

Coppola's Exhausted Eschatology: *Apocalypse Now* Reconsidered¹

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In the fall of 1994, as an undergraduate student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I wrote a term paper for Anna Brusutti's "Introduction to Cinema" class. The paper was called "Editing, mise-en-scene, and cinematography in a selected sequence from *Apocalypse Now*." Although the reader's general comments were quite sympathetic to my rather flagrantly formalist analysis of the "Suzie Q" segment, he did point out that I had, to quote a remark scribbled in the margin on the last page, "glossed over... some of the historical imagery." Little did I know then that the question of history in relation to *Apocalypse Now* would resurface almost a decade later in a slightly more ceremonial context. Given the chance, am I going to skirt the issue once again? Can we felicitously talk about a form of historical imagery that has not been sublated by what Thomas Elsaesser in his book on Weimar cinema calls the historical imaginary?

Embedded in the current topic, quite intriguingly, is a peculiar type of paradox. On the one hand, I am specifically asked to present *my* analysis of Francis Coppola's excessive and perhaps over-discussed film *Apocalypse Now* (1979), on the other hand this analysis is one that should be carried out with special reference to the interpretive—or perhaps methodological—categories of film genre, historical context, and literary pretext. We are clearly in the realm of prefixed textualities here. However, I am not at all sure that an analysis of *Apocalypse Now* that is authentically my own would in fact be compatible with the concerns indicated in the lecture topic. That is, had it occurred to me to do scholarly work on this

¹ This essay is a revised version of a lecture offered as a "trial lecture" for the degree of Dr. Art. at the University of Bergen, December 11, 2003. The topic for the lecture was "Your analysis of Francis Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) with special reference to the film's genre, historical context, and literary pretext." The occasion usefully presented me with an opportunity to reassess the nature and substance of Coppola's vision in terms of what may be seen as an anti-generic yet re-historicized sensibility.

particular film, my critical emphasis would in all likelihood be different. Can I, therefore, legitimately discuss Coppola's film with regard to genre, context, and pretext and still call the analysis mine? The struggle to reconcile these conflicting perspectives will in diverse ways inform the present argument, indisputably providing much horror along the way.

Reflecting upon *Apocalypse Now* for the first time in years, I realize that it is very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to conceive of the film's narrative as a phenomenological entity entirely divorced from notions of sheer size, scope, scale, or magnitude. A 16-month shooting schedule, 200 hours worth of footage, an editing process that took three years to complete, three different endings, and a sense of a general turmoil on the set (substance abuse, a heart attack, threats of suicide) that would probably impress even Sam Peckinpah—the significance of these facts is not merely anecdotal. The confounding enormity of the film is an inextricable part of Coppola's text and as such it militates against any predilection for structuralist ramification; as a cinematic project, *Apocalypse Now* is simply too monumentally unwieldy to be relegated to the formal stringencies of genre. Moreover, an essential question that needs to be addressed is how our appreciation and understanding of Coppola's film is enriched by defining it as a Vietnam film, a war film, or even as a genre film to begin with. If, for instance, *Apocalypse Now* is a Vietnam film, is it a Vietnam film in the same way that, say, *Casualties of War* (Brian De Palma 1989) is one? Does the former suggest a generic intention, or intentionality, in the same way that for example *Chicago* (Rob Marshall 2002) intends to be (in the sense of wanting to be or aspiring to be) a musical, or *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes 2002) a melodrama? Furthermore, why is it that the problem of genre may be brought up with respect to *Apocalypse Now* but hardly in relation to the literary text from which it putatively draws its principal inspiration? (*Heart of Darkness* is not adventure, not travel literature, but a novel or novella, period).

The idea of genre usually implies an inherited array of formal or thematic conventions or attributes, which in turn comprises a tradition. Meticulously to pinpoint the textual features that conform to pre-established generic taxonomies is on the whole an unwelcome enterprise, an analytical process that soon would have to confront what Andrew Tudor once referred to as the "empiricist dilemma" (1986: 5): to determine whether a given film is a Western requires a set of empirically verifiable criteria, but in order to know what these criteria are one would first need an a priori conception of what constitutes a Western. Such

tautological gymnastics rarely represents anything more than “a crudely useful way of delineating the American cinema” (1986: 3). According to Thomas Sobchack, the genre film is a structure that embodies the idea of form and the strict adherence

to form that is opposed to experimentation, novelty, or tampering with the given order of things. The genre film, like all classical art, is basically conservative, both aesthetically and politically. To embody a radical tenor or romantic temper in a classical form is to violate that form at its heart. (1986: 112)

Splendidly experimental, Coppola’s sensibility seems by and large antithetical to this dogmatic “adherence to form” which typifies the genre film. Kurtz and Kilgore, for example, are a far cry from the kind of stock characters that populate generic fiction.

In the case of *Apocalypse Now*, the all too probable dysfunctionality of rigorous generic formations which Tudor hints at is certainly not diminished by taking into account the unambiguous auteur status conferred upon Coppola at the time. Auteurism, a concept which seems to grow increasingly recalcitrant the more indignantly it is declared to be defunct, has always had a troubled relationship with the notion of genre.² Thus, *Barry Lyndon* is a Stanley Kubrick film first, a costume drama/historical epic only second; *Reservoir Dogs* is a Tarantino film first, a gangster movie second. This particular ambivalence which characterizes the relation between genre and auteurism is crystallized by the case of John Ford; his films are not merely Westerns, but, much more revealingly, John Ford Westerns, which is something altogether different. Finally, a genre’s visual and narrative codes, or “iconographies,” which Sobchack calls them (1986: 106), may occasionally be deceptive. Jane Campion’s recent *In the Cut* (2003), for example, is gynocentric yet post-feminist art cinema in the guise of a conventional thriller. The point is not however that any generic reading of the film is invalid but rather that a comprehension of a film like *In the Cut* in terms of genre unnecessarily constrains the film’s hermeneutical compass. Undertaken slavishly, genre criticism becomes a guarantor for the reaffirmation of the obvious. In short, the thematic-stylistic strictures of genre may at times promote a particular kind of myopia; generic conventions become an obfuscatory screen which thwarts

² See Tom Ryall’s article “Genre and Hollywood” for a more thorough discussion of the relationship between auteurism and genre.

any attempt to move beyond a surface reading of a text. As the late Raymond Durnat argued, "Insofar as no two movies pose quite the same problem in quite the same terms, no two movies can have quite the same theme" (1977: 8).

And yet—with regard to *Apocalypse Now*—we cannot really dispense whole-heartedly with the notion of genre. That would be too facile. Perhaps Coppola's movie is akin to that other leviathan of American cinema, *Citizen Kane*, in that, although it displays some elements that could be described as generic, it is not in any fundamental way a genre film. Adventure, war film,³ noir, Vietnam film, action movie, psychodrama, travel film—*Apocalypse Now* contains figural shards of all these genres, and thus the film may best be characterized as transgeneric. Just as the inter-relations between different genres are essentially "mobile," which Nick Browne points out in his preface to the 1998 anthology *Refiguring American Film Genres* (1998: xiv), so are the intrafilmic relations between different generic constellations volatile and fluid. The performance of such hybridity in *Apocalypse Now* makes the film generically impure. Co-existing on the same narrative canvas are features associated with the Vietnam film (the diegetic chronotope, the setting, is Vietnam and Cambodia during the war); the action film (Coppola resorts to spectacle in the scene where Kilgore's Teutonic army attack the village); the hardboiled genre (Michael Herr's voiceover narration, as John Hellmann has remarked, seems to emulate the style of Raymond Chandler (1986: 191));⁴ the travel/adventure film (the expedition up the river)—in this context perhaps a kind of primordial inversion of the road movie; and, finally, the psychological drama (the speculative exploration of the fractured psyches of both Willard and Kurtz). In addition, Coppola also alludes to the Western; the circumstances in which Willard is assigned his mission are reminiscent of those seen in countless Westerns in which an

³ Gilbert Adair, interestingly, has called attention to the fact *Apocalypse Now* "bears little resemblance... [to] the traditional war movie" (1981: 148).

⁴ Hellmann partly builds on Veronica Geng's observation in the *New Yorker* that "Willard talks in the easy ironies, the sin-city similes, the weary, laconic, why-am-I-even-bothering-to-tell-you language of the pulp private eye" (1979: 70). This interpretation is supported by Storaro's camera's itemization in the film's opening scene of objects often associated with the hardboiled genre, like the bottle of liquor, the revolver, the cigarette dangling Humphrey Bogart-style from Willard's lips. Then there is the fact that the name of Chandler's most famous protagonist is almost identical to that of Conrad's narrator in *Heart of Darkness*.

apprehensive community talks the drunken and disillusioned gunfighter into taking on one last job in order to save the township from the thugs who control it. *Apocalypse Now* also abounds with iconographic debris from the Western, an obvious example of which would be the cowboys-and-Indians regalia in the "Suzie Q" sequence.

Last but not least, the film may also be approached as a modern-day reworking of one of the oldest of American textual genres, the late 17th century captivity narrative. This is a structural affinity that, as far as I am aware, has not been explicitly invoked anywhere in the extensive secondary literature on the film.⁵ Like the 17th century frontiersman, both Kurtz and Willard leave their families (and "civilization") behind to venture into the wilderness, which according to Puritan philosophy was seen as a materialization of the topography of metaphysical hell (Slotkin 1973: 109). Kurtz's descent into madness evidently entails a transformation of self that recalls facets of the conversion narratives: the suspension of all principles related to Christian morality, the adoption of the inhuman laws of the wilderness, the complete abandonment of civilization, and the horrifying reinvention of oneself as "a beast, a wilderness thing," to cite Richard Slotkin's characterization of Mary Rowlandson's process of Indianization (1973: 110). Although in *Apocalypse Now* Kurtz is the captor rather than the captive, he still seems to be enslaved by the anarchic forces of the savage wilderness. After all, the film opens with an ominous image that literalizes that "wilderness of pain" which Jim Morrison sings about on the accompanying soundtrack. This is an image to which complex relationships accrue as we come to learn that these visions may be the projections of Willard's mindscreen, to use Bruce Kawin's term (2000: 79). At any rate, the subtext of the captivity narrative in *Apocalypse Now* is a subject which deserves to be examined more extensively elsewhere. Particularly exciting in that respect is the intimation of a connection between Puritan mythography and its emphasis on regeneration on the one hand with *Apocalypse Now's* inscription of the legend of the Fisher King on the other.⁶

⁵ Although he does not use the term, John Hellmann seems to allude to the genre of the captivity tales when he interprets Kurtz's deflection as an escape from the decadence of American society comparable to the "mythic journey by which the Western hero continually regenerated the American identity" (1986: 196).

⁶ A critic like Karl French, for example, sees the Fisher King narrative as "the defining myth" of the film (1998: 78).

This expressionistic internalization of the horrors of war with which *Apocalypse Now* begins situates the narrative on the threshold of history and allegory. The self-consciously surreal scene by the Du Long bridge, for example, appears to allegorize the absence of military leadership in Vietnam (Tomasulo 1990: 151). Occupying an indeterminate, liminal textual space which at once flows away from and back into history, the film creates an oscillatory historical context that is continuously superseded by intertextuality, myth, and the work of semiosis. Despite its occasional immersion in pyrotechnics, *Apocalypse Now* is a strangely introspective movie, one that seems more content with exploring the nature of the unhinged mind—along with the sedimentation of cultural memory in the form of quotation—than in elaborating on the many references to the Vietnam war which overlay the narrative. Throughout the film one gets a sense that the Vietnam setting merely provides a geographical and conceptual backdrop for an examination of other issues. In this sense *Apocalypse Now* is no more about Vietnam than Terence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) is about the second world war. Coppola's failure properly to address the war experience is according to Albert Auster and Leonard Quart due to the fact that the film "universalizes and abstracts the war by making its terror part of the human condition rather than a result of specific social and political forces" (1988: 70). While it is evident that sequences such as the one in which Willard murders the Vietnamese woman on the boat resonate with historical association (in this case to the My Lai massacre), (See Jeffrey Chown 1988: 138), they nevertheless seem parenthetical, narratively speaking, within the context of the allegorical framework of the film as a whole. In any event, whatever historical saliency these references possess is easily dwarfed by the more resolutely surreal and metaphysical final part and by the shadowy appearance of the figure of Kurtz in particular. Though I cannot endorse Frank P. Tomasulo's definition of the film as "ahistorical," his claim that *Apocalypse Now* "elided the specificity of its historical moment" by "seeking timeless and universal Truths about the Human Condition" is by far a more convincing reading of the film than those which foreground its historical embeddedness (1990: 154).⁷ The apparent

⁷ At stake in those readings which do in fact assume that *Apocalypse Now* is "about" Vietnam is, quite evidently, the question of the film's position vis-à-vis the conflict. While critics like Jakob Lothe consider the film to be both a critique of American warfare in Vietnam and "a fictional statement on... the human psyche" (2000: 178), Tomasulo (despite elsewhere labeling the movie "ahistorical") proffers a more critical reading that

ease with which the filmmaker has transposed Joseph Conrad's Congo into America's Vietnam/Cambodia adds credibility to this assertion.

That Coppola's Vietnam represents a setting more symbolic than real was a dimension critics also soon picked up on. Reviewing the film for the *Atlantic* in December 1979, Ward Just panned it for its failure to reflect or portray the war in realistic terms: "I am puzzled and appalled," he writes, "at the need for inventing a metaphor for the Vietnam war" (1979: 63).⁸ Does Tomasulo's argument that the director "turned the real-life specificity of U. S. imperialism into an abstract and philosophical cinematic meditation on good and evil" then constitute a feasible assessment of the film (1990: 147)? I would submit that his thesis both overemphasizes the metaphysical aspect and unduly downplays the film's historical import. The crucial question, as I see it, is not whether *Apocalypse Now* engages with history but rather how it does it. It seems indisputable, however, that Coppola has failed to make a movie that in any meaningful way can be said to be a reflection of history in the mimetic sense. Yet this is a film which is highly cognizant of historical issues, and specifically of history as a textual process. Some scenes in *Apocalypse Now* in fact come across as a critique of the popular media's appropriation of historical imagery. The "Suzie Q" moment, for instance, collates a range of fragments of disparate cultural phenomena into one commanding trope: the western-style outfits which the playmates wear suggest both the history of frontier atrocity and imperialism and Hollywood's rather loose reconstruction of that history; this suggestion in turn establishes a rhetorical analogy between the Indian genocide and Vietnam (a comparison accentuated by cut-aways to the Vietnamese throng separated from the soldiers by a fence, a spatial relationship which further connotes

suggests that *Apocalypse Now* is "filled with double binds and mixed messages in its attempt to have it both ways" (1990: 153). According to Tomasulo, it is this moral vacillation which renders the film apolitical. "It is tantamount to ethical 'fence-sitting,'" he maintains, "to suggest that the political and combat realities of an illegal and imperialist war can be incorporated into a vague philosophical unity of opposites" (1990: 154). More a prowar than an antiwar narrative, Tomasulo asserts that Coppola "might be saying that had Americans made war with the passion of Colonel Kilgore, the cool of Captain Willard, and the brutal honesty of Colonel Kurtz, the United States would have won" (1990: 149).

⁸ The tone of Just's criticism was to some extent symptomatic of the critical reception of the film; the reviewers attacked the film for its costly production, for its autobiographical dimension, and for being politically conservative (Lewis 1995: 170). In *Overexposure*, David Thomsen alleged that the film was "as conservative as *Birth of a Nation*" (1981: 312).

American reservation policy); the sequence features several reaction shots which present the soldiers' euphoric response to a diversion which brings together the twin legacies of misogyny and racialism; and, finally, the showbiz factor that permeates the entire sequence testifies to the significance of history as spectacle in the American consciousness. The performance of ersatz history in the "Suzie Q" segment thus becomes a truly cinematic rethinking of the past as it impinges upon the present.

I have chosen to delineate the logistics of this scene in such detail because it pertinently illustrates the importance of the look as far as the relationship between filmicity and historiography is concerned. The numerous reaction shots of the crowd cheering and looking offer a visual shorthand for the way in which the spectator's gaze both inscribes and is inscribed by the contingencies of textualized history. Any discussion of a film's historical context should at the very least be aware of the instability of the process of looking and of the impossibility of an ahistorical gaze. Hence, it is not necessarily the film that should be the primary object of historicization but rather the look itself, sited as it may be in the exigencies of the historical moment.

The problem of sight as it encroaches upon the hermeneutical task brings me to that profusely debated issue of the relation between Conrad's novella and Coppola's film. How the film both differs from and is similar to the novella has been painstakingly mapped out elsewhere, and I will not pretend to be interested in rehashing the minutiae of this work here. What concerns me more is the conceptual link between the two texts. Although I do not believe that an analysis of *Apocalypse Now* requires an (unhyphenated) pretext, literary or otherwise, there can be no doubt that the eccentricity of the connection between Conrad and Coppola provokes a peculiar fascination. Jean-Pierre Coursodon once characterized the cinema of Arthur Penn as "consciousness struggling to emerge from darkness" (1983: 264). It is tempting—and again we are operating on a purely conceptual level—to read *Apocalypse Now* as a cinematic elucidation of the darkness of its literary source. Conrad, who first published the story in the appositely entitled *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899, after all referred to Congo as "the threshold of the invisible" (1969: 593). In an article on Herbert Lang's Congo photographs, moreover, Nicholas Mirzoeff writes that the encounter with the heart of darkness was "a visual problem from the outset" (1998: 172). Vision, of course, often functions as a metaphor for perception on an intellectual level, insight in short (consider for instance the etymology of the term "theory"), and it is

the implications of this metaphor for our reading of Coppola's text and its relation to its precursor text that might be further delved into. The significance of the act of looking seems to be overtly thematized near the end of *Apocalypse Now*, more specifically in the scene where Willard's crew is approaching Kurtz's miasmatic village through an impenetrable fog. "Do you see anything, Chef?" Chief shouts shortly before he is killed by a spear. When Willard is finally introduced to Kurtz, the colonel's face is engulfed in shadows. The man seems to be gradually emerging from darkness, just as Coppola is gradually recuperating Conrad's vision. This repossessive method represents perhaps an act of what Vittorio Storaro—Coppola's cinematographer famous for his collaboration with Bernardo Bertolucci and Carlos Saura—calls *writing with light* (which is also the title of his recent book on cinematography). However, an even more urgent object of recuperation for Coppola's film may be Orson Welles's aborted project *Heart of Darkness* from 1940.⁹ *Apocalypse Now* seems to be haunted by the film that was never made and by the conceivable permutation in Welles's mind of the figures of Citizen Kane and Citizen Kurtz. (See also Elsaesser and Wedel 1997: 151).

There is little justification for considering *Apocalypse Now* to be an adaptation. In fact, the only official recognition of *Heart of Darkness* as the basis for the film occurs in its nomination for Best Screenplay based on material from another medium at the Academy Awards (French 1998: 4). How do we explain this act of omission? Why has Coppola suppressed this literary pre-text? Throughout cinema history there have been quite a few instances in which a literary source has in fact been acknowledged even when the film exhibits no tangible traces of its alleged precursor. A case in point would be Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Leaves From Satan's Book* (1919), which has little to do with Marie Corelli's *Sorrows Of Satan*. According to Mikhail Iampolski, this kind of misquoting transpires when a text willfully represses its source: "Intertextuality... works not only to establish precursors but also to deny them" (1998: 79). Iampolski's Bloomian-inflected theory is particularly appropriate for a reading of *Apocalypse Now* in that the

⁹ Welles first adapted Conrad's story as a radio production for his Mercury Company. When he later came to Hollywood, Welles intended to make a movie in which he both directed and played the roles of Marlow and Kurtz. Unfortunately, due to financial difficulties, Welles ultimately had to abandon the project (French 1998: 99). For further insights into Welles's radio version of *Heart of Darkness*, see Robert Spadoni, "The Seeing Ear: The Presence of Radio in Orson Welles's *Heart of Darkness*," *Conrad on Film*, Ed. Gene M. Moore, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997, 78-92.

mechanism of textual repression and replacement finds a diegetic counterpart in the relationship between Willard and Kurtz. Significantly, the text represses even this "degradation of the father" motif (Elsaesser and Wedel 1997: 157), for instance in that the part of the film's signature song in which Jim Morrison gives full vent to his Oedipal ravings is omitted.

The reason for Coppola's repression of Conrad's novella, I would surmise, might become clear if we bear in mind that *Apocalypse Now* stands as perhaps cinema's most unashamedly obvious act of self-mythologization. As Karl French points out, this was a film that was "designed as a modern myth" and "granted near-mythical status even in its making, long before anyone had seen it" (1998: 96). The film's self-reflexive, metacinematic quality is also made manifest by Coppola's cameo where he tells Willard "Don't look at the camera. Just go by as if you're fighting," a rhetorical maneuver later referenced by Stanley Kubrick in his considerably more audaciously anti-war film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). As a matter of fact, the production history of *Apocalypse Now* competes with the film's story itself when it comes to madness and excess, and the finished movie is less a reflection of historical events than of the aspirations and conditions of its own making.¹⁰ "I thought I was making a war film," the director told Charles Michener in an interview in *Newsweek*, "and it developed that the film was making me" (1979: 101). Fraught with a hubris and a singularity of vision no adaptation can sustain, the film has to suppress its source material so as not to appear derivative. However, as far as intertextuality is concerned, Conrad's text is just the tip of the iceberg.

Again watching the opening sequence of *Apocalypse Now*, listening to Jim Morrison intone the words "This is the end," I cannot help but be reminded of another illustrious end, that of Jean-Luc Godard announcing the "end of cinema" in *Weekend* (1967).¹¹ And it then occurs to me that this cataclysmic preface to Coppola's film may be thought of as a narrative enactment of Godard's proclamation. A movie that from its inception was intended as cinema's most extravagant statement, *Apocalypse Now* sets out to transcend cinematic history by obliterating its influences. The series of

¹⁰ One may note that for Auster and Quart, it is this interference of the filmmaker's "personal quest" that "clouds the connection between *Apocalypse Now* and the Vietnam experience" that the film purportedly aimed to depict (1988: 70).

¹¹ As Lothe has pointed out, the scene which inaugurates the narrative of *Apocalypse Now* invokes both a "prologue and [an] epilogue at the same time" (2002: 50).

superimpositions with which the narrative starts—the jungle ablaze, Willard's face, the rotating fan—gestures toward the film's palimpsestic aesthetic. *Apocalypse Now* is of course nothing if not a densely though elusively allusive film, and apart from the more palpable references to Conrad, Eliot, Frazer, Weston, and the Book of Revelation, there is a munificent spillover of evocative and haunting traces from other texts. I propose the term *liquid figurality* for this spillover function.

Educated at Hofstra University and UCLA, Coppola belonged to the first generation of filmmakers that were movie-literate in a more academic sense, a circumstance which to some extent accounts for his "penchant for allusionism" (Tomasulo 1990: 156).¹² That the director must have been somewhat conflicted in his approach to his own work may be evidenced in two largely contradictory statements that he made around the time of the film's release. At the Cannes press conference, he declared rather pretentiously that "My film is not a movie. My film is not about Vietnam. It *is* Vietnam" (French 1998: 24, emphasis in original). But in an interview with *Rolling Stone* the same year, he told reporter Greil Marcus that "style was going to be the whole movie" (1979: 55). There seems to be an inherent antagonism here between two different conceptions of the film, one which stresses its "hyper-reality," the other emphasizing its aestheticism. It is the latter that ultimately prevails.

Some critics have argued that *Apocalypse Now* epitomizes "Hollywood's attempt to recover its position as a preeminent mythmaker in American culture" (Auster and Quart 1988: 71). As I have indicated elsewhere, making sense of individual films by applying mythological registers may be a rather hazardous and even methodologically unsound approach which tends to court an irksome disregard for textual specificity and for the material sensuousness of the filmic image. Because it is helplessly postmodernist first, *Apocalypse Now* cannot be but post-mythological also. Perhaps there is an irrepressible tension here, between on the one hand the film's ambition actually to be, oxymoronically, a postmodern myth (hence its repression of many of its sources), and on the other its often inadvertent yet endemic allusionism (or what I have just referred to as liquid figurality). *Apocalypse Now* signals not only the demise of a coherent mythology, but, more importantly, the end of the temporality of texts, to modify slightly the title of Fredric Jameson's recent

¹² In Tomasulo's view, it is precisely this inclination toward citation which is seen as responsible to the "depoliticization" of the Vietnam conflict in the movie (1990: 156).

article in *Critical Inquiry*. By synthesizing canonical and contemporary texts, by turning textual chronology into discursive spatiality, the film reconfigures cinema's relations with genre, history, and its literary origins. The overall effect might be something analogous to what Jameson refers to as "the reduction to the present" (2003: 717).

Quite evidently, then, *Apocalypse Now* is a semiotically overdetermined film, with all the possible repercussions this may have for the modes of spectatorship. In their analysis of the sonic textures of Coppola's movie, Thomas Elsaesser and Michael Wedel call attention to a similar issue in the following passage:

Through the jungle of discourses that constitute its textual form,
from the biographical to the technological, from the aesthetic
to the political, its textual density seems if anything to have become
more 'substantial' as time goes by, without thereby becoming
either more realistic or more fantastic, but demanding a different
'ontology of the filmic image,' which is to say, a different spectator
(1997: 172)

This is a spectator who in her reading will have to accommodate the prerequisites of a liquid figurality, who will have to be as aware of the film's references to movie history as of those to Greek mythology. It certainly is significant that Willard's PBR is named *Erebus*, after the Greek son of Chaos and brother of Night, and that he is mentioned in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and in turn that this play is a key source for Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men," parts of which are indistinctly recited by Brando's Kurtz at the end of the film. *Erebus* is of course also mentioned in Virgil's *The Aeneid*, which Coppola's original scriptwriter John Milius has cited as his main inspiration for the story. But, it is equally significant that the idea of using Richard Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries" is lifted from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), that the sequence in which Kurtz is killed and the water buffalo sacrificed borrows not only from Coppola's own *The Godfather* (1972) but, more prominently, from Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925; and see Chown 1988: 145), and that the photograph of Kurtz that Willard keeps looking at on the boat is actually the Weldon Penderton character played by Brando in John Huston's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967).

As a filmic art object, *Apocalypse Now* is a supreme instance of what Rick Altman terms a “scarred palimpsest,” a text that upon further scrutiny discloses “diverse discursive layers” (1992: 10, emphasis on original). These layers, or what I would call a textual spillover, are also operative on the level of characterization, superimposed as they are on the character of Willard, turning him into Coppola’s own “hollow man.” According to Milius, Willard is Adam, Faust, Dante, Aeneas, Huckleberry Finn, Jesus, the Ancient Mariner, Ahab, Odysseus, and Oedipus (Thompson 1976: 15). And the list could go on. If it had not been for the “with-special-reference-to” clause of this assigned topic, I would have gravitated more toward the specifically American intertextual figurations in *Apocalypse Now*, figurations that I would claim are just as—if not more—salient for a contemporary reading of the film. An entire paper could have been written on Martin Sheen’s inexpressive performance of the James Dean persona from *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray 1955).¹³ *Badlands*, Terence Malick’s austere 1973 dramatization of the Starkweather killings, seems to be another template for Sheen’s Willard. Likewise, articles could be written on the californification of the Vietnam war in *Apocalypse Now* (the references to surf culture, drug-taking, the rock music of bands like the Beach Boys, The Doors, Charles Manson, Raymond Chandler, Disneyland, and so on), as well as on the *Wizard-of-Oz*-like trajectory of the film’s narrative. (See French 1998: 239). Moreover, I suppose I am not the only one who notices that the transformed Willard who monolithically emerges after having killed Kurtz bears a faint yet disturbing narrative resemblance to Kubrick’s Star Child at the end of *2001*.¹⁴ And could it not be argued that “the horror! the horror!” that Eliot at one point considered as an epigraph for *The Waste Land* seems somehow obliquely evocative of that unbearable whiteness of Melville’s whale? Perhaps.

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¹³ There is already some precedence for considering Sheen’s stylized acting in the film as a derivation from Dean’s Jim Stark in Ray’s movie. See Hellmann (1986: 191) and French (1998: 109).

¹⁴ More explicitly, *Apocalypse Now* also alludes to a host of other films, notable among which is David Lean’s *Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1957, 1962), *Dr. Strangelove*, another Kubrick film (1964), *Deliverance* (John Boorman 1972), *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (Werner Herzog 1973), and *Nashville* (Robert Altman 1975).

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