

Ghost Dance: Visions of Death in Contemporary Native American Cinema

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This essay examines the preoccupation with mortality in five feature films written and directed by Native Americans, namely, *Four Sheets to the Wind* (2007), *Smoke Signals* (1998), *Skins* (2002), *Barking Water* (2009), and *Goodnight Irene* (2005). In particular, it demonstrates that these recent films have a thematic preoccupation with mortality, one that may be occasioned by the fact the Native Americans currently experience disproportionately high mortality, disease, and poverty rates relative to their Caucasian counterparts.

In his major work *Being and Time* (1927), existential philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) asserts that while they don't always exhibit it openly, humans are characterized by concern for being, particularly their own (40). Moreover, he argues that what concerns people most about their being is mortality (216). Indeed, Heidegger goes so far as to claim that all specific empirical fears and existential anxiety generally, are anchored in our awareness of death, an awareness that is initially visceral (174). Anxiety is, in fact, no more than visceral cognizance of the perilous and impermanent nature of our being. This visceral awareness catalyzes the development of a conceptual awareness of death (or formal death-related thought), which ironically heightens anxiety. As Heidegger explains, the unpalatable effect of formal thought about death, coupled with the inescapability of anxiety, drives most people to live their lives in a state of denial of death, or what he describes as "inauthenticity" (40).

Interestingly, contemporary social psychology has confirmed many of Heidegger's assertions regarding death anxiety and its management. In particular, Terror Management Theory (TMT), founded by Tom Pyszczynski, Jeff Greenberg, and Sheldon Solomon, and anchored in the work of Ernest Becker (1924-1974) and Otto Rank (1884-1939), maintains that "the problem of death plays a [unique and] significant role in . . . human behavior" (Pyszczynski et al. "Why" 3). TMT contends that human activity is "designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, and to overcome it by denying it in some way" (Becker ix). Furthermore, it suggests that one, if not the primary "function of culture . . . is to provide a means of conceptualizing reality [in a way] that allows for equanimity in the face of human . . . mortality." According to TMT, culture provides individuals with a two-pronged defense against death anxiety. First, culture operates as an "anxiety buffer" by indoctrinating individuals to death-denying cultural narratives that provide individuals with "the possibility of either literal or symbolic immortality," religion being a prime example. Second, all cultural traditions establish normative

standards for behavior that offer a means through which individuals can defer thought about death and “bolster” their sense of self-worth, thus ameliorating anxiety (Greenberg et al. 308-9). TMT maintains that increased exposure to mortality, or conditions conducive to it, occasions heightened mortality salience, a state in which the individual is more likely to experience explicit death-related thought. Advocates of TMT indicate that most people are able to suppress death-related thought through what they refer to as distal defenses (Pyszczynski et al. “Dual” 2). Cultural narratives that assuage ontological insecurity by denying mortality and indirectly redirecting individual attention are the prevailing form of distal defense in most contexts. However, advocates of TMT also recognize that individuals may be unable to utilize the distal defenses successfully in instances where a sufficient number of “reminders of death” (Rosenblatt et al. 682) undermine the function of traditional distal mechanisms. These circumstances include occasions where individuals and/or communities are literally made more vulnerable by virtue of cultural marginalization, social disenfranchisement, or physical conditions of threat. When this occurs, there is a “leakage” (Solomon et al. 133) of death anxiety and an increase in explicit death-related thought. In these instances, individuals must resort to the use of more direct means of anxiety suppression, or what advocates of TMT call “proximal defenses” (Pyszczynski et al. “Dual” 2). These proximal defenses include the use of alcohol and drugs to lessen the burden of death-related thought, and in some cases, offer a temporary escape from consciousness of mortality altogether. Generally speaking, TMT maintains that distal defenses predominate and most people exist in a denial of death because of the “paralyzing terror” (Pyszczynski et al. “Why” 2) that thought about death engenders. TMT asserts that people’s base attachment to cultural narratives and religious ideologies derives from the capacity these narratives have to act as anxiety buffers. TMT asserts that intergroup bias, or the tendency to be reticent or even antagonistic toward someone who subscribes to a different cultural narrative, is largely a function of the tension that emerges when the contingent nature of cultural narratives is revealed through social contact, and death anxiety increases as a result (Solomon et al. 133).

Is Any Day a Good Day to Die?

One of the most memorable lines in the film, *Little Big Man* (1970), is delivered in the scene in which Old Lodge Skins (Chief Dan George), ascends to the tribe’s burial site with Jack Crabb (Dustin Hoffmann), also known as Little Big Man, remarking “It is a good day to die,” before laying peacefully on the ground to await his end. The line alludes to a phrase purportedly conveyed by the warrior, Low Dog, to other Cheyenne and Lakota warriors before entering the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876. Though there is skepticism regarding the accuracy of this English translation of Low Dog’s battle-cry (the aforementioned translation derives from Judson Elliot Walker’s 1881 account; some contemporary translators contend “I am ready for what comes” is a more accurate translation), the line is not only repeated again in *Little Big Man* during its portrayal of the battle, it has been appropriated in more recent works including *Smoke Signals* (1998) and the *Die Hard* series.

Putting aside the issue of its historical veracity, the sentiment conveyed in the statement “it is a good day to die,” suggests an unexpected level equanimity in the face of

death, which is unusual if one accepts TMT's assertions regarding the prevalence of death anxiety and death denial in the general public. Perhaps this is why the line resonates culturally. In the film, *Old Lodge Skins* and *Little Big Man* earn audience esteem in large part due to the courage with which they face their mortality. Interestingly, mainstream portrayals of Native Americans frequently attribute this sort of courage in the face of death to their indigenous characters. This tendency is evident not merely in *Little Big Man*, but also in *A Man Called Horse* (1970), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Last of the Dogmen* (1995), and *Dead Man* (1995). Indeed, one could argue the popular fascination with Native Americans and Native American culture derives from the mainstream assumption that Native Americans have succeeded where others have failed, specifically, in coming to terms with death.

Fact or Fiction: Are Native Americans Really More Accepting of Death?

While "romantic notions of Indians" (Kidwell 178) abound in mainstream culture, as Clara Sue Kidwell notes, "almost all of the representations [of Native Americans in popular culture] have been produced by non-Natives" (171) and are typically "homogenized or wholly 'fictive' accounts ... [that have little or] nothing to do with authentic Indians and their practices" (174). Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere,¹ these popular representations tell us more about what the mainstream wants to believe about Native Americans and Native American life, than what is true about them. As a general rule, mainstream, or what Sandy Grande aptly calls "whitestream" (4) portrayals of Native Americans seek to preserve "images and fantasies" (4) of Native Americans that exemplify what Renato Rosaldo refers to as "imperialist nostalgia" (107), which is the peculiar desire on the part of an imperialist culture to sustain and celebrate the image of the culture that it has destroyed. Arguably, this is what we tend to see in mainstream cinematic portrayals of Native American life, namely, portrayals of 18th and 19th century Indians in a prelapsarian state, and not in a contemporary one. These portrayals are highly reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of the noble savage (40-53), and tend to emphasize the "stoic" (Grande 4) nature of Native Americans, particularly their willingness to bravely meet death.

While not dismissing the courage of real Native Americans past and present, promoting an image of Native American life that has been dead for over a century, and which suggests that Native Americans are accepting of death, serves multiple mainstream purposes. First, it serves to create the illusion that this form of life remains, thereby alleviating residual collective guilt at its destruction. Encouraging the view that Native Americans have a natural equanimity toward death further lessens this guilt. After all, if Native Americans are not troubled by their mortality, then non-Natives need not worry about their oblivion either. Finally, for those mainstream audience members who are worried about their own mortality, which TMT argues that all of us are at some level, then holding up the image of a culture whose members are not concerned with death offers hope that one could escape mortality anxiety by adopting a new cultural narrative.

¹ See my book chapter, "Visions of Death: Native American Cinema and the Transformative Power of Death," in *Death in Classic and Contemporary Cinema: Fade to Black*. Ed. Jeff Greenberg and Daniel Sullivan. New York: Palgrave, 2013. 199-216.

Philip Deloria supports this view, stating that much of the interest that non-Natives have in Native American culture stems “not so much [from] a desire to become Indian...[as] a longing for the utopian experience” (185) that the prelapsarian image of Native American life has come to represent and a desire to appropriate that cultural narrative (in whole or in part).

Unexpected Indians

In *Indians in Unexpected Places*, Deloria notes that most non-Natives have a very limited opportunity to get a sense of Native American life past or present given the prevalence of stereotypes of Native Americans, the popularization of anachronistic representations of Indians and Indian life, and the real marginalization of Native Americans in American society. In the time remaining, I shall argue that the aforementioned works of contemporary Native American cinema can help shed light not only on some of the realities of contemporary Native American life, but also on Native American attitudes toward death. In this way, these works help audiences achieve Deloria’s goal of “stereo-type busting” (3), and therefore assist us in movement toward real inter-cultural understanding.

Ironically, when it comes to stereotype busting, we may need to start with TMT itself. According to a variety of TMT theorists, Native Americans subscribe to a different cultural narrative than that held by the mainstream population (Solomon et al. 103). They argue that members of America’s “aboriginal cultures” (Goldenberg et al. “Fleeing” 214) tend to manage death anxiety by “imbu[ing] all of Nature with supernatural power and significance” (215). In short, advocates of TMT suggest that the emphasis on naturalistic holism evident in many Native American traditions helps assuage death anxiety by assuring individuals that they are an integral part of a timeless totality.

Arguably, TMT’s claims regarding Native Americans and their tendency to spiritualize nature may be historically accurate, and may describe the way some contemporary Native Americans manage death-anxiety; however, they fail to describe the situation for many others. Many Native Americans cannot utilize traditional ideologies to manage existential terror in the way TMT suggests they do because they are estranged from their aboriginal culture. While cultural and language revitalization programs exist in some areas, in other cases the tribal communities in which those ideologies flourished, and the ideologies themselves, either no longer exist, or are on the verge of extinction. Under these circumstances, Native Americans are left either without a viable cultural narrative with which to manage anxiety, or they must assimilate into mainstream culture in order to gain access to the cultural anxiety buffers its distal defenses supply.

As TMT theorist Michael Salzman indicates, most minorities, including Native Americans, must assimilate; however, their success doing so is hampered by the fact that persistent and systemic racism limits the degree of integration these individuals can achieve within culture and therefore the anxiety reduction they can gain from it (Salzman 172-191). If the foregoing is true, Native Americans, as a group, are more likely to experience death-anxiety and death-related thought than their Caucasian counterparts because of their lack of access to traditional narratives and their limited integration into the mainstream one. In turn, they are also more likely to utilize proximal defenses,

namely, activities that directly redirect or repress consciousness to manage death-anxiety. Finally, and something Salzman does not discuss and I would like to emphasize, is that due to disproportionate mortality, poverty, and illness rates among the Native American population, many Native Americans literally exist in a more tenuous situation than their non-Native counterparts, including other minorities, a situation where they encounter more frequent and immediate reminders of their mortality than their non-Native peers. The five films targeted for discussion here illustrate these points clearly. They also illustrate another thing TMT needs to explore, namely, that physical death is not the only type of death we worry about and which warrants analysis.

Set in 1998, Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* is a cinematic adaptation of Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* that tells the story of two young Native American men, Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) and Thomas-Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams), as they journey from their home on the Coeur d'Alene Reservation in Idaho to Phoenix, Arizona, in order to obtain the remains of Victor's deceased father. As viewers learn, Victor and Thomas are bound not just by their shared heritage and experience on the reservation, but also by a traumatic event from childhood that neither man remembers: the death of Thomas's parents in a house fire subsequent to a Fourth of July party, a fire that Victor's father, Arnold (Gary Farmer), caused. Thus, the film focuses squarely on the death of a parent and the effect that death has on the individual.

Like *Smoke Signals*, Sterlin Harjo's *Four Sheets to the Wind* foregrounds death. The film opens with a young Seminole man dragging a body down a dirt road. Moments later the same figure is seen submerging the body in a farm pond then spreading tobacco on the water. While the opening scene raises audience suspicion, this suspicion evaporates when viewers discover that the young man, Cufe Smallhill (Cody Lightning), was fulfilling the final wishes of his father, Frank, who had committed suicide. Like *Smoke Signals*, *Four Sheets to the Wind* film follows protagonists who struggle with the death of a loved one and try to move forward in this wake of loss.

Similarly, Chris Eyre's *Skins*, inspired by Adrian Louis's novel of the same name, follows two Lakota brothers, namely, Rudy Yellow Lodge (Eric Sah Weig) and Rudy's older brother Mogie Yellow Lodge (Graham Greene) as they pursue different life paths on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Rudy contends he has made something of himself whereas his brother has not. Rudy is a ranking member of the tribal police. He owns a home and a car. In contrast, Mogie is an out of work alcoholic. While Rudy criticizes his brother for being a drunk, Mogie charges Rudy with selling out. In the end, Rudy is forced to determine his true allegiance when his duties as a law enforcement officer put him at odds with his loyalty to his brother. Although Rudy is unable to save his brother from a premature death, he shows his commitment to Mogie at the end of the film when he defaces Mount Rushmore. While the film focuses on Rudy and how he deals with the death of his brother, a fair amount of attention is also paid to Mogie and his response to his imminent death. This leads us to *Barking Water* (2009) and *Goodnight Irene* (2005).

Sterlin Harjo's *Barking Water* and *Goodnight Irene* foreground death even more explicitly than the preceding works. In these films, rather than having the protagonist grapple with the death of a family member, the protagonist confronts his or her own

mortality. *Barking Water* opens with the terminally ill character, Frankie (Richard Ray Whitman), soliciting the assistance of his ex-wife Irene (Casey Camp-Horinek) to break out of a nursing home so he can go see his children and grandchildren before he dies. The film follows the couple on their poignant road trip through rural landscape of Oklahoma as they traverse not only space, but also memory, reconciling with one another even though they don't get Frankie home in time. *Goodnight Irene*, Harjo's earlier film, shifts the focus to the Seminole woman Irene (again played by Casey Camp-Horineck) as she faces her end. The fifteen-minute short depicts Irene, who has already lost her husband and daughter, as she waits all day for treatment at Indian Health Services alongside two younger men.

What is interesting about all five of these films, films written and directed by Native Americans, is that in no case do we see a single Native American character managing death anxiety by clinging tightly to a spiritualized worldview. Thus, if we take these works by Native Americans as offering reasonable, albeit "unexpected" (Deloria 11), representations of contemporary Native American life, then they simultaneously refute TMT's claim that Native Americans tend to buffer death-anxiety through adherence to ideologies that animate belief in a "hereafter" (Swanton 513), and reinforce TMT's claim that when distal defenses are compromised or unavailable, individuals will employ proximal means of defense instead, namely direct means through which they defer thought about death or suppress it altogether. We see this use of proximal defenses in the films insofar as many characters regularly use sex as a distraction and drugs and alcohol as anesthetics. Three other things these films allude to, which I would argue TMT should investigate further, are 1) the disproportionate susceptibility of certain demographics, in this case Native Americans, to death anxiety due to the lack of viable distal defenses and social conditions that make death literally more present; 2) the notion that death-related thought is not necessarily debilitating; and 3) physiological death is not the only relevant form of dying.

Regarding the former, due to the loss of traditional culture and their increased likelihood of premature death, diabetes, coronary disease, lack of health care, and poverty, Native Americans may be considerably more vulnerable to death-anxiety than their non-Native counterparts. With an average lifespan six years less than the national average, an infant mortality rate nearly twice the national average, over 28% living in poverty, an income average approximately half that of the national average, nearly double the incidence of diabetes and coronary disease, and a suicide rate that in some areas is six to eight times the national average, many Native Americans literally experience more death, and more obvious circumstances that threaten life, than their non-Native counterparts (<http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov>). As TMT notes people tend to think more about death when they encounter reminders of it. The thematic preoccupation with death evident in the foregoing five films is arguably both expressive of this claim as well as evidence for it.

What these films also seem to demonstrate, however, is that whereas some advocates of TMT state that repression of death-related thought is "necessary for psychological health and productive function" (Pyszczynski et al. "Why" 5), these films suggest that one can live well while maintaining an awareness of death. While characters in all of the

films do utilize proximal defenses to help manage their anxiety and grief, all of them ultimately accept death and all are positively transformed by this acceptance. They illustrate more concern for others, increased sympathy, and heightened moral conviction and responsibility.

Lastly, though it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the issue in detail, the five films analyzed here also illustrate another important fact. They show that physiological death is not the only type of death that concerns us. While Heidegger and TMT theory tend to focus on physiological death as the source of individual anxiety, these films suggest that there are other forms of death that warrant consideration, forms of death that are as anxiety producing as physiological death. In this way, these films help us understand why individuals, in some cases, regard physiological death as a good thing and see some days as good days to die. The forms of death that these films highlight, perhaps because they are particularly palpable for many Native Americans, are social and cultural death.²

Existentialists, such as Heidegger, emphasize the social nature of the self, namely, the fact that personality identity develops within, and receives essential validation from, social interaction. As his successor, Jean-Paul Sartre notes, just as others “revea[l] to me the being which I am” (473), they can also erode, even destroy my sense of self. In *Being and Nothingness*, he asserts that if the other looks at me in a derogatory way, or refuses to acknowledge me altogether, this “occasions a subtle death” (354). What Sartre is describing here is social death. As we know but perhaps don’t like to admit, individuals who are socially marginalized experience social death. Though they are not alone, Native Americans certainly represent a group in the U.S. that is marginalized. Arguably, the accompanying lack of social recognition, of public acknowledgment of their individual and collective significance, is painful to bear. *Goodnight Irene* makes light of this when Irene and the two young men discuss their CDIP cards and the fact that the youngest man has misplaced his. Irene jokes with the younger man, warning him that he had better find it because without a card you “don’t exist.” Interestingly, she then tells them that she cut hers up. When the younger man finds his in his wallet and does the same, the other man laughs and says, “I don’t see you anymore.” Irene smiles and warns, “You’re going to wake up tomorrow and your skin’s gonna be real pale.”

Ultimately, all five films show how Native American characters are dismissed and often ignored by their white counterparts. They depict the fact that in many respects there is a Native American “world” that exists alongside the mainstream one, a world that the mainstream population really doesn’t see. For many people in the mainstream, neither that world, nor those who populate it, really exist anymore.

In addition to, and partly as a result of this lack of recognition and acknowledgement, many Native Americans not only experience social death, their cultures die as well. And to the extent people’s identities are indelibly linked to their culture, the death of culture is a serious concern. Again, all of the five films discussed here address the loss of

² Though not discussed here, species death should also be identified as a form of death. Thus, physiological, social, cultural, and species death are discrete forms of death that warrant consideration.

indigenous culture and the effects that loss has on individuals. None frames it more poignantly than *Goodnight Irene*. As Irene waits patiently to see her doctors, she tells the young men how hard it is for her now that no one speaks her native language anymore. When the older of the two young men tries to make her feel better by saying he speaks a little Seminole, the tragedy of this loss of native language is confirmed rather than denied, albeit comically. When Irene says to him in Seminole, “Your breath smells like buttermilk.” He responds, “You said ‘I live by the river.’” Kindly, Irene replies (in English), “No, I said, ‘I live by the lake.’” Later, when the younger man says humorously, “How do you say: ‘I sure am good lookin’?” She tells him in Seminole: “I look like an elephant.” He repeats it loudly to everyone in the waiting room, but only Irene (and the audience due to the assistance of subtitles) can laugh because no one else understands what she is saying. In the end, as Irene is called to the examining room, the men say to her, “Maybe we’ll see you around.” She nods affirmatively, but says in Seminole, “No you won’t.” The film closes with Irene walking slowly down a long hallway. The hallway is centered and at the end of it there is a light. Irene, an embodiment of traditional Native American culture, goes toward the light. The symbolism is clear: she is facing death and her movement foreshadows not only her individual demise, but also the death of her culture. As she says, in a world where one is disconnected from others, where one is a non-entity, and where one’s culture is all but lost, it is easier to be “ready” to go. This is something that these films show us, and that TMT has a hard time explaining given its focus on physiological death. If physiological death is our greatest fear, then why do some people welcome it, even choose it? Why are suicide rates among Native Americans 2.5 times higher than the national average (<http://www.cdc.gov>)? Perhaps it is because in some sense their social and cultural being is being taken away or is already gone. And that is a form of dying that the foregoing five films highlight and that ought to concern us all.

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