

DEAD AGAIN [1991]

Arthur Taussig

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

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Dead Again. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. 199

Dead Again, a 1991 film by British *wunderkind* director Kenneth Branagh, is a contemporary incarnation of a *film noir* – that post-World War II phenomena of cheaply made, dark films often about detectives more corrupt and diseased than the criminals they were seeking. One aspect of their “blackness” was a result of their lack of budget – large portions of the set simply were not lit to save the money of building and decorating a complete set. The visual aspects reflected the psychology, one of depression, loneliness, and hopelessness. Men were ensnared by calculating women and brought to their doom; minor criminals made fatal mistakes; ordinary people were sucked into lethal vortexes. The movement came to an end in 1958 with, in my opinion, the greatest *film noir* ever made, Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil*. However, *film noir* is a genre that simply will not go away. It still, after all these years, seems to have strong resonances in the collective unconscious of the film industry. There is still a trickle of these films being made: *Chinatown* [1974], *Bladerunner* [1982], *Red Rock West* [1993], *Romeo is Bleeding* [1994], and, *Dead Again* [1991].

What makes *Dead Again* different from all the *films noir* is that director/writer Kenneth Branagh injects a new element – reincarnation. Perhaps *Dead Again* is the first New Age *film noir*. The crossing of time and lives, and the psychological implications inherent in this, make this film worthy of note. But there is another unique element to this film – the use of hypnosis.

A friend of mine, after seeing *Dead Again*, complained to me about the use of hypnosis in the film, "It's a travesty. Not only is it done wrong, but it is also

done for the wrong reasons. In fact, what is shown in the film is downright dangerous." The next day, another friend, this time a locksmith, complained, "Did you see how he picked that lock? Ridiculous. Not only did he use the wrong tools, what they did show was all wrong. He didn't even turn the lock to get the door open!" This is the danger of taking your expertise to the movies. Lawyers laugh at the legal proceedings in most films (*12 Angry Men* [1957], *Philadelphia* [1993], *Witness for the Prosecution* [1957], *Disclosure* [1994], etc.). Doctors howl (or wail) at movie medical practitioners and medical problems (*M*A*S*H* [1970], *Mask* [1985], *Coma* [1978], *Rain Man* [1988], *Forrest Gump* [1994], *Junior* [1994], etc.). I am sure it is the same for plumbers or taxi drivers. While it may be difficult to step back from a film that so personally involves us, to get to its deeper meanings, we must try.

First of all, hypnosis in *Dead Again* is no more hypnosis than the streets of Paris are the streets of Paris in *Singin' In the Rain* [1952]. Hollywood depends on artifice. By going to a movie, we acquiesce; in fact, we are complicit in this unwritten contract between film maker and audience – it is called "suspension of disbelief." We know that a murder, no matter how clean or how bloody, is simply a charade: someone yells "cut," the camera stops, everyone gets up and goes to lunch. This is easier to realize about murder than about something with which we are personally familiar.

Once we recognize that *all* of film is artifice, we come to our second and more difficult point: films are not that simple; they are not *just* artifice. Anyone with even a rudimentary psychological background will quickly recognize that anything in a film can have symbolic meanings that – if the

film is worth the celluloid it's made on – will further and enhance the story as it plays in the viewer's unconscious. So, while hypnosis may not be hypnosis, it certainly is something. Our question then is, in *Dead Again*, what is the *meaning* of hypnosis?

Before we plunge into our exploration, let me say something regarding the plot of the film. If you have not seen *Dead Again* and are interested in seeing the film – read no further. It is murder mystery with some really crazy – and delightful – twists. Stop reading, rent the video (or better yet, the laser disk version that is available in the uncropped, full-screen, "letterbox" format), watch it, and then read the rest of this article. In the next few sentences, I will be giving away some major plot points. Be warned.

Here is a brief plot summary of *Dead Again*. In the mid-1940s, a famous composer, Roman Strauss (played by Kenneth Branagh), is unjustly accused, found guilty and executed for the brutal slaying of his pianist wife, Margaret Strauss (Emma Thompson). She was stabbed multiply with a pair of scissors. Case closed. In contemporary Los Angeles, a private investigator named Mike Church (Kenneth Branagh, again) pursues the identity of an amnesia victim (Emma Thompson, again). We eventually learn her name is Amanda Sharp. With the help of a defrocked psychiatrist (Robin Williams) and a dishonest antique dealer and charlatan hypnotist Franklyn Madison (Derek Jacobi), she is regressed to a previous life and the mid-1940s murder. It is eventually revealed that Margaret of the 1940s is now gumshoe Mike of the 1990s and the composer Roman is now the amnesiac Amanda. Fate has switched their genders in reincarnating them. The link between past and

present (on the physical plane at least) is the young boy, Frankie. He and his mother, Inga, helped Roman escape from Nazi Europe. In America, Inga is his housekeeper and Frankie also lives in the house. Frankie is jealous of Margaret's love for Roman and feels that Roman should instead love and marry his mother and therefore kills Margaret. In present-day LA, adult Frankie – now a hypnotist and antique dealer – is convinced that Amanda Sharp is Margaret reincarnated and Mike is Roman Strauss and wants them both "dead again." All this might become a little clearer after several viewings.

On the surface, hypnosis seems to be used as a bridging device between the 1940s and the 1990s – a simple cinematic construct to connect the two eras. And there are other bridges. For instance, we are given an early hint when an antique dealer (Get it? One who deals with issues of the past) comes to Mike's house and calls a Stickley chair a Haywood-Wakefield piece. First, the difference between the two furniture designers' style is not that different but a collector could easily tell the difference. Second, and more importantly here, the time difference between the two designers is about 50 years – the difference between the two murders!

The "big surprise" of *Dead Again* is the gender switching reincarnation. (The gender switching is echoed in a clever little cinematic pun thrown in for good measure: Inga, Frankie's mother is watching television when Mike Church comes to visit her. The movie she is watching is *Sorry, Wrong Number* [1948], a film in which telephone lines get crossed in much the same way as

lives get crossed in *Dead Again*.) Whether we believe in reincarnation or not, whether we believe in this type of gender switching or not, the point here is that somewhere within the "past" of each of the major characters are the elements of the opposite gender. One is immediately struck by the similarity of this idea to Jung's idea of the Anima and Animus. Jung proposed that within the unconscious of every normal person there resides the elements of the opposite gender, unexpressed and undeveloped. In Jung's day, this proposition, while revolutionary and met with much resistance, was a fairly simple one because gender roles were far narrower than today. Men were men and women were women, and that was it. Not so today.

Our gender world is far more complex, and the unthinking application of Animus and Anima is a very risky business. It may be beneficial to look upon gender as performance: each person – consciously and unconsciously – selects certain aspects of gender to perform, all other possibilities remain unperformed in the unconscious. What is unperformed, that is, all the unexpressed gender possibilities, I call the Contra Gender Function. For instance, in Jung's day, a woman who was aggressive would be considered to be possessed by the Animus, something to be corrected because it would interfere with her life in the late nineteenth century. Today, many women are perfectly functional and happy while being quite aggressive. Obviously, aggression, traditionally a male function, can become part of a woman's gender performance and part of her conscious life, *not* submerged into her unconscious. Thus, the conundrum of contemporary gender roles: her aggression is conscious and normal and therefore cannot be part of her "Animus," yet it is a traditional male aspect. I believe we will do far better

using the term Contra Gender Function, allowing it to vary with each individual. The same applies to nurturing males and as well as other, now expanded, gender roles. Fortunately, *Dead Again* only edges on these problems. Thus, we can safely apply the idea of Anima and Animus in looking at the film, keeping in mind that it is a very restrictive concept.

Thus, in *Dead Again* the simpler version of Anima and Animus will do quite well and, despite the gender switching, we need not open the Pandora's Box for contemporary gender roles. Thus, Mike having been a woman in a previous life, encounters his Anima through hypnotic age regression. Similarly, Amanda, through hypnosis, recognizes her Animus. It is their (and our) assumptions about the restrictive nature of the Anima and the Animus that threw us off the track for a major portion of the film. (Notice that if we were inured to the broader idea of the Contra Gender Function, the gender switching in the film would not be quite as much of a shock.) How could a good-looking, horny male have been a sensitive, piano-playing woman dressed almost constantly in flowing satin gowns? How could a meek, amnesiac, and, for some time, mute woman who must be taken care of and protected at every turn, be a composer who is writing an opera and apparently murders his wife in a jealous fit? This aspect of the film speaks miles about our current assumptions about masculinity and femininity – even in our supposedly liberated times.

This journey to the oppositely gendered aspects of the unconscious – something Jung said is the first step toward individuation – is embroidered into the film with many symbols. For instance, the film opens with what

appears to be an execution of a murderer. This turns out to be a dream. Already we are warned that a major portion of the action concerns the influence of the unconscious on our daily lives, how repressed, unresolved issues resurface, seemingly of their own volition, to upset our comfortably routine assumptions about ourselves and our world.

But let us begin at the beginning and see how we are guided into and, hopefully, through this psychological nightmare. The film begins with newspaper clippings interspersed between the titles. This gives us a compressed version of the background we need to understand the story of the 1940s. This compression device, by the way, is a lot like the newsreel introduction Orson Welles used in *Citizen Kane* [1941]. The first word we see in *Dead Again* is, "MURDER." While this clearly locates the film in the thriller genre, we are also given the opportunity to decipher it, for, as I mentioned above, murder is not only murder, but also a symbol.

Death commonly has two psychological interpretations. In parallel to what happens in the physical world, symbolic death is the plunging of something from our world into an unknown world. That is, from conscious recognition into the unconscious. In detective films, this "something" is often what the investigator has discovered, often about him- or her-self. There can be two outcomes to this process. First, what has been dredged up from the unconscious is consciously recognized, dealt with, and becomes integrated into the greater personality. For all intents and purposes, it becomes a "dead" issue. This leads to psychological growth and health. But, there is a second, unhealthier possibility. What has come up out of the unconscious cannot be

faced and is thrust back into the darkness of the mind – repressed (again). This too is symbolized by death, but it is not a permanent one. This is the "death" of monsters like Dracula and Frankenstein's Creature that are sure to return to haunt us again. *Dead Again*, because of its complex reincarnation thesis, complicates these issues considerably.

Now let us return to the film's introduction. One of the newspaper stories interspersed with the titles is authored by a reporter named Gray Baker (Andy Garcia). He represents the self-willed plunge into the impossibility of self-realization. His name is well chosen for its meanings: he is certainly a "baker" of grayness: he is bored, self-destructive, and longs for the excitement of the war, he falls in love with a married woman on her wedding day, and, ironically enough for a man whose life is involved in communication, smokes himself into laryngeal cancer so that he can only talk through a mechanical voice simulator. A symbolic baker puts yeasted dough into an alchemical oven where it rises, that is, it becomes filled with vapors of the spirit, changes its form and becomes the staff of life. Gray Baker is the very opposite of these operations; for instance, his vapors, which he inhales, are lethal. While he himself does little, he becomes a conduit for action by others. In a scene that is the best and most ghastly anti-smoking advertisement I have ever seen, Baker catalyzes Mike into the first steps of action: Mike declares himself a non-smoker. Moments later, he unknowingly supplies the key piece to the murder mystery puzzle. A gray baker, indeed.

With only these few items in the film's introduction, we are clearly warned that we must be aware of the symbolic meanings of everything in the film –

they will all have bearing on its psychological outcome. Consider. The first sequence is in black-and-white: the reporter visits the condemned man, Roman Strauss, just before his execution. After a discussion about love transcending death, we find out this sequence was really someone's dream! Contemporary times are filmed in color – mostly. But we began to ask how much of what we have seen is a dream? Certainly, the death-house sequence, but what about the newspaper clippings? If so, then what about the titles and the credits of the films itself? Are these too part of the dream? Is the film we are watching actually one of the character's dreams? Who, then, are we? Of course, all these same questions apply to the hypnotic age regression sequences as well!

Amanda Sharp (with a name like that she must be associated with the murderous scissors), mute and amnesiac, awakens terrified! She finds herself in the house where she, apparently, dreamt her own murder. She is greeted at her bedroom door by a glowing crucifix attached to a threatening nun. This film has a long series of religious references, from the investigator's name – Mike Church – to nuns and priests and even orthodox Jews wandering in and out of many scenes. A costume party is under the aegis of a cardinal. In deference to the space permitted me here, I will leave these to your analysis.

The very next scene, the following morning, contains some key symbolic elements to understanding *Dead Again*. We see several young boys playing soccer, while Amanda is oblivious to the game or the ball they are playing with. The game, of course, is the game of life, while the spherical ball symbolizes wholeness, self-understanding and the Self, something for which

everyone in the film searches. A few moments later, to the word "father" spoken off-screen, she stops the ball, picks it up and looks at it. Thus, we know that the key to finding her "self" is involved with her Animus! What better introduction can we ask to an adventure of the search for the soul?

In the next scene, detective Mike Church is introduced sitting in a car pointing the wrong way down the street, talking on his car phone. Obviously, Mike is wrong-headed in some way and is in need of straightening out. One of the things brought up in his phone conversation is that he is not looking for "Ms. Right," but for "Ms. Right Now." On the surface, he obviously is a womanizer who fears commitment. But at a deeper level, he has rejected his own internal feminine, his Anima. In most films – and for a long time we are led to believe that this is the case in *Dead Again* – his Anima would be manifest in his love interest. However, we later find out differently – and this is a unique and interesting aspect of the symbolic psychology of *Dead Again*. Mike's "Ms. Right Now" is actually part of himself that will surface "right now."

This symbolic interplay is brought out again when Mike begins to investigate the young mute amnesiac's belongings. He picks up her glove, smells it, and a ring falls out. By smelling the glove, he is attempting to internalize something feminine – perhaps he is unconsciously compensating for what is missing in himself. By inhaling the perfume, he is looking for inspiration. In addition, the glove, like many pieces of clothing, represents the Persona, the outer most aspect of the personality we present to other people in typical social situations. Here it has become detached – an appropriate symbol to introduce

someone with amnesia. (Notice – appropriately for a mute and an amnesiac – the other glove is missing.) In addition, the glove covers the hands, thus both she – it is *her* glove – and he – since he is investigating the glove and has already inhaled a portion of it – cannot control or manipulate their situation ("manus" means hand in Latin). Yet later it is the "wrong" glove that prevents her from falling directly into a murderer's clutches, but by then she and Mike have both gone beyond communicating between Personas and have gotten down to something personal. The ring that falls out of the glove symbolizes completion and wholeness. And like the Ouroboros, the snake biting its own tail, it also symbolizes the circle of life and, in this case, birth, death, and reincarnation. The jeweled anklet later (or earlier – this is so confusing) functions in the same way. You can see how this apparently simple scene, when looked at symbolically, reveals much about the characters and the action of the film.

Here are some more examples. Houses are often repositories of symbolic meaning about the owner's character. Mike's apartment, for instance, bears a strong architectural resemblance to Amanda's apartment – a central phallic tower with wings. And they both live on the top floor (we see only very late in the film). In the apartment beneath Mike's, a woman plays music. The apartment underneath, like a basement, represents the unconscious – thus there is a woman playing music somewhere in his unconscious! Later we will see Mike's emotional pitch rise and fall with the playing of the music from that apartment beneath the floor like a slightly less macabre variation of Poe's *Tell Tale Heart*. Symbolically, this is a dead giveaway that his Anima is Margaret Strauss, the pianist from a previous life.

To understand how hypnosis functions in *Dead Again*, we must understand how the film treats another common door to the unconscious – dreams. As we find out, Amanda's dreams are wrong. She dreams of Roman stabbing her with a pair of scissors. Through hypnosis, we find out that it was Frankie that did the stabbing, not Roman. Perhaps one of the psychological points of *Dead Again* is that dreams are not to be believed at face value, something most people who study dreams freely accept, but films in general seem to ignore. Yet recollections under hypnosis, whether recent or past life, are given a different level of veracity. This is a point that I will not debate here but leave to experts.

Perhaps the most important symbol in the film is the murder weapon itself – the scissors. In ancient Greek mythology, scissors are the attribute of Atropos, the last of the three Fates, the one who cuts the thread of life. The implications of this association for the film need not be elaborated. But scissors are very complex and ambiguous; they are far more than a death symbol. They are also a life symbol in that they represent the union of two similar but opposite objects (the scissors halves) and represent two acting as one. In this sense, we can see Mike and Amanda or Roman and Margaret as the elements that go together to make the scissors. Even here there is ambiguity: it would be the Margaret/Roman pair that represents death while the Mike/Amanda pair that represents life. Alternately, the scissors elements could be within each individual, one piece representing the present and one the past, Mike/Roman or Amanda/Margaret. With this internal, psychic

pairing, the outcome is more ambivalent and could lead to life or death – and this is the tension this adventure film presents to us.

Like hypnosis, the scissors are a "leakage" between states – the 1940s and the 1990s, and the conscious and the unconscious. There are other "leakages." Their past lives leak through into the present: Mike plays a snatch of Roman's opera; Mike, like Margaret in the previous time, is a little clumsy and spills some tea. This leakage seems to go in both directions, backward as well as forward, for when Gray Baker meets Margaret at her wedding reception, he says he likes to talk baseball to men, whereupon Margaret asks him who he thinks will win the World Series. As the couple gets closer and closer to the truth, the leakages become greater: Mike appears in the 1940s attempting to kill Margaret. And in the present day, in an apparent slip of the tongue, Mike calls Amanda, "Margaret."

The scissors are a connection between the two states in another way: they physically survive the intervening years. There are other constants, too. What remains constant over time and over the lives of the people in this film, reincarnated or not, is the evil, the Shadow lurking just below the surface of consciousness. Here, the root of the evil is a boy's incestuous desire for his mother – a portion of the classical myth of Oedipus. Frankie as a boy, already collecting object d'art, wants Roman to marry his mother – an obvious substitute for himself. While both Margaret and Roman die in the 1940s, Frankie and the unresolved evil lurking in his soul continue into the 1990s to again plague the same couple with the same manipulation and murder. In *Dead Again*, lives change despite reincarnation, yet evil remains constant.

But scissors have still deeper psychological implications in terms of their function. Scissors are used to cut, to discriminate and separate one thing from another or to divide a single object into several; basically, scissors are instruments of differentiation and discrimination. It is the appearance of the same scissors in both past and present that "cut" a hole, along with the hypnosis, in the time continuum that separates the two eras. The task for both the male and female heroes is to use these symbolic scissors to differentiate between past and present, between consciousness and unconsciousness, between what is consciously known and what is known but resides in the unconscious – specifically the Anima and Animus. By being used for the murder, the scissors not only end two lives, but they also connect two lives and two eras. In a sense, they also connect two psychological states.

And this is the way hypnosis is used in this film. It is one of many ways the 1940s and the 1990s are connected: Frankie and the scissors connect them physically, Margaret and Mike connect them psychologically, as do Roman and Amanda. Hypnosis fits into a hierarchy of methods of discovery. Dreams are not to be trusted. Newspapers are likewise untrustworthy. Reporters have nothing to say. Hypnosis, even in the hands of a charlatan and murderer, reveals the truth. If the hypnosis in *Dead Again* is not real hypnosis, what is it? Hypnosis, in the terms presented in this film, is the discovery that truth resides within the psyche. Hypnosis, as presented in *Dead Again*, reconfirms what every analytical psychologist already knows – to discover and heal, one must go within.