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Overview: a sketch of themes in analysis of creaturely motives

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This is a response to a Research Gate session on “Horror Sanguinis,” an essay posted by D.L. Smith and Ioanna Panaitiu, on rites of purification through which cultures prepare warriors and others tainted by violence to reenter society.

My comment sketches some basic themes in my work on creaturely motives and cultural analysis.

Following Otto Rank, Ernest Becker argues that killing others momentarily overcomes terror of death. In this view the social taboo against killing is a crucial component of collective denial of death.

My work (Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the 90s, and The Psychology of Abandon: Berserk Style in American Culture) emphasizes the coherence of the behavior. Like hunting, warfare seeks through killing to feed an appetite for more life. Through food, sexual fertility, slaves, and booty, triumph brings psychophysiological release from fear and depression and feeds self-esteem.

The danger, as Becker and others have stressed, is that once a killer violates the taboo or denial enclosing death, the violation is apt to be self-perpetuating as panic or berserk rage, with no natural closure. Hence the many rites involving food and mouth taboos: because the panic (or, as Shay reminds us in Achilles in Vietnam, the berserk state) may lead to cannibalism. Today, as in the past, soldiers running amok may destroy an enemy’s genitals and eat body parts.

Again: the behaviors are coherent as expressions of creaturely motives. We always have to kill to eat or we die. The mouth that kisses and forms social language also routinely and inescapably hides teeth that kill and chew up other living things, digesting them into (taboo) shit. Our denial of this ambivalence we register, among other things, by calling enemies or scapegoats "assholes" or "shithheads," etc.

In The Psychology of Abandon and Berserk Style in American Culture, I've proposed that we are richly ambivalent about violating the taboos of denial: that is, the language we use expresses our horror of violence, but also encodes fantasies that if we could just shed our inhibitions, we could gain access to extraordinary resources. The evidence is in military culture, sport, economics, sexuality, and the like.

The reentry rituals described in "Horror Sanguinis" are central to cultural practice, but of course also part of a panoply of strategies for organizing and controlling the problem of death—and all that death signifies: futility, weakness, illness, hunger, guilt, rage, etc. A tragic complication of culture is that death, alas, can’t be confined to a Roman martial season, eg, because in symbolic and physiological expressions, it is continually present in innumerable ways (sublimated or disguised when we’re lucky) in everyday experience. As Robert J.
Lifton has maintained, we can only think of death in terms of symbolic equivalents. And by implication, we never wholly stop thinking about the equivalents, however benign they may be in particular moments.

It's not surprising that around 50% of rampage killers in the US have had military experience (*Psychology of Abandon*). It could be argued that the military style of rampage assaults (school and office massacres) reflects the hypermilitarized state of the nation these days, with a lack of demarcation between war and peace as well as widespread availability of military-style weapons and roles. Many young rampage killers fit into the category of "pseudocommandos."

A critical determinant of self-control in extreme violence, as the essay points out, is "moral injury." Following Shay, I think of this as the foundational sense of "what is right" in the soldier's (or killer's) development of personality. Shay, Becker, Lifton et al are right, I think, to stress the way "rightness" is foundational in psychic development: meaning of course not just particular items in a moral code, but the organizational feeling of rightness or coherence that we think of as sanity.

It goes without saying that cultural purification and individual character fuse in feedback loops that can make analysis as important as it is challenging. It's hard to think of a more challenging problem than the trauma of violence and release from trauma, precisely because individual and society are joined in that knot of denial. You can say of polluting violence what I've said of trauma: that it's enduringly problematical because the injury is also an interpretation of the injury.