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Dead Men Don't Lie: Sacred Texts in Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai*

Abstract

In 1995, American auteur Jim Jarmusch released his experimental western *Dead Man*. In 1999, Jarmusch released *Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai*, which played with the genres of the samurai picture and the mafia movie. In this paper, I argue that these two films share a single narrative, and that narrative is about books and what books can do. Taking up Mircea Eliade's notion of the sacred text as a manual for recovering primordial time, I suggest that the protagonists of both films should be understood as Eliade's "religious man."

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In 1995, American auteur Jim Jarmusch released his experimental western *Dead Man*. In 1999, Jarmusch released *Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai*, which played with the genres of the samurai picture and the mafia movie. In this paper, I argue that these two films share a single narrative, and that narrative is about books and what books can do. Taking up Mircea Eliade's notion of the sacred text as a manual for recovering primordial time, I suggest that the protagonists of both films should be understood as Eliade's "religious man."

Ghost Dog is a spectacularly cool black hitman loosely associated with the fading Vargo mafia family - Louie, a lesser member, once saved his life and since then he has served Louie as a retainer, adhering strictly to the rules of the samurai code. The film begins with Ghost Dog botching a job involving Louise Vargo, the daughter of the head of the family; a hit is thus ordered on Ghost Dog himself. The rest of the film traces him as he engineers his inevitable death in such a way that he can be killed both by and for Louie. The dead man in *Dead Man* is a spectacularly uncool white accountant named William Blake who, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, moves west to the town of Machine, only to find that the job promised him by a Mr. Dickinson has been given away. Through a series of misadventures, Blake ends up getting shot by Dickinson's son; Blake kills the son in self-defense, Dickinson Sr. places a bounty on his head, and the rest of the film

follows him on the run through the badlands, until finally he reaches the water and is set adrift in a boat to die.

These narrative differences demand, naturally, that *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog* exist in different aesthetic universes: one is set in a fin-de-siècle American West and the other in postmodern New York City; one was shot in black and white and the other in color; one was scored by Neil Young and the other by the Wu-Tang Clan's RZA. Nonetheless, it is easy to compare *Dead Man* and *Ghost Dog*. They're both genre movies and these particular genres have a special family resemblance.¹ And despite the distance in terms of historical and geographical location, they also exist in the same narrative universe; Jarmusch tells us this by having the same character appear in both. In *Dead Man*, he has a lead role - Gary Farmer plays Nobody, a Plains Indian who guides the film's protagonist through hell, despite his antipathy towards "stupid fucking white men." In *Ghost Dog*, he has a cameo - Farmer plays a pigeon keeper who gets just one line: "stupid fucking white men." Stay through the credits and you find that here too the character's name is Nobody.

I want to claim though that the two movies are not just comparable - Jarmusch has in fact made the same movie twice. *Ghost Dog* is, according to the samurai code, committed to live as one already dead; from the first scene then, he is a dead man. *Dead Man* too has a protagonist who is dead from the outset although we don't learn this until the end. The film opens with Blake on a train; the train

fireman asks him “doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat?” - if, in other words, it reminds him of the last scene of the movie, when he dies. So both movies have protagonists who, while appearing to be alive, are already dead; both these dead men are sentenced to death by their employers; and both are occupied with writing what Jarmusch in each case refers to as poetry - a “poetry of war” or a poetry “written in blood.” This poetry is in neither case original: our heroes are tasked with recirculating old texts, not with generating new ones.

Jarmusch himself has old texts circulate through both movies, as props, plot points, and interstitial titles. Gregory Salyer reads *Dead Man* as exposing the American fear of inauthenticity; in *Dead Man*, he suggests, “writing is the primary medium for disseminating lies.”² I would suggest that since Jarmusch himself is a writer - a disseminator of lies - he is also, in these films, exploring the possibility that the lies of the written text can be appropriated in such a way that the reader's performance turns them into the truth. There are for Jarmusch always two levels to the book: the book as it is located historically and the book as it is appropriated by his heroes. The effect of each appropriation is to disrupt historical time. Acting out the demands of old books becomes then, for Ghost Dog and Blake, a way to refuse their historical locations and force a return to the primordial. Mircea Eliade has famously suggested that “religious man refuses to live solely in what, in modern terms, is called the historical present; he attempts to regain a sacred time”³ through

the reenactment of sacred texts. I will argue that the protagonists of *Ghost Dog* and *Dead Men* should be understood on these terms as religious men, working with sacred texts, despite the fact that, as we will see, none of the books they read are part of any standard religious canon.

There are two Japanese texts circulating in *Ghost Dog*: Yamamoto Tsunetomo's *Hagakure* and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's *Rashōmon and Other Stories*. *Rashōmon* serves as *Ghost Dog*'s linking text. Inside the space of the film, the book links Ghost Dog to the two women in the movie, and the two women to each other. Louise Vargo gives the book to Ghost Dog just after he mistakenly shoots her boyfriend in front of her, telling him "ancient Japan was a pretty strange place"; he gives it to Pearline, a young girl who introduces herself to him in the park, as an initiatory gesture of friendship; and at the end of the movie, Pearline returns it to Ghost Dog. He gives it to Louie before he dies; Louise retrieves it from Louie, covered in blood. The physical object of *Rashōmon* is thus the sign of the continuing blood relationship between the Vargo family and its heir, Louise, and Ghost Dog and his heir, Pearline. Outside the space of the film, the book links Jarmusch's movie to Akira Kurosawa's famous adaptation of *Rashōmon*.⁴ Ryōko Otomo points out that the stories collected in *Rashōmon* are modern re-workings of legends from the classical period, "a product of eclecticism"⁵ - Akutagawa's book and Kurosawa's adaptation both problematize the notion of singular ownership of

a text. What *Rashōmon* signals inside and outside the film then is that texts are not stable; texts circulate and because of this circulation they are at once elusive and open to appropriation. Otomo argues that for Jarmusch *Rashōmon* and the *Hagakure* function as “couriers of the *true*”: the “film pretends as if there were the hidden sacred *true*, and as if words/languages/texts carried it within.”⁶ I break with her reading here. “Yabu no naka,” the story to which Jarmusch links his movie, is precisely about the way that a story produces multiple truths in the telling. Texts are for Jarmusch not containers of truth, but props in the performance that produces truth.

This holds for the *Hagakure* as well. Again, the text here circulates in two ways, this time inside the space of the film and also literally inside the film - pages from the *Hagakure* are reproduced in the film as interstitial sequences that redirect the narrative. Every decision Ghost Dog makes in the movie is accounted for by this kind of textual interruption; they give the plot its coherence, but the decisions in themselves do not make sense. It is not that the passages from the *Hagakure* explain what Ghost Dog has done or why; it is that they motivate what he does - these passages themselves are the why of his actions. The *Hagakure* is the book of the samurai; through total obedience to the book, Ghost Dog becomes a true samurai. But the book itself, despite its reputation as an ancient text full of ancient wisdom, is a fake - Tsunetomo's samurai manual was published in the eighteenth

century, long after the end of Japan's Warring States period, during an age of slow decline. Its dominant mood is nostalgia and the code it sets down is a fantasy; it demands above all that the retainer kill himself for the sake of his lord, but the period during which it was written was one in which this act had been outlawed. Tsunetomo's wistful mood is plain in a passage like this one: "It is said that what is called 'the spirit of an age' is something to which one cannot return ... although one would like to change today's world back to the spirit of one hundred years or more ago, it cannot be done ..."⁷ In an interview included on the DVD release, Jarmusch refers to the *Hagakure* as an ancient text containing an ancient code; in the same interview he notes that it was written in the eighteenth century. He can do this with a straight face because, like the *Hagakure* itself, *Ghost Dog* is finally about refusing the passage of time, and effecting the impossible return to an earlier age - the primordial time of "the ancient." Toward the end of the film, Ghost Dog, leaving Vargo's estate, runs across two hunters who have just killed a bear, although it is not, as Ghost Dog points out, bear-hunting season. When the hunters threaten to kill him too, Ghost Dog shoots both men, killing one and wounding the other. He then exchanges the following words with the wounded hunter:

Ghost Dog: You know, in ancient cultures, bears were considered equal with men.

Hunter: This ain't no ancient culture here, mister.

Ghost Dog: Sometimes it is. (Gunshot)

This is a scene about the world's coming to an end - the loss of ancient cultures, the vanishing samurai, the decline of all things. But it is also a scene about the ways that time can be disrupted. The hunters have failed to observe the rules of cyclical time; they have acted in a way not consistent with the season. Ghost Dog responds by failing to observe the rules of linear time; he is acting, not only here but throughout the movie, in a way not consistent with the historical moment, and in this disobedience he changes time, allowing the ancient to presence itself.

There is yet another book that circulates through *Ghost Dog*, this one linking him not with Louise but with Pearline: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Reviews of *Ghost Dog* sometimes refer to the way its aesthetic in terms of sampling - Fiona Villella comments, for instance, that "Although *Ghost Dog* 'samples', abbreviates and short-cuts on the level of character and story, Jarmusch does so in a formally mesmerising and hypnotising way."⁸ Otomo affirms this understanding of the movie as lacking the depth of a modern work of art but offering the compensatory post-modern pleasure of formal beauty; she identifies the film as an exemplary instance of pastiche or blank parody.⁹ This should prompt us to consider the two senses of pastiche: pastiche as imitation, and pastiche as a hodge-podge, or an assemblage of odd parts. In its genre appropriations, *Ghost Dog* is explicitly pastiche in the first sense. But it also alerts us to the possibility of this second sense

by making Frankenstein one of the books through which Ghost Dog works out his own destiny.¹⁰ The first time he meets Pearline he picks up her copy of the book and begins to read the final passage aloud; “Hey, that’s the end!” says Pearline, “Don’t give away the ending.” Ghost Dog knows his ending too, and knows that it is the same as the monster’s. Jarmusch uses this book to tell us something about both his protagonist and his film - it is true that they are put together out of dead parts, but that does not foreclose on the possibility that they might come to life. The books themselves are all lies, but that does not foreclose on the possibility that they might, in the telling, tell the truth.

In *Dead Man* too this logic of turning the false into the true is played out by its central character. Our William Blake arrives in Machine bearing only a letter from Mr. Dickinson promising him a job. The fireman on the train has already told him that, though he doesn’t know how to read, “I wouldn’t trust no words on a page,” and indeed there is no job; Blake wanders out and happens across Thel,¹¹ a woman selling roses she makes out of paper. She asks him what they smell like, and taking a sniff Blake says, “paper.” When Dickinson’s son Charlie finds Blake and Thel together, he shoots Thel through the heart, wounding Blake in the process; after shooting and missing several times, Blake finally manages to kill Charlie and escape. *Dead Man* opens then with William Blake first killed by and then killing Charles Dickinson - clearly there is some literary play afoot here: the authors are

dead and paper cannot be trusted. Dickinson's letter proves to be a lie, just as the fireman said it would; Thel makes paper roses that look like the real thing but lack their spirit; the wanted poster reports that Blake killed both Thel and Charlie which is, Blake protests, "a complete fabrication." But the text can nonetheless be actualized as truth through performance.

When our Blake meets Nobody, the latter is thrilled to be meeting the dead poet William Blake, whose *Songs of Innocence* he memorized as a child enrolled under duress in an English school after having been abducted and enlisted in the traveling shows of the period. Our Blake the accountant tries to tell Nobody that he's not that William Blake, and he's not dead. What we will come to know by the end of the movie is that Nobody isn't mistaken when he says our Blake is a dead man. This suggests that he also might not be mistaken when he says our Blake is the William Blake. Over the course of the movie we see our Blake slowly come to realize himself as a dead man; the way this is negotiated is through his acceptance of Nobody's identification of him as the poet William Blake. In a pivotal scene, two white marshals trying to apprehend him call out, "Are you William Blake?" and our Blake - who has as himself proven to be a terrible shot - answers "Yes. Do you know my poetry?" before firing with perfect aim. Another character, passing by one of the bodies later on, will comment that it looks "like a goddamn religious icon." This is Nobody's William Blake manifesting, the imitation turning into the

true. It is only through a series of strange and terrible accidents that Nobody encounters William Blake's book, but he receives this text wholly and completely: "the words that you, William Blake, had written...were powerful words, and they spoke to me." It is again only through a series of accidents that Nobody encounters our William Blake, but when they meet Nobody is quite sure it is so that he can give that text back: "William Blake, it's so strange that you don't remember any of your poetry." By the end of the movie, our Blake does remember some of his poetry - like Nobody, he starts quoting from Blake's "The Auguries of Innocence" - and is granted the skill to write the poetry his situation demands.

There is one canonical text that turns up in *Dead Man*; Blake doesn't read it, but the audience does. Toward the end of the movie, Blake and Nobody happen by a trading post run by an itinerant priest; he tries to kill Blake to claim the bounty on his head, and so Blake and Nobody are forced to kill him. As they leave, Jarmusch trains the camera on a framed motto hanging on the door: "Work out your own salvation." This is a line from Philippians 2:12 - "just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." The reading I want to suggest for *Dead Man* is one in which our Blake finds himself in a world where texts circulate in the absence of any authors to verify their truths, and is nonetheless

able to work out his own salvation not by refusing the text but by submitting to Nobody's mistake and transforming himself into the text's author. The same logic is operating for Ghost Dog: he finds himself in a world without law, and still through his submission to an inauthentic text is able to make that law presence itself. So in both movies - because ultimately they are one movie - books are lies that when faithfully told will tell the truth.

¹ The films of Akira Kurosawa were heavily influenced by westerns as a genre, particularly the work of director John Ford; Kurosawa's own samurai pictures were remade as westerns, with *The Seven Samurai* becoming *The Magnificent Seven* and *Yojimbo* becoming *A Fistful of Dollars*.

² Salyer, G., 1999, "Poetry written with blood: creating death in Dead Man ." In *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together*, Plate, S. B. and Jasper, D., eds., Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 30.

³ Eliade, M., 1961, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask, New York: Harper & Row, 1961, 70.

⁴ *Rashōmon* takes its title from the title story of Akutagawa's collection, but much of its plot from another story, "Yabu no naka," which presents the conflicting accounts given by parties involved in a rape and murder. Jarmusch has Ghost Dog and Pearlline puzzle over the pronunciation of "Yabu no naka" together when she returns the book to him:

Ghost Dog: What did you think?

Pearline: I liked all six different stories... But I especially liked the first story. It's one story, but each person sees a totally different story. That was really good.

Ghost Dog: "Yabu no naka. That's my favorite too."

⁵ Otomo, R., 2000 and 2001, "'The way of the samurai'—Ghost Dog, Mishima, and modernity's other." *Senses of Cinema* 9. Also appeared in *Japanese Studies* 21/1, 31-43.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ A portion of this passage is cited in the film, from the translation by William Scott Wilson (Kodansha 1988): "It is said that what is called 'the spirit of an age' is a thing to which one cannot

return. That this spirit gradually dissipates is due to the world's coming to an end... For this reason, although one would like to change today's world back to the spirit of one hundred years or more ago, it cannot be done. Thus it is important to make the best out of every generation."

⁸ Villella, F. A., 2000, "Spirituality in the 21 st Century. Ghost Dog: Way of the Samurai." *Senses of Cinema* 7, May.

⁹ Otomo writes, "The film is a collection of postmodern 'blank parodies', to use frequently quoted Fredric Jameson's definition of postmodernism," citing Jameson's "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Foster, H., ed, 1983, Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press. In his 1991 *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, Jameson says of pastiche, "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs" (18).

¹⁰ Jarmusch also gets in a nice joke here:

Ghost Dog: Frankenstein. That's a good book.

Pearline: Yeah, better than the movie.

Ghost Dog: You thought so too?

¹¹ The poet William Blake's *The Book of Thel*, a counterpart to his *Songs of Innocence*, details the search by the young shepherdess Thel for the cause of death.