



Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere

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Left for dead in the dark days of the 1970s and '80s, the movie western is currently riding a wave of resurgence that's now lasted nearly two decades. Often conceived in the popular imagination as the most Manichean of Hollywood genres, rooted in conflicts between good and evil, civilization and savagery, men wearing white hats and men wearing black ones, the western form has always been more ideologically malleable than

its reputation would suggest. But notwithstanding the occasional throwback, like last year's remake of *3:10 to Yuma*, many of the new films—and almost all of the best ones—are qualitatively different from their forebears. Self-consciously modernist works like Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) employ formal distancing devices to reframe familiar material; even more classically inclined films like Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) and the HBO series *Deadwood* (2004-06), created by David Milch, which carry on in the genre's richest vein as deeply moral examinations of the nature of American society, tend toward a far more ambiguous take on core values like heroism and individualism. The question inevitably arises: Are these films "real" westerns in the same sense as classics like *Red River*, *The Searchers*, or even *The Wild Bunch*? What exactly is a western?

Among the most aesthetically and politically radical of contemporary westerns is Jim Jarmusch's *Dead*

Man (1995). Truly worthy of the adjective *revisionist* in its attitude toward many of the genre's familiar tropes and themes, *Dead Man* challenges the norms and conventions of the western as no other contemporary film has. If the classic western is ultimately concerned with the historical negotiation of the oppositions mentioned above with the goal of clarifying the problem of "American" (i.e. white American) identity, whether the outcome be ultimately affirmative of the existing social order (e.g. *My Darling Clementine*) or more ambiguous (e.g. *The Searchers*), it is easy to see that *Dead Man* is in important respects a different kind of film entirely. The presence of a number of familiar elements in Jarmusch's film immediately mark it as a western, in the broader sense, but far from clarifying the problem of American identity, the arrangement of these elements works to obfuscate it, deconstructing many of the classical structuring principles of the genre, undermining dominant assumptions about American history, and suggesting the existence of alternatives to

the existing social order.

Dead Man opens with accountant William Blake (Johnny Depp) in the midst of a long railroad trip from his hometown of Cleveland to a small western town named Machine. Upon arriving and finding that the job he had been promised is no longer available, Blake decides to spend the little money he has left at the local saloon, where he meets a woman. Back at the woman's house, the couple is interrupted by the appearance of her fiancé, who shoots and kills the woman and wounds Blake, who then kills him in self-defense with the woman's gun. The dead man's wealthy father (who happens to be the factory boss who rejected Blake's bid for a job) hires a group of three bounty hunters, telling them he wants Blake "dead or alive, though I reckon dead would be easier." Meanwhile, a Native American man who goes by the name Nobody (Gary Farmer) finds Blake and nurses him back to health. Blake and Nobody gradually strike up an odd friendship, and the remainder of the movie alternates back and forth between their

wanderings through the western landscape and the adventures of the bounty-hunting trio, two of whom are eventually killed by the third. Late in the film, Blake is shot again, setting up the film's enigmatic closing minutes, in which Nobody takes the dying Blake to an unidentified Native American village somewhere in the Pacific Northwest and sets him adrift on a sea canoe for his journey to the spirit world.

Dead Man is to some extent a classic western. The entire movie takes place in the American West and appears to be set during the 1870s, judging by an early scene in which several railroad passengers shoot at a passing herd of buffalo. Blake fits a standard western character type: the naïve Easterner who arrives in the West and quickly finds himself unprepared for the dangers he confronts there. The film's locations, including a railroad car, a saloon, dusty streets, and a brief glimpse of Monument Valley are familiar, even archetypal. Still, from the opening railroad sequence, the film begins to depart from generic norms—not least

significantly with the initial strums of Neil Young's anachronistic, repetitive electric-guitar score, a crucial factor in the movie's haunting otherworldly feel. At one point Blake is briefly seen playing a game of solitaire, rather than the standard western game of poker. The opening sequence also introduces the great western theme of gun violence, but rather than taking it seriously, Jarmusch plays the scene for laughs, positioning the spectator alongside the bewildered Blake as he watches most of his fellow passengers abruptly jump out of their seats, draw their guns, and fire away at the buffalo.

While Blake is easily identifiable as a variation on a standard western type, I know of no character in the entire corpus of the genre to whom I could compare Nobody. It is chiefly through Nobody, and particularly the development of his relationship with Blake, that *Dead Man* deconstructs many of the genre's fundamental oppositions, problematizing its quest for a coherent American identity. Nobody upsets the standard thematics of the western by encompassing

both poles of many of its key oppositions. He signifies as West and East, nature and culture, Native American and European. (Even his self-given name links him to Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus dubs himself "Noman" in order to elude the Cyclops). Nobody immediately recognizes Blake's name as that of the renowned poet and painter, of whom Blake himself had apparently remained ignorant, and seems equally at home reciting English poetry or discussing tribal religious beliefs. He reveals himself to be well traveled, recounting to Blake his childhood kidnapping by white men, who took him first to the East Coast and then to England. Despite Nobody's frequent philosophical commentary and his use of peyote in one scene, Jarmusch never allows the character to lapse into mystic stereotype; as Blake learns when he inadvertently walks in on a romantic moment, Nobody's interests include the carnal as well as the spiritual.

Dead Man reverses the racial politics of the western, subverting the classical opposition between savagery

and civilization by making Nobody the most civilized figure in the story. While Nobody selflessly tends to the wounded Blake, a man he had never previously met, most of the film's white characters come across either as selfish and cruel, if not outright pathological, like the factory boss and the surviving bounty hunter. One particularly unpleasant bit involves a white missionary who operates a trading post known for selling diseased blankets to the Native population. *Dead Man* further confuses generic values by pervasively linking Native Americans to community and whites to individuality. Jarmusch presents the town of Machine (located in the middle of a region that a train passenger creepily played by Crispin Glover pointedly calls "Hell") as a crude, primitive outpost; as Blake walks down the town's main street, he sees a horse pissing and a man getting a blowjob in broad daylight. The bounty hunters seem to speak for the most of the film's white characters when each sheepishly admits to the factory boss that he prefers to work alone. The only coherent vision of community

is the depiction of the Native American village near the end of the film. Once again, the traditional elements of the western are present, but radically rearranged.

One of the most persistent features of the western is the presence, or at least the threat, of gun violence. The gun plays a major role in *Dead Man*, but unlike in many earlier westerns where violence is justified as necessary for the preservation of civilization, its use is never glamorized. At best, violence is merely a grim fact of life, as when Blake awkwardly shoots and kills the factory boss's son in self-defense; at worst, it erupts upon the least provocation, as when one of the bounty hunters shoots another, a mere teenager, over a petty insult. When Blake asks the woman why she keeps a gun in her room, she replies, "Cause this is America". Nobody warns Blake, "That weapon will replace your tongue...and your poetry will now be written in blood," marking the ascendancy of violence over culture among supposedly civilized Europeans. *Dead Man* ridicules the gunfighter mentality: in the impromptu

buffalo shoot, and in a later scene of the three bounty hunters competing to see who has the fastest draw. Jarmusch continues to mock the bogus machismo of the bounty hunters throughout *Dead Man*. In a bit of black comedy that stretches the rugged individualist mentality of the film's white characters to a grotesque extreme, the surviving bounty hunter kills and eats his remaining companion; we hear a gunshot and, after a fade, see him munching on his former colleague's arm.

Blake manages to escape at least partially from this destructive mentality, but only to the extent that he gives up his identity as a white man. While he initially reacts to Nobody's tribal wisdom with skeptical incomprehension, Blake soon begins to become more like Nobody himself; his spiritual transformation is marked by the appearance of face paint and an evolving style of dress. By the end of the movie, when the apparently dying Blake drifts off to sea in the canoe that Nobody has prepared for his journey to the spirit world, his iconographic transformation

has become complete. (Whether he ever fully makes the spiritual and intellectual leap is another question; when Nobody tells him, "Time for you to go back to where you came from," a befuddled Blake asks, "You mean Cleveland?"). Blake begins the film as an Eastern outsider who only gradually becomes acquainted with the mysteries of the West. Jarmusch marks his outsider status formally with a pattern of point-of-view editing that recurs throughout *Dead Man*: graceful traveling shots show us the western landscape from Blake's visual perspective, first when he rides on the railroad, then on his walk through the streets of Machine, later on as he glides down a river in a canoe, and finally in his hallucinatory dying walk through the village near the end of *Dead Man*. At the end of the film, Blake is neither fully white nor really Native American; like Nobody, he now has attributes of both, exploding the stark opposition between Whites and Indians. The visual linking of various spaces through point-of-view editing provides formal reinforcement, deconstructing

the binary “desert/garden” view of the West.

Emphasizing the importance of the historical setting to the western’s unique power, theorist Jim Kitses has described the genre as “being placed at exactly the moment when options are still open, the dream of a primitivistic individualism, the ambivalence of at once beneficent and threatening horizons, still tenable.” Jarmusch takes full advantage of this capacity of the genre in *Dead Man*, but rather than primitivistic individualism, this film offers a radical vision of community in the friendship between Blake and Nobody. This vision constitutes nothing less than an alternative history of the United States, one based on communication and cooperation between whites and Native Americans, rather than deceit and bloodshed. In a sense, *Dead Man* does complete the basic ideological mission of the western by arranging the genre’s elements into a coherent vision of American identity, but it’s a vision radically different from the dominant, progressivist narrative of American history

often affirmed in the western, one bereft of the dubious comforts provided by black-and-white oppositions between “White” and “Indian,” civilization and savagery, or culture and nature.

At the end of *Dead Man*, as Blake drifts out to sea, he sees Nobody and a white man (possibly the surviving bounty hunter) shoot each other and fall simultaneously. It’s both a moment of maximum absurdism and one of artistic renewal: a violent staple of the western genre, the climactic shootout scene, is transfigured into an image of the ultimate futility of violence, an image that recedes from Blake’s view (and ours) in the film’s final moments.