

Anglistentag 2006 Halle


Proceedings

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Contents

<i>Sabine Volk-Birke and Julia Lippert (Halle-Wittenberg)</i>	
Preface	XI
 Section I: The Long Eighteenth Century	
<i>Therese Fischer-Seidel (Düsseldorf)</i>	
The Long Eighteenth Century: Introduction	3
<i>Howard D. Weinbrot (Wisconsin, Madison)</i>	
"Root Out This Cursed Race": Defoe's <i>Shortest Way With the Dissenters</i> and his Longer Way With Himself	7
<i>Burkhard Niederhoff (Bochum)</i>	
From Honest, Downright Barbarity to the Art of Being Natural: Primitivism in Restoration Comedy	25
<i>Sabine Baltes (Chemnitz)</i>	
'Creators of Mirth and Whim': Popular Irish Dramatists on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage	35
<i>Laurenz Volkmann (Jena)</i>	
Back with a Vengeance: The Return of Bernard Mandeville	45
<i>Christian Huck (London)</i>	
Calico Bill and the Calico Madams: Fashion, Print, and the Public	53
<i>Ingrid-Charlotte Wolter (Düsseldorf)</i>	
Education to Individuality – Individual Educationalists: Mary Wollstonecraft and Christian Gotthilf Salzmann	65
<i>Michael Szczekalla (Greifswald)</i>	
Pleading for the Autonomy of Ethics – A Fresh Look at Free-thinking in the Essays and Dialogues of Shaftesbury and Hume	75
 Section II: Creative Writing	
<i>Ian Watson (Bremen) and Frank J. Kearful (Bonn)</i>	
Creative Writing: Past, Present, Future	87
<i>Andrew Motion (London)</i>	
Where Do all the Creative Writing Graduates Go?	95

<i>Rob Pope (Oxford)</i>	
Critical Reading into Creative Re-writing: Textual Intervention in English Studies Now	101
<i>Glenn Patterson (Belfast)</i>	
Can Writers Teach Writing?	111
<i>Susanne Bach (Kassel)</i>	
"Punk-Tuition" for "Harry Krishner" – Creative Writing in Literature	119
<i>Barbara Glindemann (Hamburg)</i>	
Self-Directed and Imaginative Learning in School Projects: A Constructivist Didactics of Creative Writing	129
Section III: Politics and Literature	
<i>Jana Gohrisch (Hanover) and Merle Tönnies (Paderborn)</i>	
Introduction	143
<i>Andrew James Johnston (Berlin)</i>	
Literary Politics in Debate: Chaucer's <i>Parliament of Fowls</i> and Clanvowe's <i>Book of Cupid</i>	147
<i>Annette Pankratz (Bochum)</i>	
Body Power: Sexual Politics in Late 17 th Century Poetry	159
<i>Dirk Wiemann (Tübingen)</i>	
Bodies in Collision: Hobbes, Milton and the Body Politic	171
<i>Susanne Scholz (Frankfurt)</i>	
The Politics of Degeneration in Late Victorian Literature	181
<i>Jens Martin Gurr (Duisburg-Essen)</i>	
The 'Native' Cites Back: Postcolonial Theory and the Politics of Jim Jarmusch's <i>Western Dead Man</i>	191
<i>Aleks Sierz (London)</i>	
"Political What-Do-Ya-Call-It": British Drama and Its Politics	203
Section IV: Postcolonial Aesthetics	
<i>Elleke Boehmer (London)</i>	
A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Aspiration or Anxiety?	217
<i>Tobias Döring and Cordula Lemke (Munich)</i>	
The Postcolonial Sublime: Ossian's Scotland	227

<i>Monika Fludernik (Freiburg)</i>	
Is There a Postcolonial Sublime?	237
<i>Günter Leypoldt and Lars Eckstein (Tübingen)</i>	
T.S. Eliot and the Transcultural Sublime	249
<i>Virginia Richter (Munich)</i>	
The Nowhere Man: Strangeness as Aesthetic Means in the Work of V.S. Naipaul	259
<i>Susanne Reichl (Vienna)</i>	
Reading Aesthetics as Politics in Postcolonial Literatures	267
<i>Sissy Helff (Frankfurt)</i>	
Signs Taken For Truth: Orchestrating Transcultural Aesthetics through Transcultural Unreliable Narration	277
<i>Sigrun Meinig (Dresden)</i>	
Connecting Difference and Sameness: Empathy, Equality and Post-Colonial Literatures	289
Section V: Standards and Norms	
<i>Friederike Klippel (Munich) and Joybrato Mukherjee (Giessen)</i>	
Standards and Norms in Language Description and Language Teaching: An Introduction	303
<i>Barbara Seidlhofer (Vienna)</i>	
English as a Lingua Franca and Communities of Practice	307
<i>Claus Gnutzmann (Brunswick)</i>	
Teaching and Learning English in a Global Context: Applied-Linguistic and Pedagogical Perspectives	319
<i>Christiane Meierkord (Münster)</i>	
Standards and Norms in Interactions Across Second Language Englishes: The Case of South Africa	331
<i>Christian Mair (Freiburg) and Sandra Mollin (Heidelberg)</i>	
Getting at the Standards Behind the Standard Ideology: What Corpora Can Tell Us About Linguistic Norms	341
<i>Ute Römer (Hanover)</i>	
Learner Language and the Norms in Native Corpora and EFL Teaching Materials: A Case Study of English Conditionals	355

<i>Joybrato Mukherjee (Giessen)</i> Exploring and Annotating a Spoken English Learner Corpus: A Work-in-Progress Report	365
<i>Matthias Hutz (Freiburg)</i> Standards and Norms in Academic Writing: A Cross-linguistic Comparison	377
<i>Christiane Bongartz (Cologne)</i> Studying Classroom Language: Curricular Planning and Proficiency Assessment in Young Foreign Language Learners	387
Section VI: Varia	
<i>Anne Schröder (Halle)</i> Theoretical and Empirical Approaches to Productivity: Evidence from English Verbal Morphology	399
<i>Susanne Mühleisen (Bayreuth)</i> Of Lessees, Retirees and Besechees: a Corpus-based Analysis of the Productivity of a Heterogeneous Word-formation Pattern in English	413
<i>Dagmar Barth-Weingarten (Potsdam)</i> Prosody, Construction Grammar and Language Change	423
<i>Marco Schilk (Giessen)</i> Using WWW-derived Corpora in Research into Second-language Varieties of English: Focus on Verb Complementation in Indian English	435
<i>Patricia Plummer (Mainz)</i> Insatiable Desires: (Sub)Versions of Gender in William Beckford's <i>Vathek</i> and Frances Sheridan's <i>The History of Nourjahad</i>	445
<i>Christian Schmitt-Kilb (Rostock)</i> Longing for Origins in Postmodern Times: Absent Parents in Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>When We Were Orphans</i> (2000) and <i>Never Let Me Go</i> (2005)	457
<i>Dietmar Böhnke (Leipzig)</i> Brave New Scotland? National Identity and Contemporary Scottish Fiction	467
Notes on Contributors	477

Preface

The Anglistentag 2006 assembled more than two hundred participants in Halle an der Saale from 17-20 September. It had been ten years since the annual conference of the Anglistenverband last took place in one of the new *Länder*, and for the first time it was held in Sachsen-Anhalt. The Martin-Luther-University and the city of Halle, celebrating its 1200 year Jubilee, proved to be an ideal location, not least because of their long established Anglo-German relations. The most prominent representatives of this cultural exchange are Georg Friedrich Händel, about whose integration into and influence on British music there can be no doubt, and the scientist Johann Reinhold Forster, who accompanied James Cook, together with his son Georg, on his second voyage round the world in 1772. The *Dictionary of National Biography* claims that "Forster should be regarded as a key figure in the reception of English culture and sensibility in eighteenth-century Germany, especially through the English influence on his prose style and approach to scientific writing". Not only can our university library boast of holding the official log of his famous voyage, we are also proud to be able to name Forster as one of our professors of natural science, working here in Halle from 1780 till his death in 1798.

The opening ceremony on Monday morning took place in the magnificent historic *Aula* of the university. The delegates were welcomed by the *Rektor*, Prof. Dr. Wulf Diepenbrock, by *Staatssekretär* Dr. Valentin Gramlich (who represented the Secretary of Cultural Affairs in Sachsen-Anhalt, Prof. Dr. Jan-Hendrik Olbertz), by the Mayor of the city of Halle, Frau Dagmar Szabados, by Dr. Elke Ritt (for the British Council Germany), and by the local organizer, Prof. Dr. Sabine Volk-Birke; then the president of the Anglistenverband, Prof. Dr. Silvia Mergenthal, formally opened the conference. This year's *Journalistenpreis* for outstanding cross-cultural work, reporting on English life and letters in German, was awarded to Dr. John F. Jungclaussen, the correspondent for Great Britain of DIE ZEIT; PD Dr. Barbara Schaff gave the *laudatio*.

The traditional panel discussion, the *Forum*, this year devoted to "Chances and Problems of Interdisciplinarity", was organized and introduced by Prof. Dr. Rainer Enskat (Philosophy), the current *Geschäftsführende Direktor* of the Interdisciplinary Centre for European Enlightenment Studies (IZEA), thus taking up what was an important period in the history of the university and what is a special focus of interdisciplinary research at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg at present. The participants on the panel with their wide experience in different fields were particularly well suited to elucidate many of the relevant scholarly, didactic, political and financial aspects of the topic: Prof. Dr. Aleida Assmann (Konstanz), Prof. Dr. Reinhard Brandt (Marburg), Prof. Dr. Jürgen Schlaeger (Großbritannienzentrum, Berlin) und PD Dr. Dirk Vanderbeke (Greifswald). The audience responded with a lively discussion to the presentation of very different points of view, which ranged from sceptical assessments of the general call for interdisciplinarity, warning of the possible disregard or loss of the special methodology adapted to individual disciplines, to enthusiastic praise of the chances of

JENS MARTIN GURR (DUISBURG-ESSEN)

The 'Native' Cites Back: Postcolonial Theory and the Politics of Jim Jarmusch's *Western Dead Man*

I watched the movies and saw the kind of Indian I was supposed to be.
A cinematic Indian is supposed to climb mountains. I am afraid of heights.
A cinematic Indian is supposed to wade into streams and sing songs.
I don't know how to swim.
A cinematic Indian is supposed to be a warrior. I haven't been in a fistfight
since sixth grade and she beat the crap out of me.
I mean, I knew I could never be as brave, as strong, as wise or as visionary,
as white as the Indians in the movies.

(Sherman Alexie, 1998)

[Capitalism and the counter-culture] coexist somehow. And the counter-culture is
always repackaged and made into a product, y'know? It's part of America. If you
have a counter-culture and you put a name on it, you call them beatniks and you
can sell something – books or bebop. Or you label them as hippies and you can
sell tie-dyed T-shirts.

(Jarmusch in interview, quoted in Rosenbaum 2000, 51)

1. The Western, the 'American Ideology', and a US Film as a Post-Colonial Text

Jim Kitses's claim that "first of all, the Western *is* American history" (1969, 57) and J. Hoberman's observation that it was "typically the vehicle America used to explain itself to itself" (1991, 85) could hardly be made about any other genre of film.¹ If, therefore, one wants a drastic, a fundamental, a sweeping critique of the very concept of 'America', the Western is the natural genre in which to formulate such a critique. But since the Western as a genre encodes precisely that ideology, the Western itself must be inverted, deconstructed, turned against itself in order to deploy it for such a critique. This, I will argue, is what Jim Jarmusch's 1995 film *Dead Man*² does – and the subversion it performs by reading the Western against itself is largely effected by means of a number of strategies that have come to be regarded as specifically post-colonial.³

¹ For this function of the Western and Jarmusch's engagement with the tradition in *Dead Man* cf. also Nieland (2001). Doug Williams (1998, 93) argues that "the Western is the American Epic"; Hoberman concludes his essay by calling the Western "a genre that once epitomized America to itself and to the world" (Hoberman 1991, 92), while Kitses writes that "the Western's myth has provided a national myth and global icon, a cornerstone of American identity" (Kitses 1998, 16). Innumerable further statements to that effect are readily available.

² A brief plot summary is to be found in the appendix to this essay. All quotations are transcribed from the film.

³ Despite the multiplicity of studies on the film now available, virtually no attention has yet been devoted to it as using post-colonial strategies. Hints at a post-colonial reading only occur in

Dead Man, which Greil Marcus has called "the best movie of the end of the 20th century" (Marcus 1999),⁴ is clearly a film in the tradition that has variously been called the post-, anti-, revisionist, or deconstructive Western, a tradition that has long dissolved the mythology of the frontier.⁵ But although many of the conventions *Dead Man* parodies and subverts are no longer current in most Westerns, Jarmusch is not flogging a dead horse. For the point of his attack is not the Western as a genre but the ideology encoded in the Western – and that ideology is far from dead. The 'classic' Western still looms large as a cultural icon, and its powerful impact on the collective unconscious has not been obliterated by the tradition of the anti-Western. While a number of subversive strategies have previously been used in deconstructive or anti-Westerns, Jarmusch's film is arguably more radical than any Western before in using the genre fundamentally to undermine its encoded American ideology as propounded all the way from John Winthrop to John Wayne.⁶

In this essay, I propose a reading of the film in the light of Sacvan Bercovitch's notion of the 'American Ideology'. His definition of ideology is largely a pragmatic one: "ideology is the system of interlinked ideas, symbols, and beliefs by which a culture [...] seeks to justify and perpetuate itself; the web of rhetoric, ritual, and assumption through which society coerces, persuades, and coheres" (Bercovitch 1986a, 635). The ideological construct 'America', he goes on to argue, seeks "to absorb the spirit of protest for social ends" (ibid., 645). It thus manages to transform even radical dissent into a form of consensus. This pre-emption of oppositional voices works "by *drawing out* protest, *encouraging* the contrast between utopia and the status quo". Bercovitch thus explains "the enormous conservative, restraining power in the alliance between utopia and ideology" (1986b, 433; italics original). In a formulation in some way reminiscent of the post-colonial concept of mimicry, he then argues that "culture dominates not by coercion but by consent [...] [I]ts power, therefore, depends on myths and values to which all levels of society subscribe, *especially the excluded and repressed* (because to subscribe thus is the promised way to acceptance and power)"

Cummings (2001, 68), Nieland (2001, 183-184). Cf. also Lüdeke's excellent essay (2007), which I only came across when this essay was largely completed. None of these, however, go into any detail concerning the use of specific strategies.

4 For other enthusiastic voices cf. Cumutte, who calls it "the most original, effective and moving film of the 1990s" (2002, n.p.) or Kiefer, who speaks of "one of the most impressive filmic allegories of postmodernism – the endgame of a genre as the endgame of modern culture" (1998, 450; my translation).

5 Rosenbaum (1996b), Hoberman (1991), Rickman (1998) and others have sufficiently explored such antecedents so that no more commentary is necessary here. I have discussed Jarmusch's engagement with the Western tradition in Gurr (forthc.).

6 Frequent anachronisms and the ubiquitous suggestions of topical referentiality indicate that the film's critique is not confined to a specific point in time and that Jarmusch's portrayal of a dog-eat-dog capitalist America "can be read without much difficulty as contemporary" (Rosenbaum 1996a, 20). The most drastic of such anachronisms disturbing the illusion of witnessing events in 1870s America occurs when the perverse and cannibalistic bounty hunter is asked by his companion whether he is German, "or maybe Austrian?". In a related vein, of course, Sam Peckinpah already commented that "The Western is a universal frame within which it's possible to comment on today". Jarmusch quotes this in Rosenbaum (1996a, 23).

(ibid., 434; italics original). The American Ideology of liberal pluralism thus functions as an ideological blinder, as a mechanism to absorb and utilize dissent in order to reinforce the hegemonic American political and cultural system presumably under attack. In the post-colonial context, one might also speak of the 'absorptive capacity' of hegemonic discourses.

Synthesising Bercovitch, Kitses and Hoberman, one might claim that the Western as a genre encodes the American ideology inherent in the culture's controlling metaphor 'America'. In a word, *Dead Man* is a radically subversive 'post-colonial Western', and the film makes use of such a multiplicity of post-colonial concepts that if one seeks a text by means of which to illustrate key post-colonial theoretical notions, *Dead Man* may well be a perfect example. It virtually appears as a repository of such strategies and concepts, and in my discussion of it, I will draw eclectically on a variety of post-colonial theoretical concepts and approaches to illustrate Jarmusch's subversion of the genre.

Given the debate whether the US should be seen as a post-colonial culture, one might ask why I read a Western by a US filmmaker as a 'post-colonial' text. However, the key themes of the film – the appropriation of vast territories by displacing and systematically slaughtering the indigenous population, the complexities in the relationship between individual whites and members of the colonized ethnic group – clearly allow us to read the film as treating the experience of colonization. Finally, although the understanding of the term 'post-colonial' as propounded by Ashcroft et al. in 1989 has rightly come under attack for being indiscriminately broad and vague⁷, it still appears to be the term of choice if one is concerned with cultural responses to the experience and the aftermath of colonialism. I here agree with Ashcroft, who in his 2001 study of *Post-Colonial Transformations* provides an acute survey of terminological problems – and ultimately defends the use of the term (as his own title indicates): "rather than being disabling, this radical instability of meaning gives the term [post-colonial] a vibrancy, energy and plasticity which have become part of its strength" (Ashcroft 2001, 11).

2. A Post-Colonial Reading of *Dead Man*

In what follows, I propose to read *Dead Man* as a 'post-colonial Western' which on multiple levels uses the strategy of 'transformation', of 'writing back', of inverting and turning against themselves colonialist and stereotyping practices. I am aware of the problem that it is easy to overstate the political effectiveness of such post-colonial rewritings,⁸ and my conclusion may be seen as confirming such cautionary remarks.

7 For a short critique of a number of questionable notions in *The Empire Writes Back* cf. Kreutzer (1998). Characteristically, Kreutzer does continue to use the term. Without mentioning Ashcroft et al. (1989), Parry also incisively critiques a number of assumptions to be found there.

8 Morton (2003, 123) comments on Spivak's caution here: "Spivak's reading of Coetzee's *Foe* is important because it reveals how Spivak's critical thinking has increasingly sought to challenge the exaggerated political claims that are sometimes made on behalf of post-colonial texts", arguing that "Coetzee draws attention to the limitations of postcolonial representation as an

As an interventionist aesthetic strategy, however, the concept of 'transformative re-writing' seems to me to be unassailable. I use the 'transformation' in the sense of Bill Ashcroft's study of *Post-Colonial Transformation* (2001) as the encompassing term for the "ways in which colonized societies engaged and utilized imperial culture for their own purposes" (2001, 2);

[P]ost-colonial engagements with imperial power have been exceptionally wide-ranging. The one thing which characterizes all those engagements, the capacity shared by many forms of colonial experience, is a remarkable facility to use the modes of the dominant discourse against itself and transform it in ways that have been both profound and lasting. (Ashcroft 2001, 13)

In this vein, *Dead Man* functions as a transformative rewriting on multiple levels. In the sense that it is virtually a pastiche of literary and filmic references, frequently in subversive form, *Dead Man* is a rewriting of all these intertexts. As one out of many examples, one might cite the frequent allusions to *Heart of Darkness* as one of the set texts for post-colonial rewritings. Like *Heart of Darkness*, *Dead Man* represents a journey into the wilderness as a journey into the self and plays with the notion of a journey to a culture's limits of consciousness. The parallels, analogies and inversions in relation to Conrad's text alone would furnish material for an entire essay; let it suffice here to indicate that Nobody and Blake's canoe journey down the river towards the sea resonates with echoes and inversions of Marlow's journey up the Congo. The centrality of *Heart of Darkness* as a post-colonial intertext is too obvious to require further discussion. It may be worthwhile, however, to indicate that *Robinson Crusoe*, another set text for such "writing back" or "canonical counter-discourse" (Ashcroft 2001, 32) – *The Tempest* and Jane Austen novels being the obvious other examples – also features here. With Blake as a Westerner stranded in the Wilderness aided by a 'Native', with Nobody taking the role of Friday, *Dead Man* of course plays with a *Crusoe* constellation as well, but significantly inverts the ascription of cultural superiority. It will hardly be necessary to mention that, by parodically alluding to iconic scenes and constellations, Jarmusch's film similarly rewrites a number of individual key Westerns as intertexts.

Most interesting, however, is the film's countering of hegemonic, stereotyping, capitalist and colonialist discourses in the widest possible sense – discourses which all converge in the cultural construct of 'America'. In these subversions, the rewriting of the Western and its implicit ideology is but one strategy.

Another key device in this transformation is the inversion of traditionally assigned roles of the civilized and the uncivilized: the native American Nobody in many ways appears as the cultured and educated man, whose repeated phrase "stupid fucking white man"⁹ rings true when applied to the protagonist William Blake, the naïve and uneducated accountant lost in the West. Additionally, the role of the raw, universally

effective vehicle for political change". The reference is to Spivak's reading of *Foe* (Spivak 1991).

9 This phrase, by the way, in a clever form of self-citation, recurs in Jarmusch's next film, *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999). Here, Gary Farmer, the actor who played Nobody in *Dead Man*, has a small cameo part as 'Nobody' (only named as such in the film's credits), in which he repeats the line to a mafia killer.

destructive and literally cannibalistic barbarians is clearly allocated to a number of white characters. Again, this constitutes a direct inversion of long-lived cultural stereotypes: "To this day, cannibalism has remained the West's key representation of primitivism" (Ashcroft et al., s.v. 'cannibalism'). White cannibalism is disturbingly rendered in a long close-up of Cole Wilson (Lance Henriksen) casually gnawing on the cut-off arm of his partner he has just shot – with the wrist joint grotesquely flopping back and forth as Wilson attentively twists and turns the arm in his hands to get the last remaining bits of flesh from the bones.

A further very unobtrusive instance of such an inversion occurs among the group of bounty hunters: in one scene, the white killer Conway Twill asks his African American fellow Johnny 'The Kid' Pickett to read him the caption on a 'Wanted' poster. The film thus subtly inverts stereotypes of Whites as being superior to other ethnic groups in cognitive abilities. I would even venture the hypothesis that this might be seen as a veiled critical comment on Richard Herrnstein's and Charles Murray's highly controversial book *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, published in 1994. Arguing for a largely hereditary determination of cognitive abilities, the authors in one chapter claimed that Blacks as a group scored lower on intelligence tests than Whites and Asians. The debate about *The Bell Curve* was raging while *Dead Man* was being produced.

A final inversion of roles occurs with reference to the notion in "[m]uch post-colonial writing in recent times [that] the body is a crucial site for inscription" (Ashcroft et al. 2000, s.v., 'post-colonial body'). With both Blake and Nobody as "sites of cross-cultural inscription" (Niemand 2001, 185–187) in a metaphorical sense, the film illustrates contemporary theoretical notions of hybridity. As far as the 'inscribed body' in a literal sense is concerned, the key inversion lies in the fact that Blake rather than Nobody becomes the 'inscribed body'. Quite apart from the ritual face-painting Nobody leaves on Blake's face, Blake is a "blank page" on which everyone leaves a mark. This has frequently been remarked upon (cf. Niemand 2001, 185–186; Rosenbaum 2000, passim), but it has not been seen as a post-colonial motif. The inscribed body here is not that of the colonized but that of a representative of the colonizing ethnic group.

The film further privileges the marginalized in its emphasis on a non-folkloristic 'reconstruction' of indigenous culture and traditions. It clearly rejects simplistic 'tepee and feather bonnet' images of Native Americans and problematizes folkloristic renditions of Native Americans in Westerns. Several Native American film scholars have praised *Dead Man* for its 'authentic representation' of Native American culture (cf. Rosenbaum 2000, 23). Especially the reconstruction of a Makah village has been certified as 'authentic' – whatever that may mean. In a film otherwise so conscious of the constructedness of identity and so concerned with the dissolution of fixities, this is hardly to be understood as a naively essentialist ascription of identity. Rather, the film can here be seen as deploying a 'strategic essentialism' for a political purpose rather than an indefensible theoretically grounded essentialism, which is largely under attack

throughout the film. Benita Parry, Stuart Hall and occasionally also Spivak¹⁰ have defended the use of such a 'strategic essentialism' for political purposes in post-colonial contexts. In a similar way, the portrayal of most of the white characters in the film, who are cast in fairly clearly defined roles, is similarly to be understood as strategically motivated essentialism for political purposes.

Linguistic strategies of abrogation and appropriation as another key element of post-colonial transformation certainly also play a role in the film. The use of native American languages (without translation or subtitles) in several scenes of the film may be seen as gesturing towards Ngũgĩ's notion of *Decolonising the Mind* by discontinuing the use of English. Ngũgĩ for instance regards the use of native languages as "part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles" (1986, 28). But since English continues to be the dominant language of the film, these inserted passages more precisely function in the sense of the 'metonymic gap' in transformative post-colonial writing, as a form of distancing oneself from the colonizer's discourse by means of linguistic strategies. Ashcroft defines the metonymic gap as "that cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert unglossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references which may be unknown to the reader". These insertions are synecdochic of the colonized culture and – while the use of the colonizer's language generally continues – simultaneously "signal and emphasize a difference from it" (Ashcroft 2001, 75).

A further central transformative strategy in the film are Nobody's frequent references to and quotations from William Blake, which are entirely lost on Blake's ignorant namesake in the film. In the course of the film, Nobody cites six lines from "Auguries of Innocence" and two of the "Proverbs of Hell" from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Arguably the most striking Blake citation, however, occurs after a racist insult from the trading post missionary – "Now Lord Jesus Christ wash this earth with his holy light and purge its darkest places from heathens and philistines" –, upon which Nobody very appropriately cites two key lines from "The Everlasting Gospel": "The Vision of Christ that thou dost see / Is my Visions greatest Enemy" [sic] (Blake 1988, 142).¹¹ In Nobody's appropriation of him as a canonical figure in Anglophone literature, Blake thus literally becomes the spokesperson of a Native American. This can be read as a subversive 'Citing Back' of Blake texts – the fact that Blake himself is a marginal, subversive figure in the canon does not, I believe, invalidate this reading, but rather adds an additional ironic touch. Blake's role in British literary history as a subversive *Prophet Against Empire* – the title of Erdman's magisterial study is highly resonant in this context – is of course significant here.

Many of the post-colonial themes and strategies of the film converge in Nobody's narrative about his own past as he and Blake ride through the forest. Taking almost three minutes, this long speech is accompanied by several brief visual flashbacks

10 For a helpful recapitulation of the debate about nativism cf. Parry (2004, 37–54). Cf. also Hall (1987; 1988). For a convenient discussion of the concepts of 'nativism' and 'strategic essentialism' cf. Ashcroft et al. (2000), s.v. 'essentialism/strategic essentialism' and 'nativism'.

11 For the function of Blake references in *Dead Man* cf. also Levich (1996), Kegler (1997), Rickman (1998, 382–383 et passim), Cumutte (2002); cf. also Gurr (forthc.).

showing the young Nobody being caught by white soldiers, locked up in a cage, and finally reading a Blake book. This narrative will be discussed in detail here and must be quoted at some length. It begins with Nobody's reference to his own mixed origins, with parents from two different Native American nations:

My blood is mixed. [...] This mixture was not respected. As a small boy, I was often left to myself. [...] White men came upon me. They were English soldiers. I cut one with my knife. But they hit me on the head with a rifle. All went black. My spirit seemed to leave me. I was then taken east, in a cage. I was taken to Toronto, then Philadelphia, and then to New York. And each time I arrived in another city, somehow the white men had moved all their people there ahead of me. Each new city contained the same white people as the last. And I could not understand how a whole city of people could be moved so quickly.

Eventually, I was taken on a ship, across the great sea, over to England; and I was paraded before them, like a captured animal, an exhibit. And so I mimicked them, imitating their ways, hoping that they might lose interest in this young savage; but their interest only grew. So they placed me into the white men's schools. And it was there that I discovered in a book the words that you, William Blake, had written. They were powerful words, and they spoke to me.

But I made careful plans; and I eventually escaped. Once again, I crossed the great ocean. I saw many sad things as I made my way back to the lands of my people. Once they realized who I was, the stories of my adventures angered them. They called me a liar, Xebeche, 'He Who Talks Loud, Saying Nothing'. They ridiculed me, my own people. And I was left to wander the earth alone. I am Nobody.

While the story of his abduction, deportation and eventual escape appears to allude to the tradition of the slave narrative, the account of his confinement in a cage – visually rendered in a flashback of young Nobody in a cage – suggests "the prison, and the representation of imprisonment by the incarcerated, as the most extreme metonym of colonial occupation" (Ashcroft 2001, 168).¹²

The next strategy Nobody's speech invokes is once more the inversion of stereotypes. His remark that "Each new city contained the same white people as the last" inverts one of the oldest and most degrading imperialist stereotypes: the 'Other' – whether 'Oriental', 'Indian', or 'African' – as an indistinguishable, non-individualised part of a threatening and faceless mass. Here, this role is assigned to the whites.

Another key notion here is that of 'mimicry', which Homi K. Bhabha calls "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" and defines as follows: "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject [...] that is almost the same, but not quite" (1994, 85–86, italics original).¹³ This attempt at assimilation to the colonizing culture and the function of the educational system as one key 'ideological state apparatus' to enforce this assimilation is also present in Nobody's speech when he tells Blake about his time in England, where he was exhibited as a curious attraction: "And so I mimicked them, imitating their ways. [...] So they placed me into the white man's school."

12 This section of Ashcroft's book is entitled "The Prison House of Empire" (2001, 168–172).

13 This is in the essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1994, 85–92), first published in 1987.

But Bhabha defines mimicry not only as a cultural practice geared towards assimilation. Rather, it is a "form of colonial discourse [...] both against the rules and within them" (89). Bhabha speaks of "this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened" (86). In their inventory of *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin expand on this notion as follows:

[C]olonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to 'mimic' the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, [but] the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a 'blurred copy' of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. This is because mimicry is never far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. (Ashcroft et al. 2000, s.v. 'mimicry')

It almost seems as though *Dead Man* drastically literalizes this concept in two brief glimpses in which Nobody puts on Blake's top-hat and glasses respectively and mockingly apes him – and 'white' behaviour in general.

Finally, Nobody even represents concepts of cultural hybridity and third spaces:¹⁴ half Blood and half Blackfoot and thus an in-between figure from birth, Nobody was abducted as a child and raised and educated in England. He is portrayed as speaking four languages, "Blackfoot, Cree, Makah, and English" (Rosenbaum 1996a, 21), and sees himself as a deracinated nomad, "left to wander the earth alone".

The subaltern does speak: Nobody's account of his life is by far the most eloquent and the longest coherent speech of the entire film and can virtually be read as a *tour de force* through a number of key strategies of post-colonial transformation.

3. Conclusion: Colonizing the Post-Colonial?

Taken together, this arsenal of – frequently post-colonial – subversive strategies in *Dead Man* makes the film a "contrapuntal reading" of the *Western* tradition (ambiguity intended) in Said's sense (1993, 59), a reading which brings out the stereotypes and concepts virtually encoded in the genre itself and which thus radically undermines both the Western genre and the 'American Ideology' implicit in it. Jarmusch's rendering of the West, "one of the ugliest portrayals of white American capitalism to be found in American movies", is one in which "'[h]istory' and 'civilisation' [...] actually mean genocide, the Industrial Revolution and the concomitant destruction of nature, the spread of capitalism" (Rosenbaum 2000, 18, 54).¹⁵ But the politics of *Dead Man* are complicated by the inescapable problems in representing marginalized cultures from a 'Western' perspective. The implications of Jarmusch as a white American filmmaker speaking on behalf of Native Americans is of course highly relevant here. Two years before the release of *Dead Man*, in a 1993 article on "John Ford's Indians", Tag Gallagher wrote: "As Ford observes in *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), it is white words, white language, that have been our most potent weapon against Indians. Are we, the

14 For notions of 'Third Spaces', 'hybridity' and 'in-between spaces' cf. Bhabha (1994, 38 et passim).

15 In his short review of the film, Gino Moliterno also recognizes this radicalism: "the object of Jarmusch's critique seems to be nothing less than [sic] the very existence of America itself, to the extent that this existence has been clearly predicated on the wholesale destruction of the land and the cultures of native American peoples" (Moliterno 2001, 1).

descendants of their destroyers, now to presume to tell their stories in the language that destroyed them?" (1993, 274). Read in this light, Jarmusch's remark concluding his 1996 interview with Rosenbaum (1996a, 23) becomes highly interesting: "I'm going to take the film eventually to the Makah reservation to show them. And then Gary [Farmer] and I are going to make sure the videos are distributed to every reservation video store we can get them in. That's really important to us". This is no doubt sincere and well-intentioned, but one cannot help also finding it just a little complacent and blind to the implications of entanglement with a hegemonizing mainstream. This is where Jarmusch's role as a figure on the fringes of the mainstream comes into play: he is 'outside' artistically and largely also economically,¹⁶ but 'inside' in terms of cult factor and also to some extent economically, because *Dead Man* was distributed by none other than Miramax.¹⁷ This ambivalent role in American film-making nicely complicates the picture and adds further levels to the issue of representing the margins from the centre – or vice versa.

This is precisely the point to which Gugelberger already drew attention some ten years ago when he noted that "[t]he urge of postmodernism is to incorporate or coopt almost everything, including its oppositional other. Even the postcolonial paradigm is not free of such absorption, so that one can already speak of the postmodern colonization of the postcolonial" (Gugelberger 1994, 583). This may well be what has happened here, though I am far from claiming that Jarmusch's film merely modishly enlists a few post-colonial strategies. Rather, they are integral to the film, making it a post-colonial rather than postmodern film, if one does want to set these terms off against each other. Jarmusch's comment on the inextricable entanglement of mainstream and counter-culture already quoted as an epigraph to my essay is highly relevant here:

[Capitalism and the counter-culture] coexist somehow. And the counter-culture is always re-packaged and made into a product, y'know? It's part of America. If you have a counter-culture and you put a name on it, you call them beatniks and you can sell something – books or bebop. Or you label them as hippies and you can sell tie-dyed T-shirts. (quoted in Rosenbaum 2000, 51)

Or, one feels tempted to add, you make a radically subversive, culturally sensitive film about Native Americans and have it marketed by Miramax.

Having sufficiently out-Jarmusched Jarmusch in pointing out complicities with hegemonic America, we can conclude: Ultimately, one might say, as a *fait filmique*, as an aesthetic object on the screen, *Dead Man* is radically subversive and entirely eludes Bercovitch's trap of becoming complicit in serving the American Ideology. As a *fait*

16 He is alone among American filmmakers in owning the negatives to all his films and in having the final say on all artistic questions.

17 This inescapable complicity is not remedied by the fact that the cooperation with Miramax was far from harmonious. For the controversy over the marketing of *Dead Man* cf. Rosenbaum (2000, 15–17). For Jarmusch's relationship to Hollywood in general cf. Rosenbaum (1996a, 20–21).

cinématographique,¹⁸ as a cultural product, it is inescapably mired in the system. 'Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen.'

Appendix: A Brief Plot Summary of *Dead Man*

The film begins with a foppishly dressed young man, William Blake (Johnny Depp), on a train bound for the American west sometime in the 1870s. He is headed to the town of Machine, where he intends to take up a job as accountant in Dickinson's metal works. The young man alights in Machine, an appallingly squalid and ugly town centred around Dickinson's metal-works plant, an infernal place, spreading pollution, corruption and destruction. Blake finds that the position he has been offered has already been filled. Having spent all his money on his parents' funerals and the train ticket, he has nowhere to go. In the saloon he meets young Thel, a former prostitute who now manufactures and sells paper flowers. He accompanies her home and spends the night with her. Her fiancé enters, shoots Thel and mortally wounds Blake, who in turn shoots him and flees from the town. It turns out that Thel's fiancé was Dickinson's son. Dickinson (Robert Mitchum in his very last role) hires three bounty hunters to bring Blake back 'dead or alive'. William Blake is found and nursed by Nobody (Gary Farmer), a Native American who grew up in England, having been abducted as a child. Nobody believes Blake to be the English poet he himself loves and frequently quotes to the uncomprehending Blake, who has never heard of his namesake. The rest of the film is a mystical spiritual journey to the west coast, first on horseback, later by canoe. Blake, who is in some sense dead already, turns into a killer in the course of the journey who dispatches – among others – two US marshals, a group of three trappers as well as a trader and a customer at a trading post. Throughout the film, Blake and Nobody are pursued by the bounty hunters, who in the course of the journey decimate each other until only one of them remains, the legendary psychopath Cole Wilson (Lance Henriksen). At the very end, Nobody takes Blake to a Makah settlement on the west coast and pushes the dying man out into the sea in a canoe. The last surviving bounty hunter Wilson arrives on the beach; he and Nobody shoot each other as the dying Blake slowly drifts away.

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18 For the distinction between *fait filmique*, the two-dimensional 'film as text', the object of film semiotics, and *fait cinématographique*, film as a complex economic, political, social phenomenon, cf. Metz (1971). Metz adopts the terms from Gilbert Cohen-Séat's distinction first made in the 1940s, but he significantly alters the definitions. For a related classification into 'Movies/Film/Cinema' cf. Monaco (2000, 228-232).

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ALEKS SIERZ (LONDON)

"Political What-Do-Ya-Call-It": British Drama and Its Politics

Does not everything indicate that the night is falling and nothing that a new age is beginning? Should we not adopt an attitude appropriate to the people going into the night? (Bertolt Brecht)

British theatre has a long and noble tradition of political writing. And British playwrights, even those of a younger generation, are well aware of it. Early in Martin McDonagh's absurdist play, *The Pillowman*, which opened at the National Theatre in November 2003, the central character, an Eastern European writer named Katurian, exclaims, "You know what I say? I say if you've got a political axe to grind, if you've got a political what-do-ya-call it, go write a fucking essay, I will know where I stand. I say keep your left-wing this, keep your right-wing that and tell me a fucking story! You know?" (7). Indeed we do know. In the 1990s, the story goes, young British playwrights abandoned the genre of large-scale epic plays that evoked the state of the nation, and concentrated on small-scale domestic dramas. As Klaus Peter Müller commented just after the decade was over, "political elements are nowadays not as prominently presented as they often were in the past" and "the amount of direct political statements is accordingly rather small in these [new] plays" (2002, 15). But, since 9/11, and the declaration of the global War on Terror, all that has changed. The new political atmosphere of the Western world has, unsurprisingly, been reflected in a change in contemporary British theatre: in the past five years, there really has been an explosion of political drama. So although McDonagh was making a provocative point against the intrusion of politics into literature, and arguing instead for the primacy of narrative, he had already missed the boat. *The Pillowman* opened in a climate positively saturated by new political plays. Besides, the central feature of the great tradition of British political theatre is precisely its ability to simultaneously grind its political axe and tell "a fucking story". But what kind of story?

1. Rebirth of the Political

Since 9/11, British theatre has rediscovered politics. And not just the miserable politics of everyday life, but the big, grand politics – the issues that people actually talk about in parliament, in the media, in the pub. Everywhere you look, there are articles about the rebirth of political drama; everywhere, theatre is praised for being contemporary once more; everywhere, it is lauded for telling the truth to power. For example, in the *Guardian* newspaper, Lisa Goldman and Joyce McMillan debated political theatre, while on the radio and the internet, similar discussions ranged over the same terrain (see Goldman 2003, and various contributors).