

Death in Guyana

An epilogue

Primitivo Solis (David Watson)

I

The flash has passed and the pan is cold. All the late editions have been put to bed; the suicides lie snugly decomposing in their graves. Only the sense of queasy anticipation remains: what next?

More ghastly homicides, more spectacular mutilations, oddities, outlandish flukes, freakish massacres—extraordinary episodes performed by the lunatic fringe itself, all to take our minds off another, more pervasive decomposition, the wretched day-to-day.

Naturally no one from around here was involved. nothing has changed down here at the Disco. The lines are long and the stores are full—everyone so desperately awaiting the next tune. Nothing matters, and nothing is real.

The newspapers recited the same old homilies, culled from an assortment of academic nitwits and cretin psychiatrists. The leftist sects fell over themselves sputtering about the authenticity of their own brands of socialism and dissociating themselves from the monster socialism of Jones. The remaining cults, lips pursed a bit more tightly, more determined, are cashing in on the events to be sure, announcing that the mass suicide of one cult is incontrovertible evidence for the moral verity of theirs. The news media is on the lookout for bigger and better thrills, more “towering infernos,” closer encounters, secret conspiracies, loaded messages from the beyond.

And still the sense, ominous, of approaching danger, of armageddon. As Bill Melater once quipped, “Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress.” Hence it only follows that a pseudo-religious suicide is at once the expression of real social suicide and the protest against it.

Everywhere, the proliferation of mind-deadening pseudo-communities which thrive on the absence of and longing for genuine community within capital. Everywhere, the senseless violence, the ritual slaughter of Isaac, the sons against the father, the psychotic roulette. Everywhere the conspiracies and counterconspiracies of illuminati—the innumerable conspiracies of the capitalists merge with the biopathic zigzags of the lost. California awaiting Haley’s Comet! The Shah of Iran is an alien from another planet! Golda Meir was a People’s Temple operative and was murdered by the Masons! The Lord Mayor of London and the British oligarchs are behind it all, shifting the social scenery like theatrical props! Someone is following me! The world lurches towards disaster, and there’s something happening here and you don’t know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?

Don’t wait for the reruns of the Guyana Massacre next summer. Bigger and better spectacles are in the making. The fantasy of holocaust is no fantasy.

II

In his “Theses Against Occultism,” Theodor Adorno wrote, “The asocial twilight phenomena in the margins of the system, the pathetic attempts to squint through the chinks in its walls, while revealing nothing of what is outside,

illuminate all the more clearly the forces of decay within. The bent little fortune tellers terrorizing their clients with crystal balls are toy models of the great ones who hold the fate of mankind in their hands...The hypnotic power exerted by things occult resembles totalitarian terror: in present day processes the two are merged. The smiling of auguries is amplified to society's sardonic laughter at itself, gloating over the direct material exploitation of souls. The horoscope corresponds to the official directives to the nations, and number-mysticism is preparation for administrative statistics and cartel prices

The "reverend" Jim Jones, the "father," was reported to have suffered from the commonest of paranoid fantasies (both having as their basis, material, omnipresent fears)—of getting cancer, and of nuclear war—of internal decay and external, total destruction. These fears went all the way back to Indianapolis. One former neighbor is quoted by Newsweek as saying that Jones was so frightened by the possibility of nuclear attack, "there were times when just the sound of an airplane flying overhead would start him crying." Another acquaintance said, "He told me that he had some sort of skin disease that had turned into cancer." The paranoid contagion was the secret of his success, not only in the case of his "faith healing," but later, when he intimidated followers into leaving for Guyana by convincing them that those left behind would be exterminated in concentration camps or killed by the CIA. When the cyanide-Kool Aid drink was being prepared, he was convincing his faithful that they faced imminent attack from military stormtroopers. The most powerful fear has some basis in reality, and it worked for Jones as much as it undermined him.

No hypnosis was necessary. Jones, the restless, energetic megalomaniac, played on real fears, on real insecurities. Nuclear war, cancer, concentration camps, race war, government repression and assassination are all more or less within the realm of possibility—all that is necessary is that a sense of proportion be sacrificed. The same fears are felt everywhere throughout society—be it street crime, disease, unemployment, war and the fear of the devil, the unknown. And every huckster, every religious swindler and every politician exploits them to the max.

It follows that the inane assertions by the house-psychologists about Jones' extraordinary charismatic powers are empty. Despite the power of certain dynamic individuals, the pathological authoritarian relationships which appear in a rarefied form in small cults are only Lilliputian photocopies of all of society, and the pathology of the Leader is only "the expression of the irrational structure of mass man." (Reich)

What is so unusual about mass man dying blindly and unquestioningly at the command of his leaders? What is a mere nine hundred to 55,000 dead in Vietnam? What is the military cannon-fodder of imperialism but machine men programmed to follow the most homicidal/suicidal of orders? (The analogy is limited, naturally; well-armed soldiers "wasting" defenseless "gooks" is not the same as taking part in a mass suicide for socialism. Nevertheless, the question of character structure leads to obvious similarities: a command is a command. When does it cease to be so?)

The events in Guyana are distinct. This was 1978, not 1968. The mass suicide lies historically and psychoanalytically between the last war and the next. It is the final chapter of the last, of its generation. (The fact that the People's Temple was located next to the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco seems oddly symbolic. The fact that the People's Temple recruited among drug casualties, the ex-"movement" and civil rights milieux, and ghetto blacks, is incontestable.)

But the suicide is actually an horrific parody of the next war, the war to end all wars. And Jones, that weird amalgam of Father Devine and Mussolini, was a mini-Hitler dying in his bunker. His fears of the holocaust led him to California and eventually to Guyana, and ultimately to the holocaust itself—perpetrated by the Leader on his own gullible, demoralized troops.

And it was symbolic of the holocaust which the larger-than-life fathers, the generals and the politicians, threaten to unleash at a moment's notice upon all of us, cynic and patriot, rebel and follower, nonconformist and mass man.

III

"I saw a werewolf drinking, a piña colada at Trader Vic's. His hair was perfect."

—Warren Zevon.

The horror and the fascination: the lurid covers on the magazines, the descriptions of the rotting corpses bloated and oozing in the tropical heat. Gee, they even killed their pets. The “instant books” for drugstore consumption. And Lance Morrow commenting in a Time essay bordered by skull-and-crossbones, “It will be remembered as an emblematic, identifying moment of the decade: a demented American psychopomp in a tropical cult house, doling out cyanide with Kool Aid...” A three hour CBS television special is in the making, and without a doubt several movies are being scripted at this very moment.

The “suicide cult.” The “cult of death.” But it seemed so remote and at the same time so close to home—being held down by armed guards and old friends and forced to swallow the poison... How many died like the prisoner of Kafka’s Penal Colony at the moment of personal realization and disillusionment? Newsweek wrote, “Perhaps the greatest horror in the scene lay in the realization that more or less ordinary people [read: mass men] had been indoctrinated—and in the seed of fear that nearly anybody might be manipulated the same way.”

The fascination with the “cult of death” went deeper than that. It was society holding up a mirror to itself. It was the uncomfortable presentiment that the manipulation and the abdication have already taken place, that capital, that “our American way of life”—be it the fading market man/family/religion form or the newer and more virulent monadic/consumer/repressive desublimation of this decade—life today is the cult of death. Every surrender of liberty, every compromise, every abdication of responsibility is a tiny, cumulative dose of cyanide. We don’t kill ourselves all at once for psychotic father figures, we kill ourselves little by little for capital, under the coercion of the little father-cop which we internalized from the earliest moments of socialization. We don’t drink poison for a Leader. Leaders come and go; they can always be replaced. We kill ourselves on the installment plan, we kill ourselves for progress!

Look at their eyes as they pass you on the street. Suicided, bloodless, terminated. Look at yourself in the mirror as you dress for work, as you plan “your” day. The supercilious criticism by so many methodist peabrains and newspaper lackeys is just simply an uneasy and dishonest defense of the mainstream cult, a society which claims as its great virtues personal autonomy and the rights of individual conscience, yet which is made up of people characterologically incapable of diverging from the cult, of formulating individual opinions or ideas, and certainly incapable of living autonomously. The wave of the cults is of course a sign of the advanced stage of disintegration and collapse of the individual in its terminal stage. Not even the semblance of freedom for these victims—they must escape, and they escape into the cults. But they are not escaping from freedom, only surrendering to a more absolute unfreedom.

The horror which the journalists and the clerics and the consumers of the media feel towards the cults in general and towards this mass murder in particular is only the horror which Dorian Gray feels as he gazes upon his own portrait and the terrifying truth contained therein.



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