The opposition between nature and culture which I have insisted on seems today to offer a value which is above all methodological.

*Claude Lévi-Strauss, La pensée sauvage*

With the advent of poststructuralism, deconstructionism, the new historicism, feminism, and other theoretical paradigms, the insights of structuralism and semiotics as conceived by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss are fast fading from film and literary studies. The new methodologies have challenged the idea that film and literature, as symbolic systems like myth, can be viewed in terms of how codes consciously or unconsciously establish aesthetic and social meaning in a text. But before consigning Lévi-Strauss's method to the ash heap of outmoded critical thought, it might prove useful to reexamine what use-value can be gleaned from the structuralist project. In particular, one aspect of Lévi-Strauss's system--his mode of analysis of mythic structuration--may still prove fruitful for understanding our modern myths and epics: our national cinemas. The basic assumption that cultural products such as film and literature can be viewed as epiphenomenal manifestations of an underlying system of textual and social relations is too valuable a tool to abandon to the vertiginous vortex of recent theory.

Lévi-Strauss made a lifelong study of the kinship, mating, and mythological systems in so-called primitive cultures. His anthropological data revealed that the complex rituals of many societies could be reduced to a system of rules or codes, and that those rules and codes were themselves variants of a limited set of elemental binary oppositions: nature/culture, raw/cooked, animal/human being, and peace/war. Further, his mythological data suggested that the ostensible chaos of myths could be ordered if they were considered as aspects of a social language whose fundamental units and oppositions could be identified. More important, Lévi-Strauss spelled out the ultimate reason for such structures: "to insure the permanency of the social group."

This universal, ahistorical, and essentialist grid obviously needs to be revised and applied to the specificity of various artistic texts, cultures, and epochs. In a way, then, every text transmogrifies Lévi-Strauss’s universal dichotomies to speak of and to its own nation and era, within a particular social formation. Historicizing these cosmic concepts and concretizing them in a given film text helps clarify the role of myth in artistic construction and social reception. The concern here is with the extent to which the structures of myth are formative as well as reflective of our collective attitudes: the degree to which myths construct and uphold particular worldviews and ideologies. Lévi-Strauss was well aware of this problem when he said, "I do not
aim to show how people think in myths, but how myths think in people, unbe-

knownst to them.7

One of the most important binary oppositions in any myth or film is that

between the social representations in the text (its social imaginary) and the

social realities from which those representations are derived and with which

they interact. In general, myths consist of binary polarizations of certain

social realities and tendencies that are familiar and important to a given

culture. The myth ultimately produces the impression of resolving those

dichotomies, of sublating the dialectic. As Lévi-Strauss said, 'Myth ... provides

an interpretive grid, a matrix of relations which filters and

organizes live experience and produces the blessed illusion that

contradictions can be overcome and difficulties resolved.'8 Such a "blessed

illusion" can be very satisfying to a troubled culture and its citizens. Indeed,

Lévi-Strauss saw this ameliorating social function as crucial: "Through

their myths, people try to hide or to justify the discrepancies between their

society and the ideal image of it which they harbor."9

Regardless of whether Lévi-Strauss was correct that the source of binary

language structures is inherent in the human mind or whether binarism in

structural anthropology reflects a Western ideology imposed on native

cultures, the dramatic art of the West has relied on oppositional syntax and

construction since time immemorial. These patterns are as evident in the

contemporary products of "civilized" cultures as they are in "primitive" myths.

Indeed, the former often rely on the latter for their general structuration and specific "mythologemes." Whether consciously intended by their authors or unconsciously appropriated from the culture by an artist, the repositories of modern cultural myths—such as contemporary films—often rely on binary oppositions. These artistic antinomies, then, arise from the real contradictions of a historical period and serve specific sociopolitical ends. As Bronislaw Malinowski stated, 'Myth is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject matter ... Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency and contains practical rules for the guidance of man.'10

A MODERN MYTH: APOCALYPSE NOW

Francis Ford Coppola's stated reason for making Apocalypse Now (1978) was to assist Americans in "putting the Vietnam experience behind them."6 In the context of Lévi-Strauss's and Malinowski's analyses, then, this statement of authorial intentionality reveals much about almost all the post-Vietnam War Hollywood films, the film in question, and American society in general. Only a handful of U.S. films about Vietnam—The Green Berets (1968), In the Year of the Pig (1969), and Hearts and Minds (1974)—being the most notable—were made during the Indochina conflict. Those that followed tended to depoliticize the struggle, turning it into a test of manhood, a rite of passage, or personal trial. Many dealt with the valid issue of "Vietnamers" return to postwar American civilian life (Rolling Thunder [1977], Coming Home [1978], The Deer Hunter [1978], First Blood [1982]), but avoided overt commentary on the moral and political questions of the war itself. Instead, they tended to focus on an individual's personal reaction to his Vietnam experience and subsequent readjustment.

Apocalypse Now turned the real-life specificity of U.S. imperialism into an abstract and philosophical cinematic meditation on good and evil, light and dark. In the process, American society was treated to a film that represented not so much Vietnam-era America as America's idealized view of itself post-Vietnam, that is, from the enlightened perspective of a historical hindsight that could sublate contradictions. As such, Apocalypse Now might be categorized as both a pro-war movie and an anti-war movie in that the film's cinematic and political ambiguity both conceals and reveals a national ambivalence toward the Vietnam War.

Francis Coppola was no stranger to the concept of an ambivalent war movie. He was the screenwriter of Patton (1970), which portrayed the World War II field commander as, on the one hand, a raving megalomaniac who loved war, slapped his own soldiers, strutted around and cursed pathologically, and had an odd penchant for pearl-handled revolvers and, on the other hand, a determined military hero who took strong, decisive action to win the war in North Africa, Sicily, and Europe. It is a common marketing strategy of the American cinema to attempt to deal with controversial subject matter by having it both ways, so as not to alienate segments of the mass audience who have strong feelings on one side or another of a particular issue. Patton offended neither doves nor hawks, since each group could read into the film (like a national Rorschach test) its own preconceived ideas about the World War II general and the then-raging Vietnam conflict.

Indeed, one hawkish viewer of Patton, President Richard Nixon, watched the film twice at Camp David. Nixon publicly stated, after watching the film, that he realized that the solution to the Vietnam quagmire was strong, decisive military action, and he immediately ordered the invasion and bombing of Cambodia. Despite Nixon's one-sided "reading," dovish viewers saw the film as extremely critical of hyper-militarism. In short, through its contradictory themes and techniques, Patton was able to appeal to viewers of every political stripe. No segment of the box office was alienated, and Patton went on to win Academy awards for best picture and best screenplay, as well as the best actor award for George C. Scott.

When a nation (or, rather, its film industry) "nominates" such a divided hero-villain to explain itself to itself, that fictive representative and the entire representational process become implicated in the way that nation signifies its own conflicted view of its role in the contemporaneous real war (Vietnam), as opposed to the relatively unconflicted, historically depicted, reimagined war (World War II). Thus, Patton appropriated the reigning
sociocultural divisiveness and national disunity about the Indochina conflict and grafted it onto a less troubling military endeavor from the past, World War II. The negative contemporary ramifications were displaced and dispersed onto a more remote and more popular era of national unity. At the same time; the depiction of the hero, General George S. Patton, did bear the marks of the divided political realities of the contemporary national debate. Patton was, to some, a brave and resourceful warrior fighting in a just cause and, to others, a vain, imperious martinet.

This same strategy of "having it both ways" can be seen in *Apocalypse Now*. Having been rewarded with an Oscar, financial success, and increased professional prestige for his articulation of national divisions in *Patton*, Francis Coppola seemed to have learned his lesson well when he came to make the equally ambivalent *Apocalypse Now*. In the latter project, however, he enlisted the aid of cowriter John Milius, who is well known for his right-wing jingoistic predilections (*Dirty Harry* [1971], *Magnum Force* [1973], *The Wind and the Lion* [1975], *Conan the Barbarian* [1982], *Red Dawn* [1984]). This divided authorship may account for some of the film's unresolved combinations of dovish and hawkish elements. On the one hand, *Apocalypse Now* has been read as an anti-war statement because many scenes depict the absurdity and outright lunacy of America's Vietnam policies, as well as the machinations of high-level military commanders. On the other, certain elements of its content and style work against this dovish reading. For instance, the title, *Apocalypse Now*, seems to emphasize the destructive, pro-war side of the film, derived as it was from the anti-war slogan "Peace Now!" Yet it is also possible that the title is an ironic warning of the ultimate dangers of extended conflict.

Not all of the film's elements are so ambiguous. Many scenes and cinematic techniques work to further a pro military, pro-war interpretation. For example, by showing the U.S. winning all the battles, the film provides the American audience with a victorious rush that is accentuated by the lack of concern for Vietnamese lives. During the battle scene at "Charlie's Point," a peaceful Vietnamese village is destroyed, photographed so as to excite the viewer visceraally and to glorify war and its godlike heroes. The sheer kinesthetic excitement of this sequence—especially its sweeping and majestic helicopter shots—might even provoke a "gung-ho" response from those who revel in deeds of derring-do (or, in fact, from *most* viewers because the glory of war is a built-in code of the combat genre). The editing is quick and fast-paced, simulating the highly charged emotional state of the aptly named Colonel Kilgore and his men. The scene is synchronized to a triumphant musical score, Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," which monumentalizes the passage of dead heroes into Valhalla. Further, point-of-view camera angles inscribe the viewer in the helicopter looking down on the Vietnamese villagers, making them faceless and tiny in the frame as they are gunned down, but the camera moves in to isolate the agony of one wounded American soldier. The audience is thus cinematically implicated in the exhilarating superiority of the American attack.

This aestheticization of violence contributes greatly to the film's appeal to a twisted patriotism. The use of wide-screen, low-angle long shots of helicopters in tight formation flying up from the horizon into a rising sun creates a grandiose, romanticized, and even heavenly aura of battle that changes destruction and death from acts of horror into Armageddon-like sights of awe-inspiring beauty. In some ways, *Apocalypse Now* shows the war not as immoral, only mishandled. It may 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. The film pays tribute to our heroes' ability to search and to our technology's...
ability to destroy. As one viewer put it, "In an age of liberal moralism and bureaucratic fear, Apocalypse Now made a daringly reactionary statement: War is a beautiful and vital human experience."

Finally, on the pro-war side of the ledger, the narrative goes out of its way to justify the actions of Colonel Kurtz, the ostensibly brutal marauder whose methods are labeled unsound by his superiors. In fact, Kurtz is actually portrayed as correct in all his judgments. Although he became an outlaw to the generals by summarily executing four supposedly friendly Vietnamese, all enemy espionage activity immediately stopped after those murders. The victims were obviously Vietcong double agents (Willard, "I guess he must've hit the right four people"). In addition, Kurtz's many citations and commendations are elaborately displayed throughout the journey upriver so that he is revered even before he is first seen by the audience. Willard's voice-over narration, his aural point of view, expresses his admiration for the colonel's accomplishments: "Third-generation West Point, top of his class ... a thousand decorations."

"He had an impressive career," "Kurtz staged Operation Archangel ... rated a major success," "... passed jump school at age thirty-eight," "The more I read ... the more I admired him."

Cinematically, Kurtz's gold-star dossier is shown to us directly through Willard's eyes, through our identification figure's visual point of view. Despite Willard's indeterminate, tabula rasa facial expressions and "man without qualities" persona (qualities that would normally mitigate against emotional empathy with a character), audience identification is achieved through a fairly strict point-of-view regimen that involves Willard's detached observation of the world around him combined with overtly subjective shots (for example, the early sequence in which Willard looks through the Venetian blinds in his hotel room ["Saigon. Shit, I'm still in Saigon!"]) or the shrimp and cigarettes offered directly to the camera [Willard] in the general's quarters. Filmmakers often use subjective angles to establish perceptual, conceptual, and emotional rapport with their characters. In this case, the rigorous point-of-view structure facilitates identification with a half-psychotic, alcoholic CIA assassin.

Throughout the narrative, Willard is closely identified with his prey, Colonel Kurtz. Both are introduced reclining in bed, heavily shadowed but lit by an odd orange light. The photograph of Willard's wife at his bedside closely resembles that of Kurtz's spouse, seen in his dossier. Similarly, Willard grasps at a fly in his opening scene and Kurtz repeats the gesture later on. Willard becomes more like Kurtz as the film progresses, his gradual immersion into physical darkness (including black camouflage makeup) corresponding to Kurtz's silhouetted or darkly shadowed physiognomy.

Indeed, Willard makes their doppelgänger status explicit: "There is no way to tell his story without telling my own." After "terminating" his superior, Willard rubs his face in his hands, mimicking a gesture Kurtz used earlier.

These doppelgänger motifs imply the father-son nature of their roles and their transubstantiation in the last scene, but the growing similarity between Willard and Kurtz had been preordained from the very beginning. Both men were defined as psychotic military officers from the outset. The politics of this characteristic similarity are obvious: Willard's supplanting of Kurtz (his "termination of the colonel's command," in the film's dialogue) does not represent a change in American policy. Instead, this reenactment of the ritual death of the king-god of myth and legend only serves to show that Willard's apotheosis as supplanting redeemer makes him politically equivalent to the father figure he succeeded. In the finale, Willard appears to act on Kurtz's "fatherly" advice—"Drop the Bomb. Exterminate them all."—by calling in the air strike that decimates the Cambodian compound.

Despite these hawkish examples, the film's pro-war message is qualified by scenes showing the U.S. foisting its culture on Vietnam: destroying a village so that soldiers can surf, capsizing a peasant fishing boat while waterskiing, disturbing the serenity of native life with blaring radios and tapes, and fencing out the Vietnamese from the USO show. Willard's heavy drinking and breaking of the mirror may represent not only his own suicidal tendencies, but the U.S.'s self-destruction in Indochina as well. But even this view is compromised by chauvinism, because it concentrates on America's suffering and self-doubt, rather than on the destruction wrought on Vietnam and its people. It is as if we were fighting and killing not the Vietnamese, but ourselves.

In many ways, Apocalypse Now conjoins eloquence and idiocy as the twin opposites of the Vietnam War. It suggests that the war had a certain amount of power and valor attached to it but that a bunch of "four-star clowns" were running the show. The mission may have been worthy, but the "missionsaries" were too lazy, comfortable, and well protected, and they sorely lacked ruthlessness. Thus, blame is displaced from American political leaders and the citizens who voted for them onto the officers. The brass is criticized, not the policy or the populace. Nonetheless, even such a limited protest of the military establishment can have more far-reaching repercussions. A carnivalesque USO show ends in complete chaos, with no one in control. At the Du Long bridge, Willard asks who the commanding officer is and is asked in return, "Ain't you?" The absence of military leadership in these scenes may be likened by extrapolation to the absence of rational political direction in Washington. Even when an authority figure is in charge (for example, Kilgore or Kurtz), he is usually unbalanced and thus linked by implication to an insane national policy.

Two subtle cinematic details (both dependent on the sound track) reinforce this point. When Willard first examines Kurtz's top-secret dossier on board the river patrol boat (PBR), the lyrics of the Rolling Stones's song "Satisfaction" are heard off-screen: "... some useless information, supposed to drive my imagination." This use of sound-image counterpart suggests that the military's information gathering is ineffective ("useless information") in defining Kurtz's crimes, even while it inspires Willard to admire his prey ("drive my imagination"). Later, as Willard looks at a sideaddle newspaper photograph of Charles Manson, acidhead Lance Johnson reads aloud, "Manson ordered the slaughter of all in the home anyway as a symbol of protest." This ironic phraseology applies just as well to Kurtz, Willard, and
the top brass, all of whom murder innocents in an insane cause. By subtly linking “back-home” madness (Mansoon’s apocalyptic rampage) with the Vietnam debacle, the film seems to undercut some of the pro-war sentiment established in other scenes.

Several other incidents provide equally strong evidence of the film’s anti-war stance. The very first scene, a long, static plan sequence, shows a primeval jungle that is eventually napalmed into extinction. By first establishing the forest as lush, peaceful, and beautiful, Coppola makes the intrusion of the helicopters and bombers even more hostile than the classical Nature-versus-Civilization imagery warrants. This shot dissolves to our initial view of Willard, our identification figure (and national representative), who is seen upside-down, a camera angle that implies an abnormal personality and thus an abnormal national purpose.

Willard’s blatant murder of the innocent Vietnamese woman on the sampan provokes sympathy for the victim by recalling the My Lai massacre of 1968 and reverses some of the racist portrayals; The woman’s death is especially heartwrenching because of the cinematic treatment. First she is wounded by machine-gun fire from the overzealous PBR crew because she made a sudden move to protect her dog. Then the guilt-ridden crew decides to rush her to a medical station. Finally Willard punctuates the sequence with a single shot from his weapon, killing the woman to avoid delaying the mission. This emotional roller-coaster ride is based on a tension-relief-despair structure that is reflected in the sound track (continuous loud machine-gun fire, the calm after the storm, then ultimate finality). Similarly, the quick cut from the noisy helicopter attack to the quiet of a peaceful village filled with schoolchildren belies the heroism of the raid, especially given that the village is destroyed so that Lance (whose real name is L. B. Johnson) can surf. Nonetheless, the “peaceful” village is later shown to be a heavily defended Vietcong stronghold, complete with antiaircraft artillery and women who conceal bombs in their hats. This fact compromises the scene’s original anti-war message and partially justifies the crew’s wounding of the sampan woman later in the narrative.

This battle scene features Coppola’s cameo appearance as a television newsreel cameraman who, rather than record the action that is occurring, directs Willard into giving a performance: “Don’t look at the camera. Just go by as if you’re fighting.” The director’s brief walk-on is an obvious self-reflective m-joke, but it also implies the absurd, gamelike nature of the war. This “war is swell” theme is furthered in scenes such as the sex rioting at the Playboy-sponsored USO show, the crew’s dancing and smoking pot on the PBR, surfing at “Charlie’s Point” (“Tube City,” in Lance’s Malibu terminology), or “made-for-TV” fighting (complete with musical accompaniment). Coppola’s cinematic soldiers cling to their stateside pursuit of pleasure and entertainment amid the combat realities of a jungle war. Again, the film’s irony can be understood as vacillating between a generalized anti-war/anti-American commentary and a specific critique of the military higher-ups/ordinary “grunts” (“rock’n’rollers with one foot in their graves,” in Willard’s voice-over description).

Apocalypse Now is filled with double binds and mixed messages in its attempt to have it both ways. One subtle scene provides evidence to support this idea: as the hatchet-hit general (his face is bisected by harsh light and heavy shadow) gives Willard his mission, he begins to pontificate about human existence: “There is a conflict in every human heart between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil, and good does not always triumph.” As he says “rational,” he turns his head to the dark side; when he says “irrational,” his head turns toward the light. This minute gesture suggests that a tilt to the “dark side” ruthless—nay—might be the rational and efficient way to win the war. At the same time, the general’s dialogue is severely critical of Kurtz’s “unsound” methods precisely because they are so ruthless.

Ambivalence abounds in the opening scene as well: an image of tranquil Nature destroyed by American technology and firepower is backed by musical lyrics that state—at exactly the moment the bombs strike—“This is the End.” So the beginning is the end, and vice versa. Maybe the point is that the Vietnam War was over before it began, but more likely this juxtaposition represents an aesthetic circularity, since the final images, the actual end of the film, also feature blazing napalm. The ambivalence is conveyed through images of fire and water, a motif (borrowed from the Bible, Jesse Weston’s From Ritual to Romance, and T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”) that wends its way throughout the film. Another subtle example of the fire-water dichotomy occurs when Kilgore is about to offer a dying Vietcong suspect a canteen of water.
Stooping to give the water to his enemy, Kilgore is told that Lance Johnson, the serfer, is now in his unit. Forgetting his humanitarian mission, he tosses the water onto the ground as the pleading Vietcong prisoner reaches for it. Just then, in the background of the shot, there is a huge fireball explosion. Shortly thereafter, during the surging scene, Kilgore points out to Lance that the waves "break both ways." His precise dialogue—"[They] can break right and left simultaneously"—is illustrative of the film's (and the U.S.'s) divided political rhetoric. Whether seen in isolation or in conjunction, the motifs of fire and water become emblematic of the whole contradictory ideological project of the film.

From a political perspective, the ultimate problematic of *Apocalypse Now* was its conception. Coppola directly stated, "My very first notion ... of the style of the film—and, of course, style was going to be the whole movie—I wanted it to sweep; I wanted it to have grace." By subordinating content to style and foregrounding aesthetic ambiguity and richness, the director secondarized the ideological implications of a deeply political question—the Vietnam War. As such, the filmmaker's ideological message became as murky and subject to random interpretation as the cinematography and characterizations. To make a more forceful statement about the Vietnam conflict, social responsibility needed to be integrated with artistic expression. This is not to say that the film is full of empty stylistic features but rather that the multivalent formal elements of the film are deeply implicated in its social effectivity.

Coppola also said, "Truth has to do with good or evil—life and death—we see these things as opposites, but they are one." This sort of sublation works fine in metaphysical speculation, but it makes for apolitical films on decidedly political subjects. It is tantamount to ethical "fence-sitting" to suggest that the political and combat realities of an illegal and imperialist war can be incorporated into a vague philosophical unity of opposites. Although the film makes several visual and aural allusions to Dante's *Inferno*-most notably in the Du Long bridge scene-Coppola, as a latter-day Dante, seems to equivocate about whom to condemn to his modern Hades. The director forgot that Dante reserved a special spot in Hell for those who refused to take a stand and remained silent in times of moral crisis.

The film's ahistorical tact can be exemplified by this Coppola quote: "I started moving back in time, because I wanted to imply that the issues and themes were timeless. As you went further up river, you went deeper into the origins of human nature." By seeking timeless and universal truths about the Human Condition, the film elided the specificity of its historical moment. In addition, that human condition is defined by means of a false contradiction that used the Vietnamese and Cambodians to represent the primitive "origins of human nature" and the Americans to represent humankind's more "civilized" side. Historically, the National Liberation Front forces did not use aboriginal weapons such as bows and arrows or spears to achieve their independence, although they used them in the film to kill Chief. Here (and elsewhere) dramatic license in the service of universal truth exacerbates the unconscious racism of the film's figurations and its portrayal of the essential other-ness of Third World peoples. (The infamous Russian roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter* is another example of a fictional conceit that had no basis in reality in the real Vietnam War.) If *Apocalypse Now* does indeed tell a universal story about the never-ending conflict between Eastern primitivism and Western civilization, then it may unconsciously be feeding American fears of a barbarism and a future war more horrific than anything known in Vietnam. Yet *Apocalypse Now* is not alone in terms of such historical errors of omission and commission. All of the Hollywood Vietnam War movies are told from an American perspective. The ambivalence in *Apocalypse Now* is a product of a conflicted and xenophobic culture, not one filmmaker's murky vision.

Nonetheless, Coppola can be faulted for his aesthetic failure to account for the ideology of form, to historicize the stylistic paradigm, so to speak. The almost constant "hatchet lighting" on all the major characters mirrors their apparent insanity and moral duality. The film's cinematic correlatives for the nation's ambivalence on the war, then, were intercut pro-war and anti-war scenes, dualistic lighting, stroboscopic editing of light and dark scenes (the ritual slaughter of an ox intercut with Willard's "termination" of Kurtz), and subtle contrapuntal image-sound articulations.

That Coppola showed up at the Cannes Film Festival with two endings sug-gests the ambivalence of the film's overall narrative discourse. The "anti-war" ending, used in the film's initial 70 mm. release, showed Willard renouncing Kurtz's brutality and power by dropping his machete to the ground (causing the natives to do likewise) and leading Lance away from Kurtz's compound. This action is followed by a cleansing rain that symbolically puts out the fire of the opening images of napalmmed Nature (another use of the fire-water motif). This version had an authentically modernist, unresolved finale in which classical denouement was elided in favor of the penultimate step of dramatic construction, falling action. In other words, the 70 mm. variant eschewed the powerful and cathartic ending of the traditional war movie in favor of a more subdued and thoughtful conclusion. The final image showed the PBR drifting away from shore, with dissolves to a mysterious blue idol superimposed—a rather serene, almost pacificist, conclusion that showed Willard disavowing Kurtz's insane injunction to 'Drop the Bomb. Exterminate them all.'

The "pro-war" ending conveys just the opposite effect. The conclusion that now accompanies all 35 mm. prints and videocassettes shows the PBR drifting away from Kurtz's compound, but it also has base command making radio contact with Willard ("Calling PBR Streetgang; this is Almighty"). What follows is a spectacular series of fiery explosions, apocalyptic air strikes, that seem to represent, on the diegetic level, Willard's orders to Command to "drop the bomb" and exterminate them all. Although apparently chosen so as to provide a circular narrative structure, full-fledged emotional catharsis, and dramatic closure to the mass audience, the current ending has ideological consequences. It proves that Willard has learned Kurtz's lessons so well that he has become him, and allowed the colonel's last wish to be fulfilled. By providing an ending that better satisfied the genre expectations of mass audiences. Coppola acceded to classical dramatic structure but substituted the least artistic Aristotelian device—spectacle—for the full power of tragedy. In recutting the film, the filmmaker "disambiguated" its ending and provided crucial evidence to support a pro-war reading.
The exploding napalm also represents a contemporary correlative for one of the film's mythic substrata, the original Apocalypse, the New Testament's Book of Revelation. There are numerous other references to the final book of the Bible in Apocalypse Now. For instance, the juxtaposition of the beginning and the end in the movie's first image-sound articulation recalls the "Alpha and Omega" speech of the Lord in John's final gospel. The bleeding of Willard (and the stigmata-like wounds of Colby), liturgical vocabulary ('for my sins they gave me a mission,' "Operation Archangel," "Almighty"), sealed orders (like biblical scrolls), tiger, lamb, multitudes, trumpets of Kilgore's cavalry charge, temple, thunder, and representations of destruction all recall imagery from the kaleidoscopic picture-book text of John's revelations.

Coppola's penchant for allusionism ultimately contributes to a de-politicization of the Vietnam War (a process present in almost all the Hollywood Vietnam films). At one point, the camera glides over three books in Kurtz's compound: the Holy Bible, James Frazee's The Golden Bough, and Jesse L. Weston's From Ritual to Romance. This shot follows hard on Kurtz's recitation of T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men," whose epigraph is itself a quotation from Heart of Darkness: "Mistah Kurtz, he dead." These references are not without ideology. Eliot was known for his conservative beliefs, while Weston and Frazee foregrounded a cyclical theory of history that has more affinity with an existentialist view of human nature than with a politically progressive one. The cultural subtext of the film's allusions precludes social transformation. The main character was even consciously conceived as a postmodernist compendium of mythic and literary allusions. According to cowriter Milus: "Willard is Adam, Faust, Dante, Aeneas, Huckleberry Finn, Jesus Christ, the Ancient Mariner, Capt. Ahab, Odysseus, and Oedipus." 14

This complex reticulation of intertextual references makes for interesting art but ambivalent politics. By plunging us into a vertiginous vortex of mythic citations, the movie displaces interest from the specificity of the combat and political realities of the Indochina conflict onto the ambiguous "quest" of one individual, Captain Willard, and the even more ambiguous accretion of "universal" mythologemic detail. By thus subsuming the Vietnam War under an appeal to the "primitive" within us all, Apocalypse Now blames everyone (and hence no one) for the policy decisions that created the conflict. In addition, it suggests that the war was lost because the United States was not willing to "get primitive" enough to exercise its "will to horror" (even though six times the tonnage of bombs used in World War II were dropped on a country the size of New Mexico).

CONCLUSION

As symbolic systems, myths and legends still form the basis of more contemporary social "languages" such as Hollywood films. 15 Neither ancient myths nor modern motion pictures have force and intrinsic meaning as wholly autonomous entities; rather, they derive and pass on their significance from binary oppositions and contradictions rooted in their cultures. Thus, language speaks, myth thinks, and signs signify within a given social matrix. But in analyzing the products of the culture industry—especially Hollywood's Vietnam films—it is not enough to say that they "mirror" or "reflect" a bifurcated national mood, in a homological one-to-one correspondence. The concern should also be to investigate the means by which a film like Apocalypse Now goes beyond reflecting social realities toward creating national attitudes and political ideologies.

According to Lévi-Strauss, we live in myth and seek refuge from it in history, because history itself is a myth conceived to satisfy our need for stability and order. Apocalypse Now and most of the other Hollywood Vietnam films participate in that coded historical mystification by conflating and sublimating the contradictory social realities that were familiar and important to American society (for example, the war was morally wrong/the war was a noble cause; the officers failed/the foot soldiers failed). The establishment of these false antinomies allowed Americans to shift and displace their own blame as citizens and voters onto politicians and the military. And the mixed messages of the films rewrite that period's history for those who lived through it and for those who will come to know it mainly through its media representations.

All this leads to a theoretical point about the politics of film reception. Although much contemporary film theory valorizes the idea of the "open" text, subject to polyvalent readings and interpretations, what is really needed is at least in terms of Vietnam War movies—is a closed text, a film that takes an unambiguous stand on the imperialist involvement and illegal conduct of the Vietnam conflict. Only three American films have taken unequivocal positions: the pro-war The Green Berets (1968) and the anti-war In the Year of the Pig (1969) and Hearts and Minds (1974). Displacing and abstracting political realities onto the universal and ambiguous realm of myth (as was done in Apocalypse Now) rewrites history. We live in history, no matter how we write, think, theorize, or mythologize about it. The traditional role of myth has been to give a society an account of its historical past and a prescription for its future, even if those accounts are unverifiable. The nebulous fence-sitting stance of the Hollywood Vietnam War subgenre in general and of Apocalypse Now in particular may assist the American public in "putting the war behind us," but such social amnesia does not help Americans understand the history of their Indochina involvement or prevent future neocolonial incursions. A text without a context is a pretext, a pretext for real historical analysis and a pre-text for wars and war movies to come.
NOTES

10. Ibid.
15. This argument is developed in detail in Frank P. Tomasulo, "Mr. Jones Goes to Washington: Myth and Religion in Raiders of the Lost Ark," Quarterly Review of Film Studies 7 (Spring 1982): 331-340.