

Issam El Masmoudi

Representing Native Americans in Jim Jarmusch's "Dead man"

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Bibliographic information published by the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the National Bibliography; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de> .

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Imprint:

Copyright © 2020 GRIN Verlag
ISBN: 9783346212542

This book at GRIN:

<https://www.grin.com/document/594595>

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***Representing the Native Americans
in Jim Jarmusch's Dead Man***

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Abstract:

This paper tends to shed light on one of the fundamental concepts in media studies, which is representation. While talking about minorities such as Natives Americans, representation becomes a process of stereotyping. The white American culture has always misrepresented Native Americans by associating them with derogatory descriptions. However, movies such as *Dead Man* came to recognize the differences among races throughout the history of America since Christophe Columbus discovered it. This paper also highlights other significant terms in postmodern and postcolonial thought such as rewriting history and intertextuality. As it provides a semiotic reading of *Dead Man* using the theories of Roland Barthes and other significant figures in this field.

Introduction:

The Media is a weapon. It can make the innocent guilty as it can draw false assumptions about nations, minorities and individuals. However, the most dangerous thing is the affirmation of these ideas. The media including cinema is not innocent. As a needle, it injects myths into the mind of the mass and makes them believe that they are facts. Some texts hold with them a heavy ideological background in forms of preconceived ideas, representations and discourses. It is a common knowledge that a discourse builds its antagonism on knowledge. To know is to be powerful. White America has always tended to disfigure the image of the Native Americans in different cultural artifacts starting from Hollywood movies to the American literary canon. At any rate, this paper is divided into two parts. The first part tends to uncover the veil of the misinterpreting stories about the natives in different media products. Then, it shows how the natives are demonized through the discourse of colonialism. As a counter discourse, many American post-modern directors deconstruct those tainted images of the red Indians throughout their works including Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals* and Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*. These works are engaged on what is called in post-colonial and post-modern studies as the rewriting of history. Therefore, a semiotic reading of *Dead Man* would illustrate how the symbolism of images can rewrite the history of America. The second part of this humble paper is mainly about Interxtuality and allusion in Jarmusch's *Dead Man*. It demonstrates how the two literary figures of William Blake and Henri Michaux influence the post-modern director, Jim Jarmusch, through the process of film making in the light of his movie *Dead Man*.

I. Representing and stereotyping the natives

1. The representation of natives in the American culture:

Nobody can deny that the red Indians are the indigenous people of America. However, Native Americans have always been submitted to representation. In their book, *The Media Student Book*, Gill Branston and Roy Stafford argue that when we relate the term representation to people, it becomes a process of stereotyping. In an attempt to define stereotypes Branston and Stafford states,

Stereotypes are widely circulated ideas or assumptions about particular groups. They are often assumed to be 'lies' that need to be 'done away with' so we can all 'get rid of our prejudices' and meet as equals. Stereotypes have the following characteristics: 1) they involve both a categorizing and an evaluation of the group being stereotyped; 2) they usually emphasize some easily grasped or perceived feature(s) of the group in question and then suggest that these are the cause of the group's position; 3) the evaluation of the group is often, though not always, a negative one; and 4) stereotypes often try to insist on absolute differences and boundaries (between 'us' and 'others') whereas the idea of a spectrum of differences, which applies to many of us, is more appropriate. (p108-109)

Some examples of stereotypes may include various American movies like *Dances with Wolves* and the *Lone Ranger* and in novels, such as James Fennimore Cooper's *the Last of the Mohicans*. There is also one of the most celebrated short stories in American literature written by Ernest Hemingway titled the *Indian Camp*. The length of this short story does not exceed three pages. It tells the experience of a young boy called Nick with his father who is a doctor. They embark on a journey to an Indian camp where the doctor helps a young Indian woman to give birth to a baby through a surgery. However, her husband cannot bear this horrible scene and thus he kills himself. He cut his neck from ear to ear, which demonstrates the frailty and impotence of the husband. Second, Hemingway shows how the Indians dwell in camps in the wilderness meaning that they live in the periphery as opposed to the metropolis. Nick and his father have to cross the river in order to carry out the surgery of the Indian women. Throughout these works, Native Americans are depicted as the other, savages, having no culture, and sometimes they are not represented at all which negates their presence from the American history. Moreover, this subordination and inferiority of the Red Indians is mainly a colonial matter. Since white Americans came to the new world, they had cast natives as the other. In this process of othering, as Edward Said case with the

Orient, White Americans construct the identity of the colonial subject by using power. The result therefore is a discourse full of negative stereotypes and misrepresentations (Edgar, and Sedgwick, p. 235). The American history itself is a witness of the effacement of Red Skin Indians in several occasions such as Trail of Tears, an act of the removing Indian through forced relocation.

As a counter discourse, many filmmakers and writers grew conscious about the misrepresentation of the Natives. Therefore, they tried to write and make films to stand against those distorted images.

Sherman Alexie, a Native American writer and director, tries more or less to destabilize all those negative stereotypes about the natives. He also attempt to demystify Western myths as the figure of John Wayne, and present him to the reader as impotent and a woman-like. Alexie is known for his humor. In his *Smoke Signals*, a movie based on a novel by the same name, Alexie rewrites the narratives of the Natives as oddly different people. Using the technique of storytelling through his Red Indian characters, Alexie criticizes American pop culture especially Hollywood and movies such as *Dances with Wolves*. In another movie based on a novel by the same author under the title of *Indian Killer*, one of the characters convinces his family that Shakespeare was an Indian woman. Ironically, Alexie interrogates this canonical figure and the essentialist assumption of white-men writers as the center of Western literature. Moreover, this comparison of Shakespeare to a woman must not been seen as the frailty of women because the Indian society is based on matriarchy as opposed to patriarchy. (Liu and Hui, p. 111)

2. Jim Jarmusch' positive stereotypes about the Natives

Dead Man is a 1995, Western Revisionist, black and white and independent movie by the American producer, Jim Jarmusch. Independent Cinema refers to a small production unit working outside major studios, which gain directors a kind of relative freedom. In the 1980, the term came to denote aesthetic rather than industrial movies that include some themes untouched by Hollywood, particularly commercial movies. The works of Jim Jarmusch are about displacement, exile and cross-cultural communication. Moreover, Jarmusch is a post-modernist producer. The post-modern cinema witnessed an intense cultural revisionism and calling into question hegemonic stories from the perspective of minorities. (Suárez, p. 3/39/40)

Dead Man tells the story of William Blake starring with Johnny Depp from Cleveland who rides on a train headed to the West to work as an accountant at the Dickinson Metalworks in the town of Machine. Once he has put his feet there, he finds that the job has already taken. William tries to fix things. However, the owner, John Dickinson and his manager laugh at him and expel him by gunshots. As he is drinking in front of a bar, William meets a prostitute named Thel. Afterwards, Charlie Dickinson, the son of the owner and the boyfriend of Thel, interrupts their pillow talk. Charlie shoots Blake. Thel interposes to the shot and she is killed instead. Blake ends up being wounded. The following day, John Dickinson orders three assassins to bring Blake dead or alive. In the meantime, an Indian character, Nobody, is going to find Blake in the woods and look after him. Nobody and William Blake become friends. The three assassins are hired into a fight two of them are going to die and there remain only Cole Wilson. In the last sequence of the movie, Nobody manages to arrange a ceremonial canoe to send Blake from where he came. While the canoe is floating on the water, the last survival assassin, Cole Wilson, exchanges shots with nobody until death.

Metaphorically speaking, *Dead Man* is a poem about the dualism of the white European and the natives' cultures. It is a kind of double vision. It is about the brutal exigency of capitalist civilization, and the human side of the natives exemplified in the character of Nobody who act as the guide of the protagonist, William Blake. (Pomerance, p. 205) Blake metamorphoses from an innocent person to a gun skilled killer. This shift from the conscious to the profound subconscious of Blake is obvious from the very beginning of the movie while on the train and his experience in the woods with the help of the noble Indian character of Nobody who

is of course somebody for Blake. This metamorphosis is quite reminiscent of Kurtz journey of self-discovery in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.¹

Due to Jim Jarmusch revisionism of the Native Americans, it is said that *Dead man* is the only Western movie directed by a white man, which highly recognizes the native culture. (Suárez, p. 105). Moreover, Jarmusch includes untranslatable speeches through the tongue of Nobody without providing the audience with subtitles so that they can grasp what Nobody is saying. By doing so, Jarmusch resists the assumption of the non-cultured natives. In other words, it is a kind of resistance and a counter discourse as it is the case of Post-colonial literature by authors from countries with a colonial history. Basing on Salman Rushdie's argument of decolonizing the English language, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, in their book, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, argue that literature from once colonized countries challenge the language of colonial power by inserting untranslatable words into their works. (McLeod, p. 28)

¹ A novella written by Joseph Conrad. It is a story within a story in the sense that while the Nellie is anchored on the shores of the Thames, Marlow tells the story of his experience up to the river of Congo in Africa to his friends.

3. *Rewriting history through signs: a semiotic reading of "Dead Man"*

The concept of history is very crucial in post-colonialism as well as postmodernism for the reason that it involves the problematic of power. Therefore, we should ask the question of who writes history first. In their *The Post-colonial Reader*, Tiffin, Ashcroft and Griffiths states,

The significance of history for post-colonial discourse lies in the modern origins of historical study itself, and the circumstances by which 'History' took upon itself the mantle of a discipline. For the emergence of history in European thought is coterminous with the rise of modern colonialism, which in its radical othering and violent annexation of the non-European world, found in history a prominent, if not the prominent, instrument for the control of subject peoples. At base, the myth of a value free, 'scientific' view of the past, the myth of the beauty of order, the myth of the story of history as a simple representation of the continuity of events, authorised nothing less than the construction of world reality. (p. 355)

From this quote, we can deduce that history is reductionist in the sense that it neglects and marginalizes the history of other nations and minorities, as it is the case in our case study of *Dead Man*. In the umbrella of post-colonial studies, history is regarded as Eurocentric and thus essentialist. History is made to be seen from a white lens, which is a metaphor of white supremacy and racial discrimination.

Because of this historical hegemony over the voiceless minorities and ethnic groups, rewriting history is a key concept in both post colonialism and postmodernism as a whole. The two isms are used interchangeably for the reason that there are affinities between the two for instance many post-colonialists draw from post-structuralists as is the case of Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak basing their work on Derrida, Lacan, Foucault and Deleuze. Therefore, the role of post-modern critics and even writers is crucial here for the reason that,

Postmodern thought, by analyzing everything as text and rhetoric, tended to push hitherto autonomous intellectual disciplines in the direction of literature – history was just another narrative, whose paradigm structures were no better than fictional, and was a slave of its own (often unconsciously used) unrealized myths, metaphors and stereotypes. (Butler, p32)

Postmodernism came to deconstruct and destabilize the binary oppositions on which western epistemology is based. Before the coming of postmodern thinking, the world took the form of structures and polarities. For instance, white/black, male/woman and so on. Yet the problematic lies in the fact that the first element of each binary is meant to be seen as superior to and subordinate to the second element which results in a social inequality in terms of race, class and gender.

Thus, postmodernism enlarges the negotiation of meaning since it views any particular phenomena as a text, which has the ability to be deciphered. History, for example, is not necessarily real rather it is fiction. In other words, history becomes a kind of myth for the reason that it feeds itself on stereotypes, representation and imaginary truths, which do not exist in reality.

As it was mentioned earlier, Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* tries more or less to rewrite the American history particularly those myths about the natives as cannibals, having no culture and identity. Therefore, a semiotic reading of the film is very significant since signs are symbolic. First, it is worth to begin by hints concerning semiotics as well as some of the key thinkers of this interesting field of study. At any rate, Semiotics or semiology is the theory of signs. Particularly the way in which signs illustrates the problem of meaning and communication. Despite the fact that many approaches to semiology are deeply rooted in the study of written as well as spoken language, it deals with various forms of human artifacts with the condition of having meaning. Therefore, these human actions can be tackled as signs including images, music, literature, cinema, photograph and so on. (Andrew and Sedgwick, p306)

Ferdinand de Saussure was born in Switzerland. He is the godfather of semiology in the sense that he is the one who established the study of language, linguistics, as an independent academic field of study. Semiology is part of Saussure's study of language. Moreover, his works had a huge impact on structuralists as Lévi Strauss, Roman Jakobson and Roland Barthes himself. Saussure had never published any book until 1916 when his notes as well as those of his students based on his lectures were printed as the "Course in General linguistics". (Andrew and Sedgwick, p208). De Saussure stands against the idea that there is a historically connection between a word and its meaning. When it comes to the analysis of meaning, he differentiates between the signifier and the signified. The first one is what language refers to and the latter is the conceptual image of the signifier. These two constituents are the main components of a sign. Moreover, the relationship between them is arbitrary in the sense that it is related to a cultural convention, an agreement.

Another key concept in semiology is myth, which is a very tricky term in the sense that it has multiple and interrelated meanings. In its most traditional sense, myth is used to indicate a narrative about supernatural beings. Other examples of the use of the term myth is in Durkheimian sociology, in which myth is seen as the experience of conscience collective. (Andrew and Sedgwick, p217). The definitions of myth may vary from one thinker to another.

Ferdinand De Saussure inspired the structuralist anthropologist Lévi-Strauss's semiology. For him, a myth is a sign system and the best way to analyze it is through its underlying deep unconscious structure. Lévi-Strauss's illustration of

Oedipus myth is very significant here. He divides it into a sequence of meaningful symbols. Therefore, Lévi Strauss breaks up the narrative of Oedipus as the following: Cadmos seeks his sister, Europa, ravished by Zeus. Oedipus marries his mother Jocaster and Antigone buries her brother Polynices. Levi Strauss sees these elements as binaries in the sense that some of these groups overvalue blood relationships while the others undervalue them. Some are concerned with humans who are to some extent monstrous and the others deny the bestial side of humans. Thus, Lévi Strauss shows how myths are shaped by the human mind, which perceive the world in terms of binary oppositions. (Andrew and Sedgwick, p141)

One cannot write about semiology without crossing over Roland Barthes who is one of the most significant figures in modern literary and cultural theory. He has greatly contributed to the development of structuralism especially in his application of some techniques coming from the field of semiology to the analysis of French culture. His works cover various issues in different fields including myth and ideology, photography, narrative and the literary works of many writers such as Marcel Proust, Marquis De Sade and Honoré Balzac and George Bataille. Barthes is one of rarest modern thinkers who set up the first tenets of literary and cultural theory particularly structuralism and post-structuralism to the extent that if we want to understand theory today, we must go back to his works along with some of his contemporary thinkers including Derrida and Foucault.

In the preface to his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes states that his book is a collection of essays, which were written once each month for about two years from 1954 to 1956. Barthes states that he had a feeling of impatience at the sight of the naturalness with which the media and art dressed up a reality. Therefore, Barthes decided to track down of what he calls “what-goes-without-saying” (Barthes, p10) which is a kind of hidden ideological abuse.

Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* consists of two parts. The second part “Myth Today” is a kind of theoretical discussion to how myth works in the first part. In the first essay of the second part, Barthes writes his own definition of a myth. He states “Myth is a system of communication that is a message. It is a mode of signification. Since myth is a kind of speech, everything can be considered as a myth.” (Barthes, p107). Thus, we can deduce that all the previously mentioned works that misrepresent Native Americans are myths as the term is conceived by Barthes starting from literary works including *Indian Camp* and the *Last of the Mohicans* to apparatus of cinema with movies such the *Lone Ranger* and *Dances with Wolves*.

In an attempt to recognize the rich culture of the Native Americans, Roland Barthes theory of denotation and connotation is quite significant here in order to linger at some of the most meaningful sequences throughout the film of *Dead Man*. However, these symbolic signs are nowhere intriguing more than in the last part of the film where Jarsmuch takes us on a journey to a camp of Native American up

the river, which is quite reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway's short story, *Indian Camp*. However, unlike Hemingway, the image of Red Indians here is on the contrary positive. Since, Nobody talk to his people in order to help the protagonist of the film, William Blake, to come back from where he came from by providing him with a boat.

The above shot is full of signs and since signification is concerned, Barthes claims that there are levels of signification; he builds on De Saussure's semiology, which is the first level of a signification in order to analyze daily life myths. A sign for Roland Barthes is made up of both denotative and connotative orders. Denotation means the process of referring to something in the world while connotation serves the second level of signification of what Barthes calls Metalanguage. It is the allusion to cultural values. Therefore, this scene is not only black and white pictures set in motion. On the contrary, it hold a positive hidden message about the natives particularly the character of Nobody himself. Deep down, as Barthes's key idea of connotation operates, this scene represents the cultural heritage of the red skin Indians, which is manifested in a whole way of life. On the one hand, it represent the art of sculpting which characterizes the Native American culture. It is a handmade gate colored with black and white. These two colors are very significant when it comes to cinema especially independent film such as *Dead Man* in order to get the audience closer to the hospitality and cultural legacy of the natives. The gate takes the shape of a human being meaning that it is personified with open arms as a symbol of the hospitality and sympathy of Nobody and his fellows red skin Indians in the camp toward William Blake.

II. Intertextuality

The term Intertextuality was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960's in order to indicate that a text is not self-contained and autonomous but rather it is a product of other texts. She claims that there is a network relationship between texts. In this way, the meaning of a particular text depends on other previous texts. The Bulgarian literary theorist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva came into appearance in Paris as the interpreter of the Russian Formalist, Mikhail Bakhtin. In his collected essays *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin refers to the novel as dialogic because it contains a multiplicity of voices, Heteroglossia. In this way, a novel is not fixed as other forms of literature but rather it is subjected to change because it possesses parodies, travesties, and reaccentuates (Edgar and Sedgwick. p. 14). Roland Barthes develops the term of Intertextuality in his famous essay *The Death of the Author* in 1968. Influenced by Kristeva's work on Bakhtin, Barthes develops the idea of the text as a non-unified authorial consciousness and a form of plurality of quotations of other words, other utterances and other previous texts. As Roland Barthes puts it himself, a text is a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture." (Barthes) In this way, films become what Baudrillard calls a "simulacrum". That is, a copy of a copy. This point of view triggers off the idea of the creativity of filmmakers where "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of death of the author". (Barthes, p148). In one of his essays, T.S Eliot makes it clear that, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone, his significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (Eliot, p9).

Thus, *Dead man* is just another text that alludes to various writers but these are the main ones: Henri Michaux and William Blake.

1. Henri Michaux

Henri Michaux is a surrealist Belgian-born writer and painter. His works inspired Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* especially in the development of the plot and visual motifs. However, the most intriguing allusion to Henri Michaux is the intertext, which appears at the beginning of the movie "It is preferable not to travel with a dead man".

This line appears in Michaux's collection of sketches, which consist of prose fragments under the title of *Un Certain Plume*. This quotation belongs to the fifth

fragment which is entitled “The Night of the Bulgarians”. In this section of the collection, Plume and an unnamed friend have to share the same compartment during a train ride at night. The latter feel annoyed by the whispering and murmuring of the Bulgarians. Therefore, they shot them with their guns. To hide their crime they sit on the dead bodies. However, the corpses begin to slide off their seats. Bothered by these dead bodies, Plume comes up with the conclusion of “it is preferable not to travel with a dead man since there are nothing but trouble.” (Suarez, p. 107)

In addition to that, this quote acts also as foreshadowing of the tragic end of the movie. It is a kind of mini-summary. Since it includes words such a traveling and death. Moreover, in order to draw a link between Michaux’s *Un Certain Plume* and Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*, the wounded body of Blake is a kind of burden for the Indian character, Nobody. It is the same thing for Plume with the dead bodies of the Bulgarians.

Intertextuality can take other forms of texts such as paintings. Henri Michaux was a double artist meaning that he is a writer and a painter at the same time. Therefore, we can sense that literature goes hand in hand with visual arts. One the main instances in which Jarmusch draws on Michaux’s art of painting is when Nobody and William Blake, the protagonist, were in the woods at night. It is worth to draw an analogy between this scene taken from *Dead Man* and Michaux’s painting, *The Prince of Night*.

When Nobody was looking at William Blake, the latter’s face turns out to be a dead skull which may operate as a foreshadowing of the death of both Nobody and William Blake at the end of the film, *Dead Man*. This scene is based on Michaux’s painting, *Prince of the Night*; it is one of the greatest works of surrealism.

2. William Blake

William Blake is a 19th century English poet and painter. Since he was a child, Blake had a strong visual mind. However, his works were not given much attention at that time. His neglect is explained by his difficult personality. His visual imagination makes him think everything he says is bigger than life itself. His thoughts are limited to his own imagination; they were never been thought by others (Bronowski, p. 9).

For Jarmusch, poetry and cinema are two connected worlds. In order to make this assumption concrete, Jarmusch uses some strategies such as poetic characters. In addition to that, when Jarmusch has pick up a poem of Blake entitled *Proverb of Hell*, he reads, “the eagle never lost so much time as when he is submitted to learn from the crow” and “Except poison from standing water”. Then, he figured out that there are smailiraties between Blake’s poem and what he has read about the natives. Nobody exemplifies Jarmusch’ poetic character. Nobody is the cultured Native American who has admired the works of Blake since his childhood when he was in London. Through the tongue of Nobody, the director of the movie alludes to multiple verses by the English poet Blake. For instance, Nobody quotes from the poem of “Auguries of Innocence” when he first sees Blake, the character,

Every night and every Morn
Some to misery are Born,
Every morn and every night,
Some are born to sweet delight,
Some are born to sweet delight,
Some are born to endless night
(Blake quoted by Piazza, p. 250/1)

Another instance when Nobody quotes Blake, is his encounter with the autograph. Nobody recites one of verses in Blake’s poem *The Everlasting Gospel*:

“The vision of God that thou dost see is my vision’s great enemy”.

This verse explains Sara Piazza, is more realistic than it seems because Blake, the poet, claims that he used to see regular visions of angels who inspired him throughout his works. (Piazza, p. 254)

III. Conclusion

To sum up, it is worth to note that any reading of any particular text should be critical. Sometimes, we can read and watch something, which is unreal. This lead to misunderstandings and the stereotyping of the other unconsciously. Therefore, there would be no cultural dialogue. Difference is the first step to eliminate all kinds of discrimination and therefore the celebration of humanity. Directors like Jim Jarsmuch and others try to put back the Native Americans at the center after they were marginalized by colonial institutions particularly creative modes of art. Post-modern mode of thinking deconstructs and transcends all kind of boundaries, which impeded cultural difference to move on. Moreover, some postmodern elements such as Interxtuality illustrate that cinematic works are not self-contained meaning that movies draws from other previous texts be is a painting, a novel or just another film. Besides, unlike literature, the cinema relies on what Roland Barthes calls the rhetoric of the image. Therefore, semiotics and semiology are very significant in order to understand the underlying meanings of films such as *Dead Man*.

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