REGENERATION THROUGH VIOLENCE: ECHOES OF THE MYTH OF THE WEST IN JIM HARRISON'S *A GOOD DAY TO DIE**

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Abstract

This essay analyzes some of the reverberations of the myth of the West present in Jim Harrison's early novel *A Good Day to Die* (1973), where the myth is put to the test of compatibility with the real world. Richard Slotkin's notion of regeneration through violence as well as Jane Tompkins's observations regarding depictions of masculinity in 20th century popular westerns find affirmation in the novel's narrative. Despite the contemporaneous concern for increasing technology-aided control of nature, evident in other novels, it is remarkable how *A Good Day to Die* recreates many of the aspects of the myth of the West. Arguably, the novel simultaneously proposes that the kind of perspective that Donna Haraway terms "situated knowledges" in the end allows the unnamed narrator to maintain a more realistic connection with reality than what the myth offers.

Keywords: Jim Harrison, American West, Regeneration through violence, Road Novel, The Nez Percé.

LA REGENERACIÓN A TRAVÉS DE LA VIOLENCIA: LOS ECOS DEL MITO DEL OESTE EN *A GOOD DAY TO DIE* DE JIM HARRISON

Resumen

Jim Harrison explora la compatibilidad del Oeste mitológico con la realidad del mundo en una de sus primeras novelas, *A Good Day to Die* (1973). Las reverberaciones de ese planteamiento se observan en una novela que sirve para confirmar las perspectivas de Richard Slotkin y Jane Tompkins sobre el Oeste Americano, el primero a través de su concepto de la regeneración a través de la violencia y la segunda con sus observaciones sobre las masculinidades representadas en los westerns populares. A pesar de la preocupación contemporánea por la aplicación de la tecnología en el dominio sobre el medio natural, también presente en otras obras, es muy interesante cómo *A Good Day to Die* recrea muchos de los aspectos que relacionamos con el oeste americano, al mismo tiempo que propone la viabilidad del concepto que Donna Haraway llama "conocimientos situados."

Palabras clave: Jim Harrison, El Oeste Americano, Regeneración a través de la violencia, Road Novel, Nez Percé.

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The worst of all things is not to live in a physical world.
Wallace Stevens[1]

The aim of this essay is to analyze the echoes of Western mythologies in Jim Harrison's second novel, *A Good Day to Die* (1973), where they are questioned and juxtaposed with the actual world. Deleuze's and Guattari's concepts of "striated" and "smooth" space as well as Frampton's ideas on how the human body interacts with space help to position the myth of the West as insufficient and often spurious to see reality in its complexity. The characters of the book are a threesome in their twenties, the male unnamed narrator, Tim, and Sylvia, who set out west from Georgia with a goal to blow up a dam in the Grand Canyon. When it transpires that no dam is being built in that location, they nevertheless continue the journey west to Montana, the men's minds set to blow up any dam that stands on a river. Their trip is a show of destructive behavior towards themselves, each other, and Sylvia, and has a tragic outcome. The male characters' unyielding resolve to go west and destroy a dam is representative of their pursuit to free themselves of social constraints and to relive the myth of the frontier, which becomes conflated with the myth of the road, leading westwards to freedom and reiterating the direction of American expansion. While Harrison's later works (*Dalva*, *The Road Home*) overtly criticize US nineteenth century politics of westward expansion at the expense of Indigenous Americans and alternate ways of seeing the world, *A Good Day to Die* is an early example of a novel that reimagines the American West as multidimensional. In employing a Nez Percé saying as its title and in imagining the tribe's flight from the onslaught of the American army, the novel undermines the myth of the West in its readiness to triumph at the expense of ignoring the factual brutal underpinnings. The narrator's love of fishing and his understanding of rivers translates into making the West accessible for him on a much deeper level than what the myth offers.

For the male heroes of Harrison's novel, the narrator and Tim, the trip becomes an escape from the existing or pending confinements of marriage and domesticity but also a healing maneuver aimed at repairing trauma, disappointment, and aimlessness. Tim is a Vietnam-war veteran, physically and psychologically

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The same epigraph was used by Harrison in the 1991 publication of his collected nonfiction *Just Before Dark*, in my view, to underscore the divergence of reality from myth, which obscures the physical world in dangerous ways, exposed in *A Good Day to Die*.

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scarred, impulsive and violent, while the unnamed narrator is disillusioned with the mediocrity of middle-class living, married but away from home, fishing in the Florida keys and reflecting on "that long pull of boredom in marriage" (Harrison 1973, 135) and the "nastiness involved in earning a living" (135). By going west and communing with the open spaces of western American landscape that, according to Tompkins, represent independence, freedom, and grit in the myth of The West, the two men seem to hope to free themselves from the purportedly crippling obligations to women and society and regain vitality and balance, since, in popular culture The West

> functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest. It seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice. The desire to change places also signals a powerful need for self-transformation. (Tompkins 1992, 4)

Freedom, escape, and self-transformation are the three things that, according to Tompkins, travelers typically long to find in the West. Notably, the same three features are said to characterize the road trip as "an iconic American experience" (Brigham 2013, 15). So hitting the road and going westwards means embarking on a classic American adventure of an escape and liberation from oppressive social frameworks and of exploration, to find a new self through the regenerative powers of nature.

From the outset of the novel, the classic tropes of the myth of the West are deflected, as if in a funhouse mirror, by what happens on the road. Firstly, the trip is premised upon a miscalculation of actuality in that it follows a hearsay according to which the Grand Canyon is in peril of being flooded in consequence of the construction of yet another dam on the Colorado river. Secondly, the woman, instead of being left behind in a domestic setting, is taken along on the trip. Thirdly, the trip does not heal or solve anything but, contrarily, has a tragic outcome. To begin with, the information about the construction of the dam turns out to be false, but since the canyon has functioned as one of the ultimate symbols of majestic western American nature, the men jump at the opportunity to defend the landscape that represents the features they feel they are being deprived of. So, in addition to going simply to fulfil the need to commune with nature in order to regain lost vitality as in the model suggested by Tompkins, they become driven by an imperative to protect a symbol assumed to be endangered with annihilation.

Echoing Tompkins's proposition that the Western hero's pain resolves in violence, the existential angst of the male characters in *A Good Day to Die* translates into a belligerent plan as Tim impulsively decides that blowing up the (nonexistent) dam is the only way to go forward. Once the aggression has been ignited, there is no turning back. The absence of the dam does not convince Tim and the narrator to return or abstain from violence, because their defiant determination to protect the canyon and free the Colorado river from the obstruction that would hamper its flow represents the imperative to protect their freedom and strength, assumed to

be endangered by a relationship with a woman. They continue north-west in search of any dam that blocks a river, and the force of their resolve turns not only against the structure they finally select to blast but also against Sylvia.

Consequently, the trip itself becomes a brutal ascertainment of masculinity at the expense of the female hero, who is perceived as being similar to a dam erected on a river – an obstacle that hampers the free flow of male expression. For the male heroes, the trip thus becomes synonymous with the freedom to abuse the woman and indulge in destructive behavior such as excessive consumption of alcohol and drugs, reckless driving, paid sex, and getting into fights and arguments. But for the heroine, the trip is more of a rollercoaster ride of pain brought upon by cruelty, rejection, abandonment, physical violence, and triangulation. For Sylvia, the road, to use Krista Comer's words, is not "suggestive of possibility … as it was for Kerouac and so many masculine figures in literature and cinema" (Comer 2015, 164); rather, Sylvia is a "prisoner to the road" (164), a hostage to the idea that she is like an obstacle that restricts the free expression of manhood – a concept that has her entrapped in feeling obliged to disprove it. But, in a final twist, the way west in *A Good Day to Die* becomes equally not "suggestive of possibility" for the male characters. It becomes a distortion thereof, where the masculine figures squander the road's promise on fighting each other, playing malicious games that degrade and objectify the female hero, only to end up destroying a farmer's property, killing a dog and a cow, losing Tim in the explosion, and leaving the narrator to face the consequences.

As the novel progresses, the road increasingly represents erratic movement, disconnection, and displacement while the narrator, very much like Sal Paradise in Kerouac's classic *On the Road*, is ambivalent about being on the move. As Ording proposes, Sal is constantly torn between "the desires for the new and for the normal, the road and the home hearth" (Ording 2013, 91) and "much of the action in the novel has Sal settling down to serious work, relieved to be home again off the road, only to be swept away again the next time Dean comes courting for kicks" (88). Similarly, the narrator of *A Good Day to Die* is manipulated into going on the trip by Tim and, while on the move without the possibility to turn back, he relieves the sheer craziness of the journey by imagining himself in circumstances emanating stability. An idealized history of the American West plays a significant role in how he shapes these reveries, which often are about domestic life on the frontier. The daydreams draw his attention away from the anxiety-inducing chaos of the road towards safer spaces of stability. However, in keeping with the men's tendency for cruelty towards Sylvia, these fantasies feature women who are lifeless and devoid of agency. What is more, those domestic settings that the narrator imagines frequently acquire their safety and stability at the expense of female active presence, as the woman is either objectified or erased, as in the following fragment: "I might be a Jimmy Stewart type working a ranch in a valley with a fine trout stream running through it, a grand herd of Hereford cattle, and a lovely woman named Ramona or something like that as a helpmate" (Harrison 1973, 83). The woman is listed here as one of the narrator's possessions, in one breath with a trout stream and a herd of pedigree cattle. Physical attributes matter, but her name, "Ramona or something," does not – she could be anyone as long as she is good-looking and benign, very

much like a pure-bred cow. She is presented in reductive terms, as a "helpmate" – support to the man, with no agency of her own. An active presence of a woman with personality and agency would destabilize the film-still-like perfect image of a safe retreat. The stasis of these mental pictures brings counterbalance to the chaos of the road but at the expense of the female character.

In another reverie, the narrator tries to pacify his anxiety by imagining Sylvia literally dead. "I had an instantaneous sweeping fantasy of Sylvia in a log cabin in Montana late in the nineteenth century. It is May with only a few traces of snow left. She's in bed and has just died in childbirth; I've failed as a midwife. I gather the three children around me… Her face would be beautiful but pale" (Harrison 1973, 47). In this homesteader fantasy of potential domestic happiness, the only agency is left to the man. The woman, ultimately passive, is showcased against beautiful yet static, like she is, landscape reminiscent of an Ansel Adams photograph. She is pale like the black-and-white palette so characteristic of the photographer's vision that fixes the object in a timeless, contextless void. As in the previous fantasy, the woman's pleasurable physical attributes, not agency or active presence, stabilize the picture. It is the man who will now start anew and fully participate in life without the obstacle of having to relate to the woman. Holding the memory of her lifeless beauty, he will become rejuvenated in the process, as the image of early spring suggests, and maintain full, indivisible control over his life.

In the foregoing fantasy, the male hero has the opportunity to finally commune with pre-industrial unspoilt nature, where there are no dams to regulate the flow of rivers, that run freely and stay wild in a landscape where no civilizational hindrance stops them or interferes with the natural processes that go on inside them. By analogy, the man is on his own and no woman is present, who, like a dam on a river, would check the natural flow of his expression. In this fantasy, set in a grand mountain landscape of nineteenth century Montana, when no significant civilizational incursions existed, the narrator's yearning to avoid having to adjust to a woman or, in other words, his longing to experience, as Owen Wister would say, "the onset of the natural man himself" (Wister 1902, 256), is especially visible. The narrator's failure as a midwife is evocative of his inability or an unwillingness to be responsive or communicative and, as a consequence, to effectively mediate in the delivery: not only is the woman dead, but the "child [is] dead too" (47). In the popular Westerns, which the narrator of *A Good Day to Die* evokes in his reveries, effective communication is not one of the capacities of "the natural man," who prefers to be silent, for "nature is what the hero aspires to emulate: perfect being-in-itself … no more talkable to than a river or an avalanche," as Jane Tompkins puts it (Tompkins 1992, 57-58). Reticence and communion with nature are the attributes of the Western hero and, hopefully, also the conditions for self-transformation and regeneration.

As Tompkins argues in *West of Everything*, being uncommunicative is one of the paradigmatic attributes of masculinity in the Western. In the films and the novels that she discusses, the male hero is silent and unyielding and favors actions over words, which are associated with femininity. With his reticence, the man maintains control over himself and the outside because to speak is to open up, to

lose control, to reveal one's intentions and emotions to the world, to share oneself and expect a response, to render oneself vulnerable. Tompkins writes, "To speak is literally to open the body for penetration by opening an orifice; it is also to mingle the body's substance with the substance of what is outside it. Finally, it suggests a certain incompleteness, a need to be in relation" (Tompkins 1992, 56). By contrast, the western man is self-contained, impenetrable, and complete; he does not need to communicate or to be in a relationship. A woman, on the other hand, would use words profusely, indicating that she is lacking and thus in need of being controlled by a man to achieve completeness. As Tompkins argues, this is visible, for instance, in a scene at the end of the cinematic Western *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948), where the heroine, Tess Millay, directs a tirade of words at the hero, and then, as if realizing her own inadequacy, asks him to make her stop talking. He obliges first by covering her mouth with his hand and then by kissing her.

In a similar vein, the narrator of *A Good Day to Die* fantasizes about asserting control over Sylvia, making her a participant of another reverie of domestic stability. "I should own a duck ranch, a harmless spread speckled with ducks. … The children could have a duck or two to play with. Sitting on the porch she would say the ducks have been good to us this year. I might have to tell her to shut up" (Harrison 1973, 147). As in the two foregoing reveries, this one too has the woman domesticated and silenced, with the narrator posing as the stereotypical Western man. However, when this fantasy is juxtaposed with what happens in terms of the plot, the image of the reticent man in control of himself and his woman becomes comically distorted, thus setting the stereotypically Western tropes at a distance and demonstrating that they are too narrow to fit the complexity of the world that the protagonists travel through.

The threesome are on a mountain road in the Rockies between Idaho and Montana, with the narrator on drugs in the back seat, giving a lengthy drug-propelled "odiously boring lecture on Indians" (Harrison 1973, 146). The ensuing fantasy about operating a duck ranch puts his own real lack of control in comic contrast with the imaginary Western hero's self-command, since the narrator's manner of speaking – loud and incoherent – as well as the dubious accuracy of the information contained in the lecture is comparable to nonsensical quacking.

> At first they listened civilly with the tape deck turned low, not knowing that I had dropped one of Tim's spansules to try to ameliorate my growing dread which had got totally out of hand. … And not that I really knew much about Indians … but I countered my ignorance with what I thought was eloquent invention. I characterized my favorites – Nez Percé, Cheyenne, Blackfoot and Mandan, maybe Oglala Sioux. I kept on through the switchbacks on Chief Joseph Pass, embellishing each doubtful fact with mystery. … Sylvia's arm trailed over the seat and I could barely hear Dylan on the deck; my voice grew an octave higher and was on the verge of quacking. (Harrison 1973, 146)

Ironically, instead of using the sparse, epigrammatic language befitting that of a classic Western male hero, the narrator breaks into a nervous rant to alleviate his own anxiety and sexual attraction to Sylvia, as she looks on and listens. Her

composure is contrasted with the narrator's behavior, which rather resembles that of a Western female, described by Tompkins as "blathering on … and beneath it all really asking for sex" (Tompkins 1992, 61). The image of an anxious "quacking" man on drugs, "asking for sex," in juxtaposition with the impenetrable, monolithic "human incarnation of nature" (Tompkins 1992, 58) featured as the hero of popular Hollywood Westerns undermines the paradigm. With the reversal of roles and an ensuing tableau of a happy duck-raising family, Harrison achieves a comic distortion of the paradigm, thus proposing that myth is a grossly insufficient means to tackle reality.

As Campbell makes clear in *The Rhizomatic West*, the insufficiency of myth in understanding reality can be illustrated using Deleuzoguattarian terms that talk about space. The authors of *A Thousand Plateaus* distinguish between "striated" and "smooth space"; in the former kind, as on a map, reality is flattened and homogenized, crammed into a formula of one-dimensional discourse, which is regulated and standardized to comply with the logic of straight lines that simplify and trim the irregular landscape into identical rectangular shapes. In the mythic narrative of western American expansion and the frontier, a part of which are the later stereotypes of men and women forged by the popular Western films discussed by Tompkins, the complexity of reality was similarly trimmed to propagate nation-state building. In *A Good Day to Die*, the road reiterating the direction of nineteenth-century American expansion to the west is part of that striated space, and it prompts the protagonists to revisit the stereotypes contained in the myth. Whereas the narrator, in his ambivalence of being on the road and his acknowledgment of the historical and now erased presence of Indian tribes on the territories the road dissects, is hesitant to go along with the stereotypes of "westness" (Campbell 2016, 160), Tim is ready to immerse in the kind of freedom they promise.

For one thing, Tim is fond of cowboy props that in popular culture epitomize the American West. At the outset of the trip in Valdosta, Georgia, he is seen walking out to the car "wearing a newish pair of black tooled cowboy boots" while "Sheriff Bobby Brown [is] talking about law and order" on the radio (Harrison 1973, 38). Then, in Agua Prieta, Mexico, he gets himself a pistol (48). Finally, in Tucson, Arizona, he purchases a pair of "Tony Lama boots" (91), "pale blue and heavily tooled with steep heels" (88). The gadgets align him with and help him build a one-dimensional "mythic construction of 'westness'" (Campbell 2016, 160) which he embraces and holds onto, aided with drugs. His identification with the gadgets helps him focus on the goal of the trip with a determination of a sheriff administering justice. It helps him escape engagement in immediate matters of life that need attention, such as the relationship with Sylvia or his health. As a driver, his demeanor brings to mind a cowhand breaking a wild bronco. "He gunned up the street leaving a thirty-foot stretch of rubber before he double-clutched into second, snapping my neck" (Harrison 1973, 38). Moreover, the car itself is like a wild horse: "tight and muscular," "aggressive," understeering. Also, in his treatment of Sylvia, Tim plays a classic Western male figure: uncommunicative, distant and controlling to the point of being abusive, sometimes violent. His addiction to speed, meaning both car velocity and a drug (such as cocaine) that deprives him of sleep

and relentlessly brings about perpetual agitation, consolidates his motions in a one-directional effort towards (self)annihilation. Just as the myth obscures and erases parts of reality, the addiction makes the "smooth spaces" of the unfolding country and of human relationships at hand invisible and irrelevant.

The "smooth space," although suppressed, is still there, and it exists side by side and overlaps with the "striated space." Dissecting the landscape in blacktop and dirt lines, the road that the trio travel takes them through a country that is alive and vibrant with the sounds of nature and with untold stories of Indigenous American presence, which become accessible to the narrator through his imagination and body. This is evident in chapter fourteen when the narrator sets off before dawn to go fishing in the Big Hole river near Wisdom, Montana. His senses are attuned to the particulars of the place in such a way that one is reminded of Kenneth Frampton's discussion of "the capacity of the body to read the environment in terms other than those of sight alone" (Frampton 1990, 28). Away from the road, its perpetual anxiety and one-directional pull towards destruction, the narrator is able to immerse himself in the environment as well as to sense its richness beyond what the "striated space" of the road imposes.

Apart from the fantasies of home that alleviate the narrator's anxiety linked to being on the road, there are a few spaces in the real world that make him feel safe: these are the woods and water. He says, "I felt safe in three minimal areas of Michigan, Montana and Key West. Or pretty much in any woods or on any body of water" (Harrison 1973, 37). So, using his senses, the narrator establishes himself in the place and starts reading it in terms of the body's engagement with space. Because it is dark "about an hour before dawn" (137), he cannot use sight; instead he uses the feel of air-temperature on his skin, hearing, smell, and also taste. "[T]he bed was so warm and the air cool" (137). He hears an owl and Sylvia's breathing. Her breath "intermingle[s] with the hooting of the owl and a very distant sound of a whippoorwill" (138). "[T]he odor in the dark of the sage and sweet-grass and pine resemble[s] a subtle perfume" (138). He eats "some sharp cheddar and crackers" and reflects: "Sitting there in the cool dark I felt more conscious than I had in the previous eight days and I rather liked this unexpected awareness" (137). It is through the body and its senses that the narrator establishes his presence and places himself in the environment. As the novel draws to a close, it is as if his fantasies of placedness and domesticity that persisted throughout the trip acquire flesh, gain real, physical shape in Wisdom, Montana, where the earlier settler fantasy is re-enacted in real life with Sylvia's breath intermingling with other sounds of nature. The chaos, displacement, danger, drunkenness, drugs, and anxiety of the road give way to full awareness, engagement, and conscious being.

The narrator's body, trained in interacting with rivers, the sea, and the woods, allows him to open up to experiencing Montana as inscribed not only with what the colonial settlers established and containing not only the realizations of their worldview, culture, and institutions, but comprising also what was there before. On the ground, the narrator's vision, unlike that of a driver, who must focus on the road ahead, is stable and at ease to take notice of the small-scale and employ the imagination to see beyond what is nominally there. This way of knowing through

an embodied engagement with one's environment can be thought of in terms of Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1991, 187), which counter the way myths operate. Myths depend on apparently universal, disembodied, and "unlocateable" (Haraway 1991, 191) knowledge, whose power Haraway calls "the god-trick of seeing from nowhere"; and this lack of a physical viewpoint allows to "put the myth into ordinary practice" (Haraway 1991, 189) – the author of the stories that myths propagate being no one; myths are just there, as if a given. And myths have the power to draw "veils over the surface of reality" (Frampton 1990, 29) in ways that make seeing the world in its complexity and diversity difficult. So, according to Haraway, "only partial perspective promises objective vision" (Haraway 1991, 190); only a viewpoint based on subjective and experiential being legitimizes generalizations. Rebecca Solnit talks about a similar way of understanding the world when she says that growing in and through a particular place offers a "coherent foundation" to reach out into the farther world (qtd in Campbell 2022, 11-12). This way of seeing is advocated for in *A Good Day to Die* through Harrison's narrator, who, when going fishing, experiences his environment not through the tropes of myth but rather through interaction and what he calls "errant details," which enable him to see what the myth typically glosses over.

> Gibbon's men had watched the squaws come out of the teepees and stoke the morning fires before returning to their husbands and children. … Then the charge with the Cavalry shooting low into the tents to pick up as many sleeping bodies as possible…. I had a sharp heavy strike but failed to hook the fish. … The water reminded me of the name of Chief Looking Glass. I looked at my reflection in the water and said it aloud several times. He drank water here. Funny how such errant details make it real as if my own reflected body were that of Looking Glass taking a drink a few minutes before the battle. (Harrison 1973, 139-140)

In his later novels (such as *Dalva* and *The Road Home*) and essays, Harrison often makes it painfully clear that American nation-state building happened at the expense of Indigenous tribes, who were killed or evicted from their homeland. In a 2008 novel, for instance – *The English Major* – he reinvents the names of the states as the names of the tribes that previously lived in the territories now divided into states. In "Poetry as Survival," he paints a poignant metaphor to illustrate the scope of annihilation that accompanied the formation of the United States. He asks the reader to "imagine a map of the United States covered with white linen" that is "riddled with the blood of over two hundred Native American civilizations we virtually destroyed, from Massachusetts to California" (Harrison 1991, 300). *A Good Day to Die* is an example of Harrison's fledgling literary political advocacy for seeing the United States as not only a product of Western-European ideologies but also a place where other ways of seeing and making the world matter.

By contrast to the narrator's embeddedness in physical reality and his openness to where the "errant details" of that reality might lead, Tim's determination to follow the myth is achieved through a disconnection from his body and a suppression of the senses with alcohol, drugs, and violence. In fact, it is only by

disregarding the body and its needs that he can pursue the dream – something ephemeral which Haraway calls the "deadly fantasy" (Haraway 1991, 188) that "*disembodies* experience" (Campbell 2016, 11; emphasis in the original). Attempts at putting the myth of the West into practice disconnect Tim from the world and the reality at hand and in the end literally kill him. But the narrator's ability to feel safe practically "on any body of water" (Harrison 1973, 37), be it Michigan, Key West, Oregon, or Montana, is an instance of a "partial perspective" that spans out to "objective vision," a "situated knowledge" that stems from an embodied experience of active engagement with a river. His perspective, although partial, subjective and locatable, allows him to feel at home on any river.

A Good Day to Die affirms Richard Slotkin when he writes that myths influence us "with such power that our perception of contemporary reality and our ability to function in the world are directly, often tragically affected" (Slotkin 1973, 3). The trajectory that Tim follows is an emanation of this. His choice and single-mindedness to follow the escape route west to attain questionable freedom by leaving behind everything he has failed at tragically affects his perception of reality. Drugs and alcohol blur that perception even further, altogether removing him from reality as it is. Through the character of the narrator, the novel roots for engagement and curiosity, openness and connection to the physical world, which unfolds in a diversity of stories. While employing a framework and tropes typical for the road novel and the Western, *A Good Day to Die* draws on the contemporaneous concerns that had found expression in the counterculture of the sixties and in later environmental protection movements. Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkeywrench Gang*, featuring a similarly minded group of young people set on blowing up the Glen Canyon Dam, closely followed (1975). Although Harrison was skeptical about technology and progress, the emerging concern of this early book is that the myth homogenizes and appropriates reality in ways that hide and regenerate violence, while partial knowledges and communication, interaction and engagement with reality may open ways for reckoning history and clear vision.

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