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Claremont McKenna College

**“Nobody speaking his native language:” The Problem of the Post-Western in
Contemporary American Cinema**

Submitted to
Professor Thomas Schur, Ph.D.

By
Tamas Hever

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ABSTRACT

This senior thesis has two major purposes: One, to investigate and critique how experts characterize contemporary American post-westerns, second, to demonstrate, and suggest a more inclusive perspective through an analysis of Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1996). Experts from the fields of film and American studies claim that there is a new phase in the genre's development where post-western films move away from the conventions of the old, racist westerns. Accomplished authors have suggested that these films do not rely on the mythical west or on the regionalist culture but examine the west closely to determine the ways in which it differs from the representations and themes of the classical western. However, the films do not challenge the systematic misrepresentation of the crimes committed against Native Americans during the westward expansion which means that the films have not fully moved away from the old westerns. This cinematic perspective sickens the American conscience through the national narrative, as these films explore the early days of U.S. history. Nevertheless, Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* provides a new, much fuller perspective on the west, and faces the genocidal forces that America has thus far avoided within the western genre. *Dead Man* is a revisionist western that can help the genre to evolve even further, to include Native Americans and the truth of their history.

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“The white race is the cancer of human history. It is the white race and it alone—its ideologies and inventions—which eradicates autonomous civilizations wherever it spreads, which has upset the ecological balance of the planet, which now threatens the very existence of life itself.”

—Susan Sontag, “What's Happening in America (1966)”

During my Introduction to Film course in the spring of 2015, we watched a wide range of films representing different genres. One of these films was John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), which is considered the epitome of the classic, Golden Age of westerns. As an international student in the United States, I was immediately eager to learn more about the most prominent national genre, the western. As students in the course, we learned how this genre changed over the years. Six decades after *The Searchers*, it was obvious that old westerns were mythical. The next film that our professor, Thomas Schur, showed us was a post-western, Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man* (1996). The two films could not have been more distinct from each other. After watching *Dead Man*, the radical change in style, narrative and overall message was clear-cut. This revisionist western made me curious about political films, independent cinema, and Native American representation in general. I wanted to learn about post-westerns films and what film scholars think of them. It became clear that experts from the fields of film studies and American studies claim that there is a new stage in the genre’s development where post-western films move away from the conventions of old westerns. This is a crucial claim since westerns have been regarded as the American national narrative, as these films explore the early days of U.S. history. Nevertheless, I wanted to explore how

these post-westerns move away from *The Searchers* and explore the themes of *Dead Man*. After watching numerous “successful” post-westerns from Hollywood, I discovered that these films were in fact more like *The Searchers* than *Dead Man*. Many contemporary post-western films seemed to fail to make the leap forward that Jarmusch was able to do. In other words, I could not agree with many film scholars and their analysis.

In his book *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West*, Neil Campbell¹ makes the case that the western is not a dead genre. According to Campbell, the western is a continuously changing genre that still has meaning. It is constantly changing, just as the west as a region itself. In other words, Campbell is arguing that the west as a geographical location and the western as a genre are dynamic. However this does not mean that westerns have lost their meaning, it simply means that the genre has been required to reinvent itself. According to Campbell, it reinvented itself as post-westerns show a different geographical location and a different narrative than the old, classical westerns. We are used to seeing the west as a desert and seeing cowboys riding in the sunset looking for freedom. On the other hand, post-westerns create a new narrative, while critiquing this old image. Campbell argues that post-westerns go against one of the

¹ Campbell is a professor and Senior Research Fellow in American Studies at the University of Derby. He is also a member of the British Association of American Studies and the Western Literature Association. The book *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Region, West* concludes his trilogy of monographs on the “New West” along with *The Cultures of the American West* (2000) and *Rhizomatic West* (2008). In his book *Rhizomatic West*, Campbell seeks to change our perception on the American west. Campbell writes a new perspective and encourages us to see the western region of the United States as a new territory and space, instead of a stereotype of the west.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's main points about the genre. For Deleuze, the western did lose its meaning through revisionism. Deleuze states that westerns after 1945 tried to support the nation in order keep the American dream alive (Campbell 3). After the war, which was a crucial time for the nation to stay strong, westerns were not critical of the old west (Campbell 3). This means that westerns were still relying on the mythical, stereotypical west where anything is possible—just like the American dream.

Campbell argues against this view, however, and shows that some westerns in fact played *against* the mythical, clichéd west (3). This is important because westerns are part of America's national narrative, since they are about the early days of the United States as a nation. Campbell wants to show that the post-western found its own meaning through revisionism. He writes about how this manifests itself by utilizing Deleuze's own concept of "deterritorialization"—this is to say, Campbell shows how the west goes beyond what is "local"(Campbell 45).² Furthermore, he shows how the post-western has found new meanings for the geographical American west through his analysis of contemporary cinema. In other words, these films do not rely on the mythical west or on the regionalist culture but examine the west closely to determine the ways in which it differs from the representations and themes of the classical western.

Throughout the book, Campbell analyses post-western films. According to him, one of the main points that the films deliver is a critique of regionalism (Campbell 50). This means that they are trying to point beyond the west's legacy (Campbell 50). In the same paragraph where Campbell makes this claim, he summarizes his views by stating

² The fullest elaboration of these ideas can be found in Campbell's earlier book *Rhizomatic West*.

that post-western films are critical of the “cultures, histories, peoples, and futures of the West as region and idea” (Campbell 50). In other words, post-westerns are concerned about the west as a region and the western as a genre: they are trying to change our idea of the “western” and the “west” as concepts and make us think about the genre and the region in new ways. Yet to understand this new way of thinking, we first have to understand old westerns. Campbell generally accepts Deleuze’s claim that old westerns are mythical films. They are mythical because old westerns are stories with manipulated content, designed to normalize the “westward expansion” of the United States (Campbell 21). This means that they legitimize genocide of native Americans in order to create “tales of a West of freedom” (Campbell 54). In other words, these stories are shaped to show how settlers achieved freedom and established the progress of civilization in the west. The way they achieved this freedom is absent from old westerns, however. Old western films are not concerned with genocide. To be less than deceitful propaganda, these films would instead have to either have cast a Native American main character or show a white character who is driven by genocidal motives. It is clear that these two options are not realistic narratives in mainstream Hollywood cinema. Old westerns do not want to explore genocidal topics because they have another goal. This is what Deleuze discusses in his *Cinema* books, how old westerns needed to strengthen the nation during the healing period of the Second World War (Campbell 2).

According to Campbell post-westerns are different; they are critical of the old western genre. They do not want to show a mythical west anymore. This new approach by Campbell is based on our perceptions of the American west. In other words, in order to show the audience that post-westerns are different, the audience has to both know what

scholars know about the old westerns and move beyond this understanding. Post-westerns have the potential to change our ideas of the genre and the geography as well. They can “deterritorialize” the west (Campbell 50). The west is not just an unpopulated desert anymore. Post-westerns show the actual region and not how it is imagined. The contemporary west is filled with highways, cities, and people. These films try to destroy the typical old-western look that we have in our mind when we think about westerns. They not only try to destroy this image but point beyond it. Campbell makes it clear that this new way of representing the west is not solely interested in details of geography but the idea of the west as well. That is, the framework of the post-western as a genre is different too. This new framework can carry many different meanings. For example, we can have new narratives where Native Americans are not savages or where the plot is not about settlement. The mythical narrative framework will end, we can hope, with the post western.

One can ask the question: what should post-western films explore specifically? If post-westerns are truly critical of “cultures, histories, peoples, and futures of the West” as Campbell suggests (50), then these films are likely to be very troubling. When Campbell says that post-westerns critically explore the cultures and histories of the region in order to trouble the audience, we can be almost certain that these films will finally explore and discuss the Native American genocide in the west. These films should not be about the American dream anymore, perhaps; rather, they should be concerned with what has happened historically in the American west and what the price is of the American dream.

One of the films Campbell analyzes in detail is *Down in the Valley*. In his chapter “The Schizo-West,” Campbell argues that *Down in the Valley* is “vital to this study of

post-Western” (305). He not only states that this film is a “vital” example but is in fact the “epitome” of post-westerns (Campbell 305). This means that this movie is a perfect example to show what the post-Western is all about. If this movie is in fact the epitome of post-Western, we can be certain that every major aspect of the post-Western will be covered in his analyses. In other words, after reading Campbell’s analysis of *Down in the Valley*, we should understand the post-western as a genre. Campbell further remarks that the film is a “much darker and troubling film” than other contemporary post-westerns (305). Campbell argues that the writer and director of the film, David Jacobson, is drawing from directors such as Anthony Mann, Sam Peckinpah, and Robert Altman (306). According to Campbell, directors Mann, Peckinpah, and Altman are all interested in the “legacy of the conquest,” which involves the voices of the repressed, the words of “women, Indians, immigrants, Mexicans, and the environment itself” (40). Jacobson’s remarks about his film resonate with Campbell’s description of it. He says that the film is purposefully made to “scar its audience” by making the usual “pattern” uncomfortable (Campbell 309). If this pattern is uncomfortable and breaks the usual themes, the film, according to Campbell and Jacobson, can be expected to introduce new ideas and shows themes of the American west that the audience is not likely to be prepared for. After Campbell and Jacobson present their observations about the film in general, one expects that *Down in the Valley* will be a critical, troubling film which gives an opportunity for the repressed to raise their voices. More specifically, one would expect that the film will, at least in part, be about the Native American genocide. But the fact is, genocide figures not all in *Down in the Valley*.

The film places an old fashioned cowboy in the new urban west. This old fashioned cowboy is the usual, mythical figure from old western films. Harlan is the cowboy who thinks he can solve every issue with his gun; he is a cowboy who does not live anywhere, uses a horse for transportation, and thinks he is above the law. He is trying to find freedom and settle down while exercising his conservative values. Yet the west itself has changed, and we realize that a cowboy like Harlan simply cannot live in the west anymore. The film is an example of how post-westerns can be said to move beyond the old western's legacy and destroy (or at least complicate) our perception of this old west. From the analysis of the film provided by Campbell, it seems like Harlan mainly cannot live in this new west because the landscape has changed. The character himself is seemingly critical of globalization and technological progress. The new west is covered with highways, cars, and buildings, and Harlan has a great deal of trouble accepting this. Harlan wants to live in the old west where he can ride his horse into the sunset. This plot is only problematic when we consider that the film, according to Campbell and Jacobson, is interested in the legacy of the conquest. In this film, the repressed is the environment that we live in today—the landscape is the “character” that lived through the abuse of progress that Harlan is unable to face—in other words, the repressed is not the communities of Native Americans that were systematically exterminated by the policies of the United States during the era of western expansion.

Campbell praises the film as it shows Harlan's madness, which is said to reveal “social and historical” effects about the west (307). The issue with this analysis is that Campbell wants us to believe that this film is the epitome of post-westerns, the perfect example to examine issues about the west that are “buried deep in the American national

psyche” (15). Yet I would argue that this film, and other films that Campbell analyzes, ignore America’s genocidal history with respect to the west. According to Campbell, Harlan’s schizophrenia played out on the movie screen gives an opportunity to abolish the myth of the old west (309). In one sense we do see that, as Harlan becomes an anti-hero in the film. This means that one cannot live as an “old cowboy” in the “new west.” But I would argue that the fact that one cannot live with the same moral codes as in classical westerns is not challenging the most mythical part of the west. Rather, it is the genocidal history of the United States that has been repeatedly ignored by Hollywood; this is the historical and social part of the west that has been buried deep in American cinema. This history has not been played out even in films that Campbell analyses as revisionist and critical of the west. To be clear, the film that he argues is the most representative post-western does not mention Native Americans, despite the fact that Campbell and Jacobson believe the film gives an opportunity for the repressed to raise their voices in a way that will scar the audience. If Campbell thinks *Down in the Valley* is a perfect example to explain the critical post-western, a film that draws from the classical western to point out that we lost the old environment instead of pointing it out that we destroyed an entire culture, than Campbell leaves out a very important point, to say the least. To believe Campbell is to believe that the post-western is not very different from the classical western. One can only wonder how it is possible that Campbell misses this point, and that the film’s makers do so as well. It is a possibility that Jacobson wanted Harlan to be disillusioned because he cannot face genocide. However, the film makes it clear that the only thing Harlan cannot face is the urbanization of the west.

This ignorance of American history, and the fact that *Down in the Valley* shows that changes in the environment are the main cause of the national psyche's trauma, becomes clear in one scene. Harlan and Tobe are in a bathroom together talking. The camera switches between Harlan's and Tobe's close-up with the images overlapping. The way we see them resonates with the fact that they are both on drugs. Despite this fact, their conversation reveals a lot about them. Harlan says that he wants to speak with his true voice. He explains that in order to speak with one's true voice, one cannot listen to other voices in one's head. He claims that he knows how to speak with his true voice, but says that many times he does not. The moment he says that "I do right now"—or, I do speak with my true voice right now—his tattoo is being covered up by Tobe. This is the first and only time we see his tattoo, which is a bird's feather. His tattoo is thus an Native American cultural symbol that is covered up at the precise moment when Harlan is speaking with his true voice. It is clear that when he is talking with his true voice, therefore, he is not concerned about Native Americans. Neither Harlan nor Hollywood is concerned about or wants to explore America's genocidal history when they talk with their true voice. The scene ends here with a fade to black. During this scene, Harlan talks about what he wants to do. He says that he wants to be outside in nature, under the stars. For Harlan it is the environment that is the most important thing. Those issues of the environment are the most important thing to him, while a Native American symbol is covered up during the scene's crucial conversation, assures us that Harlan's perspective is not troubled by the Native American genocide.

Campbell argues that the old western was a "formalized vision" in order to purify the west (Campbell 21). The new western, on other hand, is said to be important because

it investigates the secrets that classical Hollywood left out in order to shock contemporary audiences out of their complacency. Jacobson argues that he intended to make Harlan schizophrenic in order to disturb our memory of the “mythical Western and its cultural landscape” in order to “scar” the audience (Campbell 310). Yet if we can agree that *Down in the Valley* leaves the nation’s genocidal history out of the film—a film that is claimed to be a perfect example of the post-western—perhaps we can agree that the film leaves out a very significant “secret” of the west indeed. The filmmakers leave out the genocidal history of the west that is buried deep in the American conscience. This means that the film is showing a “formalized vision” in order to “purify” the west, which in turn means that the absence of genocide from the this and other films that Campbell analyzes make the post-western fit into Campbell’s own description of the old classical western film. Campbell draws from the work of David Martin-Jones who writes about how the American western film “constructs and endorses national identity” (39). This is to say that westerns play a huge part in the American national identity. When Campbell, a renowned scholar in his field, suggests that *Down in the Valley* is an exemplary post-western and critical of the old west’s history—even though the genocidal history of the United States is ignored in the film—he buries the repressed horror of America’s past even deeper into the nation’s psyche, and he assists American cinema in its mythologizing enterprise.

In her essay “‘Remember, you’re the good guy’: Hidalgo, American Identity, and Histories of the Western,” Susan Kollin provides an overview of the western’s

development as a genre.³ Alongside this history of the genre, Kollin makes various arguments with respect to Native Americans and Middle Easterners in Joe Johnston's film *Hidalgo* (2004). She provides an explanation of how old westerns were "orientalist" by representing Native Americans as the "other" (Kollin 5). They often followed a format where the cowboy defeats the "other," who is represented as a savage Indian (Kollin 9). However, her essay opposes this "orientalist" view and argues instead that representation is multidimensional. First, she provides an analysis of how Native Americans and Middle Easterners, in general, used to be interchangeable in the Western world. She gives multiple examples, drawn predominantly from the art world, where these two ethnicities weren't distinguished—one was simply thought of as the other. This often meant, Kollin argues, that Native Americans and Middle Easterners were interchangeable as representatives of evil in films, without concern for the vast racial, ethnic, cultural and geographic differences that separate these people.

After examining these issues of representation and the development of the genre, Kollin focuses on *Hidalgo* and argues that the film is a revisionist western which sympathizes with Native Americans. Although she makes a few points about Native American representation, her main focus is on how contemporary Hollywood cinema portrays Middle Easterners and why they are presented in the certain way that they are. *Hidalgo*, according to Kollin, substitutes Native Americans with Arabs, and shows them

³ Kollin is the Director of English Graduate Studies at Montana State University. She earned both her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in English studies from the University of Minnesota. In 2004, she served as the President of the Western Literature Association. Her research and her teaching focuses on representations of the American West in literature, and more recently in cinema but one of her fairly recent publications is on a post western film. The article by Kollin I discuss here was written in 2010 during her teaching fellowship with the Fulbright Program.

as the new enemy. She argues that the film is more about the twenty-first century and American interactions with the Middle East than about Native Americans in the nineteenth-century. She writes that Arabs are included in *Hidalgo* to help reestablish American identity in the post 9-11 period and to justify the American invasion of Iraq (Kollin 7). Kollin acknowledges that this idea is a reaction to the scholar Philip French's point that westerns often reflect on the period in which they are released, rather than the era in which they are set (Kollin 6). This means, then, that Kollin wants us to believe that the film is revisionist, even though—like old westerns—it is used to restore America's identity and its foreign policy. Her essay is an important example for my study because Kollin argues the film should be seen as a revisionist western. Furthermore, she points out that the film shows the Wounded Knee massacre, further suggesting that *Hidalgo* is an "Indian sympathy film" (Kollin 13). Kollin's analysis of *Hidalgo* serves to shed more light on what might be meant by the term "post-western" and how these films represent Native Americans.

Johnston's film is a biographical story of an American, Frank Hopkins, who enters a long distance horse race in the Middle East. He rides a mustang named "Hidalgo"—an "impure" horse—against pure-blooded Arabian horses (Kollin 17). The film is about Hopkins and his encounters with Bedouin riders in the desert. At the end of the film, he manages to win the race and free Hidalgo. Kollin argues that *Hidalgo*'s function is to reassure America about its decision to take military action against Iraq, which means that the film is less about American history and identity in general, and more about the political scene of the early 2000s in particular. We know that this phenomenon happens in the old western genre; however, Kollin indicates that *Hidalgo* is

still one of the films that is “part of the revisionist cycle” (13). In other words, she is saying that the film is part of a popular trend of westerns functioning as revisionist art. One could think, though, that Kollin sees revisionist western cinema as a movement lacking clear definition. She does, however, differentiate revisionist westerns from “orientalist” films. An “orientalist western,” or an old western film, establishes a notion of the “other” and often portrays Native Americans as vicious savages (Kollin 6). This old racist view is challenged by the director Johnston, according to Kollin, as Hidalgo is portrayed as an “impure” horse and Hopkins himself as a “mixed raced” cowboy (13). One could understand Kollin to mean that the film involves another race than white in order to be more commercially saleable by challenging the usual old-fashioned narratives. Still, the film relies on Hopkin’s experience with Native Americans; specifically, he lives through a Native American massacre at the beginning of the film. However, according to Kollin, the film is “less about nineteenth-century Indians and more about twenty-first century American encounters with Arabs” (21). In other words, the Native Americans and the massacre are merely symbols; the film is not representing, and purposefully avoiding, Native American history. And yet, though the film might not focus on Native Americans—because of its main characters and its depiction of a Native American only in the context of a massacre—it gets our sympathy and it becomes part of the trend of westerns as revisionist. One could argue that these statements might not make the film revisionist but Kollin goes further in her analyses and states that *Hidalgo* is “defeating ghosts of the nineteenth-century past” (21). Kollin goes even further when she asserts that the film “is able to heal the wounds of the nation’s past” (17). Kollin also specifically mentions that the film does not only show the massacre as a trauma on a

personal level but on a national level (13). In other words, the movie triumphs over the usually avoided ghosts of the American past. However, if *Hidalgo* is mostly explaining American foreign policy one may be puzzled after reading Kollin's analysis. She states that the film is not about Native Americans, yet suggests that it should promote sympathy within the audience. Furthermore, she wants us to believe that not only should we sympathize with Native Americans, but after watching the film we should face our past in order to move beyond the racism that underlies much of the history of the United States. This means that, according to Kollin, *Hidalgo* is truly a post-western which manages to move beyond a narrowly conceived west and reach a point where Native American history is fairly represented. This seems rather contradictory, especially when Kollin mentions a wounded past in connection with westerns. We can only assume that she is referring to the troubling genocidal past of the United States. In other words, she seems to promise that viewers of *Hidalgo* will not only observe a just representation of Native American history, but they will witness an exploration of the troubling past of the nation which will lead to a complete understanding and healing of the scars of the past. As I have said, Kollin goes further suggesting that the film heals the wounds of the nation's past and admits responsibility of white settlers for the Native American genocide. We know that she wants us to believe the past is healed by the characters—in this case, the horse Hidalgo and the hero Hopkins. If the characters are the key to representing the trauma on a personal and a national level that heals both and moves the country beyond its troubled past, these characters not only have to represent the United States but they also have to somehow take responsibility for the nation's nineteenth-century history. This is a fault in Kollin's analysis, since we would need to see the characters amid the

overwhelming majority of European American settlers or similar symbols to trigger our unconscious about this topic. And if the characters are the key to healing deep-seated wounds, as Kollin suggests, it seems inevitable that we would see their suffering. In order to determine whether this is the case, we have to review a few specific scenes from *Hidalgo* involving its characters.

Hidalgo, unlike many post-westerns, does involve scenes where white European Americans are killing Native Americans. However, the film does not assign responsibility to them and it does not show any experience of trauma with respect to genocidal events, neither on a personal nor a national level. The Wounded Knee massacre scene is one of the earliest scenes of the film. Frank Hopkins, an American cowboy, is summoned to a Native American community to deliver a message. The leader of the American troops gets the message to disarm the Native Americans as a temporary solution to their uprising. The message from above is clearly to take control of the community and to prevent their escape in a non-violent way. While Hopkins, the main character, is leaving the scene in a medium-angle shot and moves further and further away from us, the camera pans across the region. As Hopkins is leaving, the American soldiers are marching into the community and the camera pans back following the soldiers. We do not know these soldiers, we never learn their names, we have never seen them in the film nor do they have any meaningful lines in the film. The only person we know is Hopkins who is clearly leaving the scene taking absolutely no responsibility for the actions of the army. In the scene, while the soldiers are disarming the Native Americans, a gun unexpectedly goes off which creates chaos. The chaos causes many Native Americans to run and the soldiers to gun them down. While all this is happening,

Hopkins rides his horse away from the scene, toward a beautiful western landscape on the horizon. His horse happens to stop at a certain point, though, and he turns back to find the whole community slaughtered. Although the film may not be “orientalist” in a traditional sense, it certainly establishes a notion of the “other.” The American army received a message to deal with the uprising, however the message specifically did not authorize killing anyone. This means that the high commanders of the army are not responsible for the massacre. In other words, the film makes it impossible for us to blame the nation for the massacre—despite Kollin’s claim to the contrary—as the massacre is shown to happen because of a random accident and the chaos that follows. If we can hold anyone responsible for the slaughter at all, it would be the unknown soldiers who shoot the innocent villagers. We see them in front of flames, shooting their guns while we listen to the dramatic musical score. These handfuls of soldiers were never ordered to kill anyone. The scene is set up to show that the killer soldiers are the “other.” The film suggests that they are not the *real* American soldiers but rather the exception—they are the odd “bad apples.” The movie wants to show the genocide as a mistake owing to confusion. Hopkins, the cowboy, was never there, and the commanders of the army never gave orders for the massacre. We never see the soldiers again who commit this atrocity. This means that, in effect, nobody can be held responsible for the Wounded Knee massacre. Why would this particular representation of a Native American massacre evidence responsibility on the part of the American nation, as Kollin suggests? To the contrary, the soldiers who attack the village are presented as the “other” European Americans. The Wounded Knee massacre is not presented as a national trauma or as the nation’s responsibility.

There is another scene shortly after that refers back to the scene just described, which is Hopkins's nightmare. His nightmare shows a member of the village gunned down. The scene shows faded colors except for one soldier who is in bright red, distinguished from everybody else; this soldier in red is Hopkins's friend. In other words, the most important part of Hopkins's nightmare is not the massacre itself but a horrible scenario where it is executed by someone we know. The nightmare and the personal trauma here suggest that Hopkins is afraid that his friend had something to do with the shooting. His friend's name is Buffalo Bill—one of the most recognizable figures of American lore. Hopkins's friend is a real American "hero," and Hopkins is afraid that this legendary person has committed the massacre. In other words, his nightmare admits the unconscious fear that America—as represented by Buffalo Bill—is responsible for the genocide of Native Americans.

One of the last scenes in *Hidalgo* shows Hopkins crying. Throughout the film Hopkins's everything is his horse. The only time when we see him cry is at the end when he lets his horse go; the only time we see him breakdown is when he releases his mustang to the wild again. Throughout the film it seems like Hopkins does not care about anything, really, except for his horse. No wonder, then, that the movie is also named after the horse. Hopkins's pain is letting Hidalgo go, it is not the genocidal history of the past as Kollin's suggests. The movie avoids responsibility and a true representation of Native American history. I am not suggesting that every western has to explore Native American genocide on a national level. Rather, my point here is to challenge Kollin's statement that the film explores genocidal trauma on a national and personal level and the film heals the wounds of past." Watching *Hidalgo*, it is evident that the movie avoids responsibility or

trauma on any level, which means that the film cannot and does not reconcile with the truth of America's past. The responsibility of genocide in Johnston's movie is clearly pushed to the "other" unknown soldiers. Moreover, our hero can only confront his fear that the massacre was committed by America while sleeping, in a nightmare. This is troubling, considering that—though genocide is misrepresented and responsibility is clearly avoided on a national level—Kollin, a leading scholar on the subject of the post-western in American cinema, still praises the film for its revisionist take on American history.

Mary Lea Bandy and Kevin Stoehr's book *Ride, Boldly Ride: The Evolution of the American Western* offers readers a comprehensive study of the western genre in American cinema.⁴ Their book provides a history of the genre from the silent era to the present, with the most recent films under discussion released in 2011. The chapters explore major shifts in the genre's development by analyzing key works from different eras. The authors survey the genre's central themes such as landscape, justice, the representation of cowboys and women in westerns, among other topics, to shed light on how the visual and narrative style of this genre has changed over time. Each of the chapters focuses on a decade or so, while their last chapter focuses on new works in the genre. In this chapter, the writers start by reiterating observations about what influenced

⁴ Mary Lea Bandy led the Department of Film at the Museum of Modern Art from 1979 until 2005.

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the evolution of the western and brought the genre to its current state. They provide a run-through of early westerns from the 1950s through the 70s in order to pinpoint the influence of these films on the new, postmodern westerns (Bandy and Stoehr 270). They acknowledge that late-classical westerns, made in the 60s for example, were also “genre-revising and helped pave the road for the new westerns in the current decade” (Bandy and Stoehr 270). The authors eventually turn their attention to films (and a miniseries) released between the late 1980s and 2011, and the label they give these works is the familiar one—“revisionist.”

Bandy and Stoehr make the distinction between old westerns and new westerns by suggesting that westerns nowadays move away from the narrative conventions and visual style that characterized westerns in Hollywood’s “Golden Age” such as *Stagecoach* (1939) or *The Westerner* (1940) (269). They argue that late-classical and post-classical works represent a complete change that has thrust the genre into a new cycle. According to the authors, this change takes place fundamentally at the level of the films’ narrative (Bandy and Stoehr 280). They argue that although some works pay tribute to the old westerns visually, they go against the messages of the old western narratives (Bandy and Stoehr 270). This change is a “radical revisionist” turn in the genre’s history in that it made the western a fascinating genre for audiences once again (Bandy and Stoehr 271). They believe these huge shifts in storylines have kept the genre alive. After cataloging many different examples of postmodern westerns, the authors shift their focus to a more detailed analysis of works by Joel and Ethan Coen. In fact, the writers believe that the most effective way to showcase the revisionist western is through a close analysis of the Coen brothers’ films (Bandy and Stoehr 273). They first analyze *True Grit* (2010), then

No Country for Old Men (2007) which they call “the most effective example of a postmodern take on the genre” (Bandy and Stoehr 274). In this last chapter, the authors’ purpose is to reject the claims of critics who believe that the western genre is dead. The authors assert that as the western went through this period of distinct change, the genre entered into an era of revisionism; the result is that these new revisionist works are responsible for the genre’s survival (Bandy and Stoehr 269). Since the writers provide a detailed analysis of the genre as revisionist art, their scholarship is important to consider in the context of this thesis.

Of the new westerns that emerge in American cinema in the late 1980s, Bandy and Stoehr call these “postmodern” (269). They define the postmodern western as films where the “traditional parameters of the genre have been fully critiqued, rejected and transcended” (Bandy and Stoehr 270-71). One way they characterize the postmodern western is to say that these works “turn away from the conventional narratives” (Bandy and Stoehr 269). In order to understand what they mean by radical change and, therefore, revisionist western, we have to understand how they define the old western. Old westerns are viewed as stories of national ideology, where one “conquers enemies, vanquish[es] evil and help[s] to blaze a path through the wilderness so that a law-centered civilization can flourish” (Bandy and Stoehr 269). They believe that these descriptions of the old west are absent in films of the genre as it exists now. If postmodern western films are truly radical in their new stories, then they have to go against everything that the old westerns stand for. This means that postmodern or revisionist westerns have to tell stories that purposefully go against the old national identity and Manifest Destiny. In other words, these stories have to show the other side of the European American expansion and

its consequences. For example, these narratives cannot justify the conquering of indigenous people. Furthermore, Bandy and Stoehr specifically mention that these films do not tell stories of a “law-centered civilization” making its way to a new land (Bandy and Stoehr 269). In other words, these films are not so much about European American settlers, which suggests that these films might explore Native American perspectives. If westerns go against the old stories of national identity, the conventional narrative, and focus on a Native American perspective, then we could truly call these films “revisionist.”

In Bandy and Stoehr’s chapter, the terms “revisionist” and “postmodern” are used interchangeably; the writers eventually explain that these two terms are only “loosely equated” (Bandy and Stoehr 278). According to them, a postmodern western has moved beyond revisionism. They argue that although the postmodern western is revisionist, it “incorporates and plays upon the traditional and the revisionist alike” (Bandy and Stoehr 279). Still, this can be misleading, as the writers refer to both postmodern and revisionist westerns as defining the current era of westerns. However, a revisionist film should be a critical response to a genre’s convention. The fact that they interchangeably use these two terms makes one wonder what kind of criteria do films have to meet in order to receive a revisionist label. If the term “revisionism” can be used interchangeably with “postmodernism,” it stands to reason that all new westerns would have to be critical of the old. This is to say that one cannot make a new western without critically reacting to the old westerns, which suggests that, for Bandy and Stoehr, a specific film might be revisionist just because of the time period in which it was produced. This is a problematic position because we cannot assume that every western made after the late 80s is

revisionist. Rather, we have to take a close look at the films, and individual scenes in order to determine if they go against the old conventions.

The authors argue that the Coen brothers are famous for “radicalizing” genres, which they do with the western (Bandy and Stoehr 273). They suggest that the Coen brothers’ *True Grit* is a great example of the postmodern western because it references the old western film in many ways but is immensely distinct and different in its story. This description of the film corresponds with their earlier definition of “radical revisionists” works. The film is about 14-year-old Mattie Ross who is looking for revenge. She wants to find and kill Tom Chaney, the man who murdered her father. She hires a U.S. Marshall, Rooster Cogburn, and Texas Ranger LaBoeuf also joins the hunt for Chaney. Their eventful manhunt ends with Mattie getting what she sought as she shoots Chaney in the chest. When we watch *True Grit* we can recognize that most of the conventions of the old western are still present. This western is basically a violent revenge story. The film is entirely about European Americans and their effort to restore justice. The reason why Bandy and Stoehr argue that *True Grit* is revisionist is because of the strong female character that the film presents (274). They say that the “sustained focus” on Mattie, and the vulnerability of the young, female character makes the story distinguishable from other westerns (Bandy and Stoehr 274). In other words, the fact that the main focus is on Mattie instead of Cogburn or LaBoeuf makes this film revisionist in their eyes. They compare the Coen brothers’ *True Grit* to the older 1969 version of the film where this emphasis is absent.

Since it is true that focusing on a female character is unusual, as the typical protagonist of the western is the male cowboy, one could argue that this change in focus

might elevate the film out of the mainstream. However, the film does not fulfill the requirements for the writers' own assertion of what a revisionist western means. The way they label and define this change in narrative as a breakthrough, can lead one to be disappointed after watching *True Grit*. The film is a remake with a new focus but not with a revisionist story. *True Grit* is a story about white American characters looking for freedom and vengeance, thus it is clearly not a radical revisionist turn from the old western. It does not line up to the lofty description of the writers, especially as the film is about America today. One cannot deny the fact that female representation is a popular subject of discussion in contemporary American culture; and the fight for equal pay and female representation is an important topic in the American film industry, specifically. The film is, therefore, making a statement about a contemporary issue by focusing on a female character. Even though it is an exceptionally important issue, it is problematic because it is ultimately reminiscent of old westerns: once again, this western is about American identities today, all except Native American identity.

After Bandy and Stoehr's definitions seem to promise that these films will explore Native American perspectives, we are once again denied this representation. The few scenes where we see Native Americans characters, they are silent. Additionally, the main character Cogburn is abusive towards these characters, which the film treats as comedy. For example, in a scene when Cogburn and Mattie travel without LaBoeuf, they stumble upon a trading post; Cogburn kicks around young Native Americans who do not say a word. This surprising act and the sound of it combined with the camera's long shot clearly suggest the scene is intended to make people laugh. Considering that these Native American characters do not speak, that we do not see them again, and that there is

violence against them, which the film treats as comedy, we could expect the scene to fit right into the 1969 version of *True Grit*. In effect, the Coen brothers bring back the old western and Jeff Bridges becomes John Wayne. However, in the 2010 film, this bad treatment is considered “revisionist,” even though nothing has really changed. John Wayne was nominated and won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Cogburn; Jeff Bridges, playing the same character, was also nominated for the Best Actor award (but didn’t win). The truth is that Cogburn is still the character that many clearly want to see on screen even forty years after the original film. There is still an audience, nearly half a century later, that wants to laugh when the film’s main character kicks Native Americans. Although the film does explore an important issue, female representation, the film is far from a revisionist western.

The Coen brother’s *No Country for Old Men* does not take place in the nineteenth century, which makes the film a different example from other westerns. Still, Bandy and Stoehr refer to *No Country for Old Men* as the “most effective example of a postmodern take on the genre” (274). They praise the Coen brothers’ film for various reasons and argue that it is a revisionist western. According to the writers, one of the reasons that the movie is revisionist is because of its distinct portrayal of the “New West”(Bandy and Stoehr 274). That is to say, it is the representation of the 1980s landscape of Texas and New Mexico which makes the film a postmodern western. In fact, the film includes pictures of the usual rural landscape while showing us modern buildings as well. While it is important to show images of the west that are different from the mythic open country, one might be puzzled why this is said to be radically new, especially when the writers mention that revisionism takes place in the narrative. A new landscape is clearly a visual

representation and not a radical change considering the fact that the film takes place in 1980s. Another reason for their choice to label this film as a revisionist western is the representation of the killer (Bandy and Stoehr 274). The protagonist of the film, Llewelyn Moss, finds two million dollars of drug money and tries to keep it. A hitman, Anton Chigurh, is hired to recover the stolen money. Moss fails to give up the money and dies while Sheriff Bell fails to catch Chigurh, who escapes. The writers argue that through the way Anton Chigurh is portrayed, the representation of the villain reaches a “new horrifying dimension” (Bandy and Stoehr 274). In other words, one of the reasons the writers believe that this film is revisionist is the fact that Chigurh is simply more cruel than the usual villains in westerns. Perhaps a better approach might be to ask why he is such a barbaric character in the movie. I believe the reason that the representation of Chigurh as a savage character is so easily achievable is because he is foreign: Javier Bardem, the actor who plays Chigurh, is Spanish—while “Chigurh,” his character’s name, also suggests that he is foreign. He is clearly an outsider, a foreigner. We see this when he talks to any other character, as if he speaks a different language. Other characters constantly ask him to clarify what he is saying when he talks. The mysterious Chigurh does not wear cowboy hats like the other characters; instead he wears different clothing and has an unusual weapon. His weapon is a Captive Bolt Pistol—a pneumatic gun designed to stun cattle before slaughter. He is presented as a lunatic barber, killing for no apparent reason.

This very unusual character is an imagined old western Native American savage in 1980s America. The Coen brothers are unable to make a brutal American villain in a western and so, of course, they portray the only foreigner in the film as a savage.

Although we are not sure where Chigurh is from exactly, his darker skin, unusual weapon, and clothing make us think of old westerns and their racist portrayal of Native Americans. The Coen brothers borrow this portrayal of the Native American savage from old westerns in order to create Chigurh's character. While the film only suggests that its barbaric character is a Native American, and does not specifically tell us as we have seen them in old westerns, still the portrayal of Chigurh does not make this film a revisionist western.

Another reason the authors say the film is postmodern is because of the representation of Sheriff Bell who is "more passive and jaded than we would like" (Bandy and Stoehr 275). They write that "the sheriff's inability to comprehend and deal with his current situation makes this a postmodern take on the western to be sure" (Bandy and Stoehr 275). The question that comes to mind, however, in response to this claim, is why are they bothered by Sheriff Bell's passivity. It seems like that the authors are bothered by the lack of justice, as if they want to see violence returned against Chigurh. The authors wanted to see justice delivered by a white sheriff against the savage foreigner—which is to say they want to see in this 2010 film how the old westerns operate, and they want to see the usual ending of the story. However, because this one theme isn't fulfilled at the end, the authors are not only frustrated but call the film revisionist. This alone shows how deep the western story is buried in American minds. Their analysis suggests that nothing has changed from the narratives of the old western. *No Country for Old Men* still explores themes of cowboys, sheriffs, and foreign villains—except in 1980s America.

Even when the writers say that postmodern cinema does not always mean revisionist cinema, their analyses of these two films are problematic. The themes that have been revised radically include female representation, pictures of the “New West,” and altered depictions of evil, among others. Although these topics might be significant, one can be disappointed that these themes are regarded as revisionist, especially after reading the scene analyses. The films focus on the same perspectives that we have seen in old westerns. We realize that these revisionist westerns pay tribute to the old westerns because they ignore Native American narratives and perspectives. They are not re-envisioning the west so much as they are traditional in the sense that the history and the perspective of Native Americans are still ignored.

The prevailing explanations of what constitutes a revisionist western in contemporary film studies have been largely rejected in this discussion so far. As we have seen, the films promoted as key examples by scholars in the field were simply not critical enough to deserve the revisionist categorization, as they were rooted in the conventions of the old westerns—for example, having a white protagonist and ignoring Native American perspectives. These issues, among others, were not challenged by the filmmakers. However, one could think that these conventions are so deeply rooted in American cinema that it may be impossible to discredit or otherwise counter them. Is it even feasible to make a revisionist western in America? How can westerns truly involve Native American perspectives and not focus on a white protagonist? In order for that to happen, the American settler would have to be portrayed as a villain. The white character would have to be the one who wreaks destruction. Hollywood is the dream factory and I

do not believe it can produce such nightmares for the American audience. It is hard to imagine that the many white Americans in Hollywood, in positions of power, would make Americans the anti-hero in the nation's most prominent genre. This is because, in the western, cowboys are not just Americans, they are America. As we have seen, they have always been the ones who represent national identity. We know who they are and we are rooting for them, even before the film has even started. When we see John Wayne or Clint Eastwood, we do not need to know the story in order to sympathize with them. Their faces, as American heroes, are burned into our memory. In fact, I would even suggest that when we have reason to imagine an American, we think of these actors with their cowboy hats. Even though it is a false ideology to believe that there is a typical American, we think of cowboys. That is the power of westerns—and the power of cinema. This is also to say that westerns are, in fact, very dangerous. The western film is a powerful genre, within a powerful medium, that can reach the masses and hypnotize us with the mythologized history lessons about the foundation of the United States. Hollywood, in fact, rewrites history to the point where cinema becomes official history. John Wayne and Clint Eastwood are not actors in the imagined west anymore but historical figures and heroes of the actual west.

This cinematic representation of the early days of America is clearly problematic. The foundation of any nation is important, as every empire must have a glorious history. Every nation that has survived wants to believe in a distinguished, celebrated past. Stories of old empires are glorified because winners write history. However, the westward expansion of the United States is a relatively new story. Therefore, the obvious way to pass down the “victorious” stories to the masses is through the new medium of the early

twentieth century, namely cinema. However, in the twenty-first century, we can all easily access information about those nineteenth-century political and military actions that aimed to eliminate Native Americans (through the medium we call the Internet). We do not need to rely on westerns for historical information anymore; we can know very well what happened in the west. This is why post-westerns, discussed earlier, cannot tell stories of manifest destiny—we simply do not buy these tales anymore. Evidently, post-western stories are not about a righteous cowboy versus a savage, but that still does not mean such a film is re-visioning the west or trying to portray a fairer, more accurate picture.

If these new westerns are not revisionist, how should they be categorized then? I propose that these contemporary, post-westerns, often labeled as revisionist, should in fact be called “Prozac-westerns.” This means that new westerns operate as a painkiller, where the root of the problem—an honest portrayal of the west—is not solved, rather it is medicated away. We do not tell stories of manifest destiny, but we also do not tell stories of Native American genocide, nor do we experience a “new west.” We numb ourselves with these new westerns in order to forget about problems of representation. Post-westerns are not made to counter a narrowly conceived west, but when we look at the films closely we realize they tell the same old story, as we are unable to face the disgrace surrounding the “settling” of the American west. We cannot and do not want to face the problematic history of the United States; therefore, we take the painkiller, the Prozac-western. I believe it is an appropriate term as both Prozac and post-westerns (such as *Dancing with Wolves* or *Unforgiven*) became immensely popular in the early 1990s. Prozac-westerns understand the problem, perhaps, but they do not want to hurt us. They

are part of the popular trend of trying to avoid the worn-out conventions of old westerns but not on a deeper level. Considering that the old westerns are so deeply rooted in our unconscious, and that America wants to have a glorious history, one might think that revisionism is impossible—yet, the film *Hidalgo*, for example, shows a scene of genocide. Still, as we have seen, Frank Hopkins is terrified that Americans might be responsible for the genocide which is shown in his nightmare. This is to say that even the film's hero cannot face his unconscious shame about the country's history. Readers might wonder why it is important to label films like *Hidalgo* as Prozac-westerns, but the possibility of such wondering is the very force that drives the present discussion—because this surprise or skepticism would suggest that we have stopped in the development of the genre. It would mean that film scholars and filmmakers believe that we have arrived at a revisionist representation whereas, in fact, we have not.

In many, if not all, of the films analyzed here, we see that revisionism on the level of narrative does not work. Because we know what happened in the west (or should know), telling the story does not change anything. It does not move us, or make us look at the west in a different way, especially when we are looking through a white-male lens, as we almost always are in the case of American cinema. This means that revisionism has to manifest itself somehow other than through the narrative. This would explain why those who truly want to explore history and Native American perspectives do various forms of research, including documentary filmmaking, in order to shed more light on the actual American past. People use other channels to make their points, in part, because Hollywood productions are extremely expensive, thus not affordable and not amenable to the aims of real researchers. There are documentaries that explore Native American

perspectives, and there are feature films made by Native Americans, but they do not reach the masses. Because they are not widely available they cannot challenge the unconscious understanding of the masses. This is to say, even though white American film narratives do not seem to challenge deeply held views of the west, real revisionist westerns are not feasible, despite the fact that cinema is still the only medium that can address the issue of representation at the necessary macro-level.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, in his book on Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1996), argues that America cannot be responsible for Native American genocide, and I agree. But I believe that Americans have to reconcile with their past to fully acknowledge indigenous people and their cultures. In order to acknowledge this past, I believe one has to experience the burden of American history. Experiencing the burden means going beyond the narrative, putting at risk our unconscious, so that we feel we are living through a period that accepts and admits the reality of Native American experience. Experiencing the burden—which might also mean hurting the audience emotionally—if achieved, would at least acknowledge that the history of the west is problematic. It is important to recognize that only motion pictures, and in particular the style of film, is perhaps powerful enough to accomplish this. Hurting the audience, who know all the classic westerns where America is presented as righteous, is a tough job for cinema.

Jarmusch's *Dead Man* is a true revisionist western and not a Prozac-western. It clearly re-envisioned the old westerns to provide a new, much fuller perspective on the west. Even though *Dead Man*'s main focus is on a white American's perspective, the movie shows this perspective as a "dead" point of view. Jarmusch's style and narrative presents the west as a dead territory where his main character, a white person, is a "dead

man walking,” accompanied by a Native American character, who is the only relatable character. Jarmusch is a white American director who cannot tell a story about how Native Americans lived through genocide; but he can tell a story where the audience experiences the burden of American history. During a question and answer at Lincoln Center after a screening of the film, Jarmusch shares his thoughts about *Dead Man* and how others have understood it. Jarmusch is clearly not a fan of old westerns and he is offended by how Native American culture is portrayed in westerns. He says that the film received positive feedback in general and that he was honored to be the only non-Native American filmmaker at a Native American film festival ("Jim Jarmusch Q&A 'Dead Man"). Without a doubt, this statement alone says a lot about this film and other westerns. However, Rosenbaum reminds us that the film in fact received mixed reviews, many finding the film anti-American (18). Indeed, Jarmusch had trouble distributing *Dead Man* and the film did poorly in the theaters (Rosenbaum 18). I believe this is due to the fact that the film faces the genocidal truths that America has so far avoided within the western genre. The film's critical commentary on history and society, and its exploration of Native American perspective, culture, and experience, makes *Dead Man* a truly revisionist western.

Dead Man begins with William Blake, an accountant, who travels to the town of Machine to take on his new position as an accountant. After arriving, John Dickinson and his colleagues inform him that the job has already been filled by someone else. Blake then meets a prostitute called Thel, and they spend the night together until Thel's fiancé Charlie arrives. Charlie wants to shoot Blake, but Thel saves him as she jumps in front of the bullet. Although Blake seems to be fatally wounded, he manages to kill Charlie. John

Dickinson hires the most notorious killers around to capture Blake dead or alive, as Dickinson believes Blake murdered his son Charlie and his fiancé Thel. The wounded Blake, who becomes a fugitive, floats in and out of consciousness throughout the film. A Native American named Nobody finds Blake and tries to cut the bullet out of him unsuccessfully. Blake is on the run, accompanied by Nobody who has studied the poetry of the real early-nineteenth-century English writer William Blake. Nobody is a “love child” from two opposing tribes. He shares how he was captured by white Europeans and showcased like an animal. Blake and Nobody somehow manage to kill everyone who is after them. Cole Wilson, one of the hitmen, kills the other two men hired gunslingers. In the last scene, Nobody prepares Blake for the afterlife in a canoe and pushes him away; however, Cole Wilson finds them, and he and Nobody shoot each other dead.

The narrative is unusual. There are no heroes, just villains, and we do not learn much about the characters in general. This west is not a place for a hero nor anybody else. There are no heroes because violence, a usual western theme, is deconstructed. The film is violent, but Jarmusch treats this theme as he treats western culture more generally: he makes fun of it. There is nothing heroic about dying in Jarmusch’s west, where characters seem to die from shots fired accidentally. Death and violence are treated as awkward necessities of the frontier; they are not sugar-coated with ideas of justice, or good and bad. This west is not a place of honor but the land of meaningless destruction. National values do not come from the west; rather, they have been lost there. What comes from the west is confusion. There are even plotlines that many viewers will probably not understand. *Dead Man* does not use subtitles for Native American dialogue, and Jarmusch inserts a repetitive joke in the film that non-Native American viewers will

likely not understand (Rosenbaum 24). The narrative in general also lacks the usual Hollywood formula: the characters are not motivated, nor can we identify with them. We are not told to do anything or root for anybody throughout the movie. William Blake is not a poet but a confused fugitive who dispatches everybody—including fans of the old western. In fact, westerns may never look the same again.

What is more important than the narrative in *Dead Man* is the style. The first scene introduces the characters played by the two well-known actors Johnny Depp and Crispin Glover. However, we immediately get an odd feel from the falling apart, animated title card, the low-angle shot of a train, and the black-and-white photography. In other words, this western from 1996 introduces two contemporary A-list actors through the lens of old-western style. To say the least, we are confused; this is not how post-westerns usually start. Previously discussed examples of the post-western, we might recall, make sure to introduce new themes, time periods, or a shifted main focus immediately. *Dead Man*'s style, however, is strangely familiar. We are starting with the old-western mindset only to snap out of it later. This is why style in cinema can be so powerful: it defamiliarizes the usual reality by representing it as "reality." This is to say that Jarmusch wants to wound the audience by defamiliarizing its national genre.

Jarmusch also puzzles the viewer with his choice of character names. The main character William Blake is named after the Romantic poet, while the owner of the factory John Dickinson references a founding father of the United States. Other names, such as those of the hitmen, reference the west—but not the region so much as the culture. What is most noteworthy about these characters, however, is that they are not very intelligent. Many of them are evil, and we are not invited to be curious about them. Even Dickinson,

who wants revenge for his son, sends other people to find Blake instead of going himself. Not only are they not motivated by righteousness, justice, or revenge—as in other films—but they do not seem to be motivated by anything. This is to say that western culture is stagnating, or in the case of Blake, it is dying. *Dead Man* emphasizes this point further when Nobody learns that his white companion is named William Blake. He jumps up in disbelief and steps backwards showing his fear of western culture. When Nobody is terrified of white, western culture, Jarmusch is saying, metaphorically, that nobody is in fact terrified of it. Naming the Native American main character Nobody not only depreciates him but also serves as a commentary on representations of Native Americans in general. The Native American perspective offered by Jarmusch's film has been so absent from westerns that nobody has done it before. Anything that Nobody does in this western, has been done by nobody in any western. The name also resonates with his story, as he is not fully accepted by any community. Thus, Nobody bears the heaviest symbolism throughout the film. The audience is also likely to notice the appearance of Iggy Pop, a famous punk musician who emerged from the 1970s New York music scene. In a sense, Pop's appearance breaks the fourth wall; just as Jarmusch's choice of names force us to think of William Blake or John Dickinson in real life. With the case of Iggy Pop, we do not have to think much. When one sees the film, especially audiences back in 1996, one could easily recognize him. This reference point is not about western culture in the past, but western pop culture today. It shows that our cultural heroes today are not William Blake nor John Dickinson, but Iggy Pop, who in the film, dresses up as a woman and makes fun of the Bible. This image of Iggy Pop making fun of Christianity further ridicules western culture in general.

These representations and reference points raise questions about western culture and the white man's place in the western film genre. At the same time, specific scenes make us experience these doubts, yet at a much deeper level. After Blake's westward train journey, he arrives at the town of Machine. This is one of the earliest scenes in the film, one which shows Blake's experience walking through this western town. At first, the camera faces him and seems reluctant to show what Blake is looking at. The camera is motivated to pan to the right, following the character, and then finally cuts to his point of view. The belated cut builds anticipation but the view is not what we are expecting: he sees destruction and death all around him. The frame enlarges to include him as well, so that both the audience and Blake are shocked by the sight. A town that was built by European American settlers is a "modern" yet primitive disaster. Neil Young's musical score plays in the background and the mysterious electric guitar riffs start to sound like crying. The camera becomes Blake's point of view and Jarmusch uses eyeline match cuts to transition from Blake to the locals he observes. Blake sees a coffin and buffalo skeletons. Earlier he had been told that locals are killing the buffalos, and in fact, historically, settlers were encouraged to kill buffalos in order eliminate the native's main food source (Rosenbaum 48). After Blake sees the buffalo skeletons, the camera pans down to show human skeletons emphasizing the genocidal drive that motivated the buffalo slaughters. He hears someone sneezing and sees a mother with a child looking at him with contempt. He sees a pig in the mud, a pissing horse, and people engaged in oral sex in an alley. The locals stare at him and make him feel uncomfortable; he is made to feel like an outsider, to say the least. The town and the culture is everything but attractive and sophisticated. All these images, even the mother and child, make the viewer cringe.

The facial expression of disgust is a typical weapon of the cowboy. When we think of cowboys dealing with natives, they often express disgust with their faces. Here, ironically, the viewer turns into a cringing Clint Eastwood by looking at the American settlers. But disgust and death are not the only themes that come to mind after this scene. In a scene shortly after this one, when Blake meets Thel, she talks about how she sells flowers made out of paper. The paper flowers, or the idea they signify, returns repeatedly throughout the film. They show that the landscape has also been destroyed and what's left behind is an imitation. The city, just as the flowers, is fake—nothing is natural.

The town of Machine is not only important because of its unusual portrayal of Americans in the west; Jarmusch represents it in such detail to establish a parallel with another scene that occurs much later on. Towards the end of the film, when Nobody conveys Blake by canoe to his tribe and they pass by a burnt-down native settlement, their silence suggests that the image of a destroyed community is familiar to both of them. We experience Nobody's point of view. This might be the first time we see from his point of view, and we are able to linger with this perspective because Blake is unconscious. We are expecting a fade to black transition when we see the unconscious Blake, but Nobody is in the canoe as well. Something so obvious becomes unexpected: we anticipate a transition to black, but instead we move to Nobody's perspective. The fact that we are surprised that another character's perspective is explored, even when the white character is unconscious, is a revelation. Nobody takes Blake to his community and the scene is structured similarly to that with the town of Machine. The camera behaves very similarly and we see almost identical themes, which leads us to compare the two settlements.

When they arrive, Nobody speaks in Makah language (Rosenbaum 24). The movie does not provide subtitles but assumes a Native American audience. The non-native viewer does not understand the conversation, and when one turns on the DVD subtitles one can read: “Nobody speaking his native language.” Again there is the suggestion that nobody speaks this native language anymore. This powerful representation, this radical scene, makes the non-native viewer the outsider who does not know the real narrative. Jarmusch thus deconstructs the usual and makes the viewer curious and uncomfortable. When Nobody introduces Blake to the community, Blake falls on his face. The western town *mise-en-scene* has changed to a native one and Blake faints instantly; he wants to be unconscious, so the frame fades to black. The inexplicable soundtrack starts again and Nobody holds him up and says “Walk proudly, William Blake.” Earlier, when Nobody and Blake canoed past the burnt-down settlement, they didn’t say anything because the view was familiar. However, here, Blake—the accountant from Cleveland—is unable to do anything because he has never seen an active native community. It says a lot, of course, that the white man is more shocked to see an active native settlement than a destroyed one.

Blake and the viewer are made to confront what settlers have destroyed in order to build the town of Machine. Yet Blake is dying when he compares the two settlements, and he cannot bare to look at the Native American one. As they walk through the village, we see similar images as the ones from the town, such as a mother with her baby. However, here, the baby in the arms of his mother is tucked in with a blanket. Here, the buffalos are used for food and not objects for senseless violence. The *mise-en-scene* shows an accurate Makah settlement, something that has previously been avoided as

directors do not assume a native audience (Rosenbaum 49). Jarmusch himself has even said that he does not know any movie in which indigenous Pacific Northwest culture is portrayed authentically. Blake and the audience are seeing the unseen together. Native American sculptures, a community, and images of a high culture. Thanks to the tilted, handheld camera movements and Blake's pained expressions, the whole scene makes us feel like we are on drugs and dying. The editing constantly switches between the dying Blake and the community. We are expecting the view to change to Nobody's perspective, but Jarmusch keeps the focus on Blake, making us more and more uncomfortable. This focus and the white perspective are exhausted to the point where it becomes unbearable. Even when Nobody leaves to talk with the canoe maker, the camera stays on Blake. It also suggests that Jarmusch cannot tell Nobody's story accurately—and he refuses to mythologize it—yet he also cannot continue Blake's narrative. This passivity and helplessness in relation to the possibilities of narrative is a powerful commentary on westerns and the white perspective. We become the outsider; the film does not pay attention to us and we are confused. The scene shows the privilege that we have been enjoying since the first western, as the language of the western genre and its focus has always been that of white Americans. At this moment in the film, we understand the power of perspective and how westerns maintained a white perspective without any indigenous experience to provide for a white audience. It breaks away from the standard conventions to the degree where we are not even sure if we are watching an American western film.

Watching *Dead Man*, we experience passivity but with an active state of mind, as we are constantly looking for an answer to the question, what kind of western is this? It is

certainly not a Prozac-western that we are experiencing. The entire film feels more like a psychedelic trip. No wonder Rosenbaum says that the film is an “acid western” (49-51). When one thinks of psychedelic drugs, one imagines a change in point of view, and that is precisely what *Dead Man* achieves. The viewer does emerge with a different understanding of the past and the white race in general. The drug vibe of the film comes from the episodic style, handheld camera, avant-garde music, and from the mirror that the film shows to the viewer. We do not see westerns like *Dead Man*, and westerns do not make us feel like this. Jarmusch truly deterritorializes the western by showing us a destroyed west and a destroyed white perspective. Some scholars refer to a contemporary setting as a great example of how post-western representation can go against old westerns. Yet deterritorialization should not mean highways and cars in the west. *Dead Man* instead shows the Native American west, which in some sense does deterritorialize the west by showing us what has been avoided, the nineteenth-century west threatened by genocidal white settlers. In other words, Jarmusch’s film is a case of reterritorialization, by respecting western cultures as they were and are.

The main reason *Dead Man* can assume a native audience, more than anything else ultimately, is because it is an independent film. Jarmusch did not make *Dead Man* for Hollywood nor for his own profit motive. If the film is not made mainly for financial purposes then it can explore other perspectives and can try to push the genre. In other words, the film is not for commercial purposes; it moves beyond the mainstream, beyond the Prozac-western, and reminds us that cinema can do more than make money. In fact, it is well known that Jarmusch refused to make edit changes to fit the distributor Miramax’s profile. Jarmusch is a true soldier of independent cinema and he did not forfeit. *Dead*

Man did not become a Prozac-western—it does not feel like a painkiller, the film does not numb you. On the contrary, the film is electrifying. And it might be that stimulating the imagination, as *Dead Man* does, is the only way one can truly work against the conventions dictated by Hollywood.

As an international student in the United States, it made more sense to me to study westerns for my Senior Thesis project than other film genres. I did not grow up watching old westerns or post-westerns. Therefore, the issues of representation in these films were certainly more obvious than if I had chosen a group of films to study from my own country. Yet in Hungary as well, mythologizing history through cinema is a current matter. Hungarian filmmakers often try to process the trauma of the Holocaust, a very sensitive national and global tragedy. Many films have repeatedly portrayed Hungarians as if they had no responsibility in it. However, in fact, the government was ruled by a Hungarian Nazi party, which was involved with the deportations of Jews. The issues surrounding national representation in the two countries are very different, but both American and Hungarian cinemas substitute a polished perspective for the messy truth in order to manipulate our knowledge of history. Even when we know the crimes committed against Native Americans during the westward expansion, the systematic cinematic misrepresentation of this issue is a powerful force that sickens the American conscience. That is why revisionist films could be influential. The word revision consists of the prefix “re-” which comes from Latin, indicating a backwards direction while “vision” means the ability to see. This suggests that revisionist westerns should provide us with a reverse perspective of the west. This would require a look backwards from the vantage point of

The Searchers; however, with the exception of *Dead Man*, post-westerns have generally failed to achieve this change in vision. An not only this, but scholars argue the opposite. This is a crucial misunderstanding that has to be addressed for the genre to continue to evolve. If we believe that westerns have already achieved and deserve the revisionist label, the genre will stop changing and may go backwards to become even more similar to the old westerns. The aim of this thesis has not been simply to be critical but to trust in the potential of critique to lead to better things—specifically, in this case, a post-western genre that includes Native Americans and the truth of their history.

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