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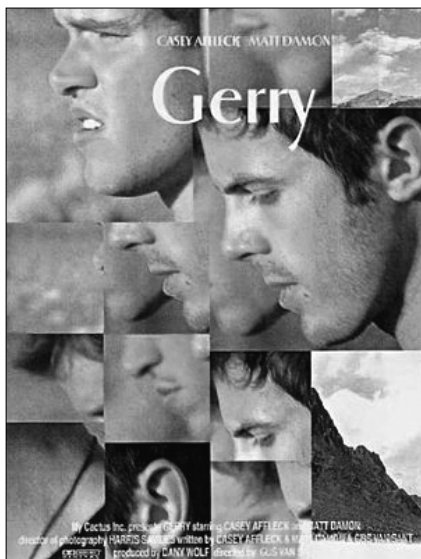
Film analysis

Patrizia LOMBARDO

MEMORY AND IMAGINATION IN FILM: *GERRY* AND *DEAD MAN*

Abstract. This article suggests that, very often, the two faculties – memory and imagination, often separated in philosophical thought – are but one in the case of artistic creation. Readers or spectators are active with their memory, and therefore imaginative in their reception of the works of art: memory and imagination co-operate in the aesthetic effect. The chosen examples, in order to illustrate this co-operation, are two films, *Gerry*, by Gus Van Sant, in which one may observe an extraordinary use of the long take, and *Dead Man* by Jim Jarmusch, influenced by the aesthetic of photography. The relationship among different media is possible thanks to imaginative operations: from painting to literature, from music to poetry, from all the arts to cinema and from cinema to cinema.

In the second part of *Gerry* (2002), we can see – and hear – one of Gus Van Sant's very long takes, lasting for almost four minutes, which is a considerable amount of time in a film: this shot shows the two protagonists (interpreted by Matt Damon and Casey Affleck), both named Gerry, walking quite speedily on the soil of the desert, where they are lost. The film starts with a few minutes shot on a car gliding along a solitary road; after the first cut we see the two faces in the car while the drive continues, and then, after the two young men park their car at the edge of the desert, we witness for almost one hour and a half their long ramble, whose aim and reason always will remain non-specified. They seldom converse, either about trivial matters, such as a TV program, or about practical choices for the directions they should take in order to find their way in the desert. A few days and nights go by, and the sun and the wind and a stormy sky follow up in a succession whose order is hard to



unfold, since so many shots emphasize that eternal landscape and repetitious circuits under the sun or the clouds, on golden sand or on dry cobbles.

In visual terms, in the shot of the two friends marching at the unison, Van Sant invented a new way of treating the close up of human faces: the two profiles and sometimes necks of Matt Damon and Casey Affleck are shown almost superimposed, in a series of variations in which one of the two might be more visible than the other, or one might for a second cover the other. The double profiles double the double name. Sometimes one of them turns very slightly on one side, looking backwards as if he were considering the amount of space they have covered. The few minutes of this shot seem to stretch over its real time since the spectator is put inevitably in the situation of expecting that something would happen: that a word or another

frame will break the continuity of those two faces. Obviously, the long take is a statement, like so many takes in Van Sant's films: they declare his rejection of the most common way of looking at a movie, looking for events and action. The film has been compared with *Waiting for Godot*, and indeed there is something quite close to the vision of Beckett and his minimalist way of narrating¹. Actually, like in Beckett's theatre and novels, there are events in *Gerry*, but they are minimal and, in spite of the linear unfolding of the filmic flux, they do not develop in a linear direction, but in a circuitous cycle, similar to the cycle of day and night and of meteorological conditions of nature (very clearly present in *Gerry*).

Van Sant often theorized the value of long takes, pointing to their openness: instead of bombarding the mind of spectators with a frantic editing too rich of information, they leave time to think and the possibility to interpret freely².

But probably, the most striking feature of the double close-up on the faces and a bit of the torsos' of the two *Gerry* is its repetitive movement up and down: the spectator is aware of their small jumps because they rhythmically follow the

1 See his interview with Jean-Marc Lalanne and Olivier Nicklaus, "Van Sant. Roi du désert", *Les Inrockuptibles*, 3 mars 2004. <http://www.lesinrocks.com/cine/cinema-article/article/entretien-gvs-gerry-0304/>, January, 24, 2010.

2 See <http://www.lesinrocks.com/cine/cinema-article/article/entretien-gvs-gerry-0304/>. cit.

noise of the stamping of their feet on the stony ground of the desert. The crackling and rattling of their steps is quite loud, and spectators, who are as blinded as the two Gerry by the sunny sky over that walk in an utterly unusual scene, might be brought somewhere else. If *cinéphiles*, or if informed about what Van Sant likes, their filmic memory is struck because of the audio portion of this shot: they can remember the effect of an extraordinary scene in Béla Tarr's *Werckmeister's Harmonies* (2000), a film which is very important for Van Sant. The dominant characteristic of the Hungarian filmmaker is the use of extremely long takes in black and white showing the misery and often the folly of a very poor rural world and underworld. In *Werckmeister's Harmonies* a shot of eleven minutes shows an angry crowd walking in the streets of a small town in Hungary. It is night and they walk heavily on the pavement until they reach the hospital and attack those who lie in their beds. The violence of this scene is obviously increased by the noise of the implacable marching of so many people.

Obviously, Van Sant, who often talks of his admiration for this artist, does not quote directly any specific shot by Béla Tarr; his sequence of the two Gerry walking in the desert, face against face, has absorbed the *effect* of scene of the marching crowd in *Werckmeister's Harmonies*. I would say that Van Sant's memory kept the impact of the continuous noise of steps and, at the same time, his imagination has reworked the elements of

Béla Tarr's shot. The darkness of the night in the Hungarian small town has been transformed into the dazzling day light in the desert, the faces of the two young men are burned by the sun. Of course, unlike the crowd in *Werckmeister's Harmonies*, in *Gerry* there are only two people. While Tarr multiplies the number of people, in the whole film by Van Sant, there are only the two Gerry, with the exception of an extremely brief appearance of two persons at the very beginning of the film, when the two friends enter the desert, and at the end, when the only Gerry who survived (Matt Damon), is in a car with a family, after having strangled his dying friend, probably in order to prevent him from succumbing to thirst³.

Memory and imagination are working together: the input from a filmic memory is re-elaborated, it stays as a pattern, but it develops into something different. This twin-walk in desert of the two Gerry stresses the audio component of the film, indicating that film should never be understood just as visual art, but as multi-media. The shot confirms a clear aesthetic direction of Van Sant: music and noises are neither ornamental, nor purely realistic. The sound-track

3 Van Sant explained in several interviews that the initial idea of the film came out of the news: two young people were lost in the desert and one of them kills the other. See his interview with *Slant Magazine*, by Ed Gonzales <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/features/gusVansant.asp>, (June 15, 2003) December 2009.

increases or determines the effect and the meaning of a sequence. As for Béla Tarr and other filmmakers, such as Scorsese, Jarmusch and Lynch, for van Sant music and images are composed in an alchemy that becomes style, both in terms of form and content.

Correspondences and Conjectures

The type of memory I am concerned with in this essay is therefore intimately connected with imagination. Memory and imagination are two different activities of the mind – as several philosophers have believed since Plato – and mainly because the first one, as defined by Aristotle in his short essay on Memory, has to do with the past, while imagination works in the present and opens up connections and intuitions projecting us in the future or in conjectures about other people than ourselves or in other situations than the ones we are living in. Nevertheless, without entering the long philosophical debate about the difference or the coincidence between memory and imagination, I suggest that, very often, the two faculties are but one in the case of artistic creation, as in the example from *Gerry* I commented above. Artists work with elements of their memory that are feeding their imagination. I would also argue that readers or spectators are active with their memory, and therefore imaginative in their reception of the works of art.

In a recent study shedding new light on the relationship between literature and the world, thanks to an original

combination of cognitive sciences and literary structuralism, Nicolae Babuts talks about dynamic patterns in literary works “as language in the form of a sentence or clause” and as possessing “a minimum context”. His hypothesis is that the dynamic pattern can be recognized and at that moment “it becomes a mnemonic event”⁴. I would say that films as well are often the result of such work of memory in the mind of the filmmaker and solicit mnemonic responses in the spectator who can recognize the traces of previous works, and in several art forms or media. Memory would be flat and passive if imagination were not acting upon it, allowing for unexpected connections.

This phenomenon, which is precisely the Béla Tarr’s effect in the sequence of the two marching *Gerry*, has to do with echoes and should be distinguished from direct quotations of films. Just to give another example among hundreds, in *Mean Streets* by Scorsese, we can see at the end of the film the Mafioso uncle of the protagonist Charlie (Harvey Keitel) switching on his television at his home, and a sequence appears on the small TV-screen: it is a famous scene from Fritz Lang’s *The Big Heat* (1953), when the policeman Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford) tries to open the door of his car and to take out his young wife, just killed by

4 Nicolae Babuts, *Memory, Metaphors and Meaning. Reading Literary Texts*, New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.), Transaction Publishers, 2009, p. 4.

the explosion of a bomb directed against Dave. This quotation from Lang is then followed by a very clear and voluntary echo, since Charlie's girlfriend, Theresa, is taken out of their car after the shooting on the highway. Same frame of Fritz Lang's shot: the car window and the woman whom the policemen help to come out, and who, this time, is not killed but seriously wounded like Charlie himself.

Scorsese has almost juxtaposed the quotation and the mnemonic echo, since the second one immediately follows the first one with the shot from *The Big Heat*. It is as if he wanted to underline the way in which the mind of film-makers works: their brain is full of images coming from various input – personal, cultural, etc. – and especially from their film-watching. In other words we can find at the basis of the either voluntary or involuntary mnemonic insurgences, the famous *cinéphilie* that characterized the understanding of film-making among the young writers of *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* and later the film-makers of the so called New Wave. *Cinéphilie* represents a passion for movies that is more than the obsessive knowledge of the history of cinema and of famous taglines: it is a creative involvement with an art, as it is evident in the case of Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer etc., since their love for film-watching became the possibility of making films. And if the creation does not become an artistic production, it can become the spark on which spectators – and that spectator who is the critic – can

construct interpretation by associating different works and finding their common ground. Similarities are not static icons which reappear in a sort of meta-filmic close universe; actually, they undergo the necessary metamorphosis that the history of film and the recollection of shots offer with the same richness that the external world and interior life display for the artist. In other words, imagination operates on various elements, finds links and transforms.

The foundation of the creative blending of memory or imagination is to be found both in Edgar Allan Poe and in Charles Baudelaire. I will just quote some essential few lines recurrent in Baudelaire's appreciation of the painter Eugène Delacroix:

Pour E. Delacroix, la nature est un vaste dictionnaire dont il roule et consulte les feuilles avec un œil sûr et profond; et cette peinture, qui procède surtout du souvenir, parle surtout au souvenir. L'effet produit sur l'âme du spectateur est analogue aux moyens de l'artiste.⁵

What is important for my argument is what I can call the circuit of memory. The work of the artist comes from a vast array of recollection of various order – nature, especially nature conceived as a dictionary, can include so many things; and the effect on the spectator is also connected with a mnemonic activity. It could also be argued that Baudelaire's

5 Charles Baudelaire, *Salon de 1846, Œuvres Complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, «Bibliothèque de la Pléiade» t. II, 1976, p. 433.

notion of imagination, which he called “the queen of faculties,” implies the sparkle of memory in order to start a mental process that allows for finding links among different things. In order to find connections, it is necessary to have a stock of information in one’s mind: we link various elements, positing correspondence where similitude seems unlike. Indeed, like in Baudelaire’s famous *Correspondances*, a color can recall a sound, or vice versa, because memory and imagination co-operate. Or a perfume can resuscitate another time and another place. The relationship among different media is possible thanks to imaginative operations: from painting to literature, from music to poetry, from all the arts to cinema and from cinema to cinema.

Edgar Allan Poe, whom Baudelaire greatly admired, liked to oppose his view to that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, imbued with German idealist philosophy, believed in the division between fancy and imagination. According to him, fancy depends on memory: it is mechanical and passive, and only accumulates: “The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space.”⁶ Imagination is the creative power acting upon human perception and opens up the finite to the infinite. Poe often criticized the distinction between fancy and imagination considering it “without a difference;

without even a difference of degree”. He suggested that power of this faculty is creative, but not in a transcendental way: “The fancy as nearly creates as the imagination; and neither creates in any respect. All novel conceptions are merely unusual combinations.”⁷ This idea of novelty is, in Poe’s reflection, based explicitly on the possibility of associating the traces of something known or seen before in various ways. But what else is this alchemy of the mind if not the composing and recomposing of memory? One has to remember something in order to use that piece in the puzzle of composition. And again this remembering could be both voluntary and involuntary, even if Poe seems to insist more on the capacity of attention, what he called the attentive faculty.

I would give as a typical example of imagination the beginning of one of Edgar Allan Poe’s famous short stories, *Murders in the rue Morgue*, when Dupin, while walking at night in the streets of Paris with the narrator, suddenly continues aloud his reflections. The narrator tells this anecdote to illustrate the extraordinary mind of his newly acquired friend, Dupin:

We were strolling one night down a long dirty street, in the vicinity of the Palais Royal. Being both, apparently, occupied with thought, neither of us had spoken a syllable for fifteen minutes at least. All at once Dupin broke forth with these words:

6 S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, New York, Putnam & Wiley, 1848, vol. 1, p. 205.

7 Poe, ‘Thomas Moore’, *Essays and Reviews*, New York: Library of America, 1984, p. 334.

– “He is a very little fellow, that’s true, and would do better for the Theatre des Variétés.”

– “There can be no doubt of that,” – I replied, unwittingly, and not at first observing (so much had I been absorbed in reflection) the extraordinary manner in which the speaker had chimed in with my meditations. In an instant afterward I recollected myself, and my astonishment was profound.⁸

Precisely in this story by Poe, we can find the link between memory and imagination: what Dupin has been able to do is to recollect what his friend said about an actor, in the recent past – likely a few days before this episode. Dupin could then retrace all the elements of reality which might have brought his friend back to his remarks about that actor and his unfitness for a tragedy. Retracing in order to achieve a result requires something more than the simple activity of listing; it requires indeed imagination, understood not as a divine source, but as the ability to combine various elements.

Creative Metamorphosis

In order to interpret the sequence of Van Sant’s *Gerry* I have commented, the critic has to proceed like Dupin, selecting elements that can be constructed in a conjecture, finding connections, elaborating single elements in a significant network.

Gerry is an experimental film of almost two hours (first shown at the Sundance festival of Independent film): as already suggested, its minimalist aesthetic dries up the narration reducing the action to the minimum. Any clear motivation of the stroll in the desert is given at any moment of the film. We never know where the two protagonists come from, what they do, why they find themselves in the desert. Are they friends or lovers? What are they looking for? The shots, which sometimes last for seven or eight or even ten minutes, seem to linger on the landscape of the desert, its mountains, clouds, sky, and sun and wind, where the two young man move, almost insignificant human beings in front of the sublime presence of the elements. The existential drama is not explained: it just happens, so to speak at the highest degree, with the most tragic end, death, a murder paradoxically accomplished by pity.

After his success with his Hollywood film *Good Will Hunting* (1997), Van Sant, whose first films are about marginal people, young drug addicts, and homosexual love, tried the most total work of quotation: remaking Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1998). This experiment shows how deeply convinced he is of the importance of the exercise of copying the work of a master, like in painting⁹. Copying is a voluntary drill of memorizing, like learning poetry by

8 Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems*, New York: Modern Library, 1938; reprint New York: Vintage, 1975, p. 143.

9 His formation has been in an art school, at the Rhode Island School of Design, where he graduated in 1970.

heart. This extraordinary remake might allude to the fact that in the postmodern era we constantly quote, and deal, like in Ezra Pound's poetry, with fragments of past works or, like Pierre M  nard, in one of Borges's *Fictions*, who rewrites *Don Quixote* with some stylistic variations. Nevertheless, in spite of this postmodern vision, Van Sant's experiment means also that he fully is conscious of the mnemonic basis of artistic works and wants to try out several possibilities.

He can display a large gamut of mnemonic traces: from the most blunt copy with his remake, to the allusions to various filmic genres, such as thrillers and mafia films in *To Die for* (1994)¹⁰, and finally to the metamorphosis of a given material via the imagination, as in the case of the transformation of one crucial element of B  la Tarr's intuition.

Let's consider another element in *Gerry* which can show the achievements of memory as imagination. As mentioned before, the film begins with a long shot, whose length seems, like in the case of the twin-walk of the two Gerry, increased because of its continuity in sound and space. The shot shows from the back a car slowly driven along an endless dusty road running the middle of the landscape made of bushes, dry ground, hillocks, and some light white clouds in the vast sky.

The horizontality of the frame is quite impressive and underlines the monotony of the drive and of the desert outline; the first cut after a few minutes shows, from the windshield, the two faces of the two people in the car: they are silent and their expression is enigmatic. Then another cut in subjective camera fuses our gaze and that of the two travelers through the landscape visible from the car's windows.

This purified sequence is almost generated in its minimalist dimension by the music that slowly distills its few notes at the piano and the only chord with the violin: *F  r Alina* by Arvo P  rt. The piece, in what he called his *tintinnabulum* style, reminding the sound of bells in Medieval liturgical music, seems to suspend time, almost turning it into space, exactly like the shot where the spatial dimension, almost swallow up the temporal succession typical of the unfolding of sequences in the endless repetition of the road, the driving, and the sky. What else if not an imaginative alchemy could join this music with those images?

If we follow the dialogue between Van Sant and Ed Gonzales in *Slant Magazine* we can see that, at the beginning of the interview, their exchange is about memory; it is similar to the encounter between the artist and the spectator through the souvenir according to Baudelaire on Delacroix: "L'effet produit sur l'  me du spectateur est analogue aux moyens de l'artiste." And the two – the artist and the spectator – might remember different things. Especially, the conscious and the unconscious can both intervene

10 The film is the story of a young woman (Nicole Kidman) who wants to become a TV celebrity. She is ready to do anything to reach her goal, also seducing an adolescent into killing her husband.

and trigger a mnemonic event that will be freely elaborated into something new. Ed Gonzales comments on the people walking out at the screening of *Gerry*, something he himself witnessed, and then he suggests that he as a spectator activated his memory even at the expenses of his concentration on the images:

Slant: I was there with two other people. We were a little distracted in the beginning because we were trying to figure out where we'd heard the Arvo Pärt piece that opens the film. Halfway through I remembered Tom Tykwer used it in *Heaven*.

GVS: Really? Also *Swept Away*.

Slant: That would explain why my friend knew he'd heard the song too. He hadn't seen *Heaven*.

GVS: Did you see *Swept Away*?

Slant: Yeah.

GVS: Didn't it play for like two days? [Laughs] Now that I know that the Arvo Pärt piece was in there, I'm happy that *Swept Away* wasn't a big hit because we would have ended up looking like "the film that used the song from the Madonna movie". I didn't think the movie was that bad.¹¹

Music and film are obviously intermingled: nevertheless the irony of Van Sant's last reply seems directed against a strict *cinéphilie* founded on erudition. The point of using something is that of

transforming it, because imagination needs memory, but in order to invent new combinations.

Pärt's minimalist music is played both at the beginning and at the end of *Gerry* (here an even more purified passage from *Spiegel im Spiegel* with no violin chords, but just a few piano notes). The most troubling effect of the choice of this music in the first minutes of the film lies, in my opinion, in what can be called the shock of memory: in fact this very slow and religious music, although it agrees with the motion of the yellow car, calls for a spectacular contrast. The landscape is typical of Westerns, and the driving in such landscape, on an infinite road, is typical of American road movies: all this is precisely what our filmic memory associates with the cult film of the 1960's by Dennis Hopper, *Easy Rider*, where the two long haired friends, Captain America (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper) start their trip through various adventure until they are shot to death while freely riding their motorcycles. Indeed, there is a clear allusion to *Easy Rider* the first night that the two friends spend in the desert: they have lit a fire and they talk together quite cheerfully like Billy and Captain America. Not unlike the voyage of the two hippies, *Gerry* ends up with a tragedy: everything is spoiled as the slang verb *to gerry* (to spoil, to ruin) suggests, and not because of a dreadful action of human hatred like at the end of *Easy Rider*, but because of a gloomy fatality, announced by several shots on a stormy sky, which multiply in the second part of *Gerry*.

¹¹ <http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/features/gusVansant.asp>. *Swept Away* is a 2002 remake by the British film maker and writer Guy Ritchie remake of *Swept Away*, the 1974 film by Lina Wertmüller.

The landscape in *Gerry* is the same as in *Easy Rider*, and a journey is also going on and there also are two friends engaged in an adventure. The contrast is nevertheless striking: nothing could be more far away from the slow rhythm of Arvo Pärt music than the electric guitar and the pop songs of Steppenwolf. Gerry with a blue sweater and Gerry with a black sweater are not “born to be wild.”

Remembering Photography

No doubt that music can feed cinema. Van Sant is one of the filmmakers of his generation who constantly proves it. Also Jim Jarmusch has always been mesmerized by the rhythm of sounds: his affection for Neil Young and John Lurie is well known, and one of his films *Mystery Train* (1989), with music by John Lurie, tells several short contemporary episodes in Memphis Tennessee, irradiating around the trip of two Japanese teen-agers who came all the way through to visit the city of the King, Elvis Presley.

Van Sant works often with rather recent material, while Jim Jarmusch, especially in his early films, seems drawn to memorial traces recalling more distant periods. His fascination for photography or more precisely for its history characterizes his production since his early films. He is attracted to the period going from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first of the twentieth century and sometimes the 1960 and 1970's, especially to those photographers who captured the life of poor people and immigrants – Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Paul Strand, etc.

It is not the dreaming and sentimental New York city of Alfred Stieglitz that touches the filmmaker, but the landscape of rural United States, the suburbs, and the bodies and faces of immigrant workers whose lives are documented in the photography of the Farm Security Administration artists. Their photography is not emphatically realistic but nakedly documentary.

Whenever one talks of history, memory is obviously involved: the allusion to that period of photography suggests both the technical substance of images in black and white and the representational and expressive aims of artists who intended to show the life of people, their poverty, and a physical world – nature, objects and clothes – corresponding to their desolate presence or even infusing its desolate essence into the faces and postures of men, women and children. It is an artistic program that emphasizes a social if not political commitment. So many shots in *Down by Law* (1986) recall the images of New Orleans and Louisiana taken by Walker Evans. The long track shot at the beginning of this film moves back and forth through New Orleans suburbs up to the swamps: the spectator mesmerized by the black and white colors is immediately brought into the light and the sites of Evans' *New Orleans Negro Street* (1935). We can see the same series of town-houses, the same dust, and pavement, and people as forlorn as the suburban setting.

The spectator might even recognize in some shot the sharp whiteness of the fence cutting the dark shades of the

houses and the sky in a beautiful 1917 picture by Paul Strand showing an image of a suburban New York. If we think, for example, of some of the New York City streets or the Ohio landscape in *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), we can perceive almost the same frames and the same gas pumps that silently inhabit the pictures of Paul Strand.

The recollection of several images of that glorious group of photographers in the United States connects the filmmaker and his spectators through a thin line of nostalgia: more than praising the past, photography reminds that it constitutes the technique at the basis of film. The effect of alluding in the 1980's to that period in the first half of the 20th century is quite strong: through the use of black and white, Jarmusch resists the colorfulness of mainstream filmmaking and the aesthetics of what Fredric Jameson called "the glossy images of postmodern film"¹², proposing aesthetic and ethic values that contradict the general direction of cinema. His revival of photography accomplishes something similar to Van Sant's long takes. Jarmusch is a resolutely independent filmmaker. He challenges the usual rhythm of films, opting for almost still frames and presenting a black screen between two shots, and therefore rejecting the quickness of frantic action typical of Hollywood. In terms of content,

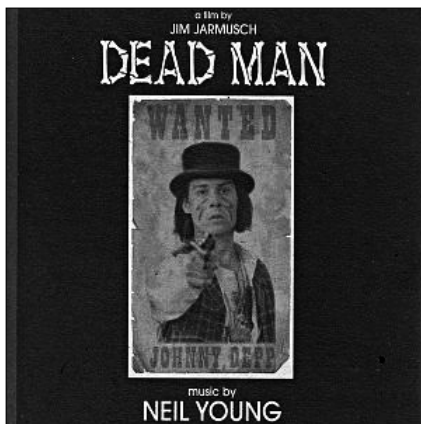
Jarmusch, whose formation had been in literature at Columbia University in New York, marked his belonging to what can be called an experimental line in the history of literature and the arts in the United States.

Juan A. Suarez, in a recent book on Jarmusch, stresses this aspect of his films, as being "concerned with situations, actions, and locales that rarely find their way into conventional texts", while they continue "one of the main projects of twentieth century experimental culture, a project at once aesthetic and political that consists in venturing into the margin of experience"¹³. And the critic recalls the role of the American novelist James Agee, who wanted to investigate "the unimagined existence" of the marginalized.

Following the hints of Baudelaire and Poe, I suggest that *Dead Man* (1995) takes its origin in the memory of the photography of Carleton Watkins, or more precisely in the photographic atmosphere of his Yosemite Valley. I am talking about an atmosphere, since Jarmusch did not quote any precise pictures by the artist who, in 1851, left his hometown Omeonta (New York) in order to travel through California during the years of the gold fever and legged innumerable photographs of the natural and industrial landscape of the West. The imagination

12 Fredric Jameson, "The Existence of Italy," *Signatures of the Visible*, New York and London Routledge, 1992, p. 186.

13 Juan A. Suarez, *Jim Jarmusch*, Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2007, p. 5.



of Jarmusch works on those elements, blending his own vision and the images that seem to come directly from the work of that artist.

Dead Man has been rightly perceived as an important post-Western in the line of those films such as Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) or Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970), that, according to some critics, marked in the late 1960's and in the 1970's, the end of the traditional Western – even if there is no agreement on what a real Western should be¹⁴. In the first eight minutes of the film, the old material of photography appears in new combinations in terms of both form and content.

¹⁴ See Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Dead Man*, London, BFI Publishing, 2005 (2000), pp. 7-8. This article has been written as part of my activity in the Project “Affective Dynamics and Aesthetic Emotions” within the Swiss NCCR (National Centre of Competence in Research) in Affective Sciences based in Geneva.

The industrial and natural landscape is the same of Watkins, but its intention is completely reversed, as much as Arvo Pärt's notes in *Gerry* shake the association with *Easy Rider*. Watkins, praised by the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, captured the sublime: the sublime of the gigantic mountains and red-woods of Yosemite Valley, and also the sublime of technology. His pictures are a hymn to Nature and human work as much as the famous poem by Walt Whitman, “Ode to a Locomotive”, sings the positive values of American democracy. *Dead Man*, even before the arrival of the hybrid Indian Nobody who always talks about the “stupid white man”, is ironical about those optimist values. The very sharp and quick close up on the wheels, the iron bars and the steam of the train alternate with quick shots showing the immense natural landscape and with shots of interior of the train where travels William Blake (Johnny Depp) with various passengers whose aspect changes along the trip crossing the whole country up to the extreme West. The wilder and wilder countenance of the people, the more and more striking absurdity of the costume and the clean suit case of the protagonist are already ironical, and the irony culminates with the incongruous conversation between William Blake and the train driver whose dirty face seems to come more from the beloved photographers of the Administration Farm, were it not for the expression of madness in his eyes.

Absurdity and irony are Jarmusch's solution to infuse a political dimension to

his works. Paradoxically, the most ironical intervention are his black or white screen continuously interrupting what could be a peaceful and glorifying visions of film frames inspired by the photographs

of Watkins. Like in Van Sant, like in all the films that elaborate mnemonic traces, *Dead Man* is mixing memory and imagination, in an unforgettable visual synthesis...