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The Melancholy of Desert(ed) Places

Abstract: Being traditionally associated with Saturn (or Chronos, the god of time), the melancholic mood has been most often analyzed in relation to a specific temporality. On the contrary, the aim of this paper is to explore the theme of melancholy as it appears in two films, relating it to cinematic space and to show that certain spaces or places have a privileged relationship with the solitude of man and his melancholic mood, namely the desert or deserted places. Even if we refer to the badlands of the Northeast region of Brazil from *Behind the Sun*, by Walter Salles, to the real deserts of Texas and Mexico or to the deserted border town from *The three burials of Melquiades Estrada* by Tommy Lee Jones, these spaces are not a mere background/setting in which things happen – they are places that make things happen, that actually generate the narrative (as shown by film theorists and critics like Martin Lefebvre and Myrto Konstantarakos, in their studies on cinematic space). That is why in these films desert spaces are, on the one hand, an object of (confusing, inexplicable) desire and, on the other hand, a catalyst for the emergence of melancholy. In *Behind the sun*, the melancholic affect occurs due to the collision of two opposite vectors: the ferocious attempt of the deserted land to keep the characters in a physical, psychological and mental captivity, and the manifest or subliminal desire of the characters to release themselves from these constraints; while in Tommy Lee Jones' film an entire community is contaminated by melancholy because of the liminal position of a small deserted border town.

Keywords: spatiality, desert, deserted places, desertion, melancholy, affect.

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From the history of melancholic spaces

The connection between melancholy and spatiality or landscape is relatively recent in the history of Western culture, beginning to be sketched only in the 17th and 18th centuries. Instead, the consecrated equation was that of the relationship between melancholy and temporality. Even from the time of Hippocrates (the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.), when the

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doctrine of the Four Humours was crystallized, the black bile (*atra bilis*, μέλαινα χολή, *melaina chole*), together with the phlegm, the yellow bile and the blood, "corresponded, it was held, to the cosmic elements and to the divisions of time" (Klibansky *et al.* 3). Consequently, melancholy was linked to a specific age (maturity or, in some cases, old age), season (autumn) and time of the day (twilight). However, as demonstrated by Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl in the well-known work *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, the fundamental link between the black bile and temporality was sealed only in the ninth century, with the ink of astrology (and mythology), when the melancholics had definitively entered under the sign of Saturn – the Latin god of crops, whose characteristics have been conflated with those of Kronos since Antiquity since Antiquity to those of Kronos, Kronos being the son of Uranus castrated and dethronated by Zeus, and with those of Chronos, the god of time, one of the two primordial divinities in the view of the ancient Greeks (133). Although this connection had been initiated since the second century by Vettius Valens and his successors, the association of the black bile with Saturn was not constant and precise until the ninth century (147).

In this diachronic path, the space element intervenes slowly, in the 17th and 18th centuries, when we witness the move from the bimilenary "concern with discerning melancholy in individuals", towards investigating this affect "across the spectrum of environmental experience and expression" and identifying non-human subjects of melancholy, in music, atmosphere, decor and landscape (Bowring 77). This made it possible to circumscribe the sites, the places of melancholy. Drawing up the vocabulary of melancholy elements found in landscape, the New Zealand professor and landscape architecture academic Jacky Bowring enumerates, in *A field guide to melancholy*: ruins (whether they are perceived prosaically or romantically), landscapes of death (cemeteries, memorials, sites of tragedy or any places where atrocities occurred), liminal sites, spaces of infinity (an endless road, the vastness of sky, the expanse of ocean/sea, the immense and monotone desert) (71-72). Of these, I think that desert spaces and deserted or desertified places have a privileged relationship with melancholy.

As far as the desert itself is concerned, as a vast expanse of sand, it has always occupied, in relation to European civilization, a marginal, peripheral position, since it is absent from the geography of the old continent. Due to this positioning, the desert has become an environment of seclusion, in which you retreat, solitary, leaving behind all the mundane preoccupations. Solitude, detachment from the world, and, to some extent, from one's self, incitement to reflexivity and self-reflexivity, all determine the melancholy character of the desert. Historically, the attested connection of this space with the melancholic state descends to the period of the Desert Fathers. Cut off from society, isolated in an omnipresent desolation and always waiting for divine signs that were usually long overdue, many of the hermits failed in their draconian ascetic program and succumbed at one point; they entered a deep depression, exhaustion,

and were invaded by melancholy or his companion, *acedia*. John Chrysostom and John Cassian (4th-5th centuries) speak, for example, of these two as spiritual illnesses manifested by symptoms such as: terrifying nightmares, seizures, convulsions, speech disorders, fits, faints, laziness, aversion to the surroundings, disgust with the cell, contempt for the company of his brethren, unjustified feelings of hopelessness about their salvation, attempts to commit suicide (Bowring 92; Flattley 35). The demonization of melancholy and *acedia*, which were subordinated to the sin of sorrow, was based on the reticence of the melancholic person toward divine goodness and his refusal to love God, neither directly, nor through His creation.

The connection of melancholy with the desert is also determined by the boundless character of this space, whose borders are imperceptible, creating the impression of an infinite expanse – which, in the view of Emil Cioran, is a necessary cause for the appearance of melancholic affect. “The interior infinitude and vagueness of melancholy [...] demands a space whose borders are ungraspable” (Cioran 39). In the book *On the heights of despair*, the Romanian philosopher states that melancholy occurs, on the one hand, due to an inner void, and on the other hand, on the background of perceiving an „exterior infinity”, which emphasizes, by contrast, the status/the condition of the man as a solitary being, left in a huge, incomprehensible and foreign world. “Melancholy detachment removes man from his natural surroundings. His outlook on infinity shows him to be lonely and forsaken. The sharper our consciousness of the world’s infinity, the more acute our awareness of our own finitude” (39). Therefore, in Cioran’s view, the intensity of melancholy is directly proportional to the vastness of the space which the melancholic inhabits. Which is why the desert, due to its geographical features, is gaining ground among melancholy places.

However, besides the actual sandy desert, I think that any space or place, once deserted or desertified, becomes melancholic. Desertification as such is an extreme case for triggering melancholy, and it works according to the desert space principles outlined above. Nevertheless, to become melancholic, there is no need to transform that place according to the coordinates and spatial characteristics of desert geography – *i.e.* its assimilation with an amorphous, inorganic, monotone, homogeneous and undifferentiated mass –, it is sufficient to empty that place of what we can say was its meaning, essence or substance. For example: a house, to arouse the melancholic affect, does not necessarily have to be demolished, reduced to the state of rubble and ruins; it is enough to be deprived of the people, of the human interaction, of the life that naturally should enliven it, that is, to lack that what would justify us to call it home and to have in it the feeling of a home. We would also say about a village or a city that they are places of melancholy, not necessarily if they are devastated by a war or by any cataclysm, but also if they are deserted by what normally was animating them: the inhabitants and the hustle/bustle of everyday life. Similarly, a natural environment, a forest, for example, will be a melancholic environment if it is deserted by the bio-system that maintains it and makes it namely a forest: animals,

insects, birds, grass or the greenery of the trees, etc. I do not claim that these spaces are melancholic only under such conditions – there is, of course, the alternative of temporality: choose any place and wait until dusk and, in that context, you will have all the chances of being melancholy – but that any space or place, even those that commonly had no connection with melancholy (in the history of melancholic affect in European culture), can become melancholic if they suffer a desertion.

I have spoken so far about desert or deserted places/spaces as active factors that cause the melancholic mood or affect, or as privileged places of melancholy. However, we do not have to believe that melancholy belongs to/lies in those spaces regardless of the perspective and commitment of a subject. In *Affective mapping. Melancholia and the politics of modernism*, Jonathan Flatley says, based on Silvan Tomkins' theory of affection, that there is a "somewhat fluid relationship" between the affect and its object. "That is, it is often difficult to tell whether the affect originates in the object or the affect produces the object" (17). In this second sense, if we perceive melancholy as a mood – in the meaning that Martin Heidegger gives to this term (*Stimmung*), as an existential, inherent to *Dasein* –, then being in the melancholic mood means to see the whole surrounding reality through the grid of this mood, as through "a kind of affective atmosphere" (19); that is, to project melancholy upon the place where you are. Therefore, ontologically, melancholy can become "a way of seeing the world" (Radden 185). We must also point out that the melancholic affect or mood does not condition a negative perception of desert or deserted space (as happened, for example, in the tradition of the desert fathers). There are also cases where melancholy is manifested by an incomprehensible, hazy, vague attraction to something indeterminate of this space which, due to its smooth, monotonous and homogeneous surface, constitutes a white, unwritten sheet upon which individuals can project their desires and fantasies. These complex coordinates of the seminal relationship between melancholy and desert(ed) spaces or places is fully exploited and nuanced in the cinematic universe, on which I will focus my attention further in this paper, by analyzing two films: *Behind the sun*, by Walter Salles and *The three burials of Melquiades Estrada*, by Tommy Lee Jones.

The oppressive desert(ed) land in *Behind the sun*

In Walter Salles's film, *Behind the sun* (2001) – originally entitled *Abril Despedaçado*, which literally means, in Portuguese, "Torn apart April" –, space is not just a simple background in which things happen. On the contrary, in the cinematic world built by the Brazilian filmmaker, in which the dead command, lead and set the rules for the living, the land that contains these dead men is assimilated to them, thus becoming an active factor which makes things happen. In this way, in the footsteps of film theorists and critics Martin Lefebvre and Myrto Konstantarakos, we should perceive landscape not as a mere (subservient) setting where action and events take place, but

as a character, as an important cinematic force that generates the narrative (Lefebvre xii; Konstantarakos 1). Land/geography triggers the feud between the Breves and Ferreiras, and it determines the perpetuation of the conflict, keeping the members of the Breves family in a physical, mental and psychological captivity and defining their identity. At the mental level, this bondage is manifested first and foremost by the fierce rigor with which the characters have to respect and worship the tradition of this house, which is under the patronage of several generations of men who have given their lives for that piece of land, which is why their images were raised to the rank of tutelary figures, and their function – still preserve many traits from the role of the dead in the Greek tragedy (which also gave the general framework of the film [Avellar and Fernandes 48]). Secondly, the decisive influence of space on the characters is also expressed by consistently resorting to the law of talion, that is, by transgressing the mere respect and worship and by enacting (when the time comes) the concrete example of the ancestors to sacrifice for the land and the honor of the family. This is exactly what father says when the youngest member of the Breves – Pacu (Ravi Ramos Lacerda) – tries to convince his brother to evade the duty of prolonging the absurd feud by killing a son of Ferreiras: “Listen to me, kid. Your grandfather, your uncles, your eldest brother, all died for this land and for our honour”. Therefore, the land demands vengeance. The space, though deserted and almost sterile, determines the parameters of thought in the Breves family.

Physically, captivity is highlighted by the explicit prohibition of the patriarch, the authoritarian and punitive father (played by José Dumont), to leave the perimeter of their land for frivolous purposes or without a well-grounded reason. Consequently, when the two sons dare one night to resort to the extravagance of an escapade into the magical world of the circus, the father will punish the older brother, Tonho (Rodrigo Santoro), unswervingly beating him for the disrespect of their ancestors. The blind attachment to that space is also revealed by the difficult, exhausting work that the characters do for the processing of sugar cane – which Pacu perceives as an absurd and inhumane work that a ruthless and unreliable God is responsible for: “Ma says God never gives us heavier burdens than we can bear. But God keeps messing up. He sometimes dumps such burdens on us, we all collapse”. The absurd nature of this activity is emphasized with greater sharpness by obsessively repeating the same halucinant circular motion around the mill. Just like the oxen involved in that movement – “We’re like oxen here. We go round and round and never go anywhere”, says Pacu –, the members of the Breves family have also become a simple function of that mill well grounded in the land and tradition; a function of an old family practice that, although once it was profitable and much easier (when the hard work was done by slaves), is now doomed to failure. Analyzing the film from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, Michael Brearley sees in this scenario a repetitive compulsion – “the need to go on doing something even when it is hard to know what sort of advantage there is to oneself” –, which manifests in both animals and humans. “The oxen are tied to

the wheel and the whip, but the system is internalized and habituated – as the child known at first only as ‘The Kid’ notices, they go round in circles even when released from their chains” (Brearley 137-138). The same thing happens to the Breves and Ferreiras, who perpetuate the work left from their ancestors, on the one hand, and the bloody feud, on the other. In this context, the words of Salustiano (a circus performer, played by Luiz Carlos Vasconcelos) about the two feuding families are conclusive: “It’s like two snakes I saw fighting. One bit the tail of the other. The other bit the tail of the first. They ate each other up until nothing was left. Nothing but a pool of blood on the ground.”

The decline of the Breves family and that of the sugar cane culture are linked to the desolation (or even desertification) of that land, placed “in the middle of nowhere” and called *Stream of Souls*, from which the stream “dried up, only the souls are left”, confesses the kid. But we can see in the film that the souls have also radically diminished in the Breves family, who no longer has slaves, and whose members have been killed by the far more wealthy and larger Ferreiras family, which is engaged in animal husbandry – much more profitable than sugar cane cultivation powered by human labour. As Michael Brearley observes in his film essay, *Behind the sun: from blind vengeance to freedom*, the aridity of that desert space (Brazilian badlands of Northeast Region) is reflected in the psyche and the identity of the characters, “the rough, barren landscapes matching the harshness and sterility of the human arrangements for dealing with murder and/or with issues of responsibility for the death of a stranger or guest on one’s territory” (135). This matching is best seen in the person of the rigid and authoritarian father, who is devoid of any trace of affection, devitalized, guided by the principle of duty and law taken from ancestors and from which he can not come out. In a more plastic expression, the kid says that, living in that unbearable, desolate environment in which almost never rains, the burning sun has melted their brains, deserting their lives of everything that goes beyond the everyday lucrative behavioral syntax: „And the sun here is so hot, but it’s so hot, that it sets our heads boiling like a pot of molasses”.

In this context, melancholy occurs precisely at the intersection of this absurd captivity of the earth, land, desert space and the manifest or subliminal desire of the characters to release themselves from these constraints; *i.e.* on the battlefield of these two opposing vectors. Accordingly, if the earth is oppressive, the gate of escape will be projected on three other elements/symbols: air, fire and water, all embodied in the person of Clara (Flavia Marco Antonio), a travelling circus performer who, in that context, represents the stranger (*xenos*), the outsider and who, due to her perpetual movement, from place to place, transgresses the limits of space and geography. In the scene where Tonho meets Clara for the first time, she is “depicted walking high, on stilts, in the air rather than trudging earth-bound in circles”, what gives the impression of an aerial being, capable, like a bird, to rise far above the telluric constraints. Later, we see her spinning acrobatically on a rope at a great height. As

Michael Brearley points out, "Clara's acrobatic flying in a circle created by Tonho's turning of the bottom of the rope is not only an expression of sexuality and love, and the whirling of Tonho's mind when confronted by choice. It is also life and freedom, fun; an escape from and contrast to the wheel of deadly compulsion" (139). For Tonho, these releasing experiences that are under the sign of the air were repressed, refuted, as we see in the scene where Tonho goes on a swing, the rope breaks, he falls down and Pacu tells him „you forgot how to fly." In contrast to the dust, inhospitable monotone decor and the infernal atmosphere of the Breves household (especially around the mill), the world of the circus to which Clara belongs is one of exuberant colors, laughter, fun, imagination and vitality. If the fire used in the mill for processing sugar cane is one of the inferno, an oppressive fire, demanding obedience and barren repetitiveness, the one used by Clara is a magical fire, that transgresses the narrow limits of everyday reality towards the unknown, the mystery, towards a world guided by the principle of pleasure. For Pacu, Clara is, as a savior, under the sign of water, being assimilated to the siren from the book he received from her. Therefore, he will try to escape the „tyranny of endless routine" (Brearley 140) and to take refuge in fantasies that he will project upon the compensatory aquatic universe he wishes to reach, building heroic, happy scenarios. However, when Tonho decides to fulfill Pacu's dream by going on the seashore instead of him (as his younger brother chose to sacrifice his life against the Ferreiras for Tonho), what we see is an agitated, cold, even threatening sea with high tumultuous waves, that does not seem to be the much coveted liberating space (Avellar and Fernandez 34). Tonho's gaze, like the gaze of Antoine (played by Jean-Pierre Leaud) in François Truffaut's film *The 400 Blows*, is lost, confused, uncertain, which is a sign that things have not been solved and melancholy is still alive.

The liminal desert(ed) space in *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*

Unlike nostalgia – a word invented by a Swiss medical student, Johannes Hofer, in the late seventeenth century (Bowring 102) – of which one can speak, pointing quite precisely the object that caused it, when we talk about melancholy we are on a field of uncertainties. No matter how they define it, the critics and the theorists generally agree that it is very difficult to identify the cause of melancholy (when it is not discussed in medical, „scientific" terms, being subsumed to depression), this word bringing with it a large dose of ambiguity and being ambivalently connotated. The melancholic mood means sadness, alienation, solitude, despondency, but also the augmentation of reflexivity and autoreflexivity, an increased mental acuity; therefore the melancholic person is neither inside the world/the community, nor entirely outside of it. He is, as Victor Turner would have said, a liminal person. In his book *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, the British cultural anthropologist

states that:

the attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* („threshold people“) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (95)

The spatial objective correlatives which correspond to such a condition are the liminal sites (hotels, airport lobbies, bridges, gas stations, borders and frontiers, no man's lands, disputed territories, etc.). Moreover, if these liminal areas are deserted, then matching is even better.

This is precisely the case with Tommy Lee Jones' film, *The three burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), the first part of which – the shooting of Melquiades, an illegal Mexican immigrant, by a newly hired American border patrolman, Mike Norton, who is abducted and forced to exhume the dead body by Melquiades' friend, Pete Perkins, who promised to return it to Melquiades family home in Mexico, for burial – takes place in a small border town in the West Texas, named Van Horn. Because of its location, Van Horn does not belong to Mexico, of course, but it does not belong to the United States either, being too far away from the usual rhythm and the proliferation of activities within the country. It is a liminal, in-between town, with the American state behind it and Mexico in front; and around, the flat desolate desert land of Texas. All this geographic conjuncture determines the desert character of Van Horn – a hotbed of melancholy, with which it contaminates its inhabitants. They are all melancholic, with the nuances of rigor that deserve to be mentioned and distinguished.

First of all, there is the „amorphous“ mass of local people, distinct only on the surface but undifferentiated in the depth of their essential structure; a community of people that lacks exactly what should bring them together, unite and increase the cohesion of the group: communication. As Tommy Lee Jones himself says: "If you read this script, really, it doesn't look like anybody's saying anything that actually matters" (Mitchell 449). This is a community of bored, solitary people, alienated (both towards others and themselves) and incapable of emotions and feelings. These aspects are augmented by the cinematic techniques and aesthetic mechanisms used in the construction of the film's framework. Analysing these techniques, Douglas Pye observes that

the fragmentation of our experience (39 scenes in 54 minutes, with constant movement between past and present) provides brief snapshots of a society that lacks any cohesiveness. We see several locations but have no sense of their spatial relationship to one another; the only homes are either trailers or the basic ranch shacks in which Pete and Melquiades live; relationships between men and women seem unstable and intimacy fleeting. (3)

Living in a deserted small town, they have a deserted, empty life full of an endless routine, a life in which nothing really matters. An eloquent example is Rachel (Melissa Leo), "the waitress in the local restaurant, married to Bob the owner, but available for afternoons in motel rooms, not because she is a prostitute but because she is friendly and bored" (Roger Ebert). Her inner rupture manifests itself through the inability to start a new life, through the fact that, although she does not love her husband, she cannot separate from him. On the other side, her husband, Bob (Richard Jones), who also perpetuates an existential boredom and an unremitting indifference to everything, does not remember neither how long they have been married, nor what day is it. This proves that we are dealing with a world without any landmarks worthy of being emotionally invested, with people whose memory is no longer anchored in any stable foundation. Melancholy, in these cases, is regarded as negative, because it acts disintegrating, dispersing, alienating.

To see how the deserted space of Van Horn is acting on the identity of those who inhabit it, causing melancholic affection, it is conclusively the case of a character coming from outside, as is Lou Ann Norton (January Jones), wife of Mike Norton (Barry Pepper), the newly hired US Border Patrol officer who mistakenly shoots Melquiades Estrada. Leaving behind the vibrant community of the distant Cincinnati metropolis, in one of the first scenes of the movie we see the young lady arriving in this small town with lively behavior and jovial attitude – a person enthusiastic about the idea of buying a new house in a totally different place, about the adventure of a radical change in her life. Yet only after a few months spent in this dull and desolate town where she has absolutely nothing to do, the space begins to work corrosively, awakening more and more the melancholic affect and increasingly accentuating the overwhelming oppressive loneliness. Emblematic for this shift is the kitchen scene, in which, while Mike Norton is mechanically mounting his wife from behind, we hear on the television the dramatic dialogue of a married couple: "it's always the same, always the same", the husband complains, until his wife asks him if he recalls "River Valley", to which he sentimentally responds: "Yes darling, I remember River Valley. And we were happy then. And we'll be happy again. I know it. Please, don't cry. There will always be a River Valley for us." His wife then intones, "I hope so, Johnny, I hope so". As Lee Clark Mitchell observes, Lou Ann is "a figure unclear about her own desires" (449). Nevertheless, when the melancholic affect intensifies and the feeling of alienation becomes increasingly acute, she has the courage and strength to utter: "I hate this place!" and to leave (at the end of the movie).

In this context of lack of communication and solidarity, the exception is the close friendship between the rancher Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones) and the Mexican cowboy Melquiades Estrada (Julio César Cedillo). Thanks to all flashbacks, we are presented with fragments of this communion, the only healthy human relationship in the desolate Van Horn, yet all we see is not but the presence of an absence, because Melquiades died at the very beginning of the film, leaving behind only a

spectrum, a reminder of what it should have been, but is no longer... Thus, right from the beginning of the film, communion is already a thing of the past. This absence, the loss of Melquiades, is one of the main causes of Pete's melancholic mood – but not the only one, as he is also heavily affected by the deserted space and everyday routine of the small town in which he lives. In this way, Pete Perkins's case lends itself to Freudian psychoanalytic interpretation of melancholia. In his 1917 famous and seminal essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud defines melancholy in relation to mourning, stating that, while in the case of mourning is successfully accepted the loss of the loved object, in the case of melancholy, the subject continues to invest libido and to identify narcissistically with the lost object (Freud 256-257 *et passim*); "he remains attached to this loss, and does not seek a cure" (Bowring 29). This attachment is rendered in the film in a very precise sense, as Pete decides to honor Melquiades wish, carrying his dead decomposing body back home in Mexico. Compared to the other inhabitants of Van Horn, for him melancholy has a dual semantic connotation: it acts on the one hand negatively, causing his loneliness and estrangement from the social sphere, with its dull life and monotonous geography, but, on the other hand, it acts positively, unifying, solidarily, even if this solidarity is manifested towards the trace of an absence, towards a loss.

In his 2000 essay, Slavoj Žižek criticizes the Freudian theory of melancholy, accusing Freud of confusing between loss and lack. While for the founder of psychoanalysis melancholy (as a pathological condition) occurs, first of all, as a result of the loss of a loved object/person and, secondly, due to melancholic person's refusal to give up this loss, for Slovenian philosopher there is no loss at all in the act of melancholy, because "the object-cause of desire is originally, in a constitutive way, lacking". This leads to the melancholic interpretation of the lack as a loss, "as if the lacking object was once possessed and then lost". In short, explains Slavoj Žižek:

"what melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is nothing but the positivization of a void or lack, a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself. The paradox, of course, is that this deceitful translation of lack into loss enables us to assert our possession of the object; what we never possessed can also never be lost, so the melancholic, in his unconditional fixation on the lost object, in a way possesses it in its very loss." (559-660)

So if the Freudian interpretation of melancholy matches the character of Pete, Žižek's one fits the character who gives the name of the film, Melquiades Estrada – the one around whose death and corpse pivots the whole action.

Like Lou Ann Norton, Melquiades is also an outsider, coming from a place in Mexico that, he says, has almost paradisiacal, dreamlike features. In a flashback, we are presented with Melquiades sentimentally describing his hometown to Pete:

“Jiménez is a beautiful fucking place. It sits between two hills. The air is so clear there you feel like you can hug the mountains with your arms. A stream of clear clean fresh water bubbles up right out of the rocks there. If you go to Jiménez, I swear to you your heart will break with so much beauty.” Therefore Jiménez is sketched as a town with completely opposed features to Van Horn, *i.e.* a non-deserted, lively, idyllic place. Also, if Van Horn is marked by solitude and alienation, Jiménez is presented as a space of solidarity and fulfilment, which the young cowboy had to leave because of poverty, leaving behind a beautiful wife (Evelia Camargo) and three children who are still waiting for him after five years of absence. However, when Pete Perkins finally arrives (following the topographical indications given by Melquiades on a sheet of paper) to what should have been the hometown of his deceased friend, he finds out that nobody knows a Melquiades Estrada, that Evelia Camargo exists, but was not his wife, that Melquiades did not actually have any children or family and the beautifully imagined Jiménez is but a desolate ruined site. Hence, as Žižek claims, in Melquiades’ case, melancholy comes from this very lack, over which he designed his deepest desires and truly believed/considered them as lost. A powerful imaginative exercise, a mechanism of faith which can be observed – as Lee Clark Mitchell notices in his article *“Is There Actually Any Jiménez?”: Believing as Seeing in The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* – in the very scene where Melquiades tells Pete about his family: “when he says «And this is Evelia. Evelia Camargo, my wife », the distant look in his eyes suggests a range of emotion from actual reminiscence to fantasy desire to pure invented memory” (453).

Nevertheless, with Melquiades we have not finished yet the inventory of melancholy in Tommy Lee Jones’s movie. There is another case, of an old blind unnamed man (played by Levon Helm) who lives in a desolate house in the middle of the desert and whom Pete Perkins and Mike Norton encounter on their way to Jiménez. Even if he lives in his dilapidated shelter, feeding on some spoiled food which has been stored for months (if not for years) and always waiting for his son, whom he knows to have cancer and therefore will never return, the old man does not want to leave that barren, waste land, because it is his waste land: “I don’t wanna go, because I always lived here”, he says. The only thing that remains for him is his death, which he desires by all means, asking Pete to fulfill his wish by shooting him. Therefore, his melancholy manifests itself as a strange but strong desire for death, for annihilation – a wish rooted in an inner void. Moreover, because of his blindness, we can say that the outside world is also a void for him, reaching, in this way, the definition that Emil Cioran gives to melancholy: an affect that occurs when an infinite interiority (or an inner void) is doubled by perceiving an infinite exteriority (an exterior void). However, Pete refuses to shoot the old man, death being thus delayed for an uncertain period of time, leaving instead room for melancholy to persist...

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