

**Jim Jarmusch:** Born 1953 in Akron, Ohio

**Films:** *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999), *Year of the Horse* (1997), *Dead Man* (1995), *Coffee and Cigarettes III* (1993), *Night on Earth* (1991), *Mystery Train* (1989), *Down by Law* (1986), *Coffee and Cigarettes* (1986), *Coffee and Cigarettes II* (1986), *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), *Permanent Vacation* (1982)

**Characteristics:** fractured narratives, multiple story lines, expansive black-and-white cinematography.

***Dead Man* (1995):** post-western, musical score by Neil Young. **Awards:** Best Cinematography (Independent Spirit Awards 1996), Best Cinematography (National Society of Film Critics 1996), Best Cinematography (New York Film Critics Circle 1996).

**From Jonathan Rosenbaum Interview (1997):** “When *Dead Man* ... premiered at Cannes last year, it suddenly became apparent that Jarmusch's honeymoon with the American press was over—although his international reputation to all appearances survives intact. There are multiple reasons for this, including *Dead Man* itself,... Though it's possible to see a director such as Alfred Hitchcock developing certain formal and thematic ideas in his Fifties movies, there's little likelihood of such an evolution being possible in a studio director today, what with agent packages, script bids, multiple rewrites, stars who get script approval and/or say over the final cut, test marketing, and so on. Within such a context, it's significant that Jarmusch as a writer-director, virtually alone among American independents who make narrative features, owns the negatives of all his films. This means that, for better and for worse, all the developments—and nondevelopments—that have taken place in his work between *Permanent Vacation* (1980) and *Dead Man* are of his own making.... Perhaps the film's most courageous defiance of commercial conventions is a response to the current cinema of violence that is so unsettling that audiences generally can't decide whether to wince or laugh. Every time someone fires a gun at someone else in this film, the gesture is awkward, unheroic, pathetic; it's an act that leaves a mess and is deprived of any pretense at existential purity, creating a sense of embarrassment and overall discomfort in the viewer that is the reverse of what ensues from the highly estheticized forms of violence that have become de rigueur in commercial Hollywood ever since the heyday of Arthur Penn and Sam Peckinpah, and which have recently been revitalized by Tarantino, among others.”

**Rosenbaum:** I've heard that Nobody speaks four languages in the film--Blackfoot, Cree, Makah, and English. How did you write the Indian dialog?

**Jarmusch:** Well, Michelle Thrush, who's in the film, spoke Cree and is Cree. We wrote some dialog together and then she translated it with someone else who was even more fluent.

**Rosenbaum:** As I recall, none of the native American dialog is subtitled.

**Jarmusch:** No, I didn't want it subtitled. I wanted it to be a little gift for those people who understand the language. Also, the joke about tobacco is for indigenous American people. I hope the last line of the film, "But Nobody, I don't smoke," will be like a hilarious joke to them: 'Oh man, this white man still doesn't get it.' Makah was incredibly difficult; Gary [Farmer] had to learn it phonetically and read it off big cards. Even the Makah people had trouble, because it's a really complicated language. ...

**Rosenbaum:** A subjective impression I had when I first saw *Dead Man* at Cannes is that it's your first political film. The view of America is a lot darker than in your previous films.

**Jarmusch:** I think it is a lot darker. You know, you can define everything as being political and analyze it politically. So I don't really know how to respond to that because it wasn't a conscious kind of proselytizing. But I'm proud of the film because of the fact that on the surface it's a very simple story and a simple metaphor that the physical life is this 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 reasons are completely disoriented from their cultures. That's the story for me, that's what it's about. But at the same time, unlike my other films, the story invited me to have a lot of other themes that exist peripherally: violence, guns, American history, a sense of

place, spirituality, William Blake and poetry, fame, outlaw status—all these things that are certainly part of the fabric of the film, that maybe unfortunately, at least for the distributors, work better when you've seen the film more than once. Because they're subtle and they're not intended to hit you over the head with a sledgehammer.

**Rosenbaum:** The notion of what Nobody calls "passing through the mirror" seems to have a lot to do with the way the movie is structured: there's the industrial town at the beginning and the Native American settlement at the end, the train ride and the boat ride...

**Jarmusch:** Yeah, and they do somehow connect with that abstract idea that Nobody has to pass Blake through this mirror of water and send him back to the spirit level of the world. But what was more fascinating to me is that these cultures coexisted only so briefly, and then the industrialized one eliminated the aboriginal culture. Those specific Northwest tribes existed for thousands of years and then they were wiped out in much less than a hundred years. They even used biological warfare, giving them infected blankets and all kinds of stuff—any way to get rid of them. And then they were gone. And it was such an incredibly rich culture.

I don't really know of any fiction film where you see a Pacific Northwest culture. I know there's the film *The Land of the War Canoes* made by Edward Curtis, the early twentieth-century photographer—he shot some Kwakiutl people, but it's sort of a "Nanook of the North" deal where he used them pretty much as actors. But their culture was so rich because where they lived provided them with salmon, and they could smoke that and exist all winter long without having to hunt very much. Therefore they spent a lot of time developing their architecture, their carving, their mythology, and their incredibly elaborate ceremonies with these gigantic figures that would transform from one thing into another, with all kinds of optical illusions and tricks. That's why the long house opens that way in *Dead Man*, when Nobody goes inside to talk to the elders of the tribe and eventually gets a sea canoe from them. It seems to open magically, but it's based on a real system of pulleys that these tribes used.

**The Makah (Generous Ones) Nation (Own Name: Kwih-dich-chuh-ahtx: People of the Sea and Forest):**  
(<http://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/renker.html>)

Like all living cultures, the Makah Tribe has undergone many changes since ancient times. Contemporary Makah children attend public school, wear blue jeans and Nikes, watch television, and play video games. Today, Makah adults are just like other American adults in many respects. They attend college, surf the net, and make decisions that affect their families, health, and education. But unlike most other Americans, Makah people also attend potlatches, join ancient secret societies, and hunt gray whales. ...

The Makah people live on a reservation that sits on the most northwestern tip of the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. The northern boundary of the reservation is the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The western boundary is the Pacific Ocean. The remaining two land borders can expand if the Tribe purchases additional parcels of real estate. The current reservation is approximately 27,000 acres, a small portion of the territory controlled by the Tribe before the Treaty of Neah Bay was signed in 1855.

#### **A Makah Creation Myth: The Two-Men-Who-Changed-Things**

(<http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/WhentheAnimalsandBirdsWereCreated-Makah.html>)

... two brothers of the Sun and the Moon came to the Earth. Their names were Ho-ho-e-ap-bess, which means "The Two-Men-Who-Changed-Things." **They came to make the Earth ready for a new race of people, the Indians.** The Two-Men-Who-Changed-Things called all the creatures to them. Some they changed to animals and birds. Some they changed to trees and smaller plants.

**From Alfred Kazin, "An Introduction to William Blake"**  
(<http://www.multimedialibrary.com/Articles/kazin/alfredblake.asp>)

Blake is not a naturalist; he believes in apprehension, not in being; in certainty at the price of reality. He does not believe that anything is finally real except the imagination of man. He grasped one horn of the classic dilemma—"how do I know that anything is real, since I know of reality only through my own mind?"—and pronounced that

the problem was settled. He **refused to believe the evidence of his senses that the human mind—however it may qualify or misread reality—is bombarded by something outside itself.** We are eternally subjective; but there are objects.... Blake assumed that **what is partial is in error,** and that **what is limited is non-existent.** But the truth is that he was not trying to prove anything philosophically at all; his greatness depends not on his conception of the world but on what he created through it. In defense of his own personality, and in defiance of his age, **he imagined a world equal to his heart's desire.** He refused to admit objective reality only because he was afraid man would have to share the creation.

It is here that Blake has perplexed his readers even more than he has delighted them. The reason lies in **his refusal to concede a distance between what is real and what is ideal;** in his desperate need to claim them as one. Blake is difficult not because he invented symbols of his own; he created his symbols to show that the existence of any natural object and the value man's mind places on it were one and the same. He was fighting the acceptance of reality in the light of science as much as he was fighting the suppression of human nature by ethical dogmas. He fought on two fronts, and shifted his arms from one to the other without letting us know—more exactly, he did not let himself know. **He created for himself a personality, in life and in art, that was the image of the thing he sought.**

....Blake—who hated the Church as much as Voltaire and was as republican as Jefferson —was concerned with the **freedom of man from all restrictions,** whether imposed by the morality of the Church or the narrowness of positivism. Like Nietzsche, he considered himself **an enemy of Socrates and of the Platonic dualism** that became a permanent basis of Christian thought. What Blake said in so many of his early poems Nietzsche was to say in his autobiography: "All history is the experimental refutation of the theory of the so-called moral order of the world." Zarathustra, dancing mysteriously to the bacchanal of Nietzsche's imagined self-fulfillment, is prefigured in Blake's Los, the crusading imagination with the hammer in his hand. And like Nietzsche, **Blake writes in his masterpiece, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, with the playful daemonism of those who league themselves with the "Devil" because his opposite number restricts human rights.**

#### **The Wounded Knee Massacre, December 1890:**

(from <http://www.lastoftheindependents.com/wounded.htm>)

#### **The Ghost Dance**

A phenomena swept the American west in 1888 by Paiute holy man Wovoka from Nevada.. Wovoka, son of the mystic Tavibo, drew on his father's teachings and his own vision during an eclipse of the sun. He began spreading the "gospel" that came to be known as the Ghost Dance Religion. He claimed that the earth would soon perish and then come alive again in a pure, aboriginal state, to be inherited by the Indians, including the dead, for an eternal existence free from suffering. To earn this new reality, however, Indians had to live harmoniously and honestly, cleanse themselves by natural detox often, and shun the ways of the whites, especially alcohol, the destroyer. Wovoka also **discouraged the practice of mourning, because the dead would soon be resurrected, demanding instead the performance of prayers, meditation, chanting, and especially dancing** through which one might briefly die and catch a glimpse of the paradise-to-come, replete with lush green prairie grass, large buffalo herds and Indian ancestors. Kicking Bear, a Miniconjou Teton Lakota, made a pilgrimage to Nevada to learn about this new religion

White officials became alarmed at the religious fervor and activism and in December 1890 banned the Ghost Dance on Lakota reservations. When the rites continued, officials called in troops to Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota. The military, led by veteran General Nelson Miles, geared itself for another campaign.

The presence of the troops exacerbated the situation. Short Bull and Kicking Bear led their followers to the northwest corner of the Pine Ridge reservation, to a sheltered escarpment known as the Stronghold. The dancers sent word to Sitting Bull of the Hunkpapas to join them. Before he could set out from the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota, however, he was arrested by Indian police. A scuffle ensued in which Sitting Bull and seven of his warriors were slain. Six of the policemen were killed.

General Miles had also ordered the arrest of Big Foot, who had been known to live along the Cheyenne River in South Dakota. But, Big Foot and his followers had already departed south to Pine Ridge, asked there by Red Cloud and other supporters of the whites, in an effort to bring tranquility. Miles sent out the infamous Seventh Cavalry led by Major Whitside to locate the renegades. They scoured the Badlands and finally found the Miniconjou dancers on Porcupine Creek, 30 miles east of Pine Ridge. The Indians offered no resistance. Big Foot, ill with pneumonia, rode in a wagon. The soldiers ordered the Indians to set up camp five miles westward, at Wounded Knee Creek. Colonel James Forsyth arrived to take command and ordered his guards to place four Hotchkiss cannons in position around the camp. The soldiers now numbered around 500; the Indians 350, all but 120 of these women and children.

The following morning, December 29, 1890, the soldiers entered the camp demanding the all Indian firearms be relinquished. A medicine man named Yellow Bird advocated resistance, claiming the Ghost Shirts would protect them. One of the soldiers tried to disarm a deaf Indian named Black Coyote. A scuffle ensued and the firearm discharged. The silence of the morning was broken and soon other guns echoed in the river bed. At first, the struggle was fought at close quarters, but when the Indians ran to take cover, the Hotchkiss artillery opened up on them, cutting down men, women, children alike, the sick Big Foot among them. By the end of this brutal, unnecessary violence, which lasted less than an hour, at least 150 Indians had been killed and 50 wounded. In comparison, army casualties were 25 killed and 39 wounded. Forsyth was later charged with killing the innocents, but exonerated.

### Questions:

1. In the 1970s, killing buffalo was a key element for US plans to eliminate Indians. How does the buffalo killing scene in *Dead Man* help enunciate this concept? Does that “plan” echo throughout the movie or not?
2. Does *Dead Man* “appeal to American audiences’ nostalgic take on the past, namely, the wide ever-expanding horizons of the frontiers, the interaction with the American-Indian, the challenging of corrupt settlers” or not? Does it present this non-Native nostalgia in a new light or does it, once again, mythologize (and so contain and control) contemporary Native Americans? Does *Dead Man*’s buddy film coding affect its Western coding? Explain.
3. If color “can reproduce reality more naturally than black and white” (Hayward 88), how does the use of black and white cinematography affect *Dead Man*? Does it increase or decrease its mythic dimensions? Does it affect the dreamlike qualities? Explain.
4. Since *Dead Man* is a road movie, what does William Blake discover, if anything? Does Nobody learn anything or not? Explain.
5. At one level, the movie creates a conflict between American poet, Emily Dickinson, and English poet, William Blake. The myth about Dickinson holds that she was a reclusive spinster-poet, brooding over a deep romantic mystery in her past. How does the use of these two names create another level to *Dead Man*? Explain.
6. What effect might seeing Iggy Pop in a dress have on spectator “suture”?
7. How are mirrors used in *Dead Man*? Does Nobody’s enunciation regarding mirrors cause any transparency on the “real” or not? Explain.