house, among the flickering shadows, his perception would take on a kind of sluggishness."<sup>37</sup> The dream state is Blake's state of mind. Jarmusch's *Dead Man* invites audiences to enter into that mind frame as well – to let recognition and vertigo work inside each other in a dreamlike fashion.

All of these factors combine to make Blake's character an empty vessel or blank slate. His lack of attentiveness and insecurity allows other people to project qualities onto him. Through their projections, Blake changes from the outside in. Jarmusch describes Blake as a blank piece of paper on several occasions. In one interview he elaborates, saying:

Yeah, he's also like a blank piece of paper that everyone wants to write all over, which is why I like Johnny [Depp] so much as an actor for that character, because he has that quality. He's branded an outlaw totally against his character, and he's told he's the great poet and he doesn't know what the hell this crazy Indian guy is even talking about.... It's like all these things are projected onto him.<sup>38</sup>

The more people Blake kills the more these projections resemble celebrity. Near the end of the movie we see Nobody and Blake go into a supply tent. Before they enter, Blake sees a row of posters with a reward that increases each time. As the reward grows, the drawing of Blake becomes more emaciated and sinister. Nobody comments that it is a good drawing of Blake and he gives Nobody the poster as a gift. In the Western, Luc Sante writes, there are several lessons that can be derived today, the first two are relevant

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Smithson, *Cinematic Atopia*, p. 141

<sup>38</sup> Jim Jarmusch, *Rosenbaum*, p. 164

to Blake's fate as it relates to his reputation as an outlaw hero, "First of all: Everyone is potentially an outlaw, and everyone who takes action is effectively an outlaw. Second: Success will probably lead to ruin."<sup>39</sup> These seem to be two of the lessons of *Dead Man*. Jarmusch speaks about ambition in relation to film in Hollywood and that his films are not about ambition. The idea that success leads to ruin could be seen as an extension of Jarmusch's DIY punk history. Jarmusch says of ambition in movies, "I've been getting scripts from Hollywood that I've been reading just out of curiosity ... But I've read maybe ten of them and every single script is concerned with ambition and rise."

Jarmusch, however, claims that his approach is one that is "about doing stories that are not about ambition."<sup>40</sup> In *Dead Man*, Blake is the anti-thesis of ambitious, making him an unusual hero – especially for what seems at first to be an American Western.

So Blake is not the typical Western hero, but he is also not a typical romantic hero. He does not seek out his fame or his transcendence. Unlike Romantic heroes who sought and valued dream states, Blake's is imposed on him by injury. Another important difference is that according to literary scholar H.N. Fairchild "The taproot of romanticism is an eternal and universal and primary fact of consciousness: man's desire for self-trust, self-expression, self-expansion."<sup>41</sup> The Romantic hero is a self-reflexive one who asserts his individuality as an antidote to industrialisms dehumanizing effects. According to William Wordsworth, the overflow of emotion is key to good Romantic writing. In those texts, an expressive hero dedicates his life to exploring internal emotions in the hope of

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<sup>39</sup> Luc Sante, "Reaching for It" in the New York Times, November 11, 2007, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com).

<sup>40</sup> Jim Jarmusch in "Jim Jarmusch" by Harold Jacobson in *Jim Jarmusch Interviews*, ed. Ludvig Hertzberg, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), p. 15

<sup>41</sup> James D. Wilson, *The Romantic Heroic Ideal*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p.

becoming a poet-prophet who will share his findings with the community at large. While Blake's fate involves being a poet-prophet of sorts, he does not arrive at it through self-reflection or assertion. Instead, he is guided to his fate. He is told by Nobody who he is and what he has become on several occasions. The first one occurs immediately after Nobody learns of William Blake's name, "But I understand William Blake. You were a poet and a painter. Now you are a killer of white men. You must rest now William Blake." Later, Nobody predicts Blake's fate, "That weapon will replace your tongue. You will learn to speak through it and your poetry will now be written with blood." It is not until after his vision quest that Blake fully adopts this role, coming across the deputies who are hunting him:

Marvin: You William Blake?

Blake: Yes I am. Do you know my poetry?

Blake then shoots Marvin who accidentally shoots Lee. Blake's unwitting transformation is complete.

Blake, however, is much more than an unaware romantic hero living between waking and sleeping. As stated earlier, he is a symbolic cinematic viewer within the film and is an allegory for a kind of movie viewing. Robert Smithson's astute observation "Making a film is one thing, viewing a film is another. Impassive mute, still the viewer sits. The outside world fades as the eyes probe the screen. Does it matter what film one is watching?"<sup>42</sup> rings true for Blake. Blake's former life – his outside world – fades as he probes the "screen" like a waking dream. Once Nobody and Blake begin their journey, we become increasingly aware of Blake's viewpoint. We see the back of Nobody's head

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Smithson, *Cinematic Atopia*, p. 138

from Blake's point of view as he follows on his pinto. The horse's movements jog the camera (Blake), emphasizing his movie within Jarmusch's. In two short scenes where Blake is briefly conscious, Blake sees Nobody don his hat and, in a later scene, his glasses. Both are shot from the ground where a groggy Blake lies. His semi-conscious state makes him as objective as the camera itself, watching rather than perceiving from a specific psychological prejudice. During the longest scene in the movie where Blake and Nobody ride through the woods, Jarmusch cuts away to show Blake noticing the repetition of silver tree trunks as he passes on horseback. But it is when Nobody takes Blake's glasses that the dying man's transformation as a *viewer* begins and his vision becomes more personal:

Blake: I seem to have misplaced my eyeglasses. I can't see clearly.

Nobody: Perhaps you will see more clearly without them.

Blake: You are a very strange man, very strange.

Blake may not fit the mold of the romantic heroic ideal (or any heroic ideal, even the anti-hero) because he is ineffective as an agent in changing his own fate. In terms of looking and seeing, however, Blake's journey – his evolution as a viewer – will prove to be a triumph.

Blake does not ever fully understand Nobody and his culture (he never catches on to the expression of friendship tied to tobacco for instance). He does, however, learn to approach his environment as one would an artwork – in the moment and with an appreciation for its beauty. In accepting the moment rather than identifying himself with the past or counting on the future Blake gains a more organic connection to life. As the

movie progresses, Blake's smile transforms from a nervous grimace (when he was on the train and when he is in Thel's room) to affectionate moments where his entire face lifts – usually witnessing Nobody's quirky behavior (as when he observes Nobody in his glasses and watches him running to apologize to his lover). This has less to do with shifting externals than with the space from which Blake observes. On the surface, we see Blake adopt qualities of Blake the “killer of white men,” but more subtly and importantly, his mindset morphs from someone attached to and/or affected by facts on paper (the letter, the wanted posters that falsely accused him of killing Thel) to a person more at ease with the shifting, organic nature of the world – its vertiginous nature. By finding a level of contentment within his lack of understanding, the man who began the movie insisting a letter “confirmed [his] position” realizes that once all familiar external comparisons are erased, there is nothing to position oneself against. Positioning is contextual. Once all things familiar disappear, Blake has no way of knowing which direction to go (literally or figuratively). I would argue that the same phenomenon is true for *Dead Man*'s audience.

Through the course of *Dead Man*, Blake morphs from habitual looking – out of the train window at remote landscapes floating by like movie screens – to appreciating the bark of a tree and seeing the beauty in a dead fawn. Perhaps Jarmusch has similar hopes for us. Once his glasses are gone, Blake begins to connect with what the Romantics called “cosmic consciousness.” Again, Jarmusch torques a Romantic idea. For the Romantic hero, self-annihilation is required to achieve an organic connection to the world. With Blake, it is through an external and literal annihilation (being shot) that he finds a new connection to his surroundings. Emerson claimed that with this death of self “all mean

egotism vanishes” and a person becomes “part or particle of God.”<sup>43</sup> The Romantics felt that “To establish that man shares his own life with nature was to reanimate the dead universe of the materialists, and at the same time most effectively to tie man back to his milieu.”<sup>44</sup>

Blake physically journeys away from the materialists in Machine who see people as tools in accomplishing tasks (bounty hunters who act out revenge, brains that keep the company’s accounts straight etc.) and finds himself in an organic world where he learns how to “share his own life with nature.” Immediately before adopting the role of William Blake killer of white men, Blake urinates by a tree. He looks closely at the bark and up at its branches. For the first time, we see Blake *studying* nature. It is obviously from his viewpoint that we study the gradations of the bark and see the spinning sky and branches above. Later, Blake stops for a dead fawn. He makes a symbolic gesture of unity. Mixing the blood from his wound with that of the fawn, Blake smears the fluid down the center of his face. He then lies down next to the fawn, looks up at the sky, which again begins to spin, and shuts his eyes

Writer Charles Bernstein once wrote, “Poetry is like a swoon with this difference: It brings you to your senses.”<sup>45</sup> This is the case for Blake. His weakness or swooning ultimately leads him to a new way of looking at his surroundings. This is most obvious when contrasting the walk through Machine and the walk through the American Indian village. Domesticated animals such as a pig, cow, or horse, startle Blake as he cuts

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<sup>43</sup> Wilson, p. 21

<sup>44</sup> M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 65.

<sup>45</sup> Charles Bernstein, quoted by Botting, p. 97

through the town of Machine on his way to Dickenson Metal Works. Jarmusch shows Blake's nervousness with one shot and then shows us what Blake sees with the next. People, mud puddles and animals force Blake to take a certain route, speeding up to pass things that are threatening and slowing down when something shocking, like the cowboy getting a blow job or when a tall, thin man blocks his path. By the end of the journey when he reaches the village, Blake is completely passive and sees what is there without judgment. In looking through damaged or semi-conscious perception, he even seems to see in a way that surpasses the senses.

When Blake reaches the Indian village he can barely walk or keep his eyes open. He was shot for a second time at the supply tent and has lost more blood. As he stumbles through the village he is not shocked by what he sees. The mood of the village is more communal and less threatening than that of Machine. Blake does not seem to have the energy to react even if he wanted to. Since Blake is almost dead, the shots do not include discernable reactions. Our primary means of understanding the character is now limited solely to his point of view – how he sees his surroundings. Due to the injury and exhaustion, there is a thinner skin between the character and what he observes. After Nobody places Blake on the ground and leaves to find a canoe, Jarmusch cuts between shots of Blake in a state of undulating swoons and images of what Blake sees every time his eyes open. Like the train scene at the beginning of *Dead Man*, the shot/counter shot dynamic dominates. Blake looks at a crowd of villagers who have gathered around and look at him. Jarmusch emphasizes Blake's disorientation by overlapping and shifting images, creating a kinetic double vision. With the bearskin coat and the faded markings that Nobody drew on his face, Blake's presence in the village is in tune with his

appearance and his psychedelic, mystical perspective. This harmony, albeit still laced with “Otherness,” stands in sharp contrast to the friction between Blake and the settlers on the train and in the town of Machine.

In *Dead Man* Blake is forced via foreign surroundings and injury to part with habitual ways of looking. Jarmusch seems to be trying to provide an opportunity for the movie’s viewers to also shift from habitual ways of looking. Interviews with director support that he sees movies a possible tool for change:

Well, see, I don’t think something that’s explicitly ideological serves any kind of even subversive purpose anymore in America, because if you make a political statement that is completely direct then you’re only reinforcing opinions of people who would agree with you anyway, and the people that don’t agree with you won’t agree with you – you’re not changing anybody’s way of thinking. So I feel that I would never make something that was directly political or ideological, yet at the same time I think that the two films I’ve made and the things I plan to make are – I don’t know how to put it – it’s not blatantly represented, it’s something that hopefully changes the way people think about their own lifestyles or their own values, that would cause them to think about their lives and maybe make some changes in things, or at least in what they value.<sup>46</sup>

It is a gamble to create an uncanny world that challenges filmgoer’s expectations. In the end, Jarmusch’s world on the screen is as remote and foreign to the people in the theater as the atopic cinema is in Smithson’s text and the natural world is for Blake. Jarmusch begins the film with a quote from Henri Michaux that reads, “It’s preferable not to travel with a dead man.” Perhaps this quote is less about Nobody traveling with Blake and more about the movie traveling with habitual viewers. In constructing a viewing environment that creates a tension between the expected and the perceived, Jarmusch

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<sup>46</sup> Jim Jarmusch, Belsito, p. 43

hopes to make the audience think about their lives as movie viewers who accept ideas of good guys, bad guys, assumptions about American history, film history and the like.

The opening quote is not the only point one could consider a reference to the movie viewer. Nobody's account of his childhood could also be considered on both literal and metaphorical terms, referencing contemporary and historic audiences in Europe and the United States. Nobody, during the ride through the patch of trees, says, "I was then taken east in a cage. I was taken to Toronto then Philadelphia and then to New York. And each time I arrived in another city somehow the white man had moved all their people there ahead of me. Each new city contained all the same white people as the first. And I could no understand how a whole city of people could be moved so quickly." On the surface this statement is the perception of a child seeing a strange world. It could also be seen as an allegorical critique of the homogenization happening between audiences and spectacle. Nobody's audiences can be considered as doppelgangers for the *real* viewers watching *Dead Man* or any movie. In Nobody's mind, it was the same audience following him from town to town.

Studies in relation to Westerns support that there are some basic similarities between even Anglo and Native American audiences. This similarity speaks to Nobody's impressions. In her essay "Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western Films Among American Indians and Anglos," Sociologist JoEllen Shively writes that "The Indians, like the Anglos, identified with the characters that the narrative structure tells them to identify

with – the good guys” when watching the John Ford movie, the *Searchers*.<sup>47</sup> The difference between the Indians on the reservation and the Anglos, however, was that the Anglos saw Westerns as “authentic portrayals of their past. In focus groups, Anglos, but not Indians, talked about Westerns as accurate chronicles of their history.” For Indians, “the film was more about cowboys than about Indians. This does not hinder their enjoyment of the film or make it less meaningful, because they did not view the Indians on the screen as real Indians.” In *Dead Man*, it is difficult to identify with one character over another. Blake has no “narrative structure” instructing his priorities. He has nothing to identify with, making him a blank slate. As an audience, it is difficult to root for a blank slate – a white piece of paper on which everyone else writes. In this way, Jarmusch forces us to abandon the hope of guidance in prioritizing one person or situation over another. We are not told who to identify with and face the same instability as Blake in this way. Jarmusch is not, consequently, critiquing the Western, but the very relationship between narrative cinema and its audiences.

Considering Jarmusch’s concern with America’s misinformed perceptions of itself as a homogenized, white society, it is feasible that *Dead Man* is an attempt to have audiences rethink their values regarding history and cinema. In 1999, just three years after *Dead Man*’s release, Jarmusch told an interviewer:

... America is made up of foreigners. There are indigenous people that lived here for thousands of years, but then white Europeans tried to commit genocide against them all. I’m a mongrel, I have Irish blood, bohemian blood, some German blood. All of America

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<sup>47</sup> JoEllen Shively, “Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western Films Among American Indians and Anglos,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 57, No. 6. (Dec., 1992), p. 730. Retrieved from Jstor, November 14, 2007.

is a cultural mixture and although America is very much in denial of this, that's really what America is.<sup>48</sup>

Jarmusch has equal concerns for how media contributes to America's denial that leads to, among other things, myopia about Native Americans and our country's relationship to that culture. Jarmusch stated in 1997, for instance:

It's really close to apartheid in America. The people in power will do whatever they can to maintain that, and TV and the movies are perfect ways to keep people stupid and brainwashed. In regards to *Dead Man*, I just wanted to make an Indian character who wasn't either A) the savage that must be eliminated, or B) the noble innocent that knows all is another cliché. I wanted him to be a complicated human being.<sup>49</sup>

This quote supports the possibility of multiple meanings in the Michaux quote and Nobody's account of the same audience moving from one American city to another. Are the people watching the movie "dead"? Have they been lulled into mental stagnation?

Could the antidote for habitual viewing of movies and American history be to present a pseudo-Western buddy movie that has no good guy and that emphasizes audience remoteness? By giving us no one to root for – even if we root for Blake, we are rooting for an arrival to his own funeral – Jarmusch forces us to look differently. If people watch *Dead Man* as a Western, it just won't work. If it is viewed in relation to the characters' ambitions and goals and whether they accomplish them, the film can only be dissatisfying. Instead, the viewer needs to absorb the film in the manner like Jarmusch where he listens "to all the sounds I can hear. As if I were listening to music." or, more specifically, as Smithson's ultimate viewer:

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<sup>48</sup> Jim Jarmusch, Belsito, p. 43.

<sup>49</sup> Jim Jarmusch, Rosenbaum, p. 163

Between blurs he might even fall asleep, but that wouldn't matter. Sound tracks would hum through the torpor. Words would drop through the languor like so many lead weights. This dozing consciousness would bring about a tepid abstraction. It would increase the gravity of perception.<sup>50</sup>

Smithson, consequently, asserts that the more non-hierarchically one views the more likely for an “increase [in] the gravity of perception.” In looking passively or non-hierarchically, Blake's values changed from purely rational to intuitive, the experiential (what he sees, hears etc.) begins to take precedence over the conceptual (his preconceived ideas). Again, Blake's journey and the audience's have the potential to take parallel perceptual paths. Perhaps by presenting a world that mirrors Smithson's atopia of “Tangled jungles, blind paths, secret passage, lost cities” Jarmusch might also jolt the audience out of habitual viewing. Maybe this jolt will “make some changes in things, or at least in what they value.”

In the end, the movie asks us to put less stock in words on paper: in our positions as lifelong movie goers; in psychological access to characters; and in knowing where we are when we look at the screen. It asks us to reject “here” and revel in “away” by presenting us with Jarmusch's version of the limbo between the two. In an article on Road Movies filmmaker Walter Salles writes:

I recently interviewed the American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti.... We were driving on the outskirts of San Francisco. At one point, he looked outside the window and said: “you know, in the 50s, there was still a country to be mapped. We didn't know what we would find at the end of the road. Today, everything has changed. With TV, there is no more ‘away.’”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Smithson, *Cinematic Atopia*, p. 142

<sup>51</sup> Walter Salles, “Notes for a Theory of the Road Movie” in the *New York Times*, November 11, 2007, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

With *Dead Man* Jarmusch tries to create a world of elsewhere that is not a window we look into, but one we look out. Like Smithson's *Nonsites* we are asked to remember what is not there – all the films we've seen before – and remember that those clippings form our landscape as viewers. The movie seen "here," is only one frame in all of the movies we have watched. Like *Dead Man*, the landscape is always there, whether we are in the frame or not.

In emphasizing film's remoteness, Jarmusch never lets us forget our own reflection in the glass. Leaving audiences to their own devices in identifying with the narrative, Jarmusch withholds guidance, presenting viewers with a foreign topography and no compass. In this way, this slow-paced road movie exhibits that there might still be "a country to be mapped" in cinema. In the case of *Dead Man* Smithson's cinematic atopia and ultimate viewing provides a good tracking method on the journey, a way to map its away-ness. In condoning the viewer getting "lost between the abyss within us and the boundless horizons outside us" Smithson's *Cinematic Atopia* essay encourages an acceptance of absence as one route to increased perception and a desired place beyond the screen. Jarmusch also promotes a non-hierarchical, passive viewing as a method for rethinking values of cinema that are often taken for granted, asking viewers to look at the ceiling and see that the "water in [our] head is not dissimilar from the landscape" of cinema.