The Mass-Slaughter of Native Americans in Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*

A Complex Interplay of Word and Image

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1. Introduction

Jim Jarmusch’s 1995 anti-Western *Dead Man*, which a number of critics have celebrated as “the best film of the end of the 20th century,”¹ may well be one of the most subtle and one of the most drastic films to represent the mass-slaughter of Native Americans. This essay aims to show that a complex interplay of word and image is at work in this representation. I will here explore this interplay as well as a number of theoretical implications. After a brief plot summary and a few remarks on the ‘revisionist Western,’ I will discuss the role of William Blake as a key to word and image relations in the film. I will then outline a few theoretical concerns necessary to my discussion of word and image relations in the representation of the genocide of Native Americans. My main thesis in the discussion of this representation is one that sheds new light on established notions of the interplay of word and image in films: In *Dead Man*, verbal and visual references to the genocide are almost consistently dissociated and hardly ever occur together. In the case of this film, however, it is precisely the need on the part of the spectator mentally to synchronize verbal and visual references which makes the representation of this issue so impressive.

Before embarking upon an analysis of word and image relations in *Dead Man*, a brief plot summary may be helpful here. After an epigraph from Henri Michaux -- “It is preferable not to travel with a dead man” -- the film begins with a foppishly dressed young man, William Blake (Johnny Depp), on a train bound for the American west sometime in the 1870s. As the film cuts back and forth between the compartment and the chugging wheels of the train, the move westwards is surreally depicted with each fade-in in the different sets of fellow passengers, who become increasingly rugged, ragged, dishevelled and uncivilized. The train’s fireman, a darkly mysterious figure reminiscent of the fireman in Kafka’s *Amerika*, sits down opposite Blake and tells him

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the town of Machine, where he intends to take up a job as an accountant in Dickinson’s metal-works, is “the end of the line” and that he has “come all the way out here to hell.” Blake alights in Machine, an appallingly squalid and ugly town centred around Dickinson’s metal-works plant, which indeed appears as an infernal place, spreading pollution, corruption and destruction. He finds the position he has been offered has already been filled. Having spent all his money on his parents’ funerals and the train ticket, he has nowhere to go. In the saloon he meets young Thel, a former prostitute who now manufactures and sells paper flowers. He accompanies her home and spends the night with her. Her fiancé enters, shoots Thel and mortally wounds Blake, who in turn shoots him and flees town. It turns out that Thel’s fiancé was Dickinson’s son. Dickinson (Robert Mitchum’s very last role, a cameo performance and epitome of his role history as the rough Westerner) hires three bounty hunters to bring Blake back “dead or alive.” William Blake is found and nursed by Nobody (Gary Farmer), a Native American who grew up in England, having been abducted as a child. Nobody believes Blake to be the English poet he himself loves and frequently quotes to the uncomprehending Blake, who has never heard of his namesake. The rest of the film is a mystical spiritual journey to the west coast, first on horseback, later by canoe. Blake, who in some sense is dead already -- see the Michaux epigraph and Nobody’s question “Did you kill the white man who killed you?” -- in the course of the journey turns into a killer who dispatches -- among others -- two US marshals, a group of three gay trappers out to rape him, as well as a trader and a customer at a trading post. Throughout the film, Blake and Nobody are pursued by the bounty hunters, who in the course of the journey decimate each other, until only one of them remains, the legendary psychopath Cole Wilson (Lance Henriksen), of whom it is said that he “fucked his parents, both of’em. [...] He killed’em; he cooked’em up; he ate’em.” At the very end, Nobody takes Blake to a Makah settlement on the West Coast and pushes the dying man out into the sea in a canoe. The last surviving bounty hunter, Wilson, arrives on the beach; he and Nobody shoot each other as the dying Blake slowly drifts out to sea.

2. Dead Man and the Revisionist Western

*Dead Man* is clearly a film in the tradition that has variously been called the post-, anti-, revisionist, or deconstructive Western, which has long dissolved the mythology of the frontier. A number of Buster Keaton pseudo-Westerns of the 1920s, George Marshall’s *Destry Rides Again* (1939) and Norman McLeod’s *Paleface* (1948) as well as Mel Brooks’s *Blazing Saddles* (1974) as comic Westerns, “critical” Westerns such John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956), Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), as well as Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man* (1970) and other critical crypto-Vietnam

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2 All quotations are transcribed from the film.
Westerns of the early 1970s have been seen as belonging to these diverse counter-traditions. It is true, of course, that the revisionist Western is as old as the genre itself and that there have always been ‘pro-Indian’ or sympathetic Westerns. One might even argue that the exceptions in recent decades by far outnumber the traditional exponents of the genre. As far as direct antecedents of Dead Man are concerned, Hoberman suggests that “The most overtly ideological of revisionist Westerns concerned the Indian wars. The revelation of American atrocities in Vietnam only reinforced the argument that the slaughter of Native Americans was less the distortion than the essence of the white man’s wars.”

It would be misleading, however, to argue that Jarmusch is flogging a dead horse: the ‘classic’ Western still looms large in the collective memory. Jarmusch’s film uses, cites or alludes to classic personnel and constellations of the genre: the Greenhorn who is initiated into manhood through confrontation with the wilderness, the fallen woman or ex-prostitute now turned respectable with whom the hero falls in love -- doffing the cap to Stagecoach? --, the trappers, the bounty hunters, the US marshals. Key themes and patterns recur: the relationship between the hunter and the hunted, the role of Native Americans, the pervasiveness of violence. Finally, the visual icons of the Western are all there: the “WANTED” posters, the swinging saloon doors, the ubiquitous guns.

But Dead Man also represents what is not usually seen: a pissing horse, the protagonist William Blake urinating against a tree, a gunman being fellated in the street, the bounty hunter discovering

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4 For the representation of Native Americans in the very early years of the genre (especially the 1900s to the 1920s), see Scott Simmon, The Invention of the Western Film: A Cultural History of the Genre’s first Half-Century (Cambridge: CUP, 2003); cf. especially part I: “‘My friend the Indian’: Landscape and the Extermination of Native Americans in the Silent Western”.

5 However, as Churchill and others have shown, even these ‘critical’ or ‘pro-Indian’ Westerns are often blatantly stereotypical. See Ward Churchill, “Fantasies of the Master Race: Categories of Stereotyping American Indians in Film,” in Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians, ed. M. Annette Jaimes (Monroe ME: Common Courage Press, 1992), repr. in Film and Theory: An Anthology, ed. Robert Stam & Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000): 697--703.

6 Hoberman, “How the Western Was Lost,” 90. For the centrality of colonialism to European -- and by implication American -- history, culture and self-representation see: Robert Young, White Mythology: Writing History and the West (London: Routledge, 1990), as well as Das Europa der Aufklärung und die außereuräpäische koloniale Welt, ed. Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006).
that his fly is open. The revisions, however, go beyond such jarring details and frequently become
downright grotesque: the obviously gay and partly cross-dressing trappers out to rape Blake talk
about eating beans and “getting the shits”; one of the ruthless killers goes to sleep with a teddy-bear
in his arms while another killer gnaws on his colleague’s cut-off arm.

Barbarianism and violence, indeed, are constant themes far beyond the norms of the genre. This
representation of violence to highlight the destructive nature of America is already hinted at in an
exchange early in the film when Blake, in bed with Thel, finds a loaded revolver under her pillow:
“‘Why do you have this?’ ‘Cos this is America.’” Later in the film, Blake shoots two US marshals
named Lee and Marvin (!).7 One of them, as he drops dead, comes to rest with his head on the
circular remains of a camp fire. Cole Wilson, in pursuit of Blake, finds the dead body and
sarcastically comments: “Looks like a goddamn religious icon,” before a close-up shows him
crushing the head under his boot -- cracking skull, spurting blood and all. Thus, Dead Man in places
virtually comes across as a splatter-Western. Throughout the film, however -- with the only
exception of Nobody at the very end -- we do not see a single Native American being killed: the
mass-slaughter is not represented directly.

The fact that violence throughout the film has nothing heroic about it, that it is usually a
clumsy, messy and entirely unheroic business, further undermines the aesthetics of the traditional
Western.8 It may be significant, of course, that Dead Man was released one year after Tarantino’s
hip, stylised and aestheticized representation of violence in Pulp Fiction.

It is important to observe in our context that in all of these revisions of the Western genre in
Dead Man, word and image closely coincide – the only theme where this is demonstrably not the
case is the mass-slaughter of Native Americans.

3. William Blake as a Key to Word & Image Relations in Dead Man
William Blake is an important key to word & image relations in this film. The protagonist of the
film, the naïve accountant lost in the west, is called William Blake. The Native American Nobody,
who becomes his travelling companion, believes him to be the reincarnation of his Romantic
namesake and frequently refers to and quotes from Blake’s works.9 But these references are entirely

7 The reference to Lee Marvin, of course, is highly significant: He played Liberty in Ford’s 1962
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, a film frequently alluded to in Dead Man. As might be
expected, My Name is Nobody (Tonino Valerii, 1973) is another film Dead Man alludes to.
8 Jonathan Rosenbaum, Dead Man (London: British Film Institute, 2000): 37--41.
9 For the function of Blake references in Dead Man see also: Jacob Levich, “Western Auguries:
Jim Jarmusch’s Dead Man,” Film Comment May/June 1996: 39--41; Hella Kegler, “Jim
Jarmusch: Dead Man -- Eine Filmininterpretation,” Inklings -- Jahrbuch für Literatur und
lost on Blake. We thus have the wonderfully ironic situation of a Native American Blake expert who quotes Blake’s poetry to a character named William Blake, who does not have a clue what the ‘Indian’ is talking about.  

In the course of the film, Nobody cites the following well-known lines from “Auguries of Innocence”:

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Every Night & every Morn
Some to Misery are Born
Every Morn & Every Night
Some are Born for sweet delight
Some are Born for sweet delight
Some are Born to Endless Night.
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One of these lines -- “Some are Born to Endless Night” -- is later cynically echoed by Blake as he virtually executes at close range one of the wounded marshals. Lastly, in the course of the film, Nobody cites two of the “Proverbs of Hell” from “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”: “The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn from the crow.” and “Drive your cart and plough over the bones of the dead.” Interestingly, these Blake quotations generally occur together with colloquial expressions. They often sound like Native American sayings and are hardly ‘marked’ as quotations. The following is a representative example: As Nobody wakes him one morning, he tells Blake: “Don’t let the sun burn a hole in your ass, William Blake. Rise now and drive your cart and plough over the bones of the dead.” This combination of colloquialisms, Native American sayings and Blake quotations is referred to as “this Indian malarkey” by the uncomprehending William Blake.

Once we are tuned to look for further Blakean themes, imagery and associations, we find the film to be studded with them. The figure of Thel, for instance, ex-prostitute now turned flower-girl, is of course a reference to The Book of Thel. This is convincingly explored by Rickman, who also finds a number of suggestive analogies with The Book of Urizen and parallels Dickinson senior

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Curnutte, “Mad Poets: William Blake, Jim Jarmusch and Dead Man,” n.p.; Levich is especially ingenious in finding suggestive analogies and allusions, but he goes too far in regarding Blakean echoes as the dominant level of meaning in the film and in declaring it to be largely an exploration of Blake’s thought.

10 For the inversion of roles and the countering of stereotypical ascriptions of cultural superiority in Dead Man see my essay “The ‘Native’ Cites Back: The Politics of Jarmusch’s Postcolonial Western Dead Man,” in Anglistentag 2006: Proceedings (forthcoming).


with Urizen himself. To cite a further example, the town of Machine resonates with images of Blake’s “London.” Indeed, constant play with Blakean notions of innocence and experience may even be seen as a structural principle of the entire film, which virtually comes across as one long disillusioned and disillusioning “Song of Experience,” with Blake himself as a figure moving from innocence to experience.

Finally, in our context, the subtle word/image relations characteristic of Blake’s work also play a key role in Dead Man. Nobody highlights this quality of Blake’s work -- and invites us to pay attention to the interplay in the film -- when he explicitly calls Blake “a poet and a painter.”

4. A Few Thoughts on Word & Image in Film

Images, as Titzmann and others have long shown, cannot make explicit what they represent. As Heusser has formulated it: “Even the photograph, often mistakenly considered an unencoded sign or perfect paraphrase of what it depicts [is] heavily dependent on language in order to function properly. A picture cannot tell what it is – for that it depends on language.” This can be illustrated by means of the famous episode in chapter 44, “City Sights”, of Mark Twain’s Life on the Mississippi on the painting of General Lee and “Stonewall” Jackson, an episode that J. Hillis Miller and others have discussed in the context of word/image relations. The painting, entitled “The Last Meeting of Lee and Jackson,” on its own cannot tell us what it represents; it depends on a title or caption to make us aware it depicts a pregnant moment. Twain gets wonderful humorous mileage out of this when he suggests several different situations the painting could also be taken to represent if we did not know the title: “Jackson Accepting Lee’s Invitation to Dinner. Jackson Declining Lee’s Invitation to Dinner--with Thanks. Jackson Apologizing for a Heavy Defeat.

14 See Rickman, “The Western under Erasure: Dead Man,” 385
Jackson Reporting a Great Victory. Jackson Asking Lee for a Match."

He then enlighteningly comments on the problems of pictorial representation and its fundamental lack of referential clarity and precision:

It tells ONE story, and a sufficient one; for it says quite plainly and satisfactorily, “Here are Lee and Jackson together.” The artist would have made it tell that this is Lee and Jackson’s last interview if he could have done it. But he couldn’t, for there wasn’t any way to do it. A good legible label is usually worth, for information, a ton of significant attitude and expression in a historical picture. In Rome, people with fine sympathetic natures stand up and weep in front of the celebrated “Beatrice Cenci the Day before her Execution”. It shows what a label can do. If they did not know the picture, they would inspect it unmoved, and say, “Young girl with hay fever; young girl with her head in a bag.”

This episode may here serve to problematize a notion advanced by Roland Barthes and still widely held because it appears to play to common-sense ideas about the direct and unambiguous iconic representation of the photograph: this is the notion of the photograph -- and by implication the filmic image -- as a “message without a code,” which directly represents things ‘as they are.’ If an image cannot even state what it represents, the notion of direct, unmediated, ‘uncoded’ representation surely becomes questionable in its theoretical reach.

A further restriction on the semantics of images is their inability to make generalizing propositions. They can only ever represent individual situations, individual people, objects, events, states of being -- they cannot generalize. The individual image can only represent momentary states; in sequence, as in a film for instance, images can even represent developments, but they can never directly represent logical connections such as cause and effect. Texts, on the other hand, can explicitly state a relationship of cause and effect and can make generalizing propositions.

These different structures of meaning of words and images -- or, in the case of film -- sequences of images, can directly complement each other if word and image coincide, if they occur at the same time, which is assumed to be the norm in word and image studies. But in the case of the film to be discussed here, one of the key themes, namely the genocide of Native Americans, is expressed in words and images which hardly ever coincide but rather occur in dissociation; they occur in sequence throughout the film.

19 Twain, Life on the Mississippi, 448
20 Twain, Life on the Mississippi, 448.
Let me briefly consider Michel Chion’s reflections on “added value” in the relationship of word and image, which are relevant to my argument here:

By added value I mean the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression “naturally” comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself. Added value is what gives the (eminently incorrect) impression that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality it brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image.

The phenomenon of added value is especially at work in the case of sound/image synchronism, via the principle of synchresis, the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears. [...] First, at the most basic level, added value is that of text, or language, on image (italics original).24

Although the summation of meaning here is a qualitative rather than quantifiable one, the logic of Chion’s argument might conceptually be illustrated as follows:

Illustration I: “added value” through interaction of word and image (visualization JMG)

The implication here, of course, is that the ensemble of word and image -- for the moment I neglect non-verbal sound, music, and written text as further filmic codes -- taken together is more than the sum of word and image taken separately. In this case, it means that spoken language gives meaning to pictures which they do not have as such. Chion’s term “synchresis” here implies that as spectators, we constantly have to correlate word and image and have to attempt to construe meaning where images and language merely supply potential meaning.

Let me for a moment stay with this need to construe meaning. Any film constantly fuels this need to construe meaning not only synchronically, at any given moment in the film, but also sequentially, by relating and trying to see connections between different elements throughout the film. To an extent almost unheard of in most other films, this is particularly true of the film

discussed here. *Dead Man* very consistently employs the classic postmodern strategy of suggesting the semantization of virtually *anything* -- objects, names, incidents -- without resolving the implications. Most of these offers of potential meaning remain open; the film denies us any form of closure. An early example in the film occurs when Blake, sitting on the train, reads *The Illustrated Bee Journal* and a number of adverts in the paper briefly become visible. Why bees? An advert headed “Vandalia” seems to point to the ubiquitous theme of pointless violence and destruction, but this is more an offer of potential semantization than a direct reference. Nieland has appropriately spoken of the film’s “promiscuous referentiality.”

As for the semantization of elements in a whole, Titzmann argues that any element in a word/image ensemble can become significant if it exists in close proximity with elements we firmly recognize as signifiers. Thus, in a painting which we recognize as being allegorical, we will attempt to allegorize even those elements in the ensemble which do not immediately lend themselves to such a reading. The mere fact that words or pictorial elements in a whole occur in close proximity with elements we recognize as signifiers makes us assume that these words or pictorial elements are significant as well. Applied to film, this would mean that all elements in a film -- whether the images on screen, spoken words, non-verbal sounds, music, or written text -- are potential signifiers which can become actual signifiers if we take them to be such. It must be noted that Titzmann largely discusses cases in which elements of a whole are semantized by signs of the same kind and in direct sequence. But this is not the way things work in *Dead Man*.

5. The Mass-Slaughter of Native Americans in *Dead Man*

A complex interplay of word and image is at work in the subtle if persistent representation of a central theme of the film: the mass-slaughter of Native Americans, frequently a focus of the revisionist Western. More precisely, it is largely an interplay of word and image, but all five filmic codes -- images, spoken language, written text, music as well as non-verbal, non musical sounds -- are at work in the representation of the genocide of Native Americans.

The first time the theme occurs verbally, visually and acoustically is in a metonymic reference to the destruction of Native American lives in the opening sequence on the train; Blake’s fellow travellers suddenly begin wildly to shoot from the train windows. In the din and confusion, the train fireman tells Blake: “They’re shooting buffalo. The government says they killed a million of them last year alone.” We only see men shooting, we do not see a single buffalo. And we have to infer this as an oblique metonymic reference to the mass-killing of the animal so vital to the survival of


Native Americans. This early reference in the first few minutes of the film is the only time word and image explicitly correspond in the treatment of this theme. From then on, there is a constant dissociation of word and image in references to the mass-slaughter of Native Americans.

Throughout the film, there are a number of verbal references, all of them unaccompanied by any visual reinforcement. As he hires the three killers and bounty hunters, Dickinson tells them: “You three are supposed to be the finest killers of men and Indians in this here half of the world.”, the implication being that there are humans and there are ‘Indians,’ and that these sub-human creatures had better be eradicated. Further on in the film, Nobody at one stage tells Blake that he knows they are being followed: “Often the evil stench of white man precedes him.” Then, as they approach the trading post, Nobody casually says: “Indians get diseases there. Smallpox, consumption. Blankets are infected. It spreads to the villages.” The following confrontation with the trading post missionary contains another key reference in another combination of codes: After a racist insult from the trader -- “Now Lord Jesus Christ wash this earth with his holy light and purge its darkest places from heathens and philistines.” -- Nobody very appropriately cites two key lines from Blake’s “Everlasting Gospel”: “The Vision of Christ that thou dost see/Is my Visions Greatest Enemy [sic].” 27 Throughout the exchange, an inscription behind the trader becomes visible, though it is unlikely anyone will consciously read it when first seeing the film. This is a quotation from Psalm 149: “To execute vengeance upon the heathen, and punishments upon the people.” 28 Having refused to sell him tobacco, the racist trader then does offer Nobody “a blanket,” but we do not see any blankets, let alone anything threatening about them. All through the scene, there are no visual references whatsoever to the virtual extinction of Native Americans. The horror is not visualized. Throughout the entire film, the verbal references are virtually never reinforced by any visual impressions.

On the other hand, in the course of the film, the theme is frequently represented visually: it appears metonymically in numerous shots of abandoned and destroyed tepees, burnt settlements and canoes, charred skeletons and scattered artefacts. These images are never commented upon verbally; they pass by silently or to the accompaniment of ominous music. It is in the first few minutes of the film, in the pre-title sequence already, that we glimpse the first such image of desolation and destruction, abandoned tepees visible from the train. As Blake looks out of the window, they become visible for some five seconds, with a gloomy and somewhat rumbling and

distorted chord of Neil Young’s electric guitar\textsuperscript{29} as the only sound in addition to the faint chugging of the train. Neither images nor music alone would be particularly memorable. Here, it is the interaction of the image with a few notes of music that produces an “added value” in Chion’s sense. The visual representation of such images of destruction without any verbal commentary is frequently highly effective and haunting, arguably more so than conventional treatment with a correspondence of word and image could have been. Possibly the most impressive such representation occurs on the river, as Nobody paddles their canoe past a burnt and deserted village. Here, we see a charred and overturned canoe on the bank of the river in front of blackened and still smoking remains of a Native American village. Most drastically, the final shot is one of a charred and still smoking skeleton. The film here cuts back and forth in reverse angle fashion between shots of Nobody (and in one case of Blake) and images on the riverbank. The reaction shots of Nobody suggest -- by means of the logic of continuity editing -- that the shots of the river bank are point-of-view shots and that we see all this from Nobody’s perspective. His face, and that of Blake as he looks at both him and the desolation on the riverbank, here clearly registers that this shocking and appalling spectacle is a deeply resonant one. Again, the scene is only accompanied by the characteristic chords of Young’s guitar.

The only time word and image even remotely correspond is Nobody’s somewhat vague and understated “I saw many sad things as I made my way back to the lands of my people” as he tells Blake the story of his return from England and a flashback of some three or four seconds reveals a burnt settlement. Interestingly, the film here uses part of the same material from the later scene on the riverbank discussed above.

The realization just how central the theme of the genocide of Native Americans is to this film hinges on one key episode: all references, whether verbal or visual, to genocide and mass murder are held together by a radically anachronistic glimpse in the film. The bounty hunter and killer Conway Twill at one point asks his perverse and cannibalistic ‘colleague’ Cole Wilson about his nationality: “What about your family history, Cole? I figured you for a German. Am I right? Am I close?” At this point, there is a fade-out to black. Into the black screen, Twill then continues: “Austrian?”\textsuperscript{30} We hear the ominous association that the mass-murderer may be “Austrian,” a shot --

\textsuperscript{29} The soundtrack, recorded by Neil Young with only an electric guitar, has frequently been celebrated as one of the most moving and most impressive soundtracks of the 1990s. See for instance Marcus, “Dead again”.

\textsuperscript{30} This key exchange is hardly ‘marked’ as important in the film. It is curiously low-key and low-pitched, because it occurs after one of Conway Twill’s notorious bouts of pointless rambling and when Twill and Wilson are already about to ride out of the picture. Without being particularly attentive, few viewers even consciously hear the question. In the context of my film seminar in the summer term of 2006, hardly anyone among almost 100 participants noticed this exchange during a first showing.
and after the fade-in, we see the mass-murderer Wilson again: he is sitting at the fire and with obvious relish nibbles on the freshly barbecued arm of the companion he has just shot. This drastic image of cannibalism is disturbingly rendered in a long zoom into a close-up of Wilson. The camera dwells on Wilson for almost half a minute as he casually gnaws on Twill’s arm, with the wrist joint grotesquely flopping back and forth as Wilson attentively twists and turns the arm in his hands to get at the last remaining bits of flesh from the bones. The ominous sounds of Young’s electric guitar we hear are clearly reminiscent of those that accompany the images of burnt Native American villages discussed earlier. This sequence itself thus also subtly works by means of word/image interaction: a relatively innocuous conversation about family history ending in the question whether the mass-murderer may be “Austrian”, a question which is significantly spoken into the fade-out of a black screen. As if to confirm Wilson’s role in the film, the drastic but purely visual scene of cannibalism occurs immediately after the fade-in.

The film is otherwise clearly set in the 1870s, so this glaring anachronism in a film full of references to genocide is of course highly significant. Taken on its own, it appears to be an anachronistic comment linking the perverse psychopath and mass murderer Wilson to Hitler. But here, the blatantly anachronistic reference to Hitler of course brings up the Holocaust and thus drastically sheds a new light on all the other references to genocide in the film.31 Seen in this light, the other oblique references become much more pertinent. In terms of audience response, this reference supports and focuses what Chion calls the mechanism of “synchresis,” the need to “forg[e] an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears;”32 – even if synchresis here means that we have mentally to synchonize and synthetize visual and verbal references scattered along the entire length of the film.

6. Conclusion

Jarmusch’s rendering of the West, “one of the ugliest portrayals of white American capitalism to be found in American movies,” is one in which “‘history’ and ‘civilisation’ […] actually mean genocide, the Industrial Revolution and the concomitant destruction of nature [and] the spread of capitalism.”33

31 To make this quite clear: I am not arguing that the film here engages in any kind of problematic comparison or setting off of one genocide with another. All I argue is that a clearly recognizable allusion to Hitler makes references to another genocide far more pertinent.

32 Chion, “Projections of Sound on Image,” 112.

33 Rosenbaum, Dead Man, 18, 54. In his short review of the film, Gino Moliterno also recognizes this radicalism: “The object of Jarmusch’s critique seems to be nothing less that [sic!] the very existence of America itself, to the extent that this existence has been clearly predicated on the wholesale destruction of the land and the cultures of native American peoples.” See Gino
What is usually discussed in Word & Image Studies is the interaction of words and images which occur simultaneously. In *Dead Man*, as I have tried to show, the representation of the genocide of Native Americans is effected by means of an interplay of word and image that is *not* synchronized. Apart from an initial metonymic reference to the mass-killing of buffaloes, which establishes the theme, all further references to the topic are either visual *or* verbal and are scattered and dispersed along the entire length of the film. The key to the haunting representation of genocide in this film is precisely the need mentally to synchronize and to synthesize these scattered references. This need is fostered and stimulated through the way in which the film incites us to semanticize everything, to attempt to construe meaning everywhere. The impressive and haunting effect of this filmic representation of the genocide here relies on the effect of “*added value*” in Michel Chion’s sense. And this “*added value*” from the integration of word and image here is significantly greater than it would be if verbal and visual references were to occur simultaneously.

**Illustr. II: increased “added value” through dissociation of verbal and visual references (JMG)**

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34 There is of course the problem of a representation of Native Americans by a white American filmmaker. Two years before the release *Dead Man*, this problem was highlighted by Tag Gallagher in a 1993 article on “John Ford’s Indians”: “As Ford observes in *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), it is white words, white language, that have been our most potent weapon against Indians. Are we, the descendants of their destroyers, now to presume to tell their stories in the language that destroyed them?”; see Tag Gallagher, “Angels Gambol Where They Will: John Ford’s Indians,” *Film Comment* Sept./Oct. 1993; repr. in *The Western Reader*, ed. Jim Kitses & Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight, 1998): 274. For this problem of representing the marginalized from the ‘centre’ see also Gurr, “The ‘Native’ Cites Back”.

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