

***Seeds of Annihilation in Dead Man,
a film by Jim Jarmusch***

Reflections on the death instinct

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With this year's theme, Seeds of Annihilation, the film, *Dead Man*, by writer and director Jim Jarmusch, immediately came to mind, not only because of the opportunity to share this wonderful film. In wondering about annihilation I am able to further explore the nature of the death instinct, an interest of mine. Last season I examined the co-relation between Eros and Thanatos in the destruction of conventional literature which allowed the birth of the Beat Generation, though mostly examining the importance of aggression in the service of this evolution. However, violence and aggression is not per se evidence of a death instinct, nor does it define this instinct, even if often related.

Psychoanalysis begins with symptoms, for it is first a treatment, even though it is also a theory of the mind, providing tremendous insights into the primacy of the unconscious, and within this the role of our most basic instincts. Symptoms imply the health from which they depart. Certainly psychoanalytic theory has been thorough in examining the libidinous instinct and its role in symptom formation, and through this we can easily imagine healthy expression. Love and the attachments we form, self-preservation, esteem of healthy narcissism, and creativity are all examples. The desire to fuse ourselves to our world in living. In considering the death instinct we can quickly speak of the problems, in the repetition compulsion or the destructive use of aggression. However, if the death instinct is truly fundamental, then we must imagine a healthy expression as well. But how so? In our enjoyment of life and living, anything else seems almost antithetical. I propose to use the analysis of the film, *Dead Man*, as an attempt to shed some light on this issue.

Jim Jarmusch's 1995 film, *Dead Man*, confronts us immediately with the idea of annihilation; the title alone suggests this. We all carry the seed of physical annihilation in the inevitability of our death, as life is a condition with one-hundred percent mortality. However, does this fact insist that we also face psychic annihilation? I am not suggesting the possibility of an afterlife, but rather asking whether our death demands the annihilation of our psyche. Very literally and by rules of logic, the answer is 'yes', but since when is our psychic life determined by literal truth and logic? Psychoanalysis, in fact, teaches us that reality is only part of our experience, and that we are servants to our unconscious. Recall that Freud described the death instinct as a drive toward diffusion – think of it as the inverse of attachment formed by a libidinous instinct. So I posit that one route to avoid psychic annihilation is in the healthy satisfaction of the death instinct, and that this film contributes to this consideration.

The inevitability of death is immediate at the start of the film with the quote by Michaux, “It is

preferable not to travel with a dead man.”. With the name of a dead man, we meet William Blake on his journey to the end of the line, the most western frontier of the United States; along the way his fellow passengers transform from ordinary people to the wild frontiers men and trappers who massacre the buffalo along the way. The first words are spoken by the train's coal stoker, reminding Blake of when he was in the boat. We do not understand of what he is referring, for it foreshadows the final scene, Blake's death. The stoker is like Charon, the ferryman across the river Acheron to Hades; he even tells Blake that he is in hell, and that in the town of Machine, “you're just as likely to find your own grave”. Time has no meaning on this train, speaking to events that will happen as if they have already occurred. The scene easily reflects the timelessness of the unconscious as well as the inevitability of death. Could it be that within the death instinct we already know death, that we are on the path with no diversion just as the train continues on its track? Without having suffered his mortal wound, Blake is already a dead man.

The town of Machine is aptly named for there is no life to be found in its culture. The town is a machine that churns out skulls, other bones, furs and hides of the animals killed by trappers and hunters, the only other industry being Dickinson Metal Works. The inhabitants seem to be impoverished of any vibrancy, desperately acting out the motions of life. Blake suffers from a passive identity, or lack of identity, and thus risks falling into the machine, being reduced to a bag of bones. This is the seed for his psychic annihilation, that he will exist and not live.

In the metal works Blake's irrelevance is highlighted. No one is expecting him any longer, his letter of employment will not be honoured and he has already been replaced. The manager does not even register his name, mistakenly calling him Br. Black. His request to see Mr. Dickinson is met with laughter. How dare someone so irrelevant seek an audience with this king of the land of death? How dare Blake insist taking the time of this powerful man? Dickinson's office is a thrown room of death, including a human skull and other trophies of murder. Dickinson appears on his thrown pointing a shotgun at Blake and announcing that the only job he will get is “pushin' up daisies from a pine box”. Blake's future, his hope, is destroyed.

The defeated Blake returns to the town with no prospects. His meager coin is not even enough to get properly miserably drunk. Blake meets Thel, a former prostitute in Machine who now makes and sells paper flowers. In some ways, the brief affair is Blake's last attempt at living, seeking something libidinous, but it is as false as the flowers Thel creates. There is no possibility for hope or love or art. In fact, even their

lovmaking was on top of a loaded gun. Charlie Dickinson, Thel's former lover, interrupts the scene. Charlie is the angel of death, bringing retribution for Blake's attempt at living. With one shot he kills Thel and delivers a mortal wound to Blake. Blake is inept at the language of violence when he grabs the gun, missing twice before the third round finds its mark. Charlie is resigned to his fate and makes no effort to fight back. Forlorn, he accepts his death, and Blake makes his escape.

In the following scene we are introduced to Nobody, a solitary nomad, with no tribe to identify as home. While he explains his name later in the film, this name also has two significant references. First is *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus encounters the cyclops; by introducing himself as Nobody, he and his crew later escape death when the monster's brethren ask who has blinded him and he insists it was Nobody. I believe it is also a reference to another film, a western, *My Name is Nobody*. In this film Henry Fonda plays the fastest gun in the west; as he is aging he wishes a peaceful life but is cursed by his reputation, as any aspiring gunmen seek to prove themselves by besting him in mortal combat. An unknown gunman, played by Terence Hill, befriends Fonda's character and also helps him cheat what seems an inevitable death. In *Dead Man*, Nobody will not be able to save Blake from death, but he will help him be spared from annihilation.

Counter to Nobody are the three bounty hunters: Cole Wilson, Conway Twill, and Johnny "The Kid" Pickett, agents for Dickinson. Dickinson wishes Blake's destruction as he has been narcissistically injured. He expresses no genuine grief for the death of his son, seemingly more upset by Blake's theft of the pinto from his personal stable. Dickinson is a representation of industrial America, unconcerned about the individual but wary of loss, the ultimate corporate sin. Had Blake received the soulless accountant job at the metal works it would have led to psychic death, and becoming its target is actually part of his salvation. While Twill and The Kid are dangerous, they primarily seek to carry out their vocation of hunting bounty. Ultimately it is Cole who embodies aggression where death – a life violently taken - is a prize. Legend of Cole's history is a perverse oedipal tale of raping, killing and cannibalizing his parents. Through Dickinson, Blake's annihilation would be impersonal, part of a societal machine, but Cole is a sadist who desires to annihilate Blake for his own, very personal satisfaction.

Nobody is a voice of insight and thus a modality for working through. His first task is to recognize the gunshot for what it is, a mortal wound, and speak this truth to Blake. After the failed attempt to remove the bullet he notes how close to Blake's heart it lies. Later he asks Blake, "Did you kill the white man who killed

you?”, recognizing the inevitability of Blake's future; importantly death is inevitable for us all, and Nobody recognizes this without prejudice. Nobody is fearful in learning Blake's name, as if seeing a ghost; is the Blake before him the reincarnation of the poet? For Nobody, Blake is a dead man who must find his way back to the afterlife, and Nobody makes it his mission to help.

The culture of the gun, the culture of violence, is a very important theme in the film. Given recent events in the United States with some highly publicized mass shootings, *Dead Man* is almost prescient except for the fact that this is an ancient problem. Violence can be confused with death, with no exception in this film where after the Dickinson Metal Works, every character of any significance is killed by a gun. Aggression is often discussed as an instinct, but it may ultimately be a powerful tool of the drives as opposed to one in and of itself. Aggression can be the servant of the libido as we fight for the survival of ourselves and our loved ones, it is a base for assertiveness, it may take shape in the energy of construction; aggression is not by necessity destructive.

While aggression has its ties to the death instinct, the violence of the gun culture hardly represents the pure death instinct. In this film we see various aspects of the psychology that contribute to this existence. First, there is group psychology: when Blake asks Thel why she has a revolver, she answers, “Because this is America”. There is a group identity in the frontiers-person that survives hardship because of the firepower, the patriot who has been freed from the tyranny of an unfair monarchy, the noble citizen who must protect themselves from the evil lurking in the shadows just waiting to pounce. The belief that the gun will protect life is held by the society, ignoring the compulsion to repeat a violence that, via the weapon, is too easily deadly.

One might, in a similar vain, see the use of guns as a counter-phobic defense. If we accept the existence of the death instinct we can postulate that we sense the nature of the instinct fulfilled, and with this an unconscious draw to satisfying our own end. This is running parallel to our desire to live and prosper, with a narcissistic belief of having more control over our living – and dying – than reality would bear out. As such, the gun becomes a symbol for power and control over the death we both seek and fear, and we repress the extent over both our desire and our helplessness which otherwise would be a source of paralyzing anxiety. The bounty hunters, particularly Twill and The Kid, embody almost a counter-phobic identity. They have achieved reputations as masters of the gun, the ones who survive by killing men, ones who might control death. Yet Twill still sleeps with a stuffed toy bear and The Kid paradoxically remains close to the naivete of youth; their

defense is challenged by the presence of Cole.

Clearly the gun is also a phallus and each bearer hopes to have the largest one, with the reputation of using it the most. Of course this insists on a highly patriarchal culture that must deny the influence of the maternal, the power of the mother. In *Dead Man* all the characters are male, with the exception of the two women that are sexual objects to the two heroes. (A side note is that the woman with whom Nobody has relations is the only character after the metal works that survives). *Twill* and *The Kid* both need a gun to mask their castration anxiety, an anxiety heightened by the presence of Cole, the man with the biggest phallus.

I would also argue that the culture of the gun is yet something different for Cole, an instrument of his sadism and aggression. Cole does not deny the risk of death. Because violence is his language, Cole lives much closer psychically to the reality of danger and actually thrives, becoming the *de facto* leader in a society rooted in firearms. Cole has the largest phallus and gets pleasure in others' fear as he wields it. Yet even within him there is anxiety, somatically held. Symbolically it can be seen in his smile: he has large gleaming white teeth which he uses to feast on his fellow man, yet in one scene he clearly has a toothache; something is ultimately rotten within.

The effect on society within the culture of violence is presented in the parody of the family unit that Blake and Nobody encounter. As they approach, Sally, the 'mother', is telling the fable of Goldilocks and the three bears but introduces a horrific ending where Goldilocks is killed, scalped, and her hair made into a sweater for Baby Bear. Sally then goes on to tell of the Emperor Nero, the scourge of Christians, and the sadistic ways he tortured and murdered them as part of an historical genocide. Finally, in reading from the Bible the passage echoes the previous tale with God delivering the enemy into the hands of the believer, who will behead the enemy and throw the bodies to wild dogs. As soon as Blake enters the scene, murder is planned under the guise of this welcoming family. The scene underlines that violence is not a result of the gun, rather it resides within us, and as such it infiltrates our home life, our literature, our religion, and our history. Needless to say, this 'family' is doomed to end in bloodshed.

Similar is the scene with the two marshals, where even the rule of law is subject to the culture of the gun. We learn that Dickinson has not only dispatched the three bounty hunters, but clearly is able to also buy the lawmen to suite his needs. There is no real attempt to apprehend Blake in the name of the law for right away the gun is pointed at him; "wanted dead or alive" clearly implies a preference for dead when violence

rules. Sadly, these issues are to be found in reality, not just film. Numerous police shootings have made headlines recently, sanctioned death within the law, for the most part. While law enforcement is meant to be protective of society, under a paranoid culture of violence every threat is lethal and thus must be met with lethal force before actual guilt is determined. The law can be bought and used for one's own purposes. Suspicion of the law results, and immediately society is antagonistically split. No longer is an identification with a good father possible, only with the aggressor father, the violent father.

A final view of this violent society is not directly captured in a particular scene, though it is deeply woven in the narrative, mainly the genocide of the indigenous peoples of North America. Symbolically it is depicted in the first scene, on the train, with the slaughter of the buffalo. Nobody is both subject to the violence, and an observer; he is a stand in for a different culture. This other culture is not non-violent, but does recognize how life and death are part of a whole. With this view there is less anxiety about death, thus less need to defend against death, preventing idealization of violence and the gun. Nobody clearly suffered severe childhood trauma, orphaned and kidnapped, and then displayed as a sideshow in England. However, he does not seek violence. Nobody receives an education – where he has learned of William Blake, the poet – makes his escape and returns to his homeland. Nobody is not naive to brutality, but he is not seeking revenge, he is not embracing aggression. He chooses instead to observe the “stupid fucking white man”.

Thus the character of Nobody offers a very important insight, namely the distinction between aggression and the death instinct. In respecting rather than fearing death, Nobody is much closer to the death instinct, it is far less repressed. One can reasonably argue that he has less need to turn to aggression as a means of holding on to life; he lives life rather than defending it. His use of aggression is far less frantic, more just another means of acting without regressing to a paranoid position. In the trapper's camp, the family scene, as the stupid white men yell, shoot at each other, desperately try to reload and kill the intruders, Nobody is calmly defending Blake and at ease accidentally discharging the weapon that kills Sally. Even at the end, facing off against Cole and his own death, he seems serene in his actions as he turns and shoots Cole. Aggression and death are separated, underlining that satisfaction of the death instinct does not insist on violent action.

At this point we are on a better footing to examine the importance of the death instinct in Blake's last days. At the beginning of the film Blake essentially has no identity. He is named after a great poet, yet his own work has no creativity – no libidinal energy – in adding up numbers for those of greater standing in

society. And even this menial work is denied him as the promised job has been given to another, no possibility of identity in his work. His parents have died. A fiancée has left him, for someone else the stoker surmises. Blake has no attachments which may bolster his ego. Consider Erickson's final stage of development where one hopes for ego integrity rather than face despair. In truth, Blake is a shell of a man, and life has become the seed for his psychic annihilation where he could simply exist without actually living. And as noted previously, in *Machine*, at the end of the line, there is no libidinal solution for Blake. At the end of life, is there anything to be gained in seeking more life?

To avoid annihilation Blake needs time to achieve ego integrity, to find an identity meaningful to his self. And he must do this in a new world where the gun dominates, where people are dying rather than living. Much has been written about the importance of language in our psychic life. Language symbolizes our experience in a manner far more complex than simply a tool to describe experience. Language aids and enriches our attachments. It is a vehicle for our emotional life. Language can be used as an art form in literature and visual art. And the basis of language may also be a platform where we may reflect on our selves and find insights. In a libidinal world the spoken word with both the manifest and latent content has tremendous power. But what is Blake to do in a foreign land where the gun rules? He must learn the language. Nobody provides this insight when he states, "That weapon will replace your tongue. You will learn to speak through it, and your poetry will now be written with blood." The bullet will replace the word.

Blake learns the language well. When Blake kills Charlie he has picked up the gun for the first time, and is firing recklessly with most shots missing the mark. He is like an infant mimicking the sounds of adults but unable to make sense of those sounds. His next kill is with the "family", and while he is frantic during the shootout, his aim is true. The infant has grown and can communicate. By the time Blake meets the lawmen the anxiety has subsided, he is fast on the draw and deliberate in his action. Finally, at the trading post he uses his new language with power, protecting his friend, Nobody, against the racist merchant. Blake has mastered the language, he has found his poetry.

It is important to remember Blake's task as he is dying, to find, maybe even create, a self: an identity. Paradoxically his identity is not that of a killer. Certainly he is viewed by others this way, the label of killer is assumed without actually knowing the man. As Blake's identity grows, so does the reward on the wanted posters. Blake's appearance changes from being attired in city clothes out of place in the frontier, to wearing a

fur that fits the environment, and his face painted with blood. He loses his eyeglasses.

So if not a killer, what is the identity Blake discovers? It is the person that Nobody identified at the first meeting. Blake must understand that he is mortal, and given his wound, that he is a dead man. Blake's realization that this is who he is, is symbolized in the encounter with the dead fawn, seeing the bullet wound that killed it and touching its blood, mixing it with his own blood and painting his face. Lying with the fawn Blake identifies with being dead, he truly understands his fate.

Throughout the film Blake is asked whether he has any tobacco, to which he repeatedly replies that he does not, as he does not smoke. Particularly amusing is after Blake and Nobody have reunited where Blake jokes that he had tobacco but traded it; this is play. And of course the argument at the trading post is over tobacco that the merchant refuses to sell to Nobody. Earlier I made a link to Charon, the ferryman who takes the dead across the river Acheron to Hades. In the myth the ferryman is paid by a coin, hence the custom in certain cultures to bury the dead with a coin in their mouth. Tobacco is this coin, the fee to enter the afterlife. It is highly relevant that Blake does not acquire the tobacco until he has accepted his own death.

So does Blake avoid annihilation? And how is his death instinct expressed? The point has already been made that forming an identity was essential for Blake, but ultimately a sense of self is primarily a libidinous construction. So we return to the theory which suggests the death instinct is one of diffusion, counter to the fusional instinct of libido; it is an instinct to let go. To satisfy the instinct Blake must know himself to be able to let go of himself. Blake forms a self, mourns the self, and then lets go of the self. The diffusion begins part way through the film when Nobody takes Blake's eyeglasses, which forces Blake to let go of the vision to which he is accustomed and opens him to a new perspective. Recall that the loss of the glasses precedes his encounter with the dead fawn.

Further diffusion happens rapidly at the end of the film. By the time of the funeral march through the native village Blake is in and out of consciousness and has lost so much strength that he requires the support of others. By the time he is in the boat he can barely lift his head. With the apathy of the dead he watches as Cole and Nobody destroy each other on the shore. Blake takes his final breaths. And in this letting go, in this satisfaction of the death instinct, Blake avoids annihilation.

Thank you.