'I wouldn't trust no words written down on no piece of paper': Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*, Jacques Derrida and the Critique of Logocentrism

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Abstract

In this article, I propose a reading of Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) in light of Jacques Derrida's observations on the axiological binary opposition of speech and writing. I argue that the relationship between the two is artistically explored in the opening scene where the accountant William Blake (Johnny Depp) meets the fireman (Crispin Glover) on the train to the town of Machine. I interpret Depp's protagonist as the representative of writing and Glover's fireman as the representative of speech. Demonstrating how the attributes that, through the long history of Western metaphysics, have been ascribed to writing are manifested by the main character of the film, I analyse a subtle personification of the written word on screen. I contend that *Dead Man* is a deconstructive text not only because it deconstructs the genre of the Western and the narrative of the West but also in the sense that it offers a critique of logocentrism and Western metaphysics.

Contributor Note

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Writing's case is grave.
Jacques Derrida

You're just as likely to find your own grave.
The fireman on the train to the town of Machine

Introduction

Taking a Derridean standpoint on the history and evolution of cinema, one could make the case that, since the shift from silent to sound cinema, film has been preoccupied with and dominated by speech. Film sound scholar Michel Chion observed that since then sound in cinema has been vococentric, or, to put it simply, has privileged the voice over other sonic elements (Chion 1994, 5). Voice, according to Chion, is usually treated as a 'solo instrument' which is used for verbal expression (Chion 1994, 6). Thus, in most cases, vococentrism means verbocentrism, the domination by words. However, it would not be accurate to say that all sound in contemporary cinema is verbocentric. Sara Piazza rightly observed that American independent cinema director Jim Jarmusch is one of a few filmmakers who take up in their works the battle against verbocentrism (Piazza 2015, 178). In his films, he uses various techniques of relativisation whereby speech is inscribed, as Chion explained, 'in a visual, rhythmic, gestural, and sensory totality where it would not have to be the central and determining element' (Chion 1994, 5). In other words, Jarmusch decenters speech in film. Piazza's study, however, is more focused on words and language as purely sonic elements in Jarmusch's films than as a means of communication. I would like to delve deeper and examine dialogue and different levels of communication, such as speech and writing.

In my view, Jarmusch not only battles against verbocentrism, but also against logocentrism, fighting hard not to allow the spoken word to have power over the written word. Written communication is of crucial importance to Jarmusch; though its importance varies by degrees, it is always a significant factor in his movies. Sometimes, writing is emphasised as a means of communication; other times, it is emphasised as just a way of life; and yet other times, it literally changes the lives of his protagonists and transforms them. In *Broken Flowers* (2005), for example, Don Johnston (Bill Murray), a man who retired from the computer industry to live the quiet life, receives a letter from an unnamed former girlfriend informing him that he has a son who may be looking for him. The eponymous *Ghost Dog* (1999) is a hitman played by Forest Whitaker who speaks as little as possible and only communicates with his employers, a group of mobsters, through messages carried by his homing pigeons. And the titular *Paterson* (2016) is a calm and silent poet played by Adam Driver who drives a bus, observes the poetry of daily life, and tries to document it, putting it down on pieces of paper in his cherished secret notebook. These instances, among many others, indicate that one of the ways that Jarmusch decenters speech is simply by paying attention to writing. If a character quotes from the *Hagakure*, as Ghost Dog does, then the text is presented on the screen in both written and spoken form. If a character reads or writes poetry, as in *Paterson*, we see the verses on screen in addition to hearing them recited in voice-over.

The way things are written is sometimes more important than how they are pronounced. In *Paterson*, for example, the little girl who the main character meets on the street introduces the title of her poem – 'Water Falls'. 'Two words though', she clarifies before reading the poem, thus stressing the significance of the written form and the meaning that can be observed only while reading. However, that is not to say that Jarmusch prioritises the written word over the spoken word. Rather, he keeps a representational balance and artistically explores the relationship between the two. This artistic exploration is especially subtle in his renowned film *Dead Man* (1995).[1]

Juan Antonio Suárez rightly observes that the film, which was described as a modern tale (Ahmadi and Ross 2012) has attracted (and, surprisingly, continues to attract) a great deal of attention from critics and scholars – more than any other film by Jarmusch (Suárez 2007, 104). Some of the critics found the movie painfully slow, 'staggeringly boring [and] utterly pointless' (Williams Arnold, quoted in Baltake 1996, n.p.), or a 'deadly bore' (Vincent 1996, n.p.); others were fascinated by the film's artistry and intellectual vitality and thought that it was 'the best movie of the end of the 20th century' (Marcus 1999, n.p.). The film was even discussed in the same breath as the work of some of the greatest directors in the history of cinema; one critic went so far as to call it 'the Western Andrei Tarkovsky always wanted to make' (Hoberman 1999, n.p.). Indeed, almost Tarkovskyan in its aesthetics, *Dead Man* is a rather

unconventional film and a decidedly atypical Western, so much so that it was quickly given such labels as anti-Western (Gurr 2006; Buchanan 2011; Thomas 2012, 57), post-Western (Baltake 1996; Suárez 2007, 106), postcolonial Western (Gurr 2006), experimental Western (Curley 2008), acid Western (Rosenbaum 2000, 49) or a Western under erasure (Rickman 1998).

Several scholars analysed it in terms of genre, discussing, among other things, revisionism, reflection on the traumatic past, Native American history and culture, and the expansion of the West (Rickman 1998; Rosenbaum 2000; Kollin 2000; Hall 2001; Nieland 2001; Bromley 2001; Pelzer 2002; Buchanan 2011). Nieland, for example, examined 'the film's complicated relationship to America's historical archive – a record structured by conflict, hybridity, and violence' (Nieland 2001, 171). The variety of subjects of discourse shows the multidimensionality and richness of the themes explored in the movie: it was investigated from the perspective of gender (DeAngelis 2001), ethnicity (Kilpatric 1999, cited in Suárez 2017, 105; McMahon 2011), otherness (Richardson 2010; Petković and Vuković 2011), communication (Suárez 2007; Richardson 2010), religion (Curley 2008), mythology (Salyer 1999; Ahmadi and Ross 2012), spirituality and imagination (Rice 2012), technology and capitalism (Salyer 1999). Some scholars examined how *Dead Man* was informed by literature. Hugh Davis (2013) looked at how William Blake's poetry is thematically and structurally incorporated in the film; in a similar manner, Troy Thomas (2012) argued that the film is an unusual and unique adaptation of Blake's work. Huan Antonio Suárez (2007) searched for the parallels

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[1] Interestingly, Greil Marcus (1999) argues that *Dead Man* 'might as well be a silent. You can read the whole film off its faces'.

between *Dead Man* and the *oeuvre* of poet, writer, and painter Henri Michaux, whose words 'It is preferable not to travel with a dead man' serve as the film's epigraph.

It would be inaccurate to say that the important questions surrounding speech and writing were passed over entirely unnoticed. Nevertheless, very few studies exist in the literature in which they are discussed directly. Davis mentioned that the opening scene in which William Blake meets the fireman on the train was used 'to introduce another important idea, both for William Blake the poet and the film: the relationship between the written and the spoken word' (Davis 2013, 85). However, Davis did not explicitly explain how that relationship manifests either in the movie or in the famous eighteenth-century English poet's writings. According to some scholars (Salyer 1999, 29; Shapiro 2004, 152; Davis 2013, 88), writing in this scene is represented as an untrustworthy medium. Gregory Salyer (ibid.) observed that this sentiment 'can be found in non-writers when … writing is introduced to the culture (Plato is most notable this regard)' (Salyer 1999, 29). Nonetheless, Salyer's analytical target was such that he failed to address this problem directly. So, too, have most scholars failed to explicitly tackle this unique problematic as it appears in Jarmusch's film. Therefore, given the fact that this has remained a scarcely investigated problem, the present article will aim to fill this conspicuous gap.

The study will contribute to the area of communication in film by advancing our understanding of audiovisual representation of the written word. One aspect of my research is related to dialogue and discourse; I examine what

and how the characters talk about writing in opposition to speech. The second aspect I am interested in is how the written word is represented by other means than through the lips of the characters, such as, for example, by symbols or personification. For the analysis of film dialogue, I apply a four-step methodology suggested by Jeff Jaeckle (2013): (1) quoting the film dialogue, (2) verifying the accuracy of film quotations, (3) analysing aural and verbal as well as (4) the literal and figurative components of film dialogue. I explore the representation of writing in the film applying the 'method' of deconstruction.

In the article, I analyse the axiological binary opposition between speech and writing in *Dead Man.* I focus on the dialogue in the opening scene of *Dead Man* and interpret the fireman (Crispin Glover) as the representative of speech and the protagonist William Blake (Johnny Depp) as the representative of writing. In the film, two figures of speech are used to represent the written word: first, the letter William Blake received which serves as a *symbol* of the written word; second, William Blake the character who acts as the *personification* of the written word. In what follows, I will discuss the treatment of the written word in philosophical literature. I will then demonstrate how the characteristics that, through the long history of Western metaphysics, have been assigned to writing are associated with the letter and how they are also ascribed to the protagonist William Blake, who, during the film, is becoming a living dead man.

I am especially interested in the writing/death association, which is a common philosophical trope that, as philosopher Jacques Derrida in his works

showed, was present in many intellectual writings from Plato to Ferdinand de Saussure. *Dead Man*, I argue, is another example of such trope, just not in intellectual literature but in cinema. However, Jarmusch's 'take' on this philosophical trope is unique, since he offers a new and more productive route to understanding the trope. I contend that, while initially positioned in the classic metaphysical hierarchized binary speech/writing (fireman/William Blake), Depp's protagonist becoming a living dead man exemplifies writing gaining the qualities of speech. I will show that with the help of a Native American man called Nobody, William Blake recognised his poetic alter ego and immersed into the spiritual world, thus experiencing a transformation from writing in a narrow sense to writing in a broader – Derridean – sense. This is a highly subjective interpretation; I will therefore end up my essay raising questions about the validity of it.

Writing as a Philosophical Problem

The renowned French philosopher Derrida is perhaps best known for his 'method' of deconstruction and his critique of logocentrism, explicitly set forth in his famous opus *Of Grammatology* (1997). After carefully studying a litany of different philosophical and intellectual texts from Ancient Greece through to the present day, Derrida developed an argument regarding the history of Western thought, or, as he characterised it, the metaphysics of presence. He found that a wide range of thinkers who had contemplated the question of being, had determined being as presence and maintained almost religious belief in presence as the origin and destination of everything.

According to Derrida, the metaphysical orientation sets up axiological oppositional binaries (such as, for example, presence-absence, speech-writing, signified-signifier, intelligible-sensible, etc.) that always privilege one term over the other. They are not just innocent binaries; they are hierarchies that orientate our thought and action. These hierarchies, in Derrida's words, are '*violent* hierarch[ies]. One of the two terms controls the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), holds superior position. To deconstruct the opposition … is to overthrow the hierarchy' (Derrida 1981b, 41).

Derrida contends that the violent system of power can be overcome, since these oppositions are unstable. The philosopher therefore calls for a revolution in consciousness that does not fetishise the notion of presence. He does not, however, suggest prioritising absence, for that would merely preserve the binary logic deconstruction is meant to deconstruct. Neither term in such binaries should be regarded as primary because every presence contains the trace of absence in itself, and every absence contains a trace of presence.

He argued that to deconstruct the binary oppositions on which the whole edifice of philosophy is built means not to reverse them or make them disappear, but rather to conceive how one of the coupled concepts 'appears as the *différance*[2] of the other, the other as

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[2] Derrida thought that meaning is produced by a sign's difference from other signs (thereby forming a chain of differences) and is always postponed. To illustrate his point, he introduced the concept of *différance*, the notion in French connoting two words: *to differ* and *to defer*.

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"deferred" within the systematic ordering of the same (e.g., the intelligible as differing of the sensible, as sensible differed [etc.])' (Derrida 1973, 148–149). Simply put, the goal is to understand how one of the binary terms is already in the other, as each *always already* carries the otherness of the other within itself.

Derrida was especially interested in the binary of speech and writing, the relationship between the spoken and the written word. In his books, he 'documented the devaluation of writing in philosophical writings' (Culler 1992, 89) and demonstrated – especially in *Of Grammatology* – that a lot of thinkers reinforced the idea that speech was primary and writing was secondary. In other words, they legitimated 'the domination of the living voice over physical inscription' (Chang 1996, 188). A speaker is present to the words s/he is saying and present in the moment in time when the words are being uttered. Thus, speech was viewed as primary in regard to this 'natural' relationship with presence, the full self-presence and full self-consciousness of the speaking subject.

Writing in Saussure's works, for example, was considered as 'derivative because *representative*: signifier of the first signifier, representation of the self-present voice, of the immediate, natural, and direct signification of the meaning' (Derrida 1997, 30, emphasis in the original). In other words, the written word was regarded as the representative of the representative. It was relegated to a secondary role due to the absence of the author and the distance from him or her of time and space. However, there is also

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According to Derrida, *différance* is a systematic play of movement that generates differences, a play of the traces of differences.

the absence of the reader and the distance from him or her of time and space. These two absences are intrinsic to writing: writing depends on them and functions only because of them.

Writing in Metaphysical Literature

According to Derrida, speech in many texts was presented as the medium of identity, interiority, spirit, presence, truth, and life, while writing was presented as the medium of difference, exteriority, body, absence, appearance and death. And this presentation usually manifested in the form of a metaphor. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pointed out that, in deconstructive criticism, one must take the 'metaphoric structure of a text very seriously. Since metaphors are not reducible to truth, their own structures "as such" are part of the textuality (or message) of the text' (Spivak 1997, lxxiv). Therefore, Derrida rigorously examined the metaphoric language used in the metaphysical texts he deconstructed.

By drawing on different texts in the history of Western thought, Derrida showed that writing was often viewed as exterior and having merely instrumental function – as well as the connotations of evil or mischief. Saussure, for instance, described writing as having 'exteriority that one attributes to utensils; to what is even an imperfect tool and a dangerous, almost maleficent, technique' (Derrida 1997, 34). Generally speaking, 'the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos' (Derrida 1997, 35). The philosopher even speculated that the problem of body and soul is to be derived from the problem of writing (ibid.).

Since writing was associated with matter, corporeality, bodiliness, it was also connected to passion and seduction. Derrida did not miss the fact that, 'for Saussure, to give in to the "prestige of the written form" is … to give in to *passion*' (Derrida 1997, 14, emphasis in the original). Elsewhere, the linguist implied that writing is tyrannical and enslaving. Derrida in his turn explained what this meant: 'tyranny is at bottom the mastery of the body over the soul, and passion is a passivity and sickness of the soul, the moral perversion is *pathological*' (ibid., emphasis in the original). According to Derrida, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, writing clearly operates through seduction, as Socrates is captured by curiosity and enticed by the writing of Phaedrus. Interestingly, it is kept close to the young Athenian's body. Derrida argued:

> Only the *logoi en bibliois*, only words that are deferred, reserved, enveloped, rolled up, words that force one to wait for them in the form and under cover of a solid object, letting themselves be desired for the space of a walk, only hidden letters can thus get Socrates moving. If speech would be purely present, unveiled, naked, offered up in person in its truth, without the detours of a signifier foreign to it, if at the limit an undeferred logos were possible, it would not seduce anyone (Derrida 1981a, 71).

Speech in *Phaedrus* is writing into soul,[3] speaking soul-to-soul; it is associated

with an intimate dialogue, dialogical love and what is nowadays labelled *platonic* love. As the historian of the idea of communication John Durham Peters observes, Socrates makes two gestures intrinsic to his philosophy: the refusal to write and the refusal to penetrate (Peters 1999, 43). In *Phaedrus*, 'we discover the intimate connection between the two refusals' (ibid.). Therefore, writing, associated with bodily passion and polygamy, to Socrates seems appropriate, 'something like an intellectual sperm bank: conception can occur between anonymous partners whose junction can be manipulated across great distances of space and time' (Peters 1999, 49). Thus, writing was allied with desire and its dispersion and seen as a 'cheating *eros*' (ibid.).

If these 'negative' qualities ascribed to writing were not enough, the written word has also been united with aggression and violence. This can be observed in the writings of the ideologist of the Enlightenment Jean-Jacques Rousseau and anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, especially in the latter's Writing Lesson for the illiterate Indians, when writing caused actual physical violence. According to Derrida, both authors 'relate the power of writing to the exercise of violence' (Derrida 1997, 106). Writing, in their works, *is* violence, since it is a threat to language; it is 'the dissimulation of the natural, primary, and immediate presence of sense to the soul within the logos. Its violence *befalls* the

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[3] Derrida was surprised to discover that the metaphor of writing is used to describe speech in opposition to writing. Derrida noticed that, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, for example, speech is introduced as good and natural 'writing' (with the implication that it was given by God or the Divine Mind), whereas the written word is colloquial, bad writing: 'the good and natural is the divine

inscription in the heart of the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body' (Derrida 1997, 17). This was a powerful metaphor, further relegating writing, assigning it to an inferior position and associating it with exteriority.

soul as unconsciousness' (Derrida 1997, 37).

The inscription is 'dangerous' since it introduces the unconscious. As Derrida explicates in *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), 'no consciousness is possible without the voice. The voice is the being which is present to itself in the form of universality, as con-sciousness; the voice *is* consciousness' (Derrida 1973, 79–80). Thus, speech, it is believed, offers the most direct access to consciousness. The voice can seem to be consciousness itself, as, it is often argued, it is the closest thing to a present thought that can be communicated through the medium of voice. Written words are separated from the thought and consciousness that actually created them. Thus, based on the binary logic, the medium of writing might be seen as related to what is *not* consciousness, i.e. to unconsciousness.

Linkages between Writing and Death

Finally, in the context of this article, it is especially important to show the established links that Derrida observed between writing and death. In the long Western metaphysical tradition, starting with Plato, as Derrida argued, 'natural writing [speech] is immediately united to the voice and to [the first] breath' (Derrida 1997, 17), while writing is united to the absence of voice and the last breath. Describing the Hegelian conception of writing, Derrida wrote: 'What writing itself, in its nonphonetic moment, betrays, is life. It menaces at once the breath, the spirit, and history as the spirit's relationship with itself' (Derrida 1997, 25). In Hegelian texts, according to Derrida, writing is 'cutting breath short, sterilizing or immobilizing

spiritual creation in the repetition of the letter … it is the principle of death and of difference in the becoming of being' (ibid.). Whereas the speech, the *parole*, in Hegel's or, for example, Husserl's texts is presented as being alive: 'My words are "alive" because they seem not to leave me: not to fall outside me, outside my breath, at a visible distance' (Derrida 1973, 76). The phenomenological tradition stresses that it is assured by the ability to 'hear-oneself-speak' that Edmund Husserl called 'auto-affection'. Briankle G. Chang, therefore, drew a conclusion based on Derrida's insights:

> Compared to speech writing appears to be 'breathless' in both senses of the term: Ungraced by the living voice animating, written words are brain-dead, vegetable-like; moreover, as a graphic representation of speech, written words are condemned to chase strenuously, though without ever catching up, their auto-affected original, the soulful inner voice (Chang 1996, 189).

Derrida found more comparisons of writing to death or the written word to a dead man. In the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau, for example, made an eloquent comparison: to 'judge genius' from books is like 'painting a man's portrait from his corpse' (Derrida 1997, 17). On Rousseau's account, 'Oriental tongues … lose their life and warmth when they are written' (Derrida 1997, 226). As Derrida aptly summarises, 'writing in the common sense is the dead letter, is the carrier of death. It exhausts life' (Derrida 1997, 17). These comparisons of writing to the act of dying or the act of killing are the outcomes of the thinking, conceptualised in Plato's work, that provided the conceptual backdrop of Western

metaphysics (Derrida 1997, 76). Therefore, it deserves a wider discussion.

In his work *Phaedrus,* Plato (or Socrates who spoke through the writing of Plato?) provided a devastating critique of writing as a questionable and rather *untrustworthy* medium. As Jonathan Culler puts it, he denounced writing as 'a bastardized form of communication' (Culler 1992, 100). A lot of scholars have long speculated what could have caused such an attack on the written word. Eric Havelock thought that *Phaedrus* should be interpreted in the context of the Greek cultural moment of a dying oral tradition and the birth of literacy (Havelock, cited in Peters 1999, 36); others read it as a premonition and fear of new information systems (Peters 1999, 36). In any case, the text went on to shape Western thought on the topic for centuries.

In the story*,* the young Athenian Phaedrus discusses with Socrates the limitations of writing. Socrates tells him a legend[4] about the origins of writing. The story goes as follows: the Egyptian divinity Thoth, known as the god of the moon, knowledge, calculation, measuring, weighting the souls, and, as Derrida argued, of death,[5] came to then King Thamus with a gift of writing that could later be made available for all. Thoth presented writing as a great

invention – a mnemonic technique, an aid for remembering. However, the King came up with the idea that writing might actually have the opposite effect – it might produce forgetfulness. For the King, it is a remedy for reminding, but not remembering. As Socrates postulates:

> In fact, it will introduce forgetfulness into the souls of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will *put their trust* in writing which is *external* and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the *appearance* of wisdom, not with its reality (Plato 1995, 80–79, my emphasis).

In his analysis of Plato's text, Derrida focuses on the usage of the word *pharmakon* (translated here as 'potion') to describe writing. It means both medicine and poison and characterises the written word as 'beneficent or maleficent' (Derrida 1981a, 70). It is one of those words that are not simply ambivalent but that house oppositional and contradictory meanings. As Chang astutely asserts, a word like *pharmakon* 'reenacts the movement of *supplément[6]*

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[4] Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff in their translation of *Phaedrus* claim that the legend Socrates tells is probably an invention of Plato's (Nehamas and Woodruff 1995, 78).

[5] Derrida is convinced that Theuth must also be a god of death and control the organisation of death: 'The master of writing, numbers, and calculation does not merely write down the weight of dead souls, he first counts out the days of life' (Derrida 1981a, 92.).

[6] Supplement is a recurring term in Derrida's writings, but was discussed the most explicitly and extensively in *Of Grammatology,* where Derrida deconstructs Rousseau's view of writing as a dangerous supplement to speech. According to Derrida, speech must be lacking, not full in itself if it needs writing to supplement it. As Culler puts it, 'Writing can be compensatory, a supplement to speech, only because speech is already marked by the qualities of writing: absence and misunderstanding' (Culler 1995, 78). The supplement, in other words, 'adds itself to an ostensibly ideal or original presence in the form

and therefore cannot be translated without a loss. Concepts like these resist 'philosophy's first desire for full presence and totalizing transcendental economy characterized by meaning-*fullness*' (Chang 1996, xv). Such words are also the illustrations of undecidability, a play of either/or and neither/nor, a structural condition in language that does not allow reducing the meaning to one single meaning.

To reinforce this idea, Derrida highlights one additional meaning of *pharmakon*. In Ancient Greek, *pharmakos* meant the ritualistic sacrifice or exile of a human scapegoat or victim. Therefore, one word becomes a composite of three meanings, which makes it an unstable unit in the text, describing writing not only as medicine and poison, but also as the one to blame for all the wrongdoings or faults of others. As Culler explains it, 'The exclusion of the *pharmakos* purifies the city, as the exclusion of the *pharmakon* of writing is meant to purify the order of speech and thought' (Culler 1992, 143).

According to Derrida, in the history of Western metaphysics, the origin of truth has always been assigned to the *logos*: 'history of truth, of the truth of the truth, has always been … the debasement of writing, and its repression outside "full" speech' (Derrida 1997, 3). The quotation from *Phaedrus* above demonstrates, among other things, a complicated relationship between writing and truth, the supposed 'incompatibility of the *written* and the *true*' (Derrida 1981a, 68, emphasis in the original). Socrates believes that genuine knowledge and wisdom can only be transferred and

obtained through living memory (*mneme*) and speech. As Derrida argues, for Socrates and Plato, 'Memory and truth cannot be separated' (Derrida 1981a, 105). There is also memory as writing (*hypomnesis*), however, the latter is far 'worse' than the former for reasons explained by Dooley and Kavanagh:

> Living memory (*mneme*) is the unveiling of truth (*alētheia*) in its self-presentation to itself. Memory as writing (*hypomnesis*), on the other hand, conceals, buries the truth (*lethe*), and, as Derrida puts it, 'simultaneously increase[s] the domains of death, of nontruth, of nonknowledge' (Dooley and Kavanagh 2007, 21).

Therefore, writing cannot be a remedy for memory; it is actually poisonous to it. From this view, Derrida posits that 'writing is essentially bad, external to memory, productive not of science but of belief, not of truth but of appearances. The *pharmakon* [writing] produces a play of appearances which enable it to pass for truth' (Derrida 1981a, 103). In other words, from the metaphysical perspective, writing can be easily taken as truth, but one should not put one's faith in it. Later in *Phaedrus*, Socrates compares writing to painting because of the illusionary impression that paintings are alive and can speak (Plato 1995, 80–81). Plato is concerned that there is no guarantee that writing will not fall into the hands of unqualified people incapable of understanding the intended meaning. In writing, the author of the work is absent and therefore unable to clarify the meaning of the work. In speech, on the other hand, the author is there to assure that the intended meaning is understood.

'Death, distance, difference' (Johnson 1982, ix) or 'distance, divergence, delay'

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of exposing the lack and self-difference at its very origin' (Wortham 2010, 204).

(Derrida 1988, 7) as well as 'absence, misunderstanding, insincerity, and ambiguity' (Culler 1992, 100) are the qualities of writing that, in the Platonic or Socratic view, possibly lead to the distortion of meaning. According to Peters, for Socrates, miscommunication or misunderstanding emerge from the loss of personal contact and original context: 'Because writing can live on far beyond the situation of utterance, it can mean many things for many people' (Peters 1999, 47). As Chang rightly observes, it is exactly 'because the letters are dead that the living can use them in any way they want' (Chang 1996, 201). Therefore, for Socrates, the true, genuine meaning can only be transferred in the presence of the author through the medium of immediacy and his living voice. For Plato, writing 'substitutes the breathless sign for the living voice' (Derrida 1981a, 92).

As soon as words are put down on a piece of paper, they are cut off from the intention that breathes life into them. In the words of Chang, '*Graphos* enters the stage only after *logos* has left the body' (Chang 1996, 193). As Peters summarises, wittingly comparing writing to a dead body, 'writing on papyrus… pretends to be a live presence but in fact is a kind of embalmed intelligence, like the mummies of ancient Egypt, whence writing supposedly came' (Peters 1999, 49). He adds that, 'As with all new media, writing opens up a realm of the living dead' (ibid.).

Derrida highlighted the fact that, in Plato's text, writing is always 'involved in questions of life and death' (Derrida 1981a, 105), and, moreover, never belongs to the living word as speech, constantly ascribed to the kingdom of the dead. Nevertheless, Derrida insists that speech and writing cannot really be separated. The presence of speech and living memory already contains within it the traces of absence and death. Therefore, speech already has the attributes of writing. Derrida stresses that Plato himself admits that speech already has holes in it, that speech needs writing to be speech. Thus, he 'shows how the undecidability of life and death, of presence and absence, plays itself out in terms of speech and writing' (Dooley and Kavanagh 2007, 22) and draws a conclusion that writing is an essential condition of speech.

In *Limited Inc*, Derrida argued that, 'the absence attributed to writing is proper to every communication' (Derrida 1988, 7). He had no doubt that any signifying mark, written or spoken, is 'grapheme in general' (Derrida 1988, 10). It can signify because of the feature of iterability – ability to be cited, repeated and altered while being repeated. Derrida insisted on the idea that 'citational grafting [7] … belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written, and … constitutes every mark as writing even before and outside every horizon of semiolinguistic communication' (Derrida 1988, 12).

That is why, as Mark Poster contends, 'speech is always already … "writing"' (Poster 1990, 102–103). He puts writing in the quotation marks because this writing is different from that which is merely one means of communication. According to Chang, in this Derridean sense, writing 'is not a bastardized imitation of speech any more; writing is no longer an ignoble or inferior species of communication. Quite the contrary, *communication is a species of écriture*

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[7] 'Grafting' refers to citing in another context.

(Chang 1996, 207, emphasis in the original). Derrida created a new word, a neologism (or rather, a neographism) but demanded retaining the old name of writing (Derrida 1988, 21). [8] In the following section, I will demonstrate that both meanings of writing are present in *Dead Man* and different features of writing discussed above are given to William Blake the character.

Dead Man: Summary of the Plot

William Blake comes to a little town called Machine, where he was promised a job in a small factory. It turns out that the position has been already taken by someone else. Now jobless, Blake meets Thel Russell (Mili Avital), a former prostitute who currently sells paper flowers, and she invites him to her home. Soon after that, Thel's ex-boyfriend Charlie (Gabriel Byrne) comes in and finds the couple in bed. He shoots at Blake, but accidentally kills Thel when she jumps in front of her new lover. A wounded Blake kills Charlie with Thel's gun and runs from the town of Machine on a stolen horse. Suffering from a gunshot wound, Blake starts wandering in the woods. He awakens in the hands of a Native American man who calls himself Nobody (Gary Farmer) whom Blake finds trying to remove the bullet from his chest. After finding out the name of the unfortunate soul, Nobody starts believing he is the incarnation of the famous English poet William Blake. We learn later that Dickinson (Robert Mitchum), who promised William Blake a job at the factory, is Charlie's father. He hires three killers to find William Blake and bring him back 'dead or alive'.

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[8] He explained this logic and strategy in great detail. See, for example, Derrida 1981b, 71.

Opening Scene Where Writing Meets Speech

Whereas Derrida is interested in the relationship of the written and the spoken word from a theoretical perspective, Jarmusch explores it in an artistic way. One of the most obvious examples of this is the opening scene from *Dead Man*. In the scene, Blake rides to the West on the train, where he meets a fireman, who starts a very strange conversation with him.

> **Fireman**: Look out the window. And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat? And then later that night, you were lying, looking up at the ceiling, and the water in your head was not dissimilar from the landscape, and you think to yourself, 'Why is it that the landscape is moving, but the boat is still?' And also, where is it that you're from?
>
> **Blake**: Cleveland.
>
> **Fireman**: Cleveland.
>
> **Blake**: Lake Erie.
>
> **Fireman**: Erie. Do you have any parents back in, uh, Erie?
>
> **Blake**: They passed on recently.
>
> **Fireman**: And, uh, do you have a wife in Erie?
>
> **Blake**: No.
>
> **Fireman**: Fiancée?
>
> **Blake**: Well, I – I had one of those, but, um, she changed her mind.
>
> **Fireman**: She found herself somebody else.
>
> **Blake**: No.
>
> **Fireman**: Yes, she did. Well, that doesn't explain why you've come all the way out here, all the way out here to hell.
>
> **Blake**: I, uh, have a job out in the town

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of Machine.

Fireman: Machine? That's the end of the line.

Blake: Is it?

Fireman: Yes.

Blake: Well, I received a letter from the people at Dickinson's Metal Works…
[Blake is showing the letter to the fireman.]

Fireman: Oh.

Blake: …assuring me of a job there.

Fireman: Is that so?

Blake: Yes. I'm an accountant.

Fireman: I wouldn't know, because, uh, I don't read, but, uh, I'll tell you one thing for sure: I wouldn't trust no words written down on no piece of paper, especially from no Dickinson out in the town of Machine. You're just as likely to find your own grave. *[Gunfire.]* Look. They're shooting buffalo. Government says killed a million of 'em last year alone.

As good dialogue should, this sequence conveys quite a bit of information about the (anti-)hero [9] William Blake and his past. However, along with this information, Jarmusch also subtly introduces the themes of the movie, which are encoded in the etymologically salient toponyms Cleveland and Lake Erie. Cleveland derives from the surname

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[9] If the film is an anti-Western (Gurr 2006; Buchanan 2011; Thomas 2012, 57) in the sense that it is not a conventional Western, the main character is an anti-hero in the sense that he does not possess the traits of a conventional Western hero. William Blake is not an active protagonist, he is not 'tough and strong' (Tomkins 1990, 11), he does not have the power inherent to Western man (Tomkins 1990, 18), etc. What is more, as many characters in Jarmusch's films, he can also be called an antihero in Beckettian sense (Petković and Vuković 2011, n.p.).

Cleaveland, which sounds the same as Cleveland, although the written form of the two words is different. 'To cleave' is one of those paradoxical concepts having two oppositional meanings: *to join* and *to split apart*. Thus, the main character, the representative of *pharmakon*, comes from the place having a name that indicates undecidability as well as the trace of otherness in itself. What is more, Lake Erie etymologically refers to the Erie tribe that once lived by the lake – Indians representing the American other. These two references are significant, since, as the film progresses, William Blake becomes both a living dead man and, to some extent, a Native American. Just as in Derrida's writing, in *Dead Man,* there is not only a strong theme of logocentrism, but of ethnocentrism, too, which Derrida related to logocentrism in the first pages of *Of Grammatology.*

The dialogue also introduces another important theme – that of the relationship between the written and the spoken word. I would like to suggest that, in this scene, the two characters who sit facing each other, in opposition, are the personifications of speech and writing. The fireman is the representative of the spoken word and the long Western metaphysical tradition. Blake, who shares his name with the famous eighteenth-century English poet, is an agent of the written word. What is more, as Salyer insightfully observes, he 'holds the same occupation as the first *writers* in Sumeria in 2000 BCE – accountant' (Salyer 1999, 29, my emphasis). It would not be difficult to justify which character in the hierarchical binary opposition is the primary figure. In the scene, the fireman very clearly dominates the proceedings: *logos* dominates *graphos*, *dictum* dominates *scriptum*. The fireman is the

one who utters the first spoken words in the film ('Look out the window') and he is the active character who starts a conversation, asks questions and generally speaks more. Blake is a passive character, both in this scene and in the whole film, providing answers to his interlocutor, but not engaging in the conversation. Symbolically, he is the one who holds the letter in his hands that serves as a document, an official record of his job offer. However, when the letter is passed into the hands of the fireman, he denounces everything that is written there – without even knowing how to read. The fireman's reaction can be interpreted as a fear of the unknown – the 'information system' that he is not able to use. He can also be compared to King Thamus, who, in Plato's legend, rejects writing. The King, just as the fireman on the train, is illiterate. Derrida explains: 'God the King does not know how to write, but that ignorance or incapacity only testifies to his sovereign independence. He has no need to write. He speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices' (Derrida 1981a, 76). The fireman does not need literacy because he is in the superior position already: he is the one who knows about the inferno William Blake is about to enter; he is the one who can alert him. The King has the right to approve or disapprove writing, just like the fireman in this scene seems to have the right to approve or disapprove the letter.

'I wouldn't trust no words written down on no piece of paper, especially from no Dickinson out in the town of Machine' is a crucial line of the opening dialogue, it is therefore important to take into account both aural and verbal, literal and figurative components of it. When the fireman utters the line, he changes the pace of his speech, speeds up the tempo, which is an indication of emotion and insistence. It is important for him to be understood, and he cares about what he says. The construction of negation using the word 'no' is generally regarded as having a stronger effect than a simple negation. A double negation ('wouldn't' and 'no') used in this particular case as well as the repetition of 'no' three times, along with the rhythm it creates, reinforces the idea suggested by the fireman and speaks volumes about his personal position with regard to writing. Furthermore, the sentence is grammatically incorrect ('wouldn't trust no' instead of 'would trust no') which is characteristic of colloquial English more appropriate to spoken language rather than writing. Such little components help the viewer learn more about the character (his social status, his preference to the spoken word) and about one of the themes of the film (speech and writing).

The line also illustrates a problematic relationship, the supposed incompatibility between truth and writing. From the point of view of this illiterate fireman, who is the representative of the spoken word, writing is indeed derivative – thus representative – and therefore an untrustworthy medium. Since there is no one to assure the letter's meaning, it is ambiguous, plural – the text might mean many things, or, as the fireman implicitly suggests, nothing at all. The job offer might appear as true, but it might as well be not true. Just as it is inherent to metaphysical thinking, speech for him is higher in the hierarchical system and is the primary medium for obtaining knowledge, consecrating social agreements and attesting to their validity. Writing without the author's presence is unauthorised and illegitimate. The

absence of the author, of a controlling voice confirming a social consensus, makes it just 'dead letters' or 'dead repetition' (Derrida 1981a, 135).

Just as writing in the texts of the authors who Derrida criticised, the letter in the film leads to miscommunication. It is a perfect example of why the written word is characterised by distance, divergence and delay. When William Blake shows the letter to the administrator of the factory, he is told that 'This letter is postmarked two months ago. Makes you about a month late'. The protagonist learns that the position is no longer available, but he feels that there must have been a misunderstanding ('I'm sorry. I think there's been some mistake') and therefore insists on talking to Mr. Dickinson. However, he is too late: their personal contact does not help to clarify the situation. The owner of the factory tells William Blake – while pointing a gun at him – that 'The only job you're gonna get in here is pushin' up daisies from a pine box' and adds 'Now get out'. The communication, in other words, becomes impossible; misunderstanding caused by the delay – unsolvable. As in the fireman's vision, not only was the letter untrustworthy, it also led to misunderstanding and misfortune. Just like in metaphysical texts, writing as a means of communication in *Dead Man* connotes mischief. It is represented as a maleficent technique that causes harm; as *pharmakon*, the written word becomes not medicine, but poison.

Interestingly, writing in the opening scene is interrelated with the theme of death. William Blake expects that the way to the West will lead him to his new life, but during the film, we find out that this way leads to his own death. At the end of the scene, the fireman even

prophesies future events by saying the words 'You're just as likely to find your own grave', which echoes Derrida's observation that 'Writing's case is grave' (Derrida 1981a, 103). It is important to stress that along with the word 'grave' we hear the gunshot, suggesting the way William Blake will meet his death. The fireman thus warns William Blake that he might not escape his destiny – to become a dead man.

William Blake as Writing – Old and New

The very fact that William Blake is leaving Cleveland suggests an urgent necessity for an inner change. As Tomkins notices, in a Western, 'The desire to change place … signals a powerful need for self-transformation' (Tomkins 1992, 4). One possible interpretation of the metaphor of death in the film is that the transformation of William Blake is spiritual – it is 'an experience of spiritual awakening' (Rice 2012, 39). My reading does not contradict this interpretation, but rather complements it. I claim that becoming a dead man for Blake means becoming the written word which was associated with body and exteriority. However, the poetic and spiritual journey of William Blake suggests that he has attained attributes assigned to speech which was associated with the inner voice and the spirit. Thus, in my understanding, Blake experiences the transformation from writing in the narrow sense, as represented in metaphysical texts, to writing as a structural condition of speech, as suggested by Derrida.

William Blake, the protagonist of the movie, possesses all the 'negative' characteristics assigned to writing. The

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written word that in metaphysical literature was related to seduction and desire also allures and invites an experience of bodily pleasures. It could be argued that it is Thel who invites William Blake to her home and bed, but one cannot deny the fact that the two strangers do indulge in passion. This love affair, as we know from the plot, leads to the tragic consequences – their love bed becomes a crime scene. Thus, the representative of writing here is associated with death, too.

Realising that he will be accused of murder, William Blake decides to leave immediately. While escaping through the window, he brushes up against a basket of paper flowers and falls down with all the paper flowers falling on his body. Thomas argues that paper flowers is a reference to William Blake's *The Book of Thel*, in which 'flowers figure prominently, especially the Lily of the Valley, a character who tries to comfort Thel, distressed over the issue of why all things must die' (Thomas 2012, n.p.). These paper flowers are not alive, they are dead flowers. Furthermore, they are white flowers, which are typically brought to funerals as a symbol of purity and innocence. Thus, even more than dead flowers, they are the flowers of death. Juan-Eduardo Cirlot indicates that a flower is an image of the 'centre' and therefore, it can be interpreted as the image of soul (Cirlot 1992, 4). Flowers therefore are the companions to death. The Greeks and Romans, for example, 'would strew flowers over the corpses as they bore them to the funeral pyre and over their graves' (Cirlot 2013, n.p.).

We can see William Blake lying there, on the ground in a virtual grave of paper flowers. In the scene, the viewer's eye is trained on the protagonist's body. For a moment, it becomes fixed as if it were dead. Just next to it, we see a puddle, reminiscent of a hole dug in for the corpse. As in the fireman's prophetic vision, in the town of Machine, William Blake finds his own grave. Suddenly, a star falls, which is also a symbol of somebody's dying. It is William Blake who begins his journey to the world of the dead. After a second, however, we see the 'grave' empty. The protagonist steals a white horse and exiles himself into the wild. Just like writing in metaphysical literature, he turns into 'an outlaw, … a vagrant, an adventurer, a bum' (Derrida 1981a, 148). He will be accused of killing not only Charlie but also Thel, which he has not done, thus becoming both *pharmakon* and *pharmakos*.

Derrida speculated that the problem of body and soul is to be derived from the problem of writing, and that is exactly what is suggested in *Dead Man*. Suffering from a gunshot wound, William Blake starts wandering in the woods as a misplaced soul and enters the realm of the living dead. At this point, he becomes the cinematic representation of the undecidable, as he cannot be decided in terms of life and death: he is dead, yet alive, alive, yet dead. Slowly turning into a dead man and entering into a spiritual world marks the beginning of a symbolic metamorphosis of becoming writing: '*Graphos* enters the stage only after *logos* has left the body' (Chang 1996, 193).

Just as in the texts Derrida analysed, the written word in the film is associated with the state of being not fully conscious or unconscious. William Blake falls asleep and/or loses his consciousness, which remains a recurring motif in the rest of the movie: we constantly see him passing out and

returning to consciousness again. The moments when he becomes unconscious make him comparable to writing because of the lack of responsiveness and awareness of the self and one's identity.

Luckily, William Blake wakes up in the hands of Nobody who is aware of his 'former' identity (the one from his past life): 'You were a poet and a painter. And now, you are a killer of white men'. William Blake, the figure of writing, here is allied with violence. Killing is ascribed to him by Nobody as the mission of his incarnation and as a new form of his writing. In other words, to kill is to write, to leave a mark – just not that of ink, but blood. Nobody instructs him: 'That weapon … will replace your *tongue*; you will learn to *speak* through it, and your poetry will be *written* with blood'. Interestingly, William Blake is obliged to represent *both* the spoken and the written word through a weapon. At first, the protagonist does not understand Nobody's references or his given assignment but in due course recognises his poetic alter ego and justifies his newly given name.

Just as in the metaphysical literature, where writing is associated with 'killing' the self-present living voice, writing here means the inscription of death. After Blake is forced to defend himself by killing, he takes up the role of ex-poet and killer of white men, a Native American with the symbolic marks on his face. That is explicitly expressed in the scene at the shop where Nobody and Blake look for tobacco. The owner of the shop recognises that William Blake is the man in the Wanted poster. After the shopkeeper asks – in a voice full of insidiousness – for his autograph, William Blake stabs a pen in the man's

hand and responds: 'There's my autograph'. The act of writing – and signing – in the scene is presented as an act of violence and the written sign as a sign of brutality and barbarism.

The scene with the signature brings in the issues related to writing: those of authorship (the absence of the author). According to Derrida, signatures are always divided; the author and authority is always to be called into doubt. As Chang explains, 'The original act of signing is a deferring act; it defers itself until later' (Chang 1996, 213). It is important to note that this act is both constative and performative in a sense that it 'is claiming to be at once the act of both stating who one is and making oneself into what one is' (ibid.). As discussed in the theoretical part of this article, speech in metaphysical literature was associated with identity, whereas writing was related to non-identity. In the movie, we see William Blake gradually losing the sense of who he was and transforming himself into somebody else. By stabbing the pen in this particular scene, William Blake declares who he is and simultaneously becomes an Indian and the killer of white man. In my view, he also becomes the figure of writing.

William Blake is often interpreted – even by Jarmusch himself – as 'a blank piece of paper that everyone wants to write all over' (Jarmusch quoted in Rosenbaum 2000, 68). Others project onto him whatever they want, and William Blake transforms his identity accordingly. As Rosenbaum observes, 'in this respect, Blake might be regarded throughout the film as a kind of mystic writing pad bearing the traces of other signatures' (Rosenbaum 2000, 68). However, bearing the traces of other signatures, ascribing himself qualities imposed on him by

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others and the identities given to him by others, William Blake kept all the features of writing and started transforming into writing in the sense of bearing traces of the spoken word, which manifests in his relation to the poetry by William Blake.

Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, the translators of Plato's *Phaedrus* (1995, 81), note that, in Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, 'Socrates argues that poetry cannot explain itself in the absence of its author, though he does not explicitly connect that with writing'. It could be argued that, in Plato's and Socrates' view, poetry shares the same characteristics as writing. However, poetry is also intrinsically connected to the oral tradition. With its origins in the (re)telling of oral epics and constant comparisons to music, poetry has a clear connection to the voice and the spoken word. It is definitely a form of literature that unites both speech and writing, supporting the argument regarding their inseparability.

Blake's work is not under the scope of this article. However, I cannot but say a few words about the intertextuality that can be traced in the work of William Blake and Jarmusch's film *Dead Man*. William Blake, the poet, as an embodiment of writing, indicates once again, in Derridean fashion, the trace of writing within speech. He thought of poetry as something connected to voice. His *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, for example, start with a child's request for the shepherd (the poet) to play a song about a Lamb, to sing it, and to write it down. However, in his works he did not allow the spoken word to be superior in any way to the written word. The poet, who was also a painter, illustrator of his written word, wanted his poetry to be read and to be seen; in other words, to be graphic and

visible.

William Blake the poet paid special attention to writing – in all possible senses of the word. It was important to him as a skill (it is presented in his work as 'a divine gift' (Douglas 2012, 36)), a process and a result. No wonder the subject pervaded his own *oeuvre*. John B. Pierce in his book *The Wond'rous Art: William Blake and Writing* reflects on that and explores writing 'as a thematic, formal, and theoretical construct' (Pierce 2003, n.p.). William John Thomas Mitchell argues that William Blake's works distinguishes themselves by the feature of graphocentrism – 'a tendency to treat writing and printings as media capable of full *presence*, not as a mere supplements of speech' (Mitchell 1994, 117, my emphasis). This position was very unusual between the other romantic poets such as, for example, William Wordsworth who believed that 'a poet is a man of speaking (not writing)' (ibid.).

Knowing how significant for William Blake the poet was the graphic representation of his poetry and writing, who he believed having the same qualities as speech, helps to shape the meaning of William Blake the character in Jarmusch's film. In this light, it becomes easier to recognise William Blake the character as the cinematic inscription of writing – at first in a narrow, but later also in Derridean sense. William Blake the character knew nothing about William Blake the poet. But the closer he was to death, the deeper he stepped into the spiritual world, the more aware he was of 'his' identity as a poet. In the second half of the film, for instance, when one of the marshals points a gun at him and asks, 'You William Blake?', he says, 'Yes, I am. Do you know my poetry?'. Thus, the

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confrontation with death crystallised his relationship with the written word as opposed to the spoken word, as poetry is intrinsically related to speech. So did various spiritual practices.

It would be possible to speculate that the discovery as well as the practical exploration of the spiritual world is also a sign of turning from the representative of writing in a narrow sense to a representative of writing in a broader sense. The rigours that William Blake had to withstand in the town of Machine and later in the woods steeled his inner strength and brought him closer to the spiritual world. Rice quotes Johnny Depp who remarks on his character's spiritual growth: 'The transition this man undergoes is a strange one because with each step his foot lands in another pile of crap but at the same time he's experiencing a kind of spiritual ascension' (Rice 2012, 78). A more attentive viewer can even notice the signs of Nobody's influence on his appearance, the signs of 'Indianized spirituality' in it, such as longer hair or 'the strand hanging down over the lightning streaks on the right side of his face [looking] like a braid' (Rice 2012, 81). Nobody introduces him to various rituals and ritualistic and/or healing 'accessories': William Blake carries the medicine bag, cedar boughs are put in his canoe at the end of the movie which serve as 'mediators' with the spiritual world. Thus, the character embodied not only the attributes that are characteristic of writing (exteriority, physicality), but also those characteristic of speech (inferiority, spirituality). The latter are progressively given to William Blake by Nobody or developed because of his overwhelming influence on the protagonist.

If one sees William Blake the character

(with reference to William Blake the poet) as the representative of writing, paper flowers made out of blank pieces of paper that Thel used to sell in the town of Machine take on a new meaning. Since paper is a material usually used chiefly for writing, printing and drawing (the activities of overriding importance for William Blake the poet) Thel brings Blake closer to his very nature and his 'former' identity. Their mutual affection and growing intimacy during the night becomes symbolic. The falling of paper flowers on the ground can be also seen as sowing, spreading seeds, with reference to linguistic 'seme' and the Derridean view of communication as dissemination. Writing in the Derridean sense or '*Écriture* unveils a wild economy of infinite semiosis, an undercurrent of semiotic "dissemination" previously unseen because logocentrically repressed' (Chang 1988, 564). It is this dissemination that 'renders meaning ultimately "undecidable"' (ibid.) and opens the text for multiple readings.

The closing scene of the film is the cinematic iteration of the fireman's words in the train when the fireman asked William Blake: 'And doesn't this remind you of when you were in the boat?' This scene, as we find out later, is a recollection of the future, of the memory of William Blake's death. It suggests that, in the opening scene, when these words were pronounced by the fireman, William Blake was already 'touched by death' (Suárez 2007, 112). He was on the way to his own death, or was already half-dead. He was still alive, but at the same time, he was a dead man. He was a man of presence, but simultaneously, a man of non-presence. In his presence, there was already a trace of absence. In his life, there was already the mark of death. He

experienced a transformation into the representative of writing, but from the very beginning there already was speech in him – encoded in his name.

Conclusion

In the opening scene of *Dead Man*, we were introduced to one of the main themes in the film – the opposition between the spoken and the written word. For the rest of the movie, the focus was on the latter. In my analysis, I demonstrated that some of the attributes that through the long history of Western metaphysics have been assigned to writing (untrustworthiness, appearance, misunderstanding) were transposed to the letter William Blake received, and some of them (exteriority, bodiliness, unconsciousness/non-identity, passion, violence, absence and death) were transposed to William Blake himself.

During the course of the film, William Blake the character, with help of Nobody, experienced a spiritual journey and the transformation from William Blake the accountant to the 'reincarnation' of William Blake the poet. On the one hand, Jarmusch maintained the association between writing and all the 'negative' qualities that have been ascribed to it. On the other hand, he showed that writing might as well be associated with supposedly oppositional qualities to writing that are usually ascribed to speech because, just as Derrida argued, they are *always already* in writing. Thus, it can be said that William Blake who was the embodiment of the written word experienced a transformation from writing in a narrow sense to writing in a broader sense.

The idea that *Dead Man* appears to be a thorough-going critique of logocentrism and binarised thinking should be supported by my reading. The film, in my view, clearly deconstructs the violent opposition between speech and writing and overthrows the hierarchy. Jarmusch makes all the deconstructive moves: demonstrates the binary opposition (speech/writing) in the beginning of the film, shows the 'negative' connotations and the inferior position given to one of the binary members (writing) and how one is in another (speech is in writing). He thus weakens still-vital logocentric tendencies in the medium of film. What is more, he not only deconstructs the narrative of the West, but also an entrenched tendency in the Western thought. It remains a question, however, whether this was actually intended by Jarmusch, the author of the text, or if it is just my interpretation of it.

A lot of Jarmusch's interviews suggest that the director is not one to pat himself on the back as the reigning textual Author(ity) with respect to his films. He does not even feel the only one deserving all the credits for creating his films. Film, 'is both the result of the collaboration of a number of persons' (Mangion 2011, 143), and, as Ludvig Hertzberg, who compiled a book of interviews with Jarmusch, rightly notices, Jarmusch 'never fails to stress the important role played by the cast and crew in 'shaping and *co-creating*' the films he directs' (Hertzberg 2001, viii, my emphasis). Furthermore, the director seems to be against a closed economy of readings as 'he regards other people's different interpretations of them to be at least as valuable as his own' (ibid). In a 1996 *Los Angeles Times* interview after *Dead Man's* release, Jarmusch called the movie 'the story of a man forced to

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surrender to his own destiny', but added that other interpretations might be equally acceptable (Jarmusch, quoted in Rice 2012, 39).

In already-cited 'Plato's Pharmacy', Derrida reflects on the question of interpretation and argues that a reader reading the text should not only look for the author's intention, but also find a 'new thread' in the text:

> There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the 'object', without risking – which is the only chance of entering into the game, by getting a few fingers caught – the addition of some new thread (Derrida 1981a, 63).

This new thread might be taken to mean embroidering, putting on a new layer of meaning *on the text* (ibid.). But what Derrida means by a new thread is the hidden thread that is *always already* there *in the text*. In other words, Derrida does not think that a reader is allowed to read the text however one wishes; simply imposing a random meaning on the text should not be regarded as a good practice of reading. However, cutting the tissue of a text with sharp methodological tools while seeking 'objectivity' and searching for the author's intentions would not be a good practice either. For Derrida, this would not even count as reading (Derrida 1981, 64). He therefore encourages us following the author's thread but finding a new or the hidden one, too.

Have we noticed the hidden thread in *Dead Man*? Can we read this modern tale (Ahmadi and Ross 2012) as a tale about the written word and interpret William Blake as the representative of writing? Since the author is absent, we cannot know his aims, motives, and intentions. And there is also the related question – and still unanswered one – of whether or not we should trust the authors of words written down on a piece of paper. Perhaps, I would like to suggest, just as writer and poet D.H. Lawrence once suggested, instead of trusting the teller, we should finally start trusting the tale.

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Filmography

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