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# Intertextuality and the Breakup of Codes: Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*

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## CHRISTOPHER SHARRETT

### *Intertextuality and the Breakup of Codes: Coppola's Apocalypse Now*

For all of the aesthetic flaws focused on by critics at its release in 1979, there is little question that *Apocalypse Now* is a pivotal American film, certainly in its description of the gradual transformation of mainstream cinematic narrative. If only by virtue of its use as a reference point for describing other films and cultural phenomena, Coppola's film is a remarkable cultural artifact. Intertextual analysis of this film is necessary as it leaps the boundaries of genre categorization on an on-going basis, discovers new audiences, separates itself from the specific issue it addresses (Vietnam) to become important to other types of discourse, and enters into a wide-ranging discussion of the nature of apocalyptic consciousness in mass society and postmodern art. Quibbling about the relationship of the film to genres such as the horror film seems a fruitless task; the current form of *Apocalypse Now's* presentation as horror and cult film<sup>1</sup> obviates discussion of the theme of descent into madness; the relevance of the station play and Expressionism; the disjointed nature of the film's universe; and the final confrontation with a "monster."

The early criticism of the film's strained intellectualism and awkward *hommages* to respected high art overlooked the fact that the film's flaws are located very much in the contradictions and anxiety of the works which are the subjects of *homage*. While most of the writings on *Apocalypse Now* to date have done a successful job of validating or refuting the film's connections to literary sources,<sup>2</sup> few if any critiques have perceived how Coppola's amalgamation and updating of *The Golden Bough*, *The Waste Land*, *Heart of Darkness*, and the myths of journey and recovery relate to the cultural milieu surrounding the film's production.

More significant to an appreciation of *Apocalypse Now* may be the notion that this film, along with horror films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, is evidence of a societal "collusion in the face of triumphant barbarism."<sup>3</sup> Whereas the barbarism of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is based on the explosion of the frontier myth

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and the civilizing restraints of that experience, *Apocalypse Now* embarks on an analysis of the factors beneath the death of the American mythos in the end-of-history atmosphere of the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, "crisis of democracy" period. *Apocalypse Now* projects a collective guilt for the disruption of myth and accepts a necessary self-immolation as penance for failure. The conflicting ideologies under the film's production — the right-wing beliefs of screenwriter John Milius and the liberal, counterculture orientation of Coppola — deny any ideological reevaluation of the death of myth and of the failure of the charismatic hero that form the text of the film. Willard's refusal of the king's sceptre acknowledges the progressive movement sentiments that confronted the Vietnam predicament, but by the end of the film "everyone is insane."<sup>4</sup> As in much contemporary popular art, apocalypse is born out of the sense of the inevitable. More than most apocalyptic works, *Apocalypse Now* acknowledges historical processes and the contradictions of dominant ideology, but ultimately sticks with genre film and representational cinema overall by viewing these contradictions as endemic to human character.

A recognizable heir of the Hollywood epic, *Apocalypse Now* is a cinema of effects, particularly in its use of spectacle to overwhelm the spectator with the basic premise of the inevitability of collapse. The film's lasting value may be in the hybrid nature of its form and the deconstruction its overlapping of genres necessarily undertakes. More significant is how the deconstruction of the war film, *film noir*, and the horror film is conjoined to an evaluation of the cultural sources of the death of the hero and the revitalization of society. A discussion of this deconstruction as constituting the aspect of the work as metapolitical cultural document seems sensible as a way of prefacing any comment on the film's narrative.

The journey of Martin Sheen (the "new James Dean"<sup>5</sup>) to meet Marlon Brando, the overarching presence whose personal mystique and legendary star quality give a galvanizing force to James G. Frazer's ideas recognizable by the current audience, must be understood within the film's cultural context. Conceived in the late 1960s, the film is explicitly not *Paradise Now*, that attempt to reinstate into theatrical experience the spirit of art as religious ritual of the ancient world. *Apocalypse Now* suggests that the Dionysian spontaneity of

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late '60s culture constituted not a revolution, but a fixation on the superstructural aspects of the "American rebelliousness" for which Jimmy Carter eulogized Elvis Presley. The discovery of a Brando no longer the Adonis concretizes the Fisher King. A cultural fixation and a creation of culture, the star figure of Brando is now alternately ridiculed and lamented, deprived of basic humanity as myth is exploded without attendance to the ideological factors underneath this specific cult of personality. Along with the revisionist biographies of Kennedy and Elvis Presley,<sup>6</sup> the ridicule of the continued presence of a dissipated Brando signifies the impossibility of the "fallen rebel" myth, particularly as the falling star/hero is treated with derision and mockery (e.g., in gossip magazines and "people" segments of news broadcasts). The end of the rebel heroes in turn signifies the condition of faded ideals in the 1980s, with the suggestion that rebellion is constituted chiefly in the cult of style represented by these figures. The demonizing of the hero in revisionist biography, far from deconstructing myth, refuses to examine the individual in an historical context, and relies wholly on the devices of myth to take a different tactic by suggesting that we as a people were foolish to allow such individuals to embody collective fantasies. The star figure is forced to self-destruct, undercutting whatever value the "charismatic" personality has in signifying a period of historical change, as the idea of the hero is continually removed from the kind of rigorous analysis which would explain the relation of hero worship to social transformation/regression, particularly as the new media age is glutted with figures spawned by society's Oedipal trajectory.

The contradictions underneath the creation of charismatic figures by industry are the same contradictions addressed in *Apocalypse Now's* narrative. Although the film has been denounced for its casual gloss of the politics of Vietnam,<sup>7</sup> its text is involved in ideological questions concerning America in the 1960s; *Apocalypse Now* succeeds at a limited level in demonstrating how a nation's mythic self-conception is tied to its ideology, and the failure of ideology coincides with the disappearance of myth. This is not to say that the cause-effect relationship between myth and ideology is addressed in the film, nor is a firm ideological position carefully elaborated. Such an elaboration is not achieved perhaps because of a tension in the film between presenting very forthrightly its major

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intellectual premises, and relying heavily on the techniques of traditional Hollywood representational cinema to convey these premises.

Nevertheless, the theme of the hero's death gives *Apocalypse Now* an intellectual resonance that makes more compelling its approach to the Vietnam debacle. The scapegoat rituals of the film and the foregrounding of the texts of Frazer, Weston, Eliot, and Conrad, if they are to be understood at all, must be perceived as part of the investigation of the failure of American myth and ritual. The death of the hero, again a topic of much popular and scholarly discourse, is presented in this film explicitly as part of a controlling national *geist* and makes the audience conscious of Vietnam chiefly as another arena for the acting-out of American ritual or, rather, as the final point of displacement for a mythic past; the theme of the hero's death is conveyed with the anxiety associated with the role of myth in culture. The death of the hero suggests an end to history, but not a Nietzschean end pointing to the birth of the New Man or the regeneration of time, nor a Marxian end permitting a consciousness of a non-mythic view of history. *Apocalypse Now* is a realization of D.H. Lawrence's apocalypse-as-wish-fulfillment insofar as it suggests a self-immolation when history is no longer able to convey meaning or symbolic values. In this regard the film may be seen by many as a reactionary work, but as a representation of the limits ideology places on a perception of myth and how, in fact, these limits suggest also the contradictions and subsequent defeat of ideology rendered mythically, this is an important work of art.

The relevance of myth to the contemporary scene is conveyed as the film opens with Willard's nightmare hallucination of the burning Asian jungle. Willard's wan face is superimposed on the flames; the face is upside-down to portray immediately the narrative's basic sense of a world out of joint.<sup>8</sup> Willard's presence and his first-person narration connects him to a line of apocalyptic narrators from St. John to the narrators of Gabriel García Márquez;<sup>9</sup> the telling of the tale coincides with the movement of history, and the end of the text marks the end of time. Like St. John, Willard is a mythical narrator, since the events of the film have already happened and the story is told from mythic time. There is no suggestion, however, that Willard is proposing a code for the rest of humanity to follow, since the film

does not offer any conclusions about Willard's fate nor does it imply that Willard's personal crisis has been resolved. Willard resigns himself to be "the caretaker of Colonel Walter E. Kurtz's memory," the repository of the history of a dead world.

The apocalypse-in-microcosm is seen as Willard begins his process of self-destruction after the dream of the burning jungle. He sets fire to a picture of his wife and loses himself in alcohol and tortured ruminations about his own self-worth. Willard's crisis is concerned with more than the alienation of the veteran. The supplementation of the inferno sequence with the Doors' famous song "The End" (which now seems, along with the rest of Jim Morrison's work, a dark mythic eulogy for a generation) enhances the mythic dimension of the film and puts the character of Willard in a broader historical context. The famous Oedipal sequence of "The End" ("The killer awoke before dawn . . .") and the lines

lost in a Roman  
wilderness of pain  
and all the children are insane  
waiting for the summer rain

effect another transformation of the Age of Aquarius by showing the entrapment of this generation by the repetitions described by both Frazer and Freud. The lines "desperately in need of some stranger's hand . . . in a desperate land" evoke the Grail myth in the late '60s context; this evocation is compelling since the hero's inability to respond to his mandate suggests another form of civilization's circumscription by myth. This entrapment is hypostasized in Willard's confinement in the Saigon hotel room and his mental disintegration. He is overwrought by the idea that "every minute Charlie squats in the bush he gets stronger" while Willard grows weaker living the life of an ordinary middle-class citizen, a life he now sees as an imprisonment. He destroys his connections to family and country when he says, "When I was home there was nothing." This "nothing" establishes the image of the Wasteland, but also the sense that the void is endemic to American civilization rather than the result of a fall from grace.

The crisis of the film is established in Willard's early scene.

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Willard is a hip moralist — another incarnation of James Dean — but he is also a soldier. He is a soldier, however, fixated only on a personal code of self-discipline, on warfare as self-discovery. His despair immediately posits a separation of culture from the rituals it generates, a disjunction between signifier and signified. Willard's martial arts practice turns into the emotionally purgative rehearsal exercises of performance art, exercises which purge very little since they do not center on the cause of illness. The self-destruction of the exercises focuses us on both the premises of modernist theater (e.g., the fall of the actant/subject in absurdism) and Willard's ineffectuality within the scope of his own, very primal "drama." Willard would rather smash a mirror than dissolve into narcissism, but the wound resulting from the damage further signifies repetition of the self-destruction based on an inflated and directionless self-image. Willard gauges his value only in his ability to perform his military role, but his self-expectations are no longer grounded in the common code of a society. He says, "Everyone gets everything he wants," suggesting a total faith either in consumer democracy or in the beneficence of the gods, but then he says, "I wanted a mission, and for my sins they gave me one." When two soldiers come to take Willard to Intelligence Headquarters he inquires, "What are the charges?" Far from believing that the freedom of life will give him everything he wants, Willard, like Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, is overcome by guilt based on his own sense of inadequacy, making him ready for victimization at the hands of the CIA and Army officials at Nha Trang.

At I-Corps Headquarters language disjunction is made pronounced as Willard simultaneously affirms and denies his role as CIA assassin: "I am not aware of such operation and would not be at liberty to discuss them if they did exist." The Trang officials interpret this as a "yes." They in turn tell Willard that the plot to assassinate Kurtz "does not exist, nor will it ever exist." The contradictions of the dominant ideology are spelled out quickly by this conversation, which neatly capsulizes the workings of the clandestine power structure and its ability actually to transform past, present, and future. By controlling information through disinformation, the power structure destroys language (Willard's order to "terminate [Kurtz] with extreme prejudice"). Willard's luncheon with General Corman and Jerry, the CIA agent, further enunciates the contra-

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dictions of ideology made manifest in communication. While the General's luncheon of roast beef and a shrimp laid out on neat linen and china ("a bite to eat") is a typical symbol of upper middle-class comfort and complacent ease ("Let's pass the food both ways to save time"), the meal conveys alienation rather than communion. Willard senses that he is being inspected, his every word analyzed. The camera focuses on his hand gingerly holding a table knife, the same hand the rulers expect him to use for murder.

The General plays Willard the tape of Kurtz's garbled transmission. Kurtz could be reading poetry when he says

We must incinerate them, pig after pig, cow after cow . . . and they call me an assassin . . . what do you call it when the assassins start accusing the assassins?

But for the Nha Trang officials the tape is simply evidence that Kurtz is "insane." The standards for evaluating mental health are not clear, however, even as Willard feels coerced to go along with the judgment: "Yes sir, obviously insane sir." Willard, the true intellectual, must put up with the condescending manner and intellectual posturing of the "enlightened" General Corman ("Well, you see Willard . . ."). The General does not in fact psychoanalyze Kurtz; he quotes Lincoln and speculates about how "the good side of man's nature does not always triumph." Kurtz's failure is an individual failure, divorced from any historical process. The tape recording is sufficient evidence to suggest to the officials not that Kurtz has committed unusual crimes, but that he is surfacing as a symptom of an illness that threatens to reveal, as Willard terms it, "the whole circus." The traditional maxim that America is a "nation of laws, not men" is violated in this scene. Willard's order to kill an American officer flies in the face of such wisdom, evidencing still further the breakup of a code. During this scene the director has Martin Sheen violate the frame (much as Robert DeNiro does in *Taxi Driver*) as Willard stares into the camera to register for the audience its incorporation into the crisis.

Willard quickly identifies with the scapegoating of Kurtz ("his voice on the tape really put the hook in me"). Willard's connections to

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Kurtz have been made apparent from the beginning of the film; the opening scene of the burning jungle contains images of the conclusion that becomes clearer with repeated viewings. The connection is obvious as the journey to the renegade Kurtz's outpost becomes for Willard a journey into the shared personality of himself and Kurtz. Willard continually examines Kurtz's dossier as he sits perspiring on the deck of the PBR; the Vietnam War often evades him as it does the boat's stoned-out crew. Willard recognizes Kurtz as the heart of his self-discovery, the river on which he journeys "a main circuit cable plugged straight into Kurtz."

Enough has been written on the theme of contradiction informing every detail of the film (Lance taking drugs; homefront luxuries; rock and roll in a different culture; the army's destruction rather than "rescue" of the population<sup>10</sup>); at issue here is how the film exposes the mythic apparatus of war. Most significant is how the confrontation between Willard and Kurtz and the implementation of the Fisher King myth address the question of the failure of mythic belief. The crisis of the film can be recognized as Girard's "sacrificial crisis" where a society's rituals no longer serve the purpose of displacing violence and reaffirming a common code.<sup>11</sup> The specific apocalypse of the film is bourgeois society's refusal to recognize the onset of chaos and its attempt to keep reinstated the same fragmented code and reactivated the same worn-out mechanism. Col. Kilgore is a demonic rather than a Kubrick-style parodic figure when we recognize that the Air Cavalry in Vietnam *did* wear the antiquated hats and neckerchiefs, and blow the same bugle calls of Bull Run and The Little Big Horn. The attempt to keep displacing American violence in activities that are bereft of mythic value, unable to unify society, forms the horror of the film. As if by osmosis Kilgore attempts to assume through the signification of hat, sunglasses, and foulard the characteristics of legendary military leaders. But one form of signification undercuts another. Kilgore's surfer T-shirt destroys the authority of his hat; Patton's camaraderie with his troops is transformed into Kilgore's homoerotic banter with his men around a barbecue, as distinctions of rank dissolve while class distinctions remain intact. Kilgore is a conscienceless sadist whose "love for his boys" necessitates their willingness to sacrifice themselves to satisfy his vanity. Willard recognizes Kilgore's insane military

tactics, but remains confused as to why the rulers would condemn Kurtz for "insanity and murder" while ignoring Kilgore. A gradual process is needed for Willard to realize that ideology can absorb all manner of insanity so long as it doesn't contradict or reveal the true nature of power.

Willard's discovery is fragmentary. He learns about Kurtz through official dossiers, *Newsweek* articles, departmental memoranda. This "education" of Willard is fitting for several reasons. Willard discovers how the power structure can alternately lionize and victimize one of its own; as the situation becomes more unstable, the crisis is seen as imminent and the rules become increasingly arbitrary. As the destruction of the code occurs the call for victims also increases. Willard's survey of Kurtz's dossier also suggests his separation from the "total picture" and the ability of power to mediate knowledge of a crucial aspect of social crisis just as it mediates all knowledge. An example of this mediation on a different scale is the Hau Phat stage show with Bill Graham and the Playmates. Here the theatre of war is transformed into pure spectacle, a media "happening." The Hau Phat show is the opposite of theatre since it foments rather than discharges emotion. Instead of unifying the group around a common idea, it instills a greater sense of chaos. The Playmates tempt and tease the G.I.s with the offer of something immediately withdrawn, which propels the soldiers into more obscenities and outrage, causing internecine fights, the perfect emblem of the vicious circle of consumerism. The distance between the spectacle itself (with its lack of language or any expression beyond the flaunting of sex) and the spectacle's intended audience suggests the remoteness of this event from any form of communication. Like a TV game show host, huckster Bill Graham is unctuous and solicitous of "all you guys who worked so goddamn hard on Operation Brute Force," only to register disgust when his show goes awry, confronting him with a possible commercial disaster. The violent obscenities shouted by the G.I.s and the tension of this scene suggest not just the failure of this form of spectacle but the unconscious rejection of what is to be worshipped and defended. The Playmate of the Year, escorted by two Green Berets, is the Whore of Babylon, an emblem not so much of the exploitation of woman by dominant ideology (although she is literally put on a pedestal by the G.I.s) as of the cumulative

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vulgarity and corruption of American culture. The violence of the G.I.'s response seems natural: it suggests a deeply-rooted need to strike back, to consume, to obliterate all the aspects of the American Dream used carrot-and-stick fashion to tease the middle class.

Mediation also occurs in the appearance of a TV news team at the Air Cavalry landing zone. The newsman (director Coppola) tells Willard to "keep moving — don't look at the camera — act like you're fighting." There is no irony in the media becoming orchestrators of ideological conflict, actually assuming the role of military figures. For the TV reporter the actuality of the Vietnam conflict is not as important as the ability to transmit a certain image, to reassure America that a code is still intact. This small scene, which leaves Willard slack-jawed, is the best example of the disjunction between signifier and signified. The signified is erased completely as reality is transformed through mediation; Willard could possibly ignore the TV team as an organization performing a specific propaganda role, but the posturing of Kilgore then suggests to him the pathology underneath the support of this mediation, the constant attempt to prop up a failing sign system.

The larger symbols of mediation are, of course, the battle sequences, first involving the helicopter attack on the village, and later the arrival of the PBR at Do Lung Bridge. Kilgore uses Wagner to "scare hell out of the slopes" in a psychological warfare operation. The Vietnamese are more afraid of the bombs and rockets than "The Ride of the Valkyries," which only gives them an early warning of the attack. Kilgore says his boys love the music, suggesting that this and rock and roll are a morale boost similar to the function of martial music in earlier periods. Morale seems hardly in question as Kilgore's "boys" merely sit in the helicopters and discuss surfing as technology does all the work; one soldier says, "I'm not going. I'm not going!" when the helicopters land.

Rock and roll is especially significant at Do Lung Bridge as a symbol of disjunction and the aestheticizing of war. Lance, Clean, and Chef, three members of Willard's PBR crew, have been listening to or singing rock songs constantly as they drop acid and pills and smoke pot; Lance describes the holocaust at Do Lung as "beautiful." The bridge sequence itself, with strung lights and hurdy-gurdy music

on the soundtrack, is the most evident literalization of the war-as-circus theme. The collision of images and the failure of language is pronounced when Willard confronts a company of black soldiers stranded in a trench, firing wildly at an unseen enemy. The company is without any command, totally removed from any understanding of the war except the necessity of survival. One soldier named Roach has a black power symbol and an American flag next to a cassette player blaring a Jimi Hendrix recording, another example of the co-optation of radical and counter-culture movements by dominant ideology. Roach wears a tooth necklace and warpaint and has an almost supernatural ability with a grenade launcher. He is a foreshadowing of the man Kurtz envisions as able to "utilize primordial instincts" to kill.

The spectacle of the Vietnam War does not divert the viewer from the central issue of the hero's descent. Willard's attempt to decipher the madness around him gives a new inflection to the Wasteland myth as the hero questions himself and his purpose enroute to the regenerative event. Willard, the journeying hero, sees that the displacement of American violence onto Vietnam has not worked in the way that previous armed conflicts united the populace. Vietnam, seen through the eyes of the hero, is a scrapyard of the American unconscious, signified by the shards of jet planes, remains of helicopters entwined in trees, and the scenes at Hau Phat and the Do Lung Bridge, where the excesses of American culture suggest the source of collective demoralization. Willard's journey to murder Kurtz would seem to be, according to the Fisher King myth reasserted at the film's conclusion, a means of providing clarity and restoring cultural vitality. Willard assumes that Kurtz possesses a secret that will help with a decoding of the chaos surrounding and within Willard's mind. The Grail myth, after all, often contains the theme of the *revitalization* of the king through a dialogue he undertakes with the hero.

One question here is how the film characterizes Kurtz as king and Vietnam as emblem of America, the Wasteland. The centrality of Kurtz to the narrative makes his "kingship" rather obvious, but his symbolic value is emphasized by the whole notion that he (as the General says) is "outstanding, a good humanitarian man," and by the crazed photojournalist's assertion that Kurtz is "a poet-warrior in the

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classical sense." Indeed, many of Kurtz's comments read by Willard summon up the image of the classical warrior who sees a simultaneous responsibility to self, the nation-state, and culture. Kurtz also asserts traditional soldierly values, exemplified by his letter to his son, wherein he explains and justifies the morality and logic of his crimes (the assassination of Vietcong double agents) against the hypocrisy of the structure that has censured his actions and ordered his arrest. As Willard tries to understand Kurtz's logic, he is for a time confused that such a representative figure of American power should be transformed into a criminal for whom a death warrant is issued. Willard notes that Kurtz "was being groomed for one of the top slots in the corporation" (making a close equation here between the military and corporate culture). Willard begins to understand why Kurtz "split from the whole fucking program" only when he begins to perceive the inconsistencies within the conduct of the war and its inevitable failure as a means of producing consensus for America. There is a note of unease in Kilgore's remark after the napalm bombardment that "Someday this war is gonna end," suggesting that the cohesion represented by combat would evaporate in peacetime. Willard says that "For Charlie there were just two ways home . . . victory or death."

Willard does not concern himself with the specific political issues of the war as he approaches Kurtz since he senses a much deeper crisis, one on a mythic and psychic level. His comment on Kilgore's remark suggests his knowledge that the American effort in Vietnam, far from restoring any stability to the collective psyche, has become a form of repetition compulsion. The immersion in violence — which previously had a specific signifying function — is believed intuitively by Kilgore and others to forestall a confrontation with the bankruptcy of their moral position. Willard begins to comprehend that it is not Kurtz's conflict with authority over war policy that has caused his scapegoating, but his intuition of the vacuum the society wants to keep hidden with its depleted rituals.

As the PBR comes closer to Kurtz's compound, the sense of disintegration increases. The Mark Twain image of young men taking a trip on the river dissolves as one by one the crew is wiped out. Chef, the black captain of the PBR, is given a funeral by the acid-head Lance in a grim answer to Leslie Fiedler's analysis of the Jim-Huck

Finn motifs of American literature. At the same time Willard tears up the pictures of Kurtz, the mediated image of the person whose identity Willard has almost totally incorporated within himself. As the boat approaches the compound, references to American history and recent American culture are supplanted by images of civilization's primeval origins. Rows of charred crosses festoon a beach: Christianity is associated with a barbaric history, or perhaps with its encumbrance by regressive institutions like the Ku Klux Klan that dissolve religion into superstition. The boat also passes a pyramid of skulls,<sup>11</sup> an altar suggesting what Chef later terms Kurtz's "pagan idolatry." The totemic arrangement of the skulls merely hyperbolizes not only the end-product of America's interventionism, but the final defeat of its attempts at regeneration through violence.

Kurtz, we discover, is the corpse at the top of the pyramid, the last emblem of violent regeneration partially redeemed by his self-consciousness. When Willard arrives at the compound his anxiety is increased not so much by his confrontation with even more excessive carnage, but by his increased uneasiness about the purpose of his role and the possibility that Kurtz can provide explanation and closure to the agony he has endured. It seems as if the evil of American civilization has drained down into the cesspool of the compound. The confrontation sequence of the last reel marks the film's movement into self-conscious discourse about the formation of cultural assumptions. Dennis Hopper's crazed photographer works not as an inflection on the mad Russian who announces the wonder of Conrad's Kurtz, but as an emblem of the remains of the origins of American youth culture. (It seems sensible that this fringe figure from the era of James Dean should greet the arrival of the "new" Dean and act as Fool for a debilitated Brando.) The photojournalist also evokes Sean Flynn, son of the late movie actor, who disappeared in Southeast Asia while covering the war; this added conjuncture of Hollywood Babylon and Vietnam, the Hemingwayesque romance of war with its possibilities of new identity, is exposed in the Hopper character's psychosis. The photojournalist evokes more specifically Charles Manson (whose image appeared fleetingly earlier in the film) as he weaves a bizarre, synthetic cosmology having little to do with Kurtz, the charismatic figure the journalist claims "enlarged [his] mind."

Kurtz's relationship to the photojournalist is useful to under-

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standing the resolution of Willard's journey. The photojournalist babbles on about the new world-view exposed to him by his guru:

. . . and that's dialectics, man, I mean something is or it isn't — you go to the moon, what are you gonna land on? Fractions? Two-fifths, three-quarters, three eighths?

Kurtz shouts, "You mutt!" at the photojournalist and heaves a volume of Eliot at him after reading a passage from "The Hollow Men." The figure of the 1960s spiritual guru is manifest in the photojournalist's veneration of Kurtz, indeed, in the worship of Kurtz by most of the seemingly catatonic residents of the compound, including Colby, the ex-Green Beret so overcome by Kurtz's power he writes his wife "Sell the house . . . I'm *never* coming back." Kurtz's followers may be said to abandon America to follow him for the same reasons many of the youth generation of the '60s dropped out of mainstream life. Sensing a period of spiritual fallowness and corruption, the Kurtz followers seek out a charismatic figure whose real ideas never actually connect or cannot be communicated in the first place. The insanity evident in the photojournalist and Colby suggests that they are attempting to adopt Kurtz's personality in the absence of personalities of their own. Their refusal to acknowledge Kurtz's humanity causes them to accept the most horrendous excesses of their guru's revenge on the civilization he has abandoned. Kurtz, like his cult followers, is simply an extension of the displacement process. If we acknowledge that Vietnam is simply another American battleground and a metaphor of the American cultural vacuum, the status of Kurtz as charismatic figure becomes clearer.

Kurtz's power over others is located in his ability to perceive accurately the contradictions of American civilization while simultaneously being a vivid, singular incarnation of those contradictions, an icon of American excess and *hubris* well-realized in Brando's bloated figure. While Kurtz's followers assume that he possesses the key to The Way, Kurtz himself, burdened and sickly, dreams nostalgically of a millennial kingdom in the American past — a gardenia plantation on the Ohio River, "a bit of heaven fallen on the

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earth." Oddly, the photojournalist sees Kurtz's disability. He tells the imprisoned Willard: "You . . . he wants *you* because you're *alive*." Kurtz's acute perceptions do not negate the fact that he is the embodiment of a dead civilization. Kurtz's connections to this past world, his belief in an older logic, military virtues, and "primordial" violence constitute the real basis of his charisma. The irony of Kurtz's dilemma is that he is unable to replace the old vision with a new one, to offer a program against the new, alien technocracy that has destroyed the Edenic dream (the gardenia plantation is now "wild and overgrown"). He would not be as foolish as Kilgore to try to reinstate the symbols of an antiquated past, but he is as ideologically naive. It is hard to accept that this brilliant strategist could not gain an overview of the power structure's Vietnam policy, but Kurtz's perception of the ruling policy *per se* is probably not the issue.

Kurtz's famous speech about his witnessing the murder of children during his Green Beret period is the key to his dilemma. His attempt to enter "primordial" time and invoke its violence shows his ahistorical interpretation of events. An understanding of the policies behind armed conflict is replaced by an assertion of the individual "will." The notion of the will-to-power supplements Kurtz's call for primordial violence; like the Nazis, Kurtz believes in summoning up the gods of a metaphysical past, a buried history that will rejuvenate the present. The "lying morality" Kurtz sees in the power structure is reducible to violence alone. Kurtz is a "classical" fascist in his belief in the restoration of collective will through myth alone; his fixation on this has caused him to scrawl "Drop the bomb! Exterminate them all" (one of the most recognizable borrowings from Conrad) across a page of his report on Vietnam policy. Thus Kurtz contains within him the quotient of the division caused by dominant ideology's contradictions. Kurtz's "dialectic" is stalled between antithesis and revolution. The only analysis for this is Kurtz's entrapment by ideology; he cannot provoke change because he has too much internalized the old world. The fact that he understands the contradictions of a system that prevents pilots from writing "fuck" on their bombers only aggravates his self-hatred, his moral schizophrenia and withdrawal from society. Willard earlier noted that Kurtz "broke from them, then he broke from himself." Willard also says he "never saw a man so ripped apart."

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We must remind ourselves that Kurtz's self-destructiveness is shared by Willard. Willard baptized himself with vodka in his hotel room; Kurtz cools his burning brain with water. Willard also lacerated during his Saigon "imprisonment" the hand he is to use against Kurtz, the hand that would reject the machete/sceptre. Willard, the regenerating knight, is as "torn apart" as the dying king he is to eliminate. Even if Kurtz, the symbol of a moribund America, had vitality that would transpose itself to Willard's soul, Willard is himself too far mentally and physically depleted to be the seat of new cultural energy and initiative.

Following the mythic dimension of the narrative, the Kurtz compound is the primordial chaos into which American civilization has returned. Ostensibly, based on the Fisher King myth invoked in the last reel, Willard's murder of Kurtz will provide closure and suggest the start of a regenerative process. Willard's murder of Kurtz, however, is carried out for wholly personal reasons. Willard says: "They were going to make me a Major for this, and I wasn't even in their fucking army anymore." Willard's process of identification with Kurtz has distorted his role of emissary of the collectivity. Both Willard and Kurtz have succeeded in unmasking the regenerative myth. It seems that the shot displaying *The Golden Bough* and *From Ritual to Romance* in Kurtz's library coincides with the movement of the film from narrative to myth back to narrative. By citing the Frazer and Weston books the film names myth and makes its operation impossible. Lévi-Strauss's theory of the end of myth is demonstrated by this process.<sup>13</sup>

One may also suggest the necessity of Lévi-Strauss not only in the evidence of the film's romantic elaboration of myth, but in the very utilization of myth to explain self-consciously recent American history. Unlike earlier American cinema (including Coppola's own *Godfather* films), *Apocalypse Now* makes its mythic structure transparent. Coppola has remarked that one purpose of his film is to "put Vietnam behind us."<sup>14</sup> His language suggests that the film is supposed to have the regenerative function of restoring myth; this notion is affirmed by Coppola's sense that we can "forget" Vietnam by pretending it was not part of an ideological system that remains in place. The contradiction here is Coppola's conscious invocation of myth to explain history along with the conventions of art. Coppola

does not seem conscious that myth and ideology are consubstantial, that to expose the bankruptcy of myth is to expose the failure of the ideology supporting it. Coppola does not equivocate, however, about his ending, despite his removal of the "napalm inferno" sequence depicting the destruction of Kurtz's compound. The ending is bleak, with the murder of Kurtz signifying for victim and executioner a flight from historical responsibility, whereas the corresponding slaughter of the caraboa suggests the drawing together of the community. The despair in both Willard and Kurtz defines Kurtz's death as a refusal of myth and an attempt to escape the entrapment of taboo established by the charismatic father and the history generated by totemism. The horror of *Apocalypse Now* lies in its assertion that nothing can fill the vacuum after we acknowledge Frazer and Freud, that history must close down once myth has been named.

The apocalypse the narrative addresses maintains a traditional view of the inevitable failure of humanity. The film contends that the exposure and analysis of myth cannot sustain itself for long; instead of joining its enterprise to the work of Barthes or Lévi-Strauss, *Apocalypse Now* offers as a new myth the notion that the refusal of myth has continued for "too long" and that retribution must occur. Although the internal sources of apocalypse are localized in Willard's self-discovery, the apocalypse is ultimately portrayed as beyond human intervention. Instead of showing concern for how humanity can become reinstated in the sacred and reclaim lost myth, *Apocalypse Now* suggests simply that myth, at some point, was destroyed by repetition, and that it can no longer work in support of a society's self-concept. *Apocalypse Now* might be termed a reactionary work not for any casual, amoral, non-critical perspective toward the Vietnam War, but for its tendency to let its deconstruction of myth drift away from a firm analysis of the relationship of myth to history and ideology. The film offers an excellent examination of the *symptoms* of social failure by its panoramic portrayal of the disintegration of language and the mythic codes providing national cohesion, but it proposes that the resulting chaos is inevitable and outside the control of the society that created these myths in the first place. To say that the hero/savior is now an impotent figure or a demon (rather than an angel) is to perpetuate the same failed mythic apparatus. The failure of the film to reduce myth to an ideological

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foundation is simply due to the film's origins in a production industry. In fairness it may be said that the revolutionary act of *Apocalypse Now* is its exposure of myth to analysis and its attempt (however muddled) to tie imperialism to the reconstitution of myth, the same project found in Conrad. The criticisms aimed at *Apocalypse Now* have been aimed even more severely at Conrad, and most of these critiques show naivete in their demand for a rigorous ideological method in the work of art. It is sufficient to say that a work is revolutionary in its ability to unmask codes and to refuse to accept myth as a given; *Apocalypse Now* could then be termed very revolutionary, even as it loses itself in a commemoration of a lost world.

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a number of years the 8th St. Playhouse, one of New York's more popular repertory cinemas, has offered *Apocalypse Now* on its midnight bill, alternating with such films as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The quasi-mystical aspect of the midnight cult film and its importance as totemic object to a demoralized youth culture is discussed (superficially) in Stuart Samuels, *Midnight Movies* (New York: Collier Books, 1983).

A discussion of *Apocalypse Now* as cult film is a subject for another study. Suffice it to say that while this film has found a more mainstream audience that acknowledges its importance to the history of American cinema and as a comment on Vietnam, another audience shows interest primarily in an aspect of its spectacle. Like *2001*, *Apocalypse Now* seems to be a work whose intellectual issues take, for some audiences, a back seat to style and effects; *Apocalypse Now* is the horrific "bad trip" as opposed to the "ultimate trip" of *2001* that fascinated youth audiences in the psychedelic, cosmic-oriented and optimistic 1960s. The modern audience may see *Apocalypse Now* as a focal point for a concelebration of an horrific millennium that replaces the forward-looking revelation of Kubrick's film.

<sup>2</sup>A few representative examples are John Tessitore, "The Literary Roots of *Apocalypse Now*," *The New York Times*, 21 October 1979, Section D, p. 21; Marsha Kinder, "The Power of Adaptation in *Apocalypse Now*," *Film Quarterly*, 33 (Winter 1979-80), 12; and Diane Jacobs, "Coppola Films Conrad in Vietnam," in Michael Klein and Gillian Parker, eds., *The English Novel and the Movies* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), p. 211. Perhaps

the most illuminating article is Garrett Stewart, "Coppola's Conrad: The Repetitions of Complicity," *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (Spring 1981), 455.

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Britton, "Sideshow: Hollywood in Vietnam," *Movie*, 27/28 (Winter 1980/Spring 1981), 13.

<sup>4</sup>Coppola makes this remark in Greil Marcus, "Journey up the River," *Rolling Stone*, 1 November 1979, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup>Martin Sheen has stated forthrightly the influence Dean had on him as a youngster and the continuing influence the Dean persona has on his acting style. See Jean Valley, "Martin Sheen: Heart of Darkness, Heart of Gold," *Rolling Stone*, 1 November 1979, p. 49. There can be no greater validation of intertextual analysis than Sheen's performance in Terence Malick's *Badlands*, where he portrayed a character strongly modeled on mass-murderer Charles Starkweather. Starkweather himself had a fixation on Dean, a fact that became part of Starkweather's mythology and a component of the equation used by popular journalism to explain his pathology. Sheen's performance makes the Starkweather-Dean association plausible from a narrative standpoint but, more important, in the context of the film it emphasizes cinema's need to revive its own legends. The poster art for *Badlands* pictures Sheen with his hands draped over a shotgun that rests across his shoulders, duplicating James Dean's famous "crucifixion pose" from the publicity material for *Giant*. Thus we have Sheen/Dean/Starkweather as savior-martyr. As an additional note, Sheen led a group of pilgrims to Dean's grave on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the actor's death in an auto crash.

<sup>6</sup>The attack on the hero, an attack further deifying the hero by denying the figure's humanity and separating him/her from a political/historical process, is a predominant aspect of current revisionist biography. Representative examples are Gary Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1981), and Albert Goldman, *Elvis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981). Goldman's book actually mentions Frazer in a discussion of Presley's decline, but shows no self-consciousness of its own enterprise in a broad cultural project of destroying the hero only to end up validating this exaggerated form of individualism. The usually scurrilous tone of the revisionist biography — a tone the author attempts to mask by the accumulation of data and the authority of research — most often indicates not only the author's reactionary temperament, but his/her denial of history and the full scope of ideology in producing and debunking the hero.

<sup>7</sup>See Deirdre English, "The Dark Heart of *Apocalypse Now*: Telling it like it Wasn't," *Mother Jones* (September/October 1979), p. 34, and Richard Grenier, "Coppola's Folly," *Commentary* (October 1979), p. 67.

<sup>8</sup>Noel Carroll mentions this in "Language and Cinema: Preliminary Notes for a Theory of Verbal Images," *Millennium Film Journal*, 7/8/9 (Fall/Winter 1980-81), 187.

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<sup>9</sup>Lois P. Zamora offers an analysis of Márquez as apocalypticist that is useful in illuminating Coppola's handling of the narrator. See "The Myth of Apocalypse and Human Temporality in García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* and *El otoño del patriarca*," *Symposium*, 32 (Winter 1978), 341.

<sup>10</sup>Some of these details are discussed in my "Operation Mind Control: *Apocalypse Now* and the Search for Clarity," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 1 (Spring 1980), 34.

<sup>11</sup>René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup>The shot seems almost an acknowledgement of Richard Slotkin's scholarship. See the last chapter of his *Regeneration Through Violence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1973).

<sup>13</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, "How Myths Die," *New Literary History*, 5, No. 2 (Winter 1974), 269-81.

<sup>14</sup>I refer to Coppola's much-quoted program notes later used to publicize the film.